

## The Flapper and Women's Rights

# UNIT 2

### Background Information

The flapper was a sight to behold. For her grandmother, she was a sight that resulted in a mad scramble for the smelling salts. The flapper's own mother would take a quick look and suffer heart palpitations and anxiety pains. The flappers were young women caught up in the youthful exuberance of the twenties, seeking thrills and excitement and a life full of zest. And this attitude, this quest for happy times, was openly revealed through the way they looked and dressed. With bobbed hair, short skirts, rolled-up silk stockings and dimpled knees, strings of beads hanging everywhere, lips and faces painted with cosmetics, the young females were outlandish and outrageous. If the flapper sought to exude an aura of notoriety, she was highly successful. Youth is always a time of rebellion, and the young people of the 1920s were no exception. And the flapper was in open rebellion against all the restraints and repressive conventions that had shackled American females in the past. The 1920s were a decade when it was great to be young, and the flapper eagerly grasped at the chance to find and enjoy all the good things life had to offer.

This was a generation sickened by the waste of human life during the Great War. Their parents had been committed to a war that was supposed to end all wars, and the young people were tired of hearing empty phrases and hollow ideals, the patriotic gore that resulted in an entire generation of young men disappearing from the face of the earth. The youth of the twenties were looking to have some fun. They wanted excitement and thrills, and as far as they were concerned, the good times could roll on forever. And the young women in America were determined to find their own place.

**YOUNG WOMEN IN AMERICA WERE DETERMINED TO FIND THEIR OWN PLACE.**

But it was more than just winning the right to vote. Suffrage was just one of the issues that women confronted and finally succeeded in attaining. Women wanted more, and the flapper exemplified this hunger to get more out of life than their mothers and grandmothers had gotten. The flapper made the statement that nothing would ever be the same again.

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### Background Information *(cont.)*

Yes, indeed, the flapper was a sight to behold. She was stunning. She was totally outrageous. And the flapper was deserving of any notoriety that attached itself to her lifestyle during the 1920s. The flapper was daring, had nerve, and challenged society's conventions at every turn. It was more than a challenge; all the rules and mores were turned topsy-turvy, and the flappers were eager to push aside the barriers that were placed in their way. Why, the flapper even smoked in public, unheard of in her grandmother's and mother's day. There was a touch of arrogance as she sucked on the cigarette, inhaled, and slowly exhaled the smoke through partly pursed lips and through her nose, while displaying a coquettish and flirting smile. She rubbed elbows with the men in the speakeasies and hoisted a drink or two to those beautiful crimson lips. Had the temperance ladies seen such a sight, they would have cringed with embarrassment and disbelief. The flapper had a dress or skirt with a hemline that accentuated lovely, dimpled knees. It was an outfit with a waistline and beltline that slithered below the hips, and the rolled-up silk stockings exposed a seductive glimpse of thigh and made her even more outlandish. All the young men loved the new look; the old folks were horrified. The flapper liked to fool around, and she advertised her desires and her passions loudly and boisterously.



The novels and writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald were revealing, giving parents a glimpse of how their children carried on. For young people, an automobile had more use than just simple transportation. It had a back seat that served the same purpose as a living room couch and afforded a great deal more privacy for necking and petting when parked in a secluded rural lane. The flappers did not exhibit any reticence discussing sex and men. Sigmund Freud's theories and ideas had a ready audience in America's youth. But the flappers had other major concerns, and many centered on appearances and how they looked. The women bobbed their hair short, and the height of fashion was a cloche, a hat that hugged the skull and demurely shaded the eyes from view. Aside from the short skirts and revealed legs, they were bright and intelligent women, for the most part. Flappers were brash. They were brazen, bold, saucy, and lovably impudent. They were young women with opinions they expressed openly, without a moment's hesitation or a second thought, even in mixed company. Many were college girls, gifted, talented, bright, and possessed of a fierce determination to live their own lives to the fullest. Grandmother and mother may have compromised, repressing their desires for careers, sacrificing everything to devote themselves to husband and home, but the flapper was going to go her own way. The young people had an attitude of "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die," inherited from the pessimistic and dark days of the First World War.

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### Background Information (cont.)

Youth wanted none of the false hopes and ideals of the past generation, and there was never any attempt to channel their unbounded energy to any particular cause or social crusade. Why blow a lot of hot air talking about meaningless things when there was always a party to go to, a dance, a date with the boys, or a chance to slum in the speakeasies or jump into the roadster and hit the highway?

The youth of the twenties had jazz, the Charleston, affluence, prosperity, and party time that extended right through the decade. There was never a moment that the flapper was excluded from any of this great adventure. The automobile was changing the way Americans lived, and the flapper was a visible participant, driving her own roadster with the same competence as any man. Beach costumes, like other fashions, changed with the times, and women happily donned abbreviated outfits that were alluring and more comfortable for the sand and ocean setting. Time and again women ran the risk of being arrested for indecent exposure, but they persisted until they won acceptance. The first beauty pageants were held in the twenties. Women participated in dance marathons, "jumpin' and jivin'" to the point of total physical exhaustion, just for the thrill. Like all the rest of those times, it was for the fun and the excitement. The young people didn't want to miss a thing. They wanted to do it all.

## BEAUTY PAGEANTS, DANCE MARATHONS, PARTIES, AND ROADSTERS!

Just as quickly, however, it all came to an end. The stock market crash in October of 1929 sobered the nation. The party was over. The happy days of the flapper were finished. The decade was coming to a rapid end, and when the stock market came tumbling down it marked the end of the happy days. The reckless times were over, collapsed like a house of cards.

F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda, the magical couple that embodied all the beauty and excitement of Jazz Age youth, paid dearly for all the zest and exuberance they put into their daily living during the twenties. Endless parties and drinking took a heavy toll, and as youth slipped away from the Fitzgeralds, reality finally arrived. His noted novel *The Great Gatsby* and his creative genius were behind him, so Scott Fitzgerald turned to Hollywood to become a hack writer while Zelda slowly descended into madness. The flapper days were over. The American economy was in a shambles. Factories and industrial plants were shutting down. Production simply screeched to a halt, and millions of America's workers found themselves unemployed. There were no jobs, the factory gates were locked, no one was getting a paycheck, and people were desperately looking for answers and solutions.