The Flapper and Her Jazz Age

The 1920s have forever been ingrained in the cultural memory as a glittering, wild and fantastically entertaining party. Littered with images of excessive drinking, a change in sexual norms and the immense bitterness deriving from the end of World War I, the 1920s saw a variety of experiences, people and newness that translated into a revolution of sorts from America’s youth. Flappers, and their male counterpart, flippers, too have resided in the forefront of the cultural memory of the 1920s. Known for their short skirts, bobbed hair and interest in jazz music, flappers ran against the grain, flaunting their disdain for gender norms. Sex began to be treated casually, smoking and driving were normal acts for a woman and a turbulent feminism was born alongside the suffragists.

As a term, “flapper” denotes the essentialness of freedom to a young woman of the 1920s. With an ability to flap her wings and fly, the flapper was able to liberate herself from the societal constraints of conservatism. As the word evolved throughout the beginning of the 20th century, “flapper” made appearances in films like The Flapper starring Olive Thomas and, most notably, much of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s literary work—for example his collection of short stories, Flappers and Philosophers.
Flappers were essential in the redefinition of gender roles in the early 20th century. Flapper behavior was alluded with independence, provocative dancing, cigarettes and freely dating. Despite the limitations of American Prohibition from 1920 to 1933, it is hard not to find literary or filmic texts portraying the American youth of the time period not drinking large vats of alcohol. Aside from the social aspect of the flapper, young women began working outside the home to better defy acceptable traditions they had grown up with. They are noted as the biggest rival to the Victorian era’s woman.

Most against this Victorian era woman was the appearance of a flapper. Donning shorter skirts, straight and loose, bare arms and heavy amounts of makeup—especially rouge, flappers were seen as ghastly controversial specimens. Corsets and pantaloons were thrown out and high heels were bought in plenty, furthering a fantastic youthful energy that the 1920s is so splattered with. As a symbolic necessity, flappers’ hair were cut to boyish lengths, celebrating the bob cut and crop cuts. Alongside appearance, a culture was created. This culture, full of slang, film and literature, and a “way of life,” was most prevalent in the 1922 periodical, The Flapper.

**The Flapper and Its Background**

Created in 1922 in Chicago, a seminal city of the 1920s, The Flapper was a short lived, monthly periodical. In the midst of Life, The Saturday Evening Post and other influential magazines of the time, The Flapper held significance to America’s

*Figure 1: Three issues of The Flapper from 1922: June, September and October.*
youth as the *Cosmopolitan* (post 1965 when *Cosmopolitan* was instituted as a women’s magazine and not a literary periodical) of sorts of 1922. With a subhead bearing the line, “Not for old fogies,” *The Flapper* initiated America’s collection of youthful flappers to band together to create a higher culture, one included in the process of modernity, evolution and transition.

*The Flapper*, as a periodical, celebrated the freedom of the women urging that “the flapper is here to stay…so surely has the doom been sealed of the timid, trusting, retiring, servile, opinionless, unattractive, shrinking creature known as the old fashioned girl” (July, 1922). Through each edition, *The Flapper* thrusts its readers into a world of vivacious energy, advertising beauty contests, film opportunities, song parodies and short fiction. Further insisting in each issue that “the flapper has leaped into public favor as a permanent, adorable and invigorating component of American life” (June, 1922). The periodical states, ever so bluntly that “the tide has turned” (June, 1922) and pushes this sense of new culture into the mainstream memory of 1920s American youth.

As a monthly periodical, *The Flapper* was accessible for a subscription of $2 per year, each copy as a single sale being twenty cents. Interestingly enough, *The Flapper* was even available in Canada—for a slightly higher price of twenty-five cents per copy or $2.50 for a year subscription. *The Flapper* held its headquarters in the Ogden Building in the heart of Chicago under its own publishing company. Thomas Lavesh served as the managing editor, Myrna Serviss as the associate editor and B.J. Peterson as the circulating manager. It is important to note the involvement of two men in the production of *The Flapper*. As a feminist magazine, *The Flapper* imposed widely independent views, behaviors and appearances, but these had to be ultimately approved by Lavesh, a man. Serviss, however wrote much of the material for the magazine, while “the flappers of America” are credited as contributing editors.
The Flapper and Its Content

Heavily influenced by the mainstream periodicals of the time, The Flapper showcased an array of information, ranging from silly fiction to investigative journalism. Though some of it may seem particularly vague and somewhat sensationalized, the journalism within The Flapper’s pages are rich with a culture of a time now far gone in the past.

In each new issue, the editors open up the magazine with a page long spread entitled, “Our Monthly Chat.” In this “chat” of sorts, the editors discuss their magazine and its relevance to modern society, the modern woman and the modern mind. The monthly chats serve as organizational tools for the celebration of the flapper—a way in which readers could be pulled into the world and culture of 1920s youth at the get go. Serviss, a self-proclaimed flapper, instituted much of her ideals in the monthly chats, rallying forth the flappers in America to unite and organize.

Even so, The Flapper, in its June 1922 issue, defined the word “flapper” in their own terms, to better convey their message and rallying cry:

“She’s independent, full of grace, a pleasing form, a pretty face; is often saucy, alsopert, and doesn’t think it wrong to flirt; knows what she wants and gets it, too; receives the homage that’s her due; her love is warm, her hate is deep, for she can laugh and she can weep; but she is true as true can be, her will’s unchained,
her soul is free; she charms the young, she jars the old, within her beats a heart of gold; she furnishes the spice of life—and makes some boob a darn good wife!”

From this ever-so humorous and yet profound rhyme, *The Flapper* instituted a widespread and modern definition of what was to become one of the most romanticized cultures of the twentieth century.

With this definition and style of writing in mind, it is easier to delve into the content of the periodical. Though each issue remain somewhat similar in content, the rise in audience and continual reference to “the flapper” as a modern girl is evident as the issues go on.

*The Hard News*

Some of the most interesting articles derive from *The Flapper’s* use of investigative journalism. This may seem silly and even trivial, but the periodical’s use of what could be noted as muckraking is essential to understanding the importance of the flapper movement to the editors and readers of the periodical. In its June issue, *The Flapper* includes a spread titled “Royal Order of Flappers Tool of Commercialism.” This magnificent headline leads the reader into a—“flapper-wise”—groundbreaking tool in uncovering the corruption in flapper society. The story accuses the Royal Order of Flappers of Chicago—an organization in promotion of flapper culture—of using its power as an instrument to promote schemes for their financial gain. No matter how supremely silly this all sounds—especially rivalling the hard-hitting investigative journalism involving the intense Chicago crimes of the day—*The Flapper* states, rather
evocatively that it is “compelled without fear of successful contradiction, to make the following
definite and astounding charges” in the interest of protecting flappers worldwide (June, 1922).

To add fuel to the fire, this investigative piece was more likely a stab at the Royal Order of
Flappers in hopes that associate editor, Myrna
Serviss’ group, The Chicago Flapper Flock, would attract more members. Throughout the issues of The
Flapper, The Flapper Flock is mentioned in terms of meeting minutes and new rules to being a flapper.
Alongside The Flapper’s definition of the flapper,
The Flock included its dedication to “do as they please and dress as they please with the object of enjoying life to its fullest extent” (June, 1922). This club, among the many other flapper organizations during the 1920s, no doubt rivalled that of the Royal Order of Flappers, hoping for its own personal gain.

The investigative story included no quotes, but a heavy use of names—much like its muckraking ancestors. Similarly, in the September issue of the magazine, a new article with the headline “Flappers Protest Dictation from Paris” was printed. Although not necessarily a “form” of investigative journalism such as that of its June predecessor, this new article called for the immediate vote invited on “retention or rejection of styles that have made flappers famous” (September, 1922). According the article, the French government was trying to impose long skits on Parisian women—a true restriction to the ideals of the flapper. Despite its, once again, silly nature of writing, the story is yet another rallying cry for organization, but this time a global
organization. *The Flapper* wrote, “for American girls may be fickle, but they know a good thing when they see it and they intend to hang on it!”

*The Fiction*

Alongside of the greatest Lost Generation writers of the day such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Barnes and Stein, *The Flapper* included various forms of fiction with its pages. Though not as essential to the trove of literary marvels of the era. *The Flapper* does provide an essential insight into the role of the flapper herself, her mind and her behaviors. Furthermore, writers such as Fitzgerald and Hemingway touched upon the idea of the flapper in their novels *The Beautiful and Damned* (Gloria Gilbert), *The Great Gatsby* (Daisy Buchanan) and *The Sun Also Rises* (Lady Brett Ashley)—Fitzgerald was married to the most widely known flapper, Zelda—but their prose rivals that of *The Flappers* as the latter includes narratives from women, those of which included themselves within the flapper generation.

In the June issue, *The Flapper* included the story “To Kiss or Not to Kiss: That is the Question!” by Paula Gould. Despite its playful title, the story follows a young flapper on her way to find the perfect flipper to date. With trivialness and familiar silliness in tow, Gould’s story not only expounds upon the behaviors of a flapper, but intensifies the will and freedom of the flapper culture. The main character is free-spirited, loud and skilled in the art of dating.

Additionally, in the October issue of the periodical, a short play titled, “A Flapper in the Court of King Arthur: A Travesty in Two Parts,” reminiscent of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, was included. Regardless of the familiar playfulness of the story, the themes of it once again include those of the flapper movement. The main character challenges the norms of women in King Arthur’s court and insists upon the ideals of the flappers,
advocating for feminine freedom and criticizing male limitations upon the female body. A simple story, though it is, the fiction emphasizes on the feminist politics of the time. Women were just granted the right to vote in 1920, but equality was sought and this story outlines it very well.

Alongside other fiction published such as poems and original songs, parodies of mainstream songs were written. Parodies of songs such as “Carolina Rolling Stones” turned “Rollin’ Bones” and “You’re Only A Baby” turned “You’re Only A Flapper” created similar narratives as the fiction, emphasizing on the importance of feminine freedom and liberation from the conservative norms of the earlier 1900s.

*The How-To’s and the Miscellaneous*

While *The Flapper* included vast amounts of fiction and “hard journalism,” the editorial pages of the periodical were heftier, making up most of the magazine’s content. The “How-To” article was published in many various forms throughout *The Flapper*’s publishing days. “How-to’s” such as “How to Behave at the Movies” by managing editor Thomas Levish in the September issue, “Ten Commandments for Flappers” by Dr. F. R. Braune in the September issue, “How to Pick the Right Husband: It’s All a Question of Curves” by William Price in the October issue were all essential to include in the thin depths of *The Flapper*. 
It is interesting to note that these articles were written by men. Though primarily a feminist magazine, *The Flapper*, as mentioned, did have a managing editor who was male. This prime example of a male-dominated society reflects that though the flapper did profess freedom from the male sex, they were still accustomed to answer to their counterparts. Even so, the “how-to’s” written by men instigate this idea wholeheartedly, proving that men still somehow managed to manipulate the flapper culture to serve as attractive and pleasing to them. Of course, this could be wrong, but it is an interesting suspicion nonetheless.

Following the “how-to’s” comes a group of pages titled the “Questionable Department” in which an anonymous writer named Kewpie, is asked various questions ranging from the subjects of sexuality, appearance and dress, love and parents. Though nothing more than your run-of-the-mill Q&A column, Kewpie’s questioners give a look inside the flapper youth and what was on their minds during that time.

In one of the questions in the June issue, Kewpie is asked by twins Lily and Tilly what to do in their love triangle predicament. Both twins are in love with the same man and essentially ask Kewpie what to do. Kewpie in turn tells the girls to toss a coin for which twin should change their look. Once this is done, the boy in question will be able to make his choice. Another comical situation for Kewpie to rescue is that of “ Lovesick” who, no matter how much makeup she uses, cannot help her to “catch a fellow” (June, 1922). Kewpie humorously asks the questioner, “Have you tried carrying a flask in your handbag or on your hip? That gets the most backward ones” (June, 1922).

Though incredibly comedic and brashly trifling, Kewpie’s “Questionable Department” brings both humor and truth to flapper society, very similar to ask columns that have sprung up throughout the history of newspaper editorials in the United States.
Moreover, in the September issue of the periodical, “Class for the Thin: Slender, Lean and Slim” was published by a suspicious Professor McMeSpiffy (sounded out as make-me-spiffy). In this confusing editorial, the professor takes back his instructions on “how to get rid of your surplus weight” (September, 1922) from the issue before, and now tells readers how to gain it back. Despite its scrupulousness, the article is essential in seeing through The Flapper’s writers. Though much of its content was written by Serviss and various flappers from around the country, it is important to note the willingness to add slightly comical pseudonyms to cover up the true names, which were no doubt Serviss or Levish.

The Graphics

The final content that must be noted is The Flapper’s use of graphics. Strictly illustration and cartoon driven, The Flapper’s initiation of graphics into the periodical is reminiscent to other early twentieth century periodicals of the time. Mostly by way of headers and statement pieces, the art within The Flapper were drawn in a cartoonish style with a familiar font that could be categorized as similar.

With headers ranging from “Health for Flappers,” “Film Flickers” and “From the Reader’s Point of View,” the graphics displayed are simple and yet aesthetically pleasing, breaking up the black and white text and pulling in fun charm and cartoonish wit. The covers of the periodical were photographs. The photographs, in turn, were those of flappers posed in
delicate and stoic positions, artsy lighting and familiar 1920s-esque compositions. They are surrounding by a border with the written words, “The Flapper” in a large, art-decco styled font.

**The Flapper and Its Legacy**

*The Flapper’s* legacy is simple and clear. In a time of cultural revolution, liberation and youthful bliss, the flapper stands out sentry as the essential symbol of the 1920s, furthering her ideas of feminism and challenging those of female norms. Though not as oppositional as the suffragists’ *The Revolution, The Flapper* maintained an identity of alternation that recollects the cultural memory of the 1920s. It called for organization, rallied for inclusion and acceptance and helped the female youth of the 1920s to find their true sense of self.

Despite being somewhat similar to the modern *Cosmopolitan*, *The Flapper* remains a strong symbol for feminist action and organization. Regardless of its stereotypical silly articles, its message of liberation and freedom stands strong amongst the trivialness. By way of its own identity, *The Flapper was* able to unite a culture that ignited throughout the 1920s until the pivotal crash of 1929. In essence, *The Flapper* is a tangible embodiment of the time period, clueing the ignorant into the minds of the liberated flapper, and the youthful environment of the 1920s.

*The Flapper*, it would seem is neither alternative nor oppositional, but could not be categorized as mainstream either. In the sea of conservatism post World War I, society was split between the notion of going forward past the horrors of war and into the age of modernity, or back to the comfortable past, a golden age of industrialization and romance. *The Flapper* stands out as one of those cultural treasures that runs against that conservatism in a light, silly and comical way, igniting a path of organization for those young girls that are earnest on being
liberated from the restrictions of a post-war world. Perhaps *The Flapper* is in fact oppositional and alternative in face of the mainstream conservatism, but its nature is friendly and nonaccusatory, playful yet goal-driven. *The Flapper* said it best, insisting on its culture as a wonderful break from the mainstream and “a permanent, adorable and invigorating component of American life” (June, 1922).
Works Cited


