

## 2 The Twenties Woman

TERMS & NAMES  
• flapper  
• double standard

**LEARN ABOUT** changes in lifestyles, jobs, and families during the 1920s  
**TO UNDERSTAND** how women's roles changed.

### ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

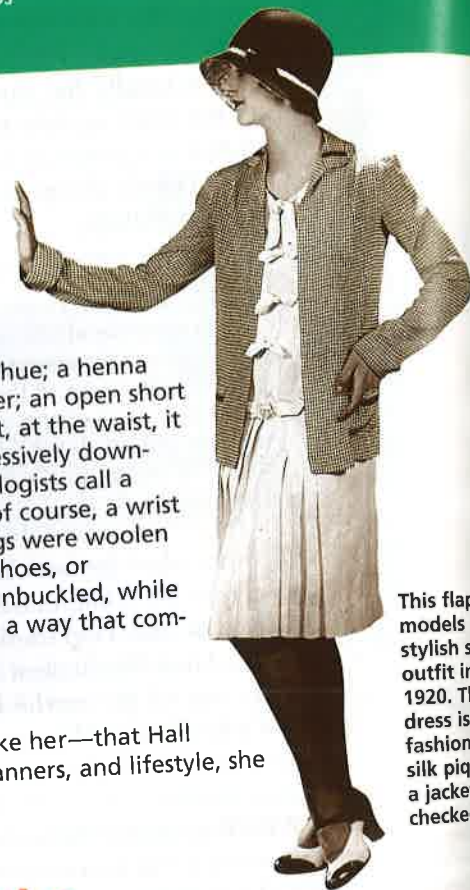
One January day in 1922, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall was strolling down the street when he encountered a young woman. She was about 16, "comely, happy, innocent," and Hall took the "liberty to look at her . . . carefully."

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

She wore a knitted hat, with hardly any brim, of a flame or bonfire hue; a henna scarf; two strings of Betty beads, of different colors, twisted together; an open short coat, with ample pockets; a skirt with vertical stripes so pleated that, at the waist, it seemed very dark, but the alternate stripes of white showed progressively downward, so that, as she walked, it gave something of what . . . psychologists call a flicker effect. On her right wrist were several bangles; on her left, of course, a wrist watch. Her shoes were oxfords, with a low broad heel. Her stockings were woolen and of brilliant hue. But most noticeable of all were her high overshoes, or galoshes. One seemed to be turned down at the top and entirely unbuckled, while the other was fastened below and flapped about her trim ankle in a way that compelled attention.

G. STANLEY HALL, "Flapper Americana Novissima," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1922

So noteworthy was this young woman—and millions of others like her—that Hall wrote a long article about the Twenties woman. In her fashions, manners, and lifestyle, she represented a gathering social revolution.



This flapper models a stylish summer outfit in June 1920. The dress is fashioned in silk piqué with a jacket of checked crepe.

### Young Women Change the Rules

By the 1920s, the experiences of World War I, the pull of cities, and changing attitudes had opened up a new world for many young Americans. These "wild young people," wrote one of them (John F. Carter, Jr., in a 1920 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*), were experiencing a world unknown to their parents: "We have seen man at his lowest, woman at her lightest, in the terrible moral chaos of Europe. We have been forced to question, and in many cases to discard, the religion of our fathers. . . . We have been forced to live in an atmosphere of 'to-morrow we die,' and so, naturally, we drank and were merry." In the rebellious, pleasure-loving air of the Twenties, many women began to assert their independence and demand the same freedoms as men.

**THE FLAPPER** During the Twenties, a new ideal emerged for some women: the **flapper**, an emancipated young woman who embraced the new fashions and urban attitudes of the day. Even though many young women donned the new outfits and flouted tradition, the flapper was more of an image of rebellious youth than a widespread reality. Even so, the casual, boyish fashions of the 1920s reflected this image of a new, sophisticated woman. Prewar clothes disappeared into attics and trash bins—all those dark and prim ankle-length dresses, whalebone corsets, petticoats, black stockings, and high-laced shoes. Out of the shopping bags came close-fitting stockings; sleek pumps; strings of beads; and bracelets. Flappers clipped their long hair into boyish bobs and dyed them jet black. The finishing touches were rouge on the cheeks and "kissproof" lipstick on the lips. "The prevailing feminine ideal was a type that suggested criminality—not an unnatural reflection of the speakeasy life introduced by prohibition," said a writer for *Life* magazine.

The new fashions reflected a new attitude. Some women in the 1920s acted differently, too, as psychologist Hall noticed in the young woman he observed that day in January 1922.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

We were on a long block that passed a college campus, where the students were foregathering for afternoon sports. She was not chewing gum, but was occasionally bringing some tidbit from her pocket to her mouth, taking in everything in sight, and her gait was swagger and superior. 'Howdy, Billy,' she called to a youth whom I fancied a classmate; and 'Hello, boys,' was her greeting to three more a little later.

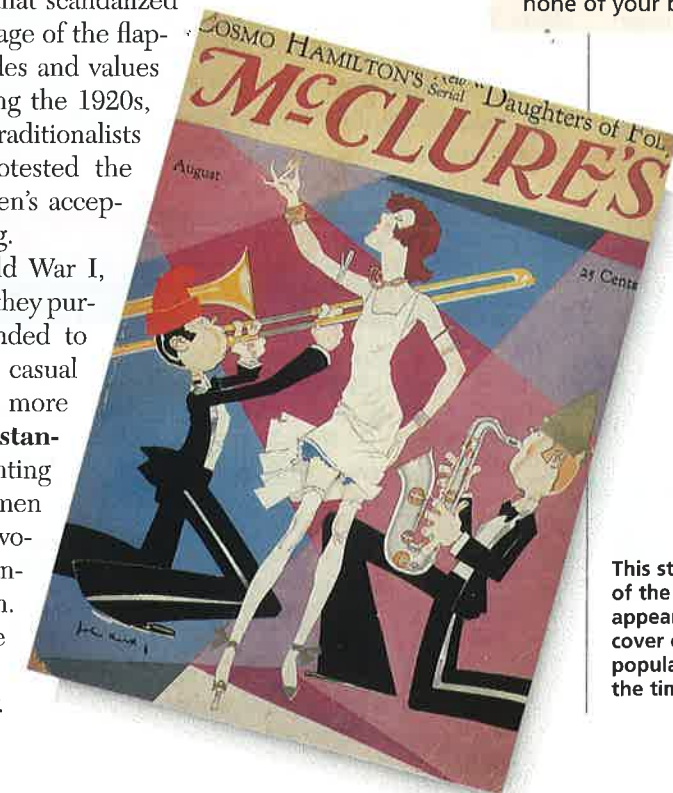
G. STANLEY HALL, "Flapper Americana Novissima," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1922

Like the young woman Hall observed, many young Twenties females became more assertive. In their bid for equal status with men, some began smoking cigarettes and drinking in public, actions that would have ruined their reputations not many years before. They danced the fox trot, camel walk, tango, lindy hop, and shimmy with abandon. Early in the decade, young women who still wore corsets left them behind when they went to dances for fear that they might be called "ironsides" or spend the evening as a wallflower. Some women learned to play golf and competed with men on the fairways.

Attitudes toward marriage changed as well. Many middle-class men and women began to view marriage as more of an equal partnership, although both agreed that housework and child-rearing were a woman's job.

**THE DOUBLE STANDARD** Magazines, newspapers, and advertisements promoted the image of the flapper, and young people openly discussed relationships in ways that scandalized their elders. However, the image of the flapper did not reflect the attitudes and values of many young people. During the 1920s, morals loosened only so far. Traditionalists in churches and schools protested the new, casual dances and women's acceptance of smoking and drinking.

In the years before World War I, when men "courted" women, they pursued only women they intended to marry. In the 1920s, however, casual dating became increasingly more accepted. Even so, a **double standard**—a set of principles granting greater sexual freedom to men than to women—required women to observe stricter standards of behavior than did men. As a result, many women were pulled back and forth between the old standards and the new.



This stylized rendition of the flapper appeared on the cover of *McClure's*, a popular magazine of the time.

NOW & THEN

#### THE MISS AMERICA PAGEANT

"There she is, Miss America; there she is, your ideal." These are the opening words to the song that came to represent the Miss America pageant.

This tradition began in 1921 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Hotel owners had dreamed up the bathing-beauty pageant in 1920 to attract tourists to the city after Labor Day. The first Miss America was Margaret Gorman, a petite, innocent 16-year-old from Washington, D.C. The second was 15-year-old Mary Katherine Campbell from Columbus, Ohio, a straight-A high school student with red hair and tiny, size-three feet. Campbell recalled her road to the title:

"I was pretty naive when I was starting. . . . Mercy, after all I was only fifteen. You were supposed to be sixteen, so I was sixteen, but I was really only fifteen in May. I came home and told my mother, 'I was chosen Miss Columbus, and they said it's because of my figure. Mother, what's a figure?' My mother said: 'It's none of your business.'"



## Women Shed Old Roles at Home and at Work

The fast-changing world of the 1920s produced new roles for women in the workplace and new trends in family life. A booming industrial economy opened new work opportunities for women in offices, factories, stores, service jobs, and professions. The same economy churned out time-saving appliances and products that reshaped the roles of housewife and mother.



A young woman in 1920 works as an expert typesetter in a publishing house.

**NEW WORK OPPORTUNITIES** The wartime trend of working women continued into the Twenties, but opportunities for women changed with growing mechanization and the return of men to the work force. In the 1920s, nearly 1 million female college graduates moved into the “women’s professions” of teaching and nursing, and thousands more became librarians and social workers. The number of women bankers, lawyers, police officers, and probation officers rose, too.

Big businesses required extensive correspondence and record keeping, creating a huge demand for clerical workers. Two million women seized the opportunity and took jobs as typists, filing clerks, secretaries, stenographers, and office machine operators. In addition, about 800,000 women became clerks in stores, and about 2 million took jobs on assembly lines. A handful of women broke the old stereotypes by doing work once reserved for men, such as flying airplanes,

driving taxis, and drilling oil wells.

By 1930, 10 million women were earning wages; however, they were only 24 percent of American workers. The battle for equality in the workplace had just begun. Medical schools imposed a 5 percent quota on female admissions. Consequently, the number of women doctors declined between 1910 and 1920. Few women rose to managerial jobs, and wherever they worked, women earned less than men. Fearing female competition for well-paying jobs, men argued that women were just temporary workers whose real job was at home. Between 1900 and 1930, the patterns of discrimination and inequality for women in the business world were established.

**THE CHANGING FAMILY** Widespread social and economic changes reshaped the family. The birthrate was continually dropping during the century and it dropped at a slightly faster rate in the 1920s as married women had fewer children. The decline in the birthrate during the 1920s was due in part to the wider availability of birth-control information.

At the same time, social and technological innovations simplified household labor and family life. Stores now overflowed with ready-made clothes, sliced bread, and canned foods. Children spent their days at school. Agencies and spe-

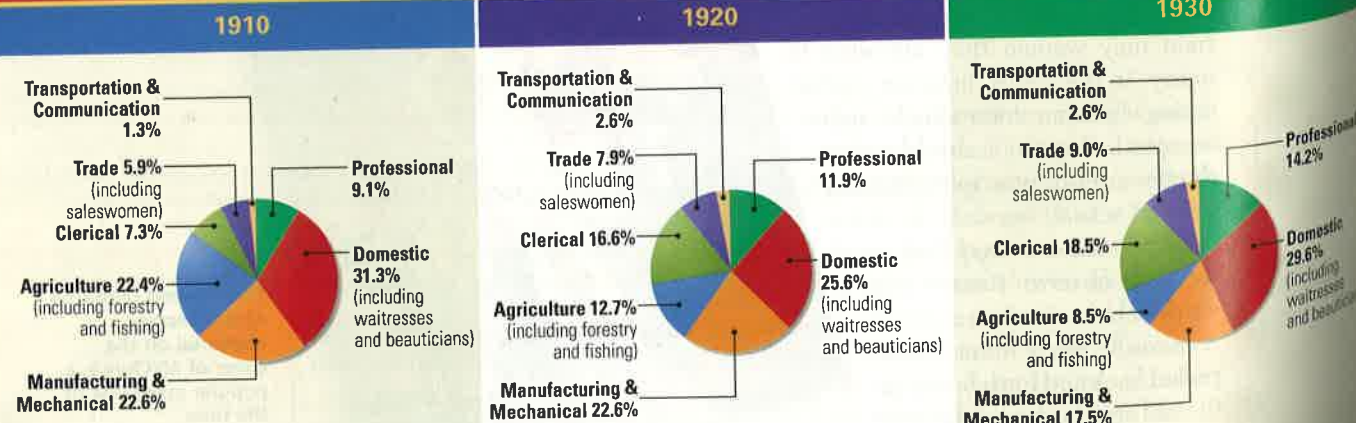
**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**B. Recognizing Effects** How did the growth of business and industry affect women?

### SKILLBUILDER

#### INTERPRETING CHARTS

According to the pie charts, in which area of work did the percentage of women decline the most between 1910 and 1930? In which area did the percentage of women increase the most?

### Women’s Changing Employment, 1910–1930



Source: *Women Who Work* by Grace Hutchins

cial homes helped care for elderly parents. As various agencies and institutions handled more and more family tasks, many middle-class housewives, the main shoppers and money managers, focused their attention on their homes, husbands, children, and pastimes. “I consider time for reading clubs and my children more important than . . . careful housework and I just don’t do it,” said an Indiana woman in the 1920s.

Marriages were increasingly based on the personal choices of the two people involved rather than on the choices of their families. During the 1920s, many couples ended marriages they might have tolerated earlier. By the end of the decade, the divorce rate had doubled.

Despite these many changes, the vast majority of married women remained homemakers since many people felt that wives who worked did so because their husbands had failed as breadwinners. Those women who did work included working-class women whose families needed the income and women with college degrees whose families also often needed the income. Both groups quickly discovered the pressure of juggling work and family, but the strain on working-class women was more severe. Helen Wright, who worked for the Women’s Bureau in Chicago, recorded the struggle of an Irish mother of two.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

She worked in one of the meat-packing companies, pasting labels from 7 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. She had entered the eldest child at school but sent her to the nursery for lunch and after school. The youngest was in nursery all day. She kept her house “immaculately clean and in perfect order,” but to do so worked until eleven o’clock every night in the week and on Saturday night she worked until five o’clock in the morning. She described her schedule as follows: on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday she cleaned one room each night; Saturday afternoon she finished the cleaning and put the house in order; Saturday night she washed; Sunday she baked; Monday night she ironed.

HELEN WRIGHT, quoted in *Wage-Earning Women*

As women adjusted to changing roles, some also struggled with rebellious adolescents, who put an unprecedented strain on families. With stricter child labor laws and the move to compulsory education, children stayed in school through their teens—a time when youth in earlier generations had begun to work. Teens in the 1920s studied and socialized with other teens and spent less time with their families. As peer pressure intensified, some adolescents resisted parental control.

This theme of adolescent rebelliousness can be seen in much of the popular culture of the 1920s. Education and entertainment reflected the conflict between traditional attitudes and modern ways of thinking.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**C. Recognizing Effects** What were some of the changes that affected the family in the 1920s?

### Section 2 Assessment

#### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify:  
• flapper  
• double standard

**2. SUMMARIZING** Copy the concept web shown below and add to it examples that illustrate the concepts.



Write a paragraph explaining how you think women’s lives changed most dramatically in the 1920s.

**3. ANALYZING** During the 1920s, a double standard required women to observe stricter codes of behavior than men. Do you think that some women of this decade made real progress toward placing both genders on an equal footing? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

#### THINK ABOUT

- psychologist G. Stanley Hall’s observations on pages 618 and 619
- the flapper’s style and image
- changing views of marriage

**4. FORMING OPINIONS** Today the term “glass ceiling” refers to the barriers women and minorities encounter in seeking higher career positions. In your opinion, could this term be applied to women’s job opportunities during the 1920s? Cite evidence to support your answer.

#### THINK ABOUT

- technology’s impact on jobs
- women’s battle for equality
- roadblocks to professional success for women

*“You younger women have a harder task than ours. You will want equality in business, and it will be even harder to get than the vote.”*

ANNA HOWARD SHAW,  
VETERAN SUFFRAGIST