

## **Women's Liberation in 1920s Myth or Reality?**

1. The decade following World War I proved to be the most explosive decade of the century. America emerged as a world power, the 19th amendment was ratified, and the expansion of capitalism welcomed the emergence of consumerism. The consumer era was established, which generated new spending opportunities for most Americans in the 1920's. From the latest fashions to the world of politics, ideologies collided to construct a society based on contradicting principles. These powerful ideologies infected men and women of all classes with an inescapable desire for material possessions; however this ideological tug-of-war affected women the most. Although legally declared citizens, society's assumption of motherhood and domesticity, being the only professions for women, still remained supreme in the country that supposedly promoted equal opportunity. New sex role stereotypes appeared throughout society and women became identified with the consumer culture for they were "major purchasers of products" and "constituted a crucial underpinning of the economy" (Dumenil 144). No group was more responsive to this than the advertising industry, which introduced new images while reinforcing traditional stereotypes. As speculation on women's rights grew tiresome after suffrage had been won, women separated in search of their own individuality; however a woman's identity was based on the sex-role stereotypes advertisements continuously portrayed which in turn transformed cultural expectations and thwarted women's autonomy.

2. The emergence of consumerism allowed advertisements to be viewed worldwide. "Across the nation, women in cities, towns and farms paged through issues of mass-circulation magazines like the Ladies' Home Journal, Woman's Home Companion, and the American Home Magazine, studying their often extensive fashion and home décor features and advertisements" (Sterns and Lewis 379). Due to advances in technology, significant changes in advertising appeared in the 1920's. In the latter half of the

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1900's ads were illustrated in color for the first time and the layout of most magazines changed. Advertisements, in the 1910 Ladies' Home Journal, were mostly located in the back of the magazine. Though due to the popularization of name brands, ads moved to the front as competition between products produced more revenue.

3. The new layout and colorful images proved to be a success as readers were provided with lively illustrations that advertised popular names and fashionable trends. Historian Susan Strasses in her study of American mass-market development "found that by the early 1920's Americans were requesting brand names from their grocers" (Scanlon 31). In addition to the introduction of new advertising techniques, it has been estimated that 94% of the United States, including African Americans, could read. Even so advertisements only marketed towards the white middle class for they were the one's generating the money; and "between 1910 and 1929, the average purchasing power of Americans rose 40%" (Scanlon 12).

4. Contrary to belief, the independent young woman connected with post-World War I actually emerged in the early 1900's. By 1930 481,000 women attended college, which is a significant increase compared to the 85,000 women who attended college in 1900; however the courses offered to women differed greatly. At women's colleges before 1914, "a student might take classes in Urban Social and Economic Conditions or Rural Social and Economic Conditions" but "by the middle of the 1920's courses in Husband and Wife, Motherhood, and the family as an economic unit" (Parrish 153) were mandatory in many of the prestigious women's colleges. The statistics reflect society's expectations regarding a woman's intellect. The independent woman was now forced to take subjects that pertained to her future occupation in the domestic sphere.

5. Women, before 1914, sought independence through working in a profession outside the home. They considered the profession of domesticity as uneventful and simply

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wanted more. Conversely the older generation held women's education responsible for promoting this independence and regarded the radical activities of the emerging youth as a threat to the family. One writer of the time defended the youth for she "saw herself and the women around her caught in a 'maelstrom of feminism'" (Scanlon 85); constantly surrounded by advertisements, pamphlets, and calendars that supported women's suffrage and independence. From the simple "Votes for Women" commercial advertisement to the "Susan B. Anthony Calendar" lined with sophisticated quotations advocating suffrage, it was a persuasive movement that gradually led to the ratification of the 19th amendment.

6. After suffrage had been won, women did not utilize the vote and the suffragist's incessant efforts were legally but not socially recognized. Rose Young in 1920 expressed the reason for the lack of political participation in the article, "The End of the Great Adventure". She insisted that women "had no preparation, no guidance, no civic training. It was up to women to train themselves and others to use the ballot wisely and well; they could depend on no one else" (Scanlon 127). This might have been true, however, women truly believed that equality had been achieved by the 19th amendment. Many of the advocates for suffrage felt they had accomplished their goal and went back to their every day lifestyles; as a result national organizations saw a decrease in membership. The National American Woman Suffrage Association "had two million members in 1920 but in 1930, after a decade of building, the league's rolls consisted of only 100,000 women" (Dumenil 107). In one decade the importance of women's rights subsided and their interests had moved on.

7. Since 1848, women continuously pressed for women's rights. It was an inescapable movement that motivated, influenced and most important of all united women from around the world. Women of all classes and races banded together under the common goal of equality; this essence

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allowed women to form their own individuality. Nevertheless the impression of sexual and political freedom permeated American society, and women tried to incorporate it into their lives. On the contrary women were unclear as to their proper place in society and the definition of womanhood. The advertising industry quickly jumped at this opportunity; one agency declared, "the proper study of mankind is man, but the proper study of markets is woman" (Sivulka 150). Subsequently, advertisers relied on psychological research and many hired behavioral psychologists. "Although some agencies expressed no interest in the new ideas, others like J. Walter Thompson, seemed obsessed with discovering—and then—exploiting—the secrets of human nature"(Sivulka 148).

8. The enthusiasm women's liberation produced was exploited by advertisements for they linked the vote with products by using words such as "freedom" and "independence." "Advertisers recognized that politics, for many women, had become an essential rather than peripheral part of their self-definition, and promised that by consuming particular products women could prove themselves community-minded, politically astute, and sophisticated" (Scanlon 134). As a result ad campaigns manipulated women into buying items like cars, refrigerators and face creams. One advertisement for Pond's cold cream featured Alva Belmont, a member of the National Woman's Party, "operated with premise that women, even the rich and cultured, had to keep their youthful beauty. She asserted that a woman's importance rested on this. 'A woman who neglects her personal appearance loses half her influence,'" she stated. "The wise care of one's body constructs the frame encircling our mentality, the ability which insures the success of one's life. I advise a daily use of Pond's Two Creams" (Scanlon 132). Another ad for Royal Baking Powder illustrates women suffragists campaigning for the "fight for pure food." The ad read, "Women are enlisting all over the country in

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movements affecting the great issues of our times"... "Years ago alum was widely used in bleaching flour for bread. Doctors and chemists objected, women protested, and such use was prohibited. Today alum is used in some baking powders. It is necessary for the women to protest again. They will do it, and they will win" (Scanlon 135). The paradox of Alva Belmont's involvement exudes the impression that a woman's success depends on her appearance. Moreover the alum's baking soda advertisement reinforces gender stereotypes of the housewife by stressing her endeavor to clean up the nation in her "fight for pure food."

9. Sexual liberation was another freedom women thought they inherited from the 19th amendment. Many people as well as historians equate the sexual revolution with the Roaring Twenties; however the sexual revolution transpired as late as 1909 with the works of Freud, Jung, and Sanger. Their views provided the world with new ideas concerning a woman's sexuality and gradually changed the long-established universal rule that a woman must fulfill her only duty in life: to reproduce. Before the 19th amendment was ratified, the activists for women's rights, who fought for political freedom, also had supported sexual emancipation. Nevertheless after women won the right to vote, the ideas of Margaret Sanger, a leading activist for sexual liberation, were abandoned. Due to the lack of interest from women's organizations, she was forced to change her political approach; instead she argued the importance of eugenics and catered to the working class. The loose set of morals regarding women's sexuality accepted women's involvement in sexual activities such as petting before marriage. Regardless "it appears that according to prevailing norms, intercourse was still reserved as a prelude to marriage among engaged couples" (Dumenil 136).

10.

The "sexual revolution" of the 1920's was merely a phrase coined by the advertising industry. Sexual freedom

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became another image in the advertising world. "The rampant commercialization of sex, especially by Hollywood and Madison Avenue, reinforced gender stereotypes by emphasizing physical attractiveness as the most important feminine characteristic, a development that intensified women's passive role as both a consumer of beauty products and an object of consumption" (Parrish 157). By wearing cosmetics, fashionable clothes and other accessories, the ad industry expected to create the image of a sexy desirable female. One 1928 Vogue advertisement for Marie Barlow Cosmetics, emphasizes the importance of youth and beauty. The heading: "For men demand youth in women's faces!"... "Every time a woman looks in her mirror she remembers man's confessed admiration for youth in feminine faces." The ad not only correlates women with beauty products, it also implies that women should look beautiful not for herself, but for a man.

11. In conjunction with the "Sexual Revolution" the image of the flapper emerged. She was a powerful individual with sexual allure, who thought she was truly liberated from old Victorian ways. From her bright red lipstick, bobbed hair and fashionable clothes to smoking cigarettes, petting and consuming alcohol, the 1920's individual was defied a rebel by the older generation. Scott F. Fitzgerald in *Echoes of the Jazz Age* states that the "adolescents during the confusion of the War" were considered "the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually overreached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste" (6). According to Fitzgerald the flapper really emerged during World War I; almost five years before the 19th amendment was ratified. Shortly after, the flapper became an image exploited by the ad industry; by 1926 the flapper became a universal symbol and young women, good or bad, wanted to emulate her.

12. The advertising industry not only provided women with the image of the flapper but also defined her

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personality. The heading of a 1924 advertisement, "Flappers they may be – but know the art of feminine appeal" attempts to define the flapper. "First of all, of course they're young. And next they're smart. They know their way around. Judged by older standards, perhaps they are a bit sophisticated for their years. No silly mid-Victorian stuff for her! Unafraid she looks to the 20th century in the face" (Atwan 266). The ads use of lively illustration along with descriptive adjectives such as "young", "smart", "sophisticated", and "unafraid" not only painted the new woman's assumed portrait but also outlined her personality. Elizabeth Stevenson in *Babbits and Bohemians* describes the life of many of these so-called independent women. She explains that "many girls by the mid-twenties, however grew up, finished school, fell in love, married, all without any whif of the style of the type – yet bobbing their hair, doing their hems, learning to Charleston" (141). The liberated woman was merely a false image that camouflaged women as revolutionary flappers.

13. Although the flapper might have been sexually liberated to an extent and defied the traditional norms, she was always dependent on a man; her sexuality was always traded in for domesticity. The heading of a 1927 advertisement for S.O.S., "You think I'm a flapper but I can keep house" contradicts the liberated woman's identity. "If we get married, I'll keep my house better than mother does hers. But I'm not going to turn into a slave". The ad continues with a solution why "S.O.S. is so popular with the younger generation"... "She's painfully frank, sometimes, but I've found that she's usually mighty capable too... Girls today want more leisure and they get it by using short-cuts" (Sivulka 155). The preceding ad defines the flapper as the new emancipated woman whereas the S.O.S. advertisement insinuates that, whether a flapper or not, it is still a woman's duty to clean the pots and pans, which in turn typecasts that women are subservient to men.

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14. Women who ventured out into the economic sphere to try and find their individuality found it difficult to keep up with society's expectations. During World War I "women performed in many jobs that had never been considered suitable for them before" (Harriman 301). They proved to the world that their role in society was not biologically determined when they worked "as chimney sweeps, truck drivers, cement makers, steel workers and so forth" (301). Despite the increase of women in the workforce in the 1920's, oddly enough, domesticity and motherhood remained the chief occupations for women. Magazines "consistently attempted to make the household more systematic, more appealing to the women who wanted to use their education and intellect as well as their rolling pins" (Scanlon 65). Thus women returned back to the private sphere of the household after marriage, by 1930 "wives employed outside the home accounted for only 12% of the population" (Harriman 306). Many ads convinced women to believe housework was an exciting leisure activity and that by using products such as Libby's canned food, "The woman who never went out" would realize "there was more in the world than the view from her kitchen window."

It hurt—that sudden flash of seeing herself as others must see her. A drudge— that's what she was. One of the army of women past whom the world whirls gaily, while they grow older and more faded and colorless. Til finally one morning they wake up and realize that their chance to play has slipped away forever... She had allowed her housekeeping to absorb not all her time but her interest and vivacity (Atwan 19).

By using Libby's canned foods women were guaranteed to have more time for themselves.

15. Christine Frederick, a writer for the Ladies Home Journal, emphasized housework as a profession. In 1913, her article "How I Made my Country Kitchen Efficient"

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provided women with a diagram that offered a methodical approach to kitchen work. Later many ad agencies applied her idea to advertisements; if the steps were followed then women would have more freedom. The 1927 toastmaster ad constructed "An amazing new way to make toast: 1. Drop a slice of bread into the oven slot. 2. Press down the two levers. This automatically turns on the current and sets the time device. 3. POP! Up comes the toast automatically and when it's done the current automatically turns off" (Sivulka 161). In reality, the new household appliances did not give women more leisure time. In the Ladies' home journal the writer of the article "Selling Mrs. Consumer" expresses "because we housewives today have the tools to reach it, we dig every day after the dust that grandmother left to a spring cataclysm" (Dumenil 128). "Besides cleaner houses, advertisers typically suggested that women spend the time saved playing with their children, attending club activities, reading, playing golf, or going to the theater. None of the ads mentioned a career outside the home" (Sivulka 172).

16. The only time women entered the workforce were the years between college and marriage; otherwise it was not considered appropriate. "Many advice writers argued," from the Ladies' Home Journal "the experience of cooking and cleaning provided the unmarried 'girl' with the skill she would need later on as a married woman" (Scanlon 57). One ad for Listerine made women feel as if something was wrong with them if they were not married. The headline "Often a bridesmaid but never a bride" baits the reader into reading the solution: "Edna's case was really a pathetic one. Like every woman, her primary ambition was to marry" and "as her birthdays crept gradually toward the tragic thirty-mark, marriage seemed farther from her life than ever" (Sivulka 161). Even if a woman did work in the public sphere, advertisements like Lysol regarded her as "The woman who does man's work." As a result she simply could not "give way to the vagaries and nerves and weakness so

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long considered characteristic of the weaker sex, for her competition is not alone with men but with her own healthy, eager sisters—the woman must keep young" (Atwan 21). The secret to this was to prevent the usual feminine sicknesses by using Lysol.

17. Many ads recognized the workingwoman, however their messages were belittling for they continuously accentuated that once again the beautiful and clean woman was more successful than the working one. It defines her as a sexual object begging to be noticed by the omnipotent man; further the ad promotes the stereotype of women as the "weaker sex", which in turn influences society to believe it. Therefore the traditional sex role norms never change and women do not move forward as equals in society.

18. The cultural expectations of women engendered a society of individuals, who were confused and distressed. The research examines different explanations as to why the advertising industry had such an impact on society in the 1920's. It also analyzes advertisements in order to prove that the expectations of women were indefinite and contradicting. Nevertheless research on nonfiction diaries and stories should further be examined to get a better understanding of women in the 1920's. Similarly a study comparing and contrasting the advertising industry of today with the one of the twenties would help determine the effect different advertisements might have on people.

19. In *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, Sut Jhally and Ian Angus argue "that the media have become paramount in the construction of our cultural identity, indeed that we identify and construct ourselves as social beings through the mediation of images" (Luigi and Manca 31). The images develop into universal icons, which become the norm as advertisers repeatedly display these images in magazines, movies and commercials. Nonetheless "when norms are not explicit or are undergoing change, problems emerge" (Sari 15) and in the 1920's the norms regarding a woman's place in society were ambiguous and unrealistic.

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20. The advertising industry of the 1920's laid the foundation for the commercial worldwide business advertising is today. Furthermore it created a desired image women recognized as their own. Even though 1920's advertisements always highlighted the importance of individuality, a woman's identity was based on the names of products. As a result women found it difficult to model the "accepted image" and were forced to succumb to the false definition of womanhood. The difference between women of the 1920's and early 1900's was their power. Women of the early 1900's banded and worked together to advance their status in society. Even though a majority, the heterogeneous group of women in the twenties divided into individual groups that did not have influence within society. It is important that women join together and use their power to promote equal rights. Without women in the public sphere human achievement will diminish and thwart the progress of any country.