

A Truly Modern Decade

The 1920s and Women's Rights

Early 20th Century

- The early 20th century is a period of change
- An era of reform after decades of rapid economic and technological advancement after the Civil War of the previous century and soon to come - “The Great War” (1914-18)
- The “Gilded Age” of the later 19th century was represented by a small population of very wealthy men who controlled large corporations/huge market shares vs. a rapidly urbanizing populace - a rich minority gets richer, while working class Americans and embattled small farmers fight for their own economic rights (populism, labor movement)
- A growing middle class establishes its own values and culture
- Big cities are dazzling with skyscrapers and modern living, but poverty and squalor are present here, too

Early 20th Century

- Just before, during, and after World War I (“The Great War”), rapidly-changing American life sparks various progressive movements intended to deal with problems that arise from rapid immigration, economic inequality, public safety crises, and more
- Racial and gender inequality activism is returning to the national stage, too - black Americans organize to fulfill the promises made in the 1860s-70s AND in 1917-18, as black soldiers fight for liberty abroad during WWI when they have little of their own at home (W.E.B. DuBois - a sociologist and activist - wrote about his disillusionment in 1919’s *Returning Soldiers*)

The Women's Movement

- In the decades after the Civil War, women are beginning to work outside the home/farm in larger numbers - and not just as teachers/nurses!
- In addition to factory worker women, professional women are now doing office work; their new roles in white collar city jobs influences fashion!
- Menswear-inspired looks like the 1886 ensemble at right
- Active lifestyles = active clothing





The Women's Movement

- Women are getting degrees, too! But colleges and universities are still very much a man's world...
- Collegiate women are often a very small minority at institutions of higher learning in the later 19th and early 20th century, and quickly come together to support each other, often through early women's fraternal organizations (we call them sororities today)



College Women

Alpha Omicron Pi founded January, 1897 at Barnard College (Columbia University)

The Women's Movement

- Non-collegiate women have also been organizing their own charitable, moral (TEETOTALERS!), and patriotic societies throughout the 19th century, and mobilizing to protect their own rights!
- Voting rights as fundamental rights (remember Frederick Douglass?)
- In the 1870s, Virginia Minor (of the National Woman Suffrage Association) and Susan B. Anthony are barred from voting (Anthony is actually arrested for trying)
- Minor sues (*Minor v. Happersett* 1874), but loses her 14th amendment case - she had claimed that the “privileges and immunities of citizenship” clause should include her right to vote, but SCOTUS holds that the right to vote is not a federally-protectable right...sound familiar?

Women's Suffrage

- Many different philosophies behind the desire for women's suffrage
- Some women saw it as a way to “clean up” society and government (Women's Christian Temperance Union)
- Some women saw it as a way to promote economic independence for women of all classes, and as a way to promote the general cause of labor (National American Suffrage Association joins forces with Women's Trade Union League)
- Some saw it as a way to, ironically, promote white supremacy in the south
- National Women's Party organizes marches and protests culminating at the White House

Women's Suffrage

- In 1918, President Wilson declares his support for women's suffrage
- In 1920, The 19th amendment to the US Constitution is ratified, giving women the indisputable right to vote in the United States
- Wyoming (1869), Colorado (1893), and Utah (1896) were ahead of the curve! Western territories wanting more representation (and also wanting to encourage women to come marry out west, ha!)

“Now We Can Begin”

- Piece by feminist Crystal Eastman about the meaning of women’s suffrage
- What does she mean when she says that now that the fight for suffrage is over, women can finally “begin”?
Begin what?
- What does real “freedom” for women involve, to Eastman?

“Now We Can Begin

- She’s a socialist - anti bourgeois culture (women get their status and make their livelihood at home, as wives and mothers)
- Freedom is... sovereignty over self, economic freedom, professional freedom, legal freedom, educational freedom, equality in all spheres of American life, including political
- Freedom is... emancipation from domestic drudgery responsibility while men skate off and leave women to take care of everything at home
- Freedom is...the ability to raise feminist sons who can take care of themselves at home
- Freedom is...the right to choose work over motherhood
- Freedom is...the right to be seen as human, with a soul

The 1920s

- Jazz age! Worldly young men (and some women!) return home after the war...
- “How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after the’ve seen Pareeeee?!” - French fashion, French stereotypes capture the American imagination
- Liberated women after the collective downer that was WWI and the 1918 Influenza epidemic, plus the heady atmosphere of the roaring 20s economy!
- Women workers (white collar jobs in offices!)! Women voters! Women drivers (technology!)! Flappers! Freedom! Partying! Jazz music! Smoking in public! BOYS!
- Young people - especially middle class young white women - want their share of fun and success in the dazzling postwar world

Flappers

- The term “flapper” probably comes from early 20th century British slang for high-spirited young women and/or female theatre performers/dancers, and also likely the birdlike motions of the Charleston dance craze; some claim it is rooted in much earlier slang for prostitutes (seriously?!)
- The “Gibson Girl” is the 1900s predecessor of the 1920s Flapper - slimmer, more active, more independent than her Victorian elder sisters
- Young women enjoy greater social and sartorial freedom in the 19-teens and especially after the Great War
- Bobbed hair, makeup, shorter dresses that show more skin (rolled stockings, oh my!)
- A refutation of Victorian fashions and virtues - and body type! (Constance Chatterley from D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* bemoans how her body is out of fashion in the Jazz Age)
- Women who party and flirt attain “fun” but sometimes scandalous images

Alice Joyce

Actress, 1926

The Flapper aesthetic



Jazz Age Film

- *Our Dancing Daughters* - 1928 - starring a young Joan Crawford as Diana Medford, a “good” girl who lives a “flapper” lifestyle
- Shows the double-standards of the age - it’s more “okay” for young women to be liberated in the 1920s, but they’re expected to settle down and lead traditional domestic lives after awhile
- Party girls are depicted as “fun,” but if they’re *TOO* fun, they’re “damaged goods.” Hmm!
- A late silent film directed by Harry Beaumont; we’re on the cusp of the synched dialog “talkie” era! 1927’s *The Jazz Singer* is the first synchronized dialog, synchronized soundtrack film - starring singer, dancer, actor, and comedian Al Jolson

Video Response #2

- What seems to be this film's view of young "flapper" women? Give examples.
- Why is Di put forward as deserving of love and happiness while Ann is not?
- Does the film allow the young female characters to be both virtuous, good people AND liberated women exercising agency over their own lives?
- How can the young women portrayed in the film reconcile their "flapper" images with society's desire for women to "settle down" into domestic life?
- How would Crystal Eastman feel about this story, and these characters? Explain why.