One Girl Revolution: Not the Average Jane

“She flirted because it was fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure, she covered her face with paint and powder because she didn’t need it, and she refused to be bored because she wasn’t boring” (Miller 254). Zelda Fitzgerald describes what she and many other rebellious women of her day were called—flappers. Flappers of the Roaring Twenties revolutionized fashion and the effect of media on young women, changed gender roles and standard behavior of everyday women, and helped increase the rise of mass-marketing and urbanism.

According to novelist Elinor Glyn, every woman wanted “It”—a quality of “animal magnetism” and “the open sesame to success in life and love” (Miller 258). Actresses and stars like Louise Brooks, Joan Crawford, Clara Bow, Colleen More, Coco Chanel, and Aviatrix Liner Smith certainly had “It.” All of these extraordinary women were flappers. They sported short, dark bobs cut close to the neck to reveal the skin on the back of the neck and ears. With a short style hair-cut, there was less time spent to wash, dry, and style and more leisure time. Flappers were young, good-looking adolescent ladies who were fair-skinned, long-legged, and thin. They wore silk stockings with the tops rolled and twisted below the knee and a below-the-knee skirt. Alternatively, flappers wore a step-in (one-piece lingerie) over a low cut, short-sleeved/sleeveless, lightweight and shapeless dress revealing the neck and throat, sometimes described as “a sack without a waist.” They were outspoken, rebellious, and set the standard for women of the twenties. It was important that they de-emphasis their hips and breasts by
wrapping them under their apparel. Flappers were notorious for their slouch: a lop-sided stance with a sunken chest and rounded shoulders as though to suggest a fatigued look, which was only the opposite. These young ladies applied make-up in public, wearing bright red lip stain, and rouge circles on the cheek bone.

Flappers topped their outfits off with a long string of beads, bangles, and unbuckled galoshes or heels. In Old English, flapper means “unruly girl,” and literally, a British term meaning a girl who was an adolescent during war and wore galoshes open and flapping. (Miller 254). She was the opposite of the Gibson Girl of later days who was bosomed and corseted, wore long hair on top of her head, had proper posture, and was a homemaker. It posed a threat that long skirts were unsanitary dragging on the ground, and tight-laced corsets created health hazards. (Latham 57). Fashion went from pocked hoops and padding in the 1800’s, to corsets, and finally to the flapper’s straight slim look that accentuated legs rather than the hips, breasts, or the waist of a woman.

Just like today, many women in the twenties paid close attention to star’s appearances and behavior. They set the bar for the rest of the world. It was here where the media carefully impacted women’s image and fashion like never before. Mothers began imitating daughters, and magazines, silent films, radio, and ads brought about new and exciting attractions and ideas for adolescences. Sex and confession magazines, lurid films, and radio had a curious effect on the public that had never been open to sexual libido. Such titles of magazines/articles were, “What I told my Daughter the Night before her Marriage, Indolent Kisses….” (Allen 151).

Legislators in many states created bills to reform feminine dress. Police arrested women on beaches wearing ‘The Annette Kellerman’ or (one-piece bathing suit), named after the swimmer/movie star. It was banned in some parts of the country because women were not
wearing the proper bathing attire with stockings, skirts, and shoes. It was considered the most
daring piece of apparel because it revealed the whole feminine figure. In 1921, a bill in Utah
fined/imprisoned any woman sporting skirts higher than three inches above the ankle, and a bill
in Virginia for blouses violating three inches of bare neck.

Along with fashion in magazines, advertisements were also made for housewives and
cleaning products. Women had to ask themselves, what kind of woman am I? - An elegant
woman in satin dress who goes out, or woman in apron cleaning the sink? Were they expected to
be both, & how?” (Gourley 50). The working woman wanted comfortable, simple clothes, so
many followed a two-piece jersey Chanel knock-off. Dirty hard jobs women took over from
men during the war, wore trousers and dungarees—not part of high fashion look of the 1920’s, but
Georgina Howell, writing about women in wartime says, “Some refused to adapt to dress that
signified a returned to domestic circumstance so wear to show work did not confine her to the
house and refusal to accept conventional images of womanhood (Lucas 112).

Women observed movie stars crazed slimness—most of whom were already slender so
ordinary women desired to get thin because of the conflicting media telling women how they
“should be.” This correlates to today’s dramatic negative impact on media and young women. Is
this revolution the fault of media’s crazed impression? In a 1925 article, Bruce Bliven, editor for
*New Republic* magazine, pondered why women dressed this way and imagined how the average
flapper would answer, writing “Flapper Jane” articles in the magazine relatable to today’s, “Dear
Abby”. He said, “In a way, it’s just honestly. Women have come down off the pedestal lately.
They are tired of this mysterious-feminine-charm stuff. Women still want to be loved…but for
who they really were and not for some ideal image of womanhood. Not all women were ready
right off the bat for marriage or in the language of the flapper, for the “home-and-baby act.”
Questionable remarks of women’s androgynous fashion in the twenties based on morals, health, or media seem small arguments compared to the larger issue of what the apparel says about a woman with her belonging to society and how her fashion makes her feel.

With all the newest trends the media influenced, flappers spurred the rise of the cosmetic industry with the sex appeal ads. Mabel Williams applied homemade petroleum jelly and coal dust to her eyelashes to appear longer to attract men, and her brother patented it and called it Maybelline mascara. An urban nation with technological advances like films and radio, led to mass production and consumption where new lifestyles were portrayed. With an increase in consumption, there were higher standards of living, which meant a productive business world. This may also explain a flapper’s expensive taste. Mass production of goods like clothes created jobs for the independent women and no longer did she have to make her own clothes. Industries short work weeks also meant more leisure time for flappers.

With flappers taking roles in movies, the big screen hit hard with 400 million people a week hitting the theatres. Just as technology was a bit hit in the twenties, so were magazines and books. In 1926, there was a rapid growth in sales and publishing of two million magazine readers (Allen 152). The automobile was a sign of freedom and excitement for flappers where they could ride without a chaperone and even find a spot to park and kiss a significant other! The first birth-control clinics and marketing of sanitary napkins sold in the twenties with controversy over women’s needs shown in public. As stated in Flappers and the New American Woman, few flappers cared who ran the country or factories, because as long as there were jobs and goods that catered to their wants, it was all about having fun in social situations (63).

During WWI when men were shipped off to war, it was the women who took over their jobs. When they returned after war, not all women were replaced. In fact, a quarter still worked
outside the home, but still had limited opportunities compared to men. After the war, women sought less to change the other sex and concentrated on changing themselves. The conclusion to war brought the “eat-drink-be-merry-for-tomorrow-we-die” spirit, women’s suffrage came in 1920, smaller houses that were easier to manage, and women took over the business front. Many blamed the war on the rebellion of youth, upset by the uneven sex balance and confused women’s role in society.

There was a huge change occurring where women joined the labor force and experimented with unthinkable behavior that would have been forbidden years ago such as raising the hemlines of clothing, smoking, drinking, dancing the jazzy Charleston (a swinging dance banned in NJ for fear of being too rigorous on delicate ladies), flirting at speakeasies/bars, taking joyrides, getting drunk or “blotto” and even chewing gum. There was a ‘moral code’ of the country, where women were guardians of morality and expected to act accordingly with innocence, not kissing until marriage…etc. Flappers shattered these previous standards of behavior. They were a symbol of the sexual revolution who challenged gender roles, demanding the same social freedoms as men.

Parents had no clue what was going on until F. Scott Fitzgerald, a Princeton graduate came out with his book, *This Side of Paradise* in 1920 when fathers/mothers fully realized what went on such as a “petting party” where kissing became like an indoor sport. Freudian “gospel” was psychological science that taught new & disturbing things about sex to society. After years of following social rules imposed upon them by men, women wanted to make up their own rules of what was acceptable or not. Bliven wrote, “Women have highly resolved that they are just as good as men, and intend to be treated so. They don’t mean to have any more unwanted children, they don’t intend to be debarred from any profession or occupation which they chose to enter”
(Gourley 66-7). Society was paying greater attention to young than ever-for first time, nation’s youth than elders set standards for American society.

The flapper was a very important contribution to women’s roles in history and led to media impact today with fashion and industry taking over. New gender roles and behavior for women soon developed after WWI, and women were able to feel free, becoming independent individuals in their own ways, seeking the same social lives as men. Sought-after stars were admired for their fashion and attitude, paving the way for flappers of the twenties. This shows how even one woman has the strength to make change for all--for we know the flapper was not the “average Jane.” This was a one-girl revolution in which the flapper was reforming women’s moral lives, creating history in the making right before her dancing feet.

Comment [mk4]: Great job, Vanessa. There were a few punctuation type problems, and a couple MLA problems, but overall a very solid paper. Keep up the good work, and keep writing! 96/100
Annotated Bibliography

Goldberg, Ronald Allen. “A New Culture Emerges.” America in the Twenties. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2003. 83-101. Print. Ronald Goldberg is a professor and history chairman of the History Department at Thomas Nelson Community College in Hampton, VA. Goldberg focuses the chapter, “A New Culture Emerges” on the expansion of business communities, industrialism with less working hours, and more leisure time. It tells how more women were in college or working, and receive manners from entertainment like radio and T.V. This source will help me in my paper by showing me how the economy/market and population grew in quantity and quality through change in feminism to improve society and women’s social freedoms.

Gourley, Catherine. Flappers and the New American Woman. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books. 2008. Print. Catherine Gourley uses her resources of history as national director for a reading-writing program of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and curriculum writer of an educational outreach program on film study and visual literacy. Gourley uses a lot of personal story sources as examples of the traditional 1920’s woman. It explains a typical woman’s daily schedule; music listened to, fashion, and police of public morals who measure length of bathing suits, etc. This book will help in describing the fashion of a flapper in great detail, famous women who inspired the look like Louise Brooks, and the blaming of war on the flapper “rebellion.”

Latham, Angela J. Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and other Brazen Performers of the America 1920’s. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 2000. Print. Analyst Angela Latham collects information from conservative moralists, feminists, and men and women of the Roaring Twenties. This book shows the fight for women’s personal power presented through self-presentation in fashion and financial status. Detailed explanation and views of flapper fashion and “slouch” are stated, along with the difference between the flapper and her opposite- the “Gibson Girl,” of the later
Lucas, John. *The Radical Twenties: Writing, Politics, and Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1999. Print. Research professor of English at The Nottingham Trent University, John Lucas, combines together writings from writers of the 1920’s and discusses this era as a time of political activism and unruly behavior portrayed by women. Lucas covers specifics such as women’s resistance to men’s writings, which leads to the social freedoms women strived for that I will discuss in my paper. This source covers certain personal stories about women of the 1920’s such as Kathleen Hale, which will give opinion based info on women’s attitude for my paper. In depth, this book states what was acceptable for drinking and smoking, new advances for playing music through gramophones, sexual “looseness”, drugs, and dance music. All of these aspects help towards the cultural and personal story-based info from the 1920’s from a woman’s perspective.

Miller, Nathan. “Runnin’ Wild.” *New World Coming: The 1920’s and the Making of Modern America*. New York: Scribner, 2003. 253-273. Print. Nathan Miller is credited as an award-winning journalist and Pulitzer Prize nominee of twelve works of history and biography. Miller’s chapter examines the sexual revolution of women to look and act like star role models to become flappers, which will lead to my argument “if the impact of the media on women officially sparked in the early 1920’s.” Miller discusses how the term flapper originated from Britain, quotes by Fitzgerald on flapper’s reasoning for their behavior, college students making drinking acceptable for women, Freud’s lectures on sexual behavior for women and feminist Ellen Kay’s view on marriages denying women sex and how they should be dissolved. This info on the sexual revolution gives the perspective I need to portray in my paper about women’s behavior changing even with morals turning upside down.
Frederick, Allen. “Culture and Entertainment: Women Enjoy a New Morality.” The 1920’s. Ed. John F. Wukovits. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000. 141-153. Print. American social historian, author, and editor Allen describes the many changes in women’s lifestyles of the 1920’s from excerpts of his book, Only Yesterday: An Informed History of the Nineteen-Twenties. This chapter of morality states the reasons for a revolution which included prohibition, sex and confession magazines, films, and automobiles. Wukovits explains how parents were unsure if their child was rebelling by partaking in smoking, drinking, etc., and that most all media and part of this sexual revolution came from foreign propaganda. Women were free from the household as occupations opened up. Higher-hemmed skirts and masculine fashion are presented along with new dance styles that were a “syncopated embrace,” and partners were stuck like glue. The strange morals that were flipped around yet strangely accepted is the topic I want to hit hard in my final paper; discussing why drinking, smoking, and such became acceptable all at once for women to join into.