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The (Im)morality of the New Woman in the Early 20th Century

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The (im)morality of the *New Woman* is scrutinized in this article. The question is why and how this outstanding female figure was born and what the reasons are behind *her behavior and actions*. It is studied in brief which social, political, ideological and conceptual changes helped this process to take place, like, for example, the feminist movement, the change in the place of women, the popular recognition of Freudianism or WWI. This all is presented through a major focus on the visual representations of the *New Woman* such as *the Gibson Girl*, *the Christy Girl* and many other magazine cover images. It is demonstrated how *her evolution* occurred and what the inner and outer attributes of her various images are. I point out that the incompatibility of the Victorian feminine ideal and the coexisting prostitution is a major cause behind the great change in women's sexual behavior at the beginning of the twentieth century and as soon as smaller changes take place releasing some tension, the avalanche cannot be stopped and the women start to do sports, go to college, start to work, dress more comfortably and do not deny the pleasures of life which was forbidden for them before. In *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967), I trace all the elements and features of the *flapper existence* and present how this era and its prominent female figure functioned.

In my paper, I intend to examine and analyze the moral issues from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, together with the emergence of the New Woman. My aim is to present how this process was manifested in the United States, what reasons were behind the birth of this new female figure and the great changes in morality. After the theoretical considerations, I will show in a brief example how all this was realized in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967), in a film made about this eminent female personae.

The most common and widespread image of the New Woman is the *flapper* of *The Roaring Twenties*, the female skyscraper, the symbol of modernity. However, her history

dates far back into the nineteenth century, starting in about 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. The change of women's morality, and thus morality in general, had its roots in the antagonism between the Victorian feminine ideal and the coexisting prostitution:

Respectable femininity was womanhood in its normal, healthy and (many argued) asexual state of married motherhood. The prostitute, on the other hand, was deviant femininity, the negation of the womanly norm. (Pykett 1992: 63)

The wives and mothers were considered to be healthy, asexual and less attractive than the mistresses while

[t]he women of the demi-monde were seen not only as being more sexually attractive than their respectable counterparts, but also as more lively and interesting, and hence more suitable companions for educated middle-class men. (Pykett 1992: 64)

Due to the middle-class custom that marriage was delayed until the man could support his family in a proper, normative bourgeois manner, the institution of prostitution was paradoxically a threat but also the result of marriage and proper femininity of that age (Pykett 1992: 64). Nevertheless, there were many who drew a parallel between marriage and prostitution, both being commercial transactions through which the exchange of sex for money or for financial security occurred (Pykett 1992: 65-66).

All the questions raised in relation to women's issues in the mid-nineteenth century prevailed and took form by 1890s in the figure of *the New Woman*, who can be best introduced and described by Lyn Pykett's words.

First and foremost the New Woman was a representation. She was a construct, 'a condensed symbol of disorder and rebellion' (Smith-Rosenberg 1985: 247) who was actively produced and reproduced in the pages of the newspaper and periodical press, as well as in novels. The New Woman (and the moral panic which surrounded her) was yet another example of the way in which, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, femininity became a spectacle. (Pykett 1992: 137-138)

The New Woman turned upside down the whole world and called forth rather opposing and harsh reactions. For example, as Pykett has described, "The New Woman was the embodiment of a complex of social tendencies. The title named a beacon of progress or beast of regression, depending on who was doing the naming" (Pykett 1992: 139). She also represented the demand for women's inclusion in the political life, which was paired with the feminization and proletarianization of the public sphere (Pykett 1992: 139). The New Woman refused being a mother, and with her *mannish* appearance, she threatened to dissolve the existing gender boundaries (Pykett 1992: 140).

Paradoxically the New Woman was represented as simultaneously *non-female*, *unfeminine* and *ultra-feminine*. The New Woman's loss of female characteristics was evident in the bearded chin, the bass voice, flat chest and lean hips of a woman who has failed in her physical development. (Pykett 1992: 140)

The lack of femininity was signaled by the refusal of motherhood and womanly roles, and the hyper-femininity was beacons by her excessive susceptibility to feeling (Pykett 1992: 140).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, and especially at the beginning of the 20th century, great changes took place in which women played a central role. Women invaded all

fields of life, stretched the boundaries and unhallowed conventions. They took part actively in arts and politics, and contributed immensely to social and political changes (Rudnick 1991: 69).

New Women would achieve self-fulfillment through a combination of meaningful work, love and sexuality. Such personal goals were politically articulated by feminist, Freudian, socialist, and Bohemian movements centered in Greenwich Village. A more fulfilling sexual and personal life was part of their radical vision of a new society. (Trimberger 1991: 98)

A significant shift took place in the emotional culture, as well. While for Romantics and Victorians, sentiment and emotional intensity were highly valued, by the beginning of the twentieth century they lost their significance and physical appearance gained importance. This phenomenon was also signaled by the fact that femininity became a spectacle by this time, meaning that women's bodies were presented and "reproduced" in journals and magazines. The most important feature was to have a thin, *mannish* and/but sexy outlook and having intense emotions was regarded as something suspicious (Spurlock and Magistro 1998: 2-4, 34). Women not only changed but they also left their previous sphere of life: the home. The 'new woman,' 'the new freedom,' and the 'sexual revolution' all referred to cultural changes that moved young women out of the Victorian home into the public realm that men had long claimed as their own (Spurlock and Magistro 1998: 4).

This also caused serious emotional problems for women because many of them were not able to handle the new situation or they could not match their private and public life in a new and changed world. It was primarily women who had wanted the change, but it still took time for them to adjust to the new world, as well, and it happened quite often that they did not get what they expected or wanted. Eventually, this crisis reached its peak only in the 20s with the *Flapper Wife* principally.

However first, let us go back and look at visual representations of the New Woman. Carolyn Kitch by citing Ernst Gombrich claims that the New Woman was not a single image but a series of images changing through time because of the varying factors surrounding them from which they could not be divorced.

While she represented societal change, the image of the New Woman varied significantly from the 1890s to the 1920s, expressed through a series of 'types.' Because these images appeared at particular times and in particular order, they functioned not just as individual icons but rather as a symbolic system that visual theorists call 'iconology.' In this view, wrote Ernst Gombrich, an image 'cannot be divorced from its purpose and requirements of the society in which the given visual language gains currency' – in other words, from its social, economic, and historical context – nor can its meaning be divorced from other images in the surrounding culture. (Kitch 2001: 8)

The role and situation of women changed greatly during this period and got visual manifestation in the diverse representations. This passage also draws our attention to the fact that images do not exist on their own. If the images of women mostly depicted vamps, party girls, scheming beauties (Kitch 2001: 60) and flappers, then, society needed and created these female figures and stereotypes. *The American Woman* first appeared on covers as a mature woman, a mother, a nurse, but already she was depicted outside her home quite many times. Then came *the Gibson Girl*, created by Charles Dana Gibson, who was tall, aristocratic, elegant, serious-looking and who represented "the lifestyle to which the 'rising' classes might

aspire” (Kitch 2001: 13). Then followed *the Fisher Girl* by Harrison Fisher who was well-dressed and, – genteel, though, – she pursued sports and might even looked a bit coquettish (Kitch 2001: 44-48). *The Christy Girl* by Howard Chandler Christy followed her predecessors and also contemporaries with a healthy and sporty look; she was friendly and went to college (Kitch 2001: 48-51). James Montgomery Flagg drew vamps, sexy young women who made use of men and ridiculed them. Then, during WWI, women were depicted as nurses, angels, Red-Cross workers, and certainly mothers who were proud to give their sons to Uncle Sam, and to bear new children of /for the future (Kitch 2001: 101-120). With this, we arrived at the period when the *flappers* ruled, *the Roaring Twenties*. The major artist of this female figure was John Held, Jr. (Kitch 2001: 121). However, we must not forget about Neysa McMein’s (as well as Jessie Willcox Smith’s and Norman Rockwell’s) *modern American wife and mother*, either, who was also the product of the 20s with all her ambiguities (Kitch 2001: 136-159).

While Charles Dana Gibson and John Held, Jr. both drew only rich *white girls*, Nell Brinkley often depicted *working women*, and what is even more important, she portrayed women of *all race* equally represented as beautiful (Robbins 2001: 2-3, 42-43). Nell Brinkley depicted women of the 20s as active, or in the midst of working, or as women who pursued sports, who had snowball fights, who dressed as Spartans, who read *Essays in Political Economy*, but she also represented them as silly shopping girls or party girls. She even made portraits of female murderers during trials. Last but not least, mothers with their children also got a place in her artwork (Robbins 2001: 79-112).

Thus, it can be seen that the New Woman went through a major evolution and had several faces, as the following quotation narrates:

Imagery in 1920s mass media, which included movies as well as magazines, suggested that the New Woman had undergone a remarkable evolution – from a serious-minded college (or working) woman to a carefree, scantily clad “flapper” who existed to wear modern clothes, have fun, and, ultimately, catch a man who would support her. ‘The flapper symbolized a solipsistic, hedonistic, and privatized femininity, a gay abandonment of social housekeeping, women’s organizations, and dogged professionalism,’ writes Mary P. Ryan. (Kitch 2001: 12)

One of the reasons behind this new and free behaviour was Freudianism. Freud’s ideas spread quickly and brought about change in social recognition of sexuality and sex roles. However, the problem was that, most people misinterpreted his concepts. It was typical of the Jazz Age to rely on popular misinterpretation(s) of the Freudian Theory (Fishbein 1986: 246). As Frederick J. Hoffmann, cited in Fishbein’s study, articulates,

[p]sychoanalysis had proved useful to the postwar generation as a means both of scoffing at Victorianism and searching for new bases of social behavior. However, Freudian doctrine was commonly misinterpreted to justify sexual license, to provide a scientific justification for sexual expression. (Fishbein 1986: 246)

All this became more extreme with the passing of time, since by the mid-twenties the sexual freedom of the flapper had turned into a social imperative (Fishbein 1986: 248). As Eleanor Rowland Wembridge noted, “a lack of sexual activity was viewed as abnormal” (Fishbein 1986: 248). Most of the girls *fell into this trap*, so to speak, because they had nothing else besides sexuality for emotional expression. They did not have an urge to search for a personal identity or they did not have intellectual interests, and in the end they were lost in convulsive sexual behavior (Fishbein 1986: 248-249).

To this, it can be added that the modern home was not a hearth, a shrine or a sacred institution anymore. It was just a place for shelter and food, a meeting and leaving place, and its practical advantages greatly *defeated* its social and spiritual ones (Fishbein 1986: 248). As the home had lost its sacrosanct nature, the idealized function of the mother within its bounds also lost its significance (Fishbein 1986: 247-248). Thus, the mature woman figure was replaced by a young, slim and *easy-going* kind of girl who was enabled by both the popular acknowledgement of female sexuality and a new birth control movement, so she could express her sexuality freely and safely (Kitch 2001: 8-9).

The spectacular transformation of women was signaled by various attributes. First, their skirt became quite short, about nine inches above the ground and constantly going higher. Dresses were thin, short-sleeved or sleeveless, and the stockings were rolled lower and lower. Women abandoned their corsets and wore more and more make-up. They drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, swore, talked frankly and openly, danced *indecent dances* like the one called *Bunny Hug*, spent time with men in cars, kissed, necked and did other things of the same sort. There were sex and confession magazines, and the movies also encouraged the *younger generation* to behave freely. There was a breakthrough in the use of fabrics, as well. Previously, cotton and wool were the most widely-used materials. Now these were used less and less, and instead silk, and a new invention, rayon, were mostly used. The new type of hat was the cloche, which fitted tightly the bobbed head, bobbed hair being one of the most outrageous changes. Shoes were low-heeled, and dresses were long-waisted and straight. Cocktail parties and petting parties became *social institutions* just like *with the help of the Prohibition Law*: the speakeasies. Women took part in everything equally, and these egalitarian thoughts left their mark likewise on their looks, which were boyish, just like everything they did (Allen 1959 [1931]: Ch 5).

In *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967), in the film's very first song we learn the *rules* of how to become a modern woman (wear short skirt, bobbed hair, paint the lips and brows, kiss, smoke etc.), and what is more, Millie sings about the social changes. As she is singing, she becomes what she is singing about, appearing first as a *Victorian feminine ideal* and by the end of the song having transformed herself into a *perfect flapper*; and as an end result, she exclaims: "Goodbye Good-Goody Girl/I'm changing and how!/So, beat the drums/Coz here comes thoroughly Modern Millie now!" (Hill 1967). In fact, however, she does not really become a perfect flapper but she remains a Victorian lady in her heart. Later, she also talks about what feminism has achieved. Women have to live by the *new rules* and should make use of the new possibilities. Actually, she makes an attempt to do so: she throws herself into partying, spending time with men in cars, learning how to drive and the like. Millie declares that she is men's equal – she can smoke, drink, swear and does kiss back – but this has nothing to do with love. Her sole aim is to marry an available bachelor, her boss, because she thinks it is modern to get married without love. She acts as a scheming beauty, as a vamp, as a party girl, as a flapper but she does not manage to become any of them. She is a working woman, a stenographer, she is active throughout the whole film, and when Miss Dorothy (the symbol of *old womanhood* as a contrast to Millie who represents the *new womanhood*) is kidnapped, it is actually Millie who finds her and answers the riddles. The film has a thoroughly happy ending, and Millie transforms herself back to *normal womanhood*, from which, in fact, she does not manage to break out in spite of her efforts. The aim of this film was to make a mockery of the 1920s, but only in a light-hearted comic form, and it achieved its goal. At the end of the film, Millie annuls everything she did during the entire film with one sentence when she declares that she does not want to be equal any more, she only wants to be Mrs van Hossmere. Her example perfectly reflects the ambiguities and the anomalies of the New Woman.

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