

"Notes on New Womanhood," Professor Catherine Lavender,  
Prepared for Students in HST 386: Women in the City, 1998.

## FLAPPER FANNY says



Ethel Hays, illustration from weekly comic *Flapper Fanny Says* (1926)

## *New Womanhood Defined*

Women's lives at the end of the nineteenth century were changing dramatically on various fronts, most visibly so for daughters middle and upper classes. Female education was expanding. Secondary school system growing rapidly. From 1890 to 1920, women comprised 55% all high school students and 60% all high school graduates. By 1900, all but three state universities admitted women on same terms as men (Virginia, Georgia and Louisiana). While only a tiny portion of Americans had college educations, the proportion of 18-21 year old undergraduates was on the increase, from 4% in 1900 to 8% in 1920. Women made up a growing portion of those undergraduates, as seen at University of Chicago: 40% in 1910 and almost 50% in 1920. Going to college was a badge of class privilege but for some women, it was also a badge of aspiration signifying goals beyond the ordinary horizons of most women. Acquiring higher education signified that a woman was busy with worldly and not just domestic occupations. White, native-born women were joining white foreign-born and black women in the labor force for first time and despite exploitative conditions under which they sometimes labored. These women were increasingly to be found in the previously male domains of business and the professions. The percentage of female professionals reached an historic peak in the early twentieth century while new and highly visible white collar occupations provided work for secretaries and salesgirls. Women in the professions were only 6.4% of non-agricultural female work force in 1870 but were 10% in 1900 and 13.3% in 1920, representing almost one million women.

Although fewer than 1% of all women in non-agricultural occupations were employed as clerical workers in 1870, by 1920 were more than 25%--two million in all. These "new women" represented to selves and to society a kind of vanguard of social usefulness and personal autonomy--independent womanhood. Women determined to extend boundaries and raise stakes woman movement.

Here, among the new women were the new feminists, described by Randolph Bourne, progressive intellectual at Columbia University:

"They are all social workers, or magazine writers in a small way. They are decidedly emancipated and advanced, and so thoroughly healthy and zestful, or at least it seems so to my unsophisticated masculine sense. They shock you constantly...They have an amazing combination of wisdom and youthfulness, of humor and ability, and innocence and self-reliance, which absolutely belies everything you will read in the story-books or any other description of womankind. They are of course all self-supporting and independent, and they enjoy the adventure of life; the full, reliant, audacious way in which they go about makes you wonder if the new woman isn't to be a very splendid sort of person."

### *The Emergence of the New Feminism*

Feminism was part of a free-ranging spirit of rebellion at the turn of the century. It severed the woman's movement from Christianity and conventional respectability. It was part of the broader "revolt against formalism" in American culture--refusal to heed the abstraction of womanhood, the calcified definitions of female character and nature handed down to them by previous generations. These new feminists were determined to "realize personality," to achieve self-determination through life, growth, and experience. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman described her: "Here she comes, running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman."

Feminism sought to change human consciousness about male dominance. To do so, they had to create a community of women in struggle against patriarchy. They found such a community in the suffrage movement. But suffragism and feminism were separable, though overlapping and reciprocally influential, movements.

Feminists' presence in the suffrage movement broadened the margins of the movement, bringing in working women, leftists, and pacifists, while the suffrage campaign gave feminists a platform. Yet feminists differed from suffragists in terms of style and attitude. They reacted against the emphasis in the woman movement on female nurturance, selfless service, and moral uplift. Feminists would brag that they were doing the world some good but that it was just as important that they were also having a better time than any woman in world before. (Emma Goldman was well-known for having supposedly said, when criticized by a leftist colleague for dancing when there was still human suffering in the world, "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.")

The Woman movement stressed woman's duties while feminists reinvigorated demands for woman's rights. It demanded the removal of social, political and economic discrimination based on sex and sought rights and duties on the basis of individual capacity alone.

### *The Heterodoxy Club*

One example of this new feminism was the Heterodoxy Club of Greenwich Village, a group of 25 women coming together in 1912. The club met at regular Saturday meetings, and was a consciousness-raising group before term was invented. The members of the club were inward-looking and individualistic despite their ideology of women's social awakening and concern with social tumult around them. Their purpose was individual psychic freedom. Said Marie Jenny Howe, leader of Heterodoxy Club and a middle-aged nonpracticing minister and wife of noted Progressive municipale reformer Frederic Howe, "We intend simply to be ourselves, not just our little female selves, but our whole big human selves." Feminism stood for self-development as contrasted with self-sacrifice or submergence in family. The feminists of Heterodoxy Club were all highly educated women, with either formal education in colleges and graduate school or informal education in labor or socialist

movements. They were able to assert individuality in livelihood, personal relationships, habits of dress and living.

### ***Key Tenets of the New Feminism: Economic and Sexual Freedom***

New feminists deemed an independent livelihood a necessity. The new feminism had ideologically grown out of the left of the political spectrum; it was first espoused by women who were familiar with socialism and who had advantage of bourgeois backgrounds but identified with working classes and hoped for the elimination of class oppression. These new feminists tended to romanticize working-class woman who they saw as economically independent and self-reliant. Their critique of the American gender system was embedded in their critique of its social and economic system. Feminism appealed to them because they saw an analogy between feminism's and socialism's analyses of group oppression--meaning they saw the patterns of class oppression as parallel to gender oppression--and they saw in the proposals of one to transform society the potential to transform both.

The freedom to choose work regardless of one's sex and marital status was a central belief of New Feminists. The most influential member of the Heterodoxy Club in terms of articulating this view was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman published a newspaper, *The Forerunner*. She also published a number of theoretical books--*Women and Economics* and *His Religion and Hers*--as well as novels such as *Herland* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In these she critiqued what she called the sexuo-economic relation that bound men and women, molding women to exaggerate certain sex-specific characteristics in order to attract men upon whom they relied as economic providers. The major themes of her work were the economic subordination of women, a belief in human changeability and the inevitability of progress (she was devoted to evolutionary theory); a belief in human reason and rationality; opposition to behavior or ideas based on unexamined authority or blind obedience; and the need to replace male power

with what she called the female principle of nurturance and cooperation. Gilman urged women to leave what she saw as their ancient and unspecialized occupation as homemakers and to follow the modern path stretched out by industry and the professions. In order for women to exercise their full human capacities in useful work of all sorts, Gilman proposed the socialization of home employments such as cooking and laundry. She argued that housecleaning and childcare were better performed by specialized, paid employees than by untrained housewives and mothers not necessarily suited for and certainly not paid to do these tasks.

The new feminists were also committed to heterosexual attraction and intimacy--they thought sexual freedom went hand in hand with economic freedom. They believed that women had sexual passions equal to men's. In this, twentieth-century feminism parted company with the nineteenth-century, Victorian idea of women's moral superiority to men as being rooted in their passionlessness (for more on this, see "Notes on True Womanhood," linked below). New feminists celebrated female sexuality and asserted women's "sex rights." Sex outside marriage was a kind of behavioral outlawry that appealed to new feminists' desires to overturn conventionality. Personal forms of action such as sexual affairs were risky and thrilling. However, Feminists did not make very clear what they meant by women's sex rights beyond basic acknowledgement of women's erotic drives. They did not articulate clearly how female eroticism was related to marriage, or monogamy, or homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships. Generally, feminists critiqued bourgeois marriage as predictable, emotionally barren, and subject to male tyranny. But their purpose seemed less to destroy monogamy than to restore it to value, based on a new egalitarian companionability and mutual desire on the part of men and women. They cared little whether these relations were blessed by state and church or not.

It is interesting that most feminists found the theory of nonmarital sex easier to swallow than the continued practice of it. Feminists did marry, divorce, and remarry, often keeping their maiden names and trying to establish egalitarian relationships. Heterodoxy Club member Mary Heaton Vorse put her compromise this way: "I am trying for nothing so hard in my own personal life as how not to be respectable when married."

This was difficult. Early twentieth-century feminists assigned considerable value to sexual freedom and assumed that free women could meet men as equals on the terrain of sexual desire just like that of political representation or professional expertise. It was not easy for them to acknowledge the potential for a woman to submerge her individuality and personality in her heterosexual love relationships. They saw the potential for domination in loving men. Nor could they publicly discuss the potential in these relationships for men's sexual exploitation of women who broke the bounds of conventional sexual restraint. In private, however, they acknowledged these problems. Doris Stevens, California suffragist imprisoned and force-fed for her heroic actions on behalf of suffrage, wrote, "I am sure the emancipated man is a myth sprung from our hope and eternal aspiration."

These women often turned to other women for consolation and love. They valued their deep emotional relationships with women. Victorian society had been marked by powerful bonds of homosocial love. Women's relations with other women had been deemed the purest form of love and the most beautiful expression of female character. Members of the Heterodoxy Club, for example, included heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women who coexisted harmoniously respecting one another's sexual and love choices. For many lesbian feminists of the era, loving other women became a way to escape what they saw as the probabilities of male domination inherent in a heterosexual relationship.

Difficulties of reconciling sexual expression with the new feminist agenda come out in the work of the Swedish writer Ellen Key, one of many European theorists to whom American rebels looked for justifications for changing sexual morality. Key romanticized female eroticism and linked erotic life to bodily health and spiritual harmony. She claimed that women's true fulfillment was sex-specific: it was bound to nurturance and to maternity. But Key broke the Victorian separation of motherhood from female eroticism and linked motherliness to heterosexual desire. She argued that women should be free to form love relationships whenever so moved and should be able to end marriages which did not bring them sexual satisfaction.

Key's ideas were problematic for feminists because she envisioned a sex-specific destiny for women. While her views were anti-patriarchal, she glorified the redeeming value of motherhood and believed that women who achieved satisfaction in heterosexual love should fulfill selves as mothers. Key was a powerful influence on Margaret Sanger, the founder of the American birth control movement. The politics of birth control appealed to feminists and was one important form taken by their ideas on sexuality. Stirred up by anarchist Emma Goldman, Sanger challenged conventional respectability by speaking openly of sex and linking sex oppression to class oppression. Goldman argued that women must be free to exercise their sexuality and to do so they must control their reproductive capacity without interference from men or the state. The birth control movement serves as the link between the two chief ideas of the new feminism--economic and sexual independence. Neither women's economic independence nor their heterosexual freedom would be possible without birth control.

### **The Paradox of the New Feminism**

Feminism in 1910s pursued two interconnected but theoretically antagonistic kinds freedom. New feminists sought the emancipation of woman as a human being and as "sex-being," creature of her special

nature. Feminists wanted to have it both ways--to like men and in some respects to be like men, while loyal politically and ideologically to their own sex; and to expand the concept of womanhood while proclaiming the variability of individuals within a sex. Feminism was full of double aims: it joined the concept of women's equality with men to the concept of sexual difference; it joined the aim of individual release of personality with that of concerted social action; it joined the endorsement of what was human to the development of political solidarity among women.

For more on the New Woman, especially as expressed in fashion, see Emily Spivack's 2013 *Smithsonian Magazine* series, "The History of the Flapper" in five parts:

1. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-history-of-the-flapper-part-1-a-call-for-freedom-11957978/>
2. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-history-of-the-flapper-part-2-makeup-makes-a-bold-entrance-13098323/>
3. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-history-of-the-flapper-part-3-the-rectangular-silhouette-20328818/>
4. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-history-of-the-flapper-part-4-emboldened-by-the-bob-27361862/>
5. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-history-of-the-flapper-part-5-who-was-behind-the-fashions-20996134/>

For a discussion of the "True Womanhood" against which the "New Women" rebelled and defined themselves, see:

Catherine J. Lavender, "Notes on The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood," Prepared for Students in HST 386: Women in the City, Department of History, The College of Staten Island/CUNY (1998), <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/truewoman.pdf>

## **ABOUT THESE NOTES:**

The notes above were derived in part from the lectures of Dr. Lee Chambers, Professor of American Women's History at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the author of *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America, The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Thanks, Lee!

## **PREFERRED CITATION:**

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