

THE FLAPPERS: A ROMANTIC AND SEXUAL REVOLUTION IN THE TWENTIES FROM THE EYES OF FITZGERALD'S *BERNICE BOBS HER HAIR*

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Abstract: *Most of Fitzgerald's novels and stories start as a romance of love or a fantasy of extravagant glamour in representing his characters. Bernice Bobs Her Hair, however, suggests Fitzgerald's different approach by reducing this element. Critics believe that it is simply because it is a short story, or maybe because it is more based on his personal concern about the society. Nevertheless, this work has surprised many people that latter become Fitzgerald's unique characteristics in writing his fictions.*

Compared to other Fitzgerald's work, Bernice's settings and the interplay between its characters and the places they live are quite simple. However, this simplicity contains deceptive symbolism that replicates American culture in the twenties. Fitzgerald's unparalleled representation of Jazz Age as a time of post war's confusion as well as negative consequence of industrialism is brilliantly pictured in this story.

Fitzgerald uses the twenties, the time setting of the story, as a source of imagery objects that reflects social trends and individual desires. Although he uses local and restricted settings for the action site of the story, the impression of America in the twenties can be strongly felt in this story. Such quality, the writer argues, proves the outstanding ability of Fitzgerald's fiction in picturing the story with its complexities and sophistication that crosses the barrier of time and space.

This article analyzes an old topic, but relatively a challenging subject in most of Fitzgerald's fiction: its connection to the nineteen twenties

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of America. It tries to look at the dynamic of the women in the twenties not only from the view of Fitzgerald as an author, but is more likely through panoramic view of the social and psychological landscape of the time. The writer argues and confirms Fitzgerald's excellent aesthetic and philosophical quality in picturing cultural dynamic of a society.

Key words : Jazz Age, Fitzgerald, nineteen twenties of America

THE FLAPPER

by Dorothy Parker

The Playful flapper here we see,
The fairest of the fair
She's not what Grandma used to be,
You might say, au contraire.
Her girlish ways may make a stir,
Her manners cause a scene,
But there is no more harm in her
Than in a submarine

She nightly knocks for many a goal
The usual dancing men.
Her speed is great, but her control
is something else again.
All spotlights focus on her pranks.
All tongues her prowess herald.
For which she well may render thanks
to God and Scott Fitzgerald.

Her golden rule is plain enough
Just get them young and treat them rough

INTRODUCTION

Bernice Bobs Her Hair was Fitzgerald's fourth *Saturday Evening Post* story published on May 1st 1920 and has provided the subject for the dust-jacket illustration when it was collected in a compilation entitled *Flappers*

and Philosophers. The story occupies an important position in the Fitzgerald's standard as an amusing early treatment of a subject that he would later examine more seriously: the competition for social success and the determination with which his characters - especially the young women - engage in it.

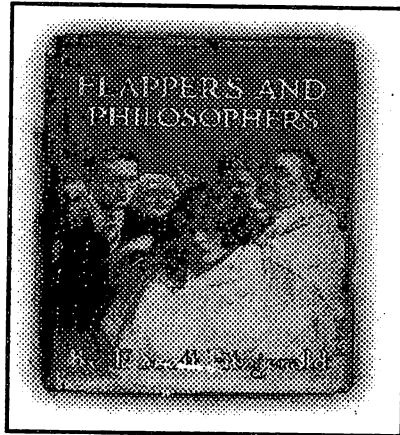


Figure 1: Fitzgerald's *Flappers and Philosopher* with a picture of Bernice in "Bernice Bobbed Her Hair" as the theme cover.

The story was based on a memo that Fitzgerald wrote to his younger sister, Annabel, advising her how to achieve popularity with boys, i.e. "To cultivate deliberate physical grace", Fitzgerald wrote to her advising the importance of physical appearance for woman in the twenties. In *Bernice Bobs Her Hair*, Fitzgerald portrays this view in the context of rivalry between two young women: Bernice Eau Claire and Marjorie Harvey as if the world around them has turned upside down.

As in other stories, Fitzgerald portrayed the society in the twenties from the eyes of the rich and wealthy, which he called "the gallery." Fitzgerald in the story used the contrast between city and rural areas, school and home, church and bar to accentuate the gap between youthful romantic ideals and harsh realities. He mostly used the city setting to present an even fresher, wider, and bleaker view of the increasingly urbanized American society of the 1920s. This is understandable since by the time Fitzgerald started his

writing career, the city had become the center of modern life. The urban setting has strengthened Fitzgerald's view in emerging the public's curiosity about the excitement and complexity of the urban areas. The fast-growing dominance of the city in modern American life amazed him and instigated to discover the essential meaning of city life.

THE STORY

The story began on the scene in the golf-course and country-club full of caddies, ingenious chauffeurs, and golfers. It focused on the story of Bernice Eau Claire, a simple country girl who visits her cousin Marjorie Harvey, a spoiled young woman who was proud of being the member of the new modern society. Bernice experienced the conflict between the old values with the new values introduced by Marjorie during her short stay in a city. As a simple country girl, there were certain rules in the new society that Bernice did not understand such as the rule of being cut in on a dance that determines someone's popularity among others. Being popular in the twenties was as important as the only means to be able to fit in a society. In the story, reputation was gained from an act of being different.

Bernice's adventure in the new "wilderness" finally came to a point when she decided to cut her hair in order to be different and to be accepted in the society. Her conversation with Marjorie showed that girls had to attract men in order to be noticed:

Well, you've got to learn to be nice to men who are sad birds. You look as if you'd been insulted whenever you're thrown with any except the most popular boys. Why, Bernice, I'm cut in on every few feet—and who does most of it? Why, those very sad birds. No girl can afford to neglect them. They're the big part of any crowd. Young boys too shy to talk are the very best conversational practice. Clumsy boys are the best dancing practice. If you can follow them and yet look graceful you can follow a baby tank across a barb-wire sky-scraper. (www.sc.edu/Fitzgerald/Bernice/.html)²

Bernice sighed profoundly, but Marjorie was not through:

If you go to a dance and really amuse, say, three sad birds that dance with you; if you talk so well to them that they forget they're stuck with you, you've done something. They'll come back next time, and gradually so many sad birds will dance with you that the attractive

² The text is scanned from its 1st book appearance *Flappers and Philosophers*, New York: Scribners, 1922, copyright by the board of trustees of the University of California, last updated 22 July 1996 in <http://www.sc.edu/Fitzgerald/Bernice/.html>

boys will see there's no danger of being stuck-then they'll dance with you."

"Yes," agreed Bernice faintly. "I think I begin to see."

"And finally," concluded Marjorie, "poise and charm will just come. You'll wake up some morning knowing you've attained it, and men will know it too." (www.sc.edu/Fitzgerald/Bernice/.html)

What makes this story considered as one of the most important of Fitzgerald's work is in how it portrays the emergence of a new generation. A generation that is totally new and so revolutionary that is often considered as radical generation. Fitzgerald witnessed the growing tendency of the young generations in the twenties to move toward the new values that was in equivalent with the growing of industrialism. A great number of movement of the people from rural to urban areas have changed American society from a traditional conservative into a mechanized, mass and fast moving community.

The change, however, is not always smooth. In the beginning of the story, Bernice contrasted her old values with Marjorie's. Her conflicts have turned her view in looking at the society. There was a deep contrast between the values. She started to look at Marjorie as an example of a modern woman in the twenties: charming and lively, which was popularly known as "Flappers".

IMAGE AND CHARACTER OF FLAPPERS

The term "flapper" first appeared in Great Britain after World War I. It was used to describe young girls who had not yet entered womanhood. In the June 1922 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, G. Stanley Hall describe these awkward woman as "... a fledgling, yet in the nest, and vainly attempting to fly while its wings have only pinfeathers; and I recognized that the genius of 'slanguage' had made the squab the symbol of budding girlhood."³

In William and Mary Morris' *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, Flapper is described as "a giddy, attractive and slightly unconventional young thing who- in H. L. Mencken's words was a somewhat foolish girl, full of wild surmises and inclined to revolt against the precepts and admonitions of

³ Hall, 772 and Ralph K. Andrist, ed., *The American Heritage: History of the 20's & 30's* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1970) 130.

her elders.”⁴ From this point, the word Flappers had both an image and an attitude.

Authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and artists such as John Held Jr. use the term half reflecting and half creating the image and style of the flapper. Fitzgerald described the ideal flapper as “lovely, expensive, and about nineteen.”⁵ Held accentuated the flapper image by drawing young girls wearing unbuckled galoshes that would make a “flapping” noise when walking⁶

Like the social change in the community, the Flappers’ appearance consisted of drastic - to some, shocking - changes in women’s clothing and hair. Nearly every article of clothing was trimmed down and lightened in order to make movement easier. It is said that girls “parked” their corsets when they were to go dancing.⁷

The new, energetic dances of the Jazz Age, required women to be able to move freely, something the “ironsides” didn’t allow. Replacing the pantaloons and corsets were underwears called “step-ins.” The outer clothing of flappers is even still extremely identifiable (see Figure 2). This look called “*garconne*” (“little boy”), was instigated by Coco Chanel.⁸ To look more like a boy, the women would tightly wound their chest with strips of cloth in order to flatten it.⁹ The waists of flapper clothes were dropped to the hipline. Women would wear stockings - made of rayon (“artificial silk”) starting in 1923 - which the flapper often wore rolled over a garter belt.¹⁰

The hem of the skirts also started to rise in the 1920s. At first the hem only rose a few inches, but from 1925 to 1927 a flapper’s skirt fell just below the knee. The skirt comes just an inch below her knees, overlapping by a faint fraction her rolled and twisted stockings. The idea is that when

⁴ Morris, William and Mary. *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, 2nd ed. Harper Collins, 1988.

⁵ As quoted in Jackie Hatton, “Flappers,” *St James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, 2000.

⁶ Ralph K. Andrist, ed., *The American Heritage: History of the 20’s & 30’s* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1970):130

⁷ G. Stanley Hall, “Flapper Americana Novissima,” *Atlantic Monthly* 129 (June 1922): 773

⁸ As quoted in Andrist : 130.

⁹ As quoted in Jackie Hatton, “Flappers,” *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, 2000: 112.

¹⁰ Judith S. Baughman, ed., *American Decades: 1920-1929* (New York: Manly, Inc., 1996): 157

she walks in a bit of a breeze, you shall now and then observe the knee (which is *not* rouged - that's just newspaper talk) but always in an accidental, Venus-surprised-at-the-bath sort of way.¹¹



Figure 2: Ideal women of the twenties (left) and of woman in bobbed hair (right)

Flappers also started wearing make-up, something that had previously been only worn by loose women. Rouge, powder, eye-liner, and lipstick became extremely popular.

Beauty is the fashion in 1925. She is frankly, heavily made up, not to imitate nature, but for an altogether artificial effect - pallor mortis, poisonously scarlet lips, richly ringed eyes - the latter looking not so much debauched (which is the intention) as diabetic.¹²

The spirit to trim down the outfit, was comparable with the spirit of American industrialism, which was reflected in Flapper's attitude. After the World War I, the younger generations was introduced with a brand new values caused by wide generation gap between the old and the young and teenage generations. Additionally, fast movement of industrialism also fostered the growth of American entertainment and mass-media industry such as Charlie Chaplin's silent movie that help broaden the image of the flapper's attitude and appearance to the public. (see Figure 3)

Historically, the image of a new woman started even before the World War I. *The Gibson Girl*, a style inspired by Charles Dana Gibson's drawings, pictures a woman whom her long hair was loosely on top of her head and wore a long straight skirt and a shirt with a high collar. She was feminine

¹¹ Bruce Bliven, "Flapper Jane," *The New Republic* 44 (Sept. 9, 1925): 65.

¹² Bliven, 65.

but broke several gender barriers for her outfit allowed her to participate in sports, including golf, roller skating, and bicycling.



Figure 3: Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* illustrates how modernism has trapped the people inside it.

Then, the World War I started. Young men in the world were used as the target for the older generation's ideals and mistakes. The slow destruction rate in the frontline left no hope that they would survive long enough to return home. They found themselves imposed with an "eat-drink-and-be-merry-for-tomorrow-we-die spirit."¹³ During the war, however, people back home was introduced with new values of woman in order to support the war. Women were brought into the patriotic passion and aggressively entered the workforce. This radical movement has changed the image of women in the US. To replace the men who fight in the frontline, women become the backbone of the economy. Women were not wearing skirts, and make-up anymore. They begun to wear men's clothes -most of them even wore men factory aprons such as in the steel industry—that facilitate their function, and practicality in doing their job. These conditions, had slowly but surely changed the American women to be more independent and more self-reliant than before.

When the war was over in 1918, the war survivors went home and the world tried to return to normalcy. Unfortunately, settling down in peacetime was more difficult than it was expected especially for the teenagers who experienced a social gap in the community. Both the boys and the girls of this generation had broken out of society's structure, which they found it

¹³ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1931): 94.

very difficult to return. The boys who experienced the near death and violent experience had difficulty to settle down into the regular routine of American life as if nothing had happened as to accept the moral values and norms of the elders. Women, on the other hand, were just as anxious as the men to avoid returning to society's rules and roles after the war. In the age of the *Gibson Girl*, young women do not date. They waited until a proper young man formally paid her interest with suitable intentions such as marriage. However, nearly a whole generation of young men had died in the war, leaving nearly a whole generation of young women without suitable partners. Young women decided that they were not willing to waste away their young lives waiting for a husband; they were going to enjoy life. The "younger generation" was breaking away from the old set of values.

The complexity of social life and the confusion in the twenties has created a serious social tension. The Flappers' most distinguishable image was mostly laid on the drastic or even shocking changes in women's clothing and hair. Stark truthfulness, fast living, and sexual behavior became their general attitude. Flappers seemed to cling to youth as if it were to leave them at any moment. They took risks and were reckless. They wanted to be different, to announce their departure from the *Gibson Girl's* morals. So they smoked. This was something only men had done previously. Actually, smoking wasn't the most outrageous of the flapper's rebellious actions. Flappers drank alcohol. At a time when the United States had outlawed alcohol (prohibition), young women were starting the habit early. Some even carried hip-flasks full so as to have it on hand. More than a few adults didn't like to see tipsy young women. Flappers had a scandalous image as the "giddy flapper, rouged and clipped, careening in a drunken stupor to the lewd strains of a jazz quartet."¹⁴

The Gibson Girl, who prided herself on her long, beautiful, lush hair, was shocked when the flapper cut her's off. The short haircut was called the "bob" which was later replaced by an even shorter haircut, the "shingle" or "Eton" cut. The shingle cut was slicked down and had a curl on each side of the face that covered the woman's ears. Flappers often finished the ensemble with a felt, bell-shaped hat called a *cloche*. Though Flapper's clothing was modeled after little boys' outfits, flappers displayed their sexuality. As described in the May 1920 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, flappers "trot

¹⁴ Hall: 771.

like foxes, limp like lame ducks, one-step like cripples, and all to the barbaric yawp of strange instruments which transform the whole scene into a moving-picture of fancy ball in bedlam.”¹⁵ Major changes also happened in women’s clothing and hair. The new energetic dances of the Jazz Age required the women to be able to move freely. For the Younger Generation, the dances fit their fast-paced life-style.



Figure 4: Life Magazine’s cover depicting the social trends of the era.

This image was accompanied with the ‘wild’ way of expressing it. “The Jazz Age”, a term used by Fitzgerald that refer to the era, was born to accommodate the fast moving people in the twenties and became the most popular past-times for flappers. Quick steps in many popular dances such as Charleston, Black Bottom, and the Shimmy suggest that people were moving in synchronized motion with the American economy. The American economy in the twenties were filled with new inventions and new rich and wealthy people and families. Great inventors and businessman such as Henry Ford and Thomas Alva Edison, were some characters in the twenties that made significant contributions to American economy as well as the birth of American new sub culture. Similar to Bell’s telephone invention, Henry Ford’s innovations in mass producing not only made the automobile as an

¹⁵ Hatton: 112

affordable mean of transportation, but also fostered the birth of the new values. Unlike the bicycle and train, cars were more personal, fast and risky — perfect for the flapper's attitude. Flappers, moreover, not only insisted on riding in them; they drove them. Unfortunately for their parents, flappers didn't just use cars to ride in. The back seat became a popular location for the new popular sexual activity: the petting.¹⁶

At the end of the 1920s, the stock market crashed and the world was plunged into the Great Depression. Frivolity and recklessness was forced to come to an end. However, much of the flapper's changes remained. They dropped the corset, chopped their hair, dropped layers of clothing to increase ease of movement, wore make-up, created the concept of dating, and became a sexual person. They created what many consider "new" or "modern" woman. These facts were captured in Fitzgerald's story. Although he did not refer to any of his characters as flapper, Bernice's act in bobbing her hair symbolized the radical change in her community. It also suggested that there was no other way to attract others unless she made a radical change. In most cases, this action brought both admiration as well as disparagement.

Bernice's daring act in bobbing her hair showed this phenomenon. Marjorie was astonished and afraid that she will be accused of encouraging her to cut her hair, but also she envied Bernice daring act in cutting her hair regardless of what people think about her. On the other hand, Bernice felt that she has fulfilled her task in the new society. Bernice's extreme decision by cutting her hair has shown that there was a social movement and also a tendency in changing the world in the most radical way in the US. Fitzgerald, however, did not justify the righteousness of the characters. He symbolized Bernice as a simple American girl in the twenties who was somewhat confused in the beginning, and made a daring decision in order to cope with the radical change in her social community. At the end of the story, Bernice tossed her cut braid on Warren's porch. This showed that she has entered a new stage in her life by conquering her old values and became following the mainstream of American culture, which was totally in contrary with her previous life.

CONCLUSION

Bernice Au Claire's decision to bob her hair explains the radical movement among the youngsters in the twenties in order to be accepted in

¹⁶ Ellen Welles Page, "A Flapper's Appeal to Parents," *Outlook* 132 (Dec. 6, 1922): 607.

society. While at the same time, Marjorie's loss of her braids symbolizes the defeat of the old Victorian values. These conditions bring confusions among the teenagers in the twenties. Social transitions from old values to the new could not be made smoothly because economic wealth was not supported by the readiness of the people. The unequal number of man and woman after the war made the condition worse. Inspired by their mother who are more independent than before, young woman has to be more aggressive in order to get man's attention.

The spirit to gain popularity as represented by Bernice in the story reflects the consequences of post war social revolution in the US especially in major cities. Advertisement, industrialism, commercialism as well as modernism has created a chaotic atmosphere as clearly pictured in the character of Bernice Eau Claire, a rural girl who came to a big city. Fitzgerald uses the confusion that Bernice represented to illustrate social revolution that spread wildly across the nation. The old and new values are overlapping each other, which creates confusion. Marjorie, on the other hand, is a product of American mainstream, whom represented the young American woman in the twenties, i.e. the flapper.

Bernice's daring decision in bobbing her hair symbolizes the radical change in the US, that is, the independent woman of the twenties. Bernice's act as a new flapper symbolizes the birth of a new generation that is far from its roots. Characters such as Warren McIntyre and Otis Ormonde symbolizes the conflict between two different things: old and new, which is collided each other. At the end of the story, Fitzgerald leaves the audience to judge and to think about the story, which is not only focusing on the confusion of a young women but on the radical social movement that has changed American sub culture in the way people never imagine before as reflected on his next novel: *The Great Gatsby*.

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