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FAMST 101A
December 5, 2017

The Representation of Young Women in *Photoplay*'s Short Stories (1923-1927)

The late 1910s to the early 1920s represented an age of transition from the traditional young woman to modern femininity and youth. And fan magazines were one of many mediums that significantly aided in bolstering this new movement. While much research has been conducted on fan magazines as a whole, little to none has been conducted on the short stories in popular fan magazines; for this reason, I will be analyzing a collection of short stories from *Photoplay* magazine's 1924 to 1927 issues to research the types of messages young women of this era were receiving and how they affected their everyday lives. After reading over ten of *Photoplay*'s short stories from the Media History Digital Library, I narrowed down my selection to four short stories that best represents *Photoplay* from different years. I have found that each story's message to young women can be separated into two categories: the changing ideas of youth and femininity, with subcategories about personal life and professional life, and acknowledging the traditional and changing notions of youth and femininity.

But why do the messages presented in fan magazines matter at all? Many historians who studied female audiences in the 1920s contend that the female audience's behaviors were highly influenced and constructed by films and various forms of fan discourse, like fan magazine short stories. Although films like *It* (1927), *Dancing Mothers* (1926) and *Black Oxen* (1925) proved to captivate young women, the content within fan magazines like *Photoplay* was also a source of consumption that influenced their actions. Miriam Hansen argues that many female film goers turned to fan magazines to supplement the ideas that their favorite films produced and turned to

imaginative strategies, like *Motion Picture's* "Fame and Fortune" contest¹. This particular contest allowed women to act upon their desires to become famous, desires influenced by films and similarly short stories in fan magazines.

Since young females relied heavily on fan magazines to learn more about films and further fuel their wishes to be like their favorite movie stars, anything within the covers of the magazine was seen as almost holy among young women, this included the few fiction stories in each edition of *Photoplay*. By adding stories that suggest that "petting" is an acceptable activity to partake in or stories that depict women pursuing more masculine careers, short stories incorporate the new notions of femininity and youth that were first expressed in films like Clarence G. Badger and Josef von Sternberg's film, *It*. Clara Bow's performance significantly aided in the narrative's goal of objecting to the traditional, conservative notions about women and how they should act. One of her most notable traits that separate this film from traditional Victorian age films is her overly sexualized demeanor, which is expressed throughout the entire film, but specifically in the final scenes. Although the narrative ends with Bow's character, Betty Lou, marrying her boss, Cyrus Waltham, Bow's erotic behavior overrides the old idea of women having to marry. Cynthia Felando provides an in-depth analysis of the movie's final seconds and asserts that even though *It* concludes with a conventional ending "it is the heroine's sexuality that is foregrounded by Bow's enchanting, kinetically charged performance".² Since Bow's sexual performance was in the forefront of the film's narrative, young female spectators modeled their lives after Bow; after all, she was considered "the era's most popular icon of youthful sexuality" and an idol for other young women.³ With eager young women flocking the streets,

¹ Orgeron, "Making It in Hollywood: Clara Bow, Fandom, and Consumer Culture," p. 78.

² Felando, "Clara Bow Is *It*," p. 18.

³ Felando, "Clara Bow Is *It*," p. 8.

wanting to learn more about stars like Clara Bow, fan magazines tapped into this frenzy and reinforced ideas presented in films to bolster their popularity. Essentially, films and short stories worked hand in hand in controlling the behavior of young women and these two influential mediums used their power to address the changing norms of youth and femininity.

The first short story I will be analyzing is titled, "Liar's Lane" by Frank Adams and comes from *Photoplay's* January 1924 issue. This particular story falls under the category of promoting the changing ideas of youth and femininity in a young woman's personal life. The story describes Richard Lord's journey from Davenport to Los Angeles and the people he meets along the way. After his good friend and neighbor, Katie, says her last goodbyes, Dick takes the train to Los Angeles where he meets siblings Robert and Millie Luther. He is fascinated by Millie's beauty and eventually they film a movie together, but their movie is short lived and becomes bankrupt. However, Dick overhears the siblings talk about their plan to use his money for their own good and later learns that the two are actually married. After a long creative dry spell, Dick makes his first movie about his incident with Millie and ends the film with him marrying Katie. And as if by fate, the two marry in real life.

Although women are not the main characters of the story, the way in which Adams portrays them speaks to the way in which the media tried to influence young women. Adam's first description of Katie is about a paragraph long, praising her nice skin and figure. By dedicating an entire paragraph to Katie's external features, Adams reinforces the importance of a slender appearance. This particular description plays an important role in addressing the slimmer bodily desires of the 1920s. This period acted not only as a period of transition for how a woman should act, but for how a woman should look, preferring a slenderer and petite size over a more

robust appearance.⁴ After describing her looks, he characterizes Katie as the girl next door and claims that “her womanliness was of the maternal type rather than the sweetheart”⁵. However, once she says her final goodbyes to Dick, Katie reveals a completely new side of her that encourages young women to act and dress more sexually. As he opens the door, Dick is surprised to see Katie in a negligee and lingerie because she had always acted innocently. This transition from conservative to sensual, regarding clothing, seems to tell young women who might be accustomed to a traditional wardrobe, to explore more erotic fashion. Both Katie’s costume and Bow’s job as a lingerie clerk in the movie, *It*, discuss a once taboo area of clothing—lingerie. Before the 1920s, many thought of lingerie as “the foundation of the wardrobe of the woman of refinement”⁶, as opposed to the growing sexualized undertones associated with lingerie that emerged during the 1920s. Not only does Katie dress sensually, she acts slightly flirtatious and is the to first initiate intimacy. Similar to Katie’s wardrobe, her actions also encourage young women to act more provocative and initiate sexual relations. Katie’s interaction with Dick can be compared to Betty Lou’s reaction to intentionally rejecting Cyrus after he breaks up with her. Both women take charge of their wants and power by either initialing sexual contact or purposefully refusing marriage. Both the short story and the film echo the new notions of femininity surrounding the idea of not being docile and compliant, especially when around men. As a whole, the way in which Adams presents Katie invites women to act and dress more sexually and works with popular films and general notions surrounding femininity and youth to encourage young women to challenge traditional norms.

⁴ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, p. 222.

⁵ Adams, “Liar’s Lane,” p. 38.

⁶ Gernsheim, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*, p. 85.

The second short story I will be analyzing is titled, “Happy Daze” by Octavus R. Cohen and comes from *Photoplay*’s January 1926 issue. This particular story also falls under the category of promoting the changing ideas of youth and femininity in a young woman’s personal life. However, the plot speaks less about femininity as *Liar’s Lane* did and more about what types of activities were accepted among the youth at this time. The story describes Jimmy Claxton and his cousin and co-worker Cyril Waring’s interactions with a flirtatious woman. As the story begins with business talk regarding their partnership in the film industry, the two begin to deviate from their original conversation and talk about their love lives. Cyril describes a “fluffy little blonde” girl named Juanita Gould who he has been seeing romantically. He later encounters Juanita once more and she flirtatiously coaxes him into going to her bathing party. However, after the party, the men have a falling out because of their business.

Although the story is told from a male perspective the activities that Cyril partakes in can influence an impressionable youth culture. Cyril’s relationship with Juanita is indicative of the “flaming youth” culture that had been encouraged by earlier films. Cyril and Juanita’s relationship was not the traditional husband-wife type, instead the two only experienced casual romance and participated in “petting”. The idea of petting seemed taboo pre-1920s, but this activity became more popular and sensible as the youth argued for the “new morality”,⁷ or the sexual experimentation where many young people tested to see if a couple is sexually compatible. Sexual chemistry had not been a priority in relationships in the past, but films and other forms of media, like short stories, helped to make this activity more common.

The last short story that falls into the category of encouraging changing ideas of femininity and youth comes from *Photoplay*’s August 1926 issue and is titled “They Called Her

⁷ Dell, *Love in the Machine Age: A Psychological Study of the Transformation from Patriarchy*.

Melisande” by May Stanley. However, this short story focuses on a young woman’s professional life as opposed to her personal life. This is the story of an ambitious woman named Florence Bishop who was expected to work at the town’s greenhouse; however, she dreamed of doing more with her life. Ted, Florence’s boyfriend, wants to take a job at the head of their hometown Newspaper, but Florence is upset because when men change jobs, women are expected to drop everything and act as their assistant, but she wants more. Instead of settling for a small Newspaper company, Florence encourages Ted to be more like her and to strive for something better, but he ends up joining the army. As time passes, Florence is seen by a talent agent and is recruited as a model and finds herself in New York, modeling for big-name companies, taking the star name of Melisande and becomes engaged to a rich business man. However, Ted tracks Florence down and confesses that he would have looked for her earlier but he had been in New York for over a year trying to find a better job and has failed. Florence is surprisingly delighted that Ted at least tried to strive for a better job and promptly decides to marry him.

Florence’s desire for a higher level of success was highlighted throughout the piece to emphasize her ambitious personality. As Florence makes her goals clear, other women criticize her for not being complicit with her current place in life, asking, “Why on earth couldn’t Florence act like other girls?”⁸ This disapproval represents the older, more traditional women who found the new youth too rowdy, too sexual and overall too rebellious. Many women, like Florence’s critics, believed in maintaining one’s role in society and always being docile. However, Florence challenges both of these Victorian norms as she strives for a better job and condemns Ted for settling on a mediocre job. Stanley ensures that Florence’s desires are made

⁸ May, “They Called Her Melisande,” p. 69.

clear throughout the story in order to influence young women to also strive for a better professional life.

However, the overly sexual and rebellious woman is only one representation of the youth culture as other short stories depict mixed notions of the modern woman and the traditional, Victorian woman, notions that I have included in the second category of youth and femininity. To accommodate other types of films being released at the time, short stories also aligned themselves with the traditional flapper movie that generally followed the following plot: A young, innocent woman finds herself in the Big City and takes advantage of her newfound freedom by dancing, drinking, smoking, joyriding and engaging in more sexual acts. However, this young woman finds herself in a dangerously life-changing situation where a past admirer comes to the rescue, eventually, causing her to reject her new ways and to fall back into the “promise of marriage that her Victorian grandparents would embrace”.⁹ Flapper movies that include a story that resemble the conventional flapper plot provide mixed ideas about changing notions of youth and femininity, showing the fun side of the flapper lifestyle, but also countering these activities with traditional ideas, like the promise of marriage. Similar to these movies, many fan magazine short stories portray young female characters and include commentary that acknowledges both the changing behavior and traditional norms of young women. This secondary representation of youth and females in short stories help reinforce not only ideas presented in films, but countering sides of the reception of the modern woman, encouraging women to uphold a well-balanced life of rebellion and responsibility.

The first short story that belongs in this category is from *Photoplay*'s January 1927 issue, titled, “Amazing April” by Faith Baldwin. The story begins by introducing St. Thomas' power

⁹ Felando, “Clara Bow Is *It*,” p. 11.

couple, Cherry and Jack. Everyone describes the two as fashionably up to date and overall risk takers, with Cherry showing her ankles. After three years of marriage, Cherry announces that she and Jack will be having a daughter. Once the two learn about their new child they name her April and begin to plan out her entire life and how she will act: “She’ll break hearts”, Jack says, “She’ll be an outrageous flirt”, Cherry replies. However, as April grows older, she acts nothing like Cherry and Jack’s anticipated daughter. Instead, she cooks, cleans, takes care of her parents and embodies a “reformed” version of her parents. Even on family vacations, Cherry and Jack enjoy themselves while April contributes to the war efforts. April had never attended any school dances nor talked to boys, until she has a mild crush on her Professor; however, their relationship is short-lived. But one day April spots her mother scantily dressed with a younger man by the name of Howard Andrews. Consequently, April furiously confronts Howard about his affair with her mother, but surprisingly falls in love with him. Eventually, the two marry and Cherry and Jack once again plan out their future grandchildren’s lives.

April and her parents’ feuding personalities represent the real disputes around youth and femininity that occurred during this time of transition. The ways in which April voluntarily cooks and carries out domestic duties refers to the Victorian woman who was portrayed as highly domestic, whose main duty was to take care of any household problems. The traditional woman was expected to be responsible and April demonstrates this characteristic as she assumes the parenting role in her family, cleaning up after Cherry and Jack, contributing to the war efforts and scolding Howard for acting immorally. Ironically, April’s parents are not as dependable as their daughter. The ways in which Cherry and Jack carry themselves is contradictory to how “good” parents should act, but their resentment of being conventional parents represents the new youth culture that denounces most of the traditional notions of how one should act. Specifically,

one motif that occurs throughout the story is Jack and Cherry's planning for their future generations. From wanting their daughter to be a heart breaker or flirt to hoping their future grandchildren grow up to be rebellious, the two extend their own beliefs and personalities onto their family and further emphasize their untraditional personalities, representing new notions in youth and femininity. By providing two contrasting personalities, Baldwin highlights the feuding among the Victorian-aged adults and the new youth. However, the multiple perspectives also encourage young women to explore the new youth culture, like Cherry and Jack, while simultaneously upholding some aspects responsibilities, like April.

Overall, short stories in fan magazines work with films to influence how young women of the 1920s acted. The popularity of fan magazines, as a result of the growing fan culture, opened the doors for short stories and created a new target audience. However, the magazines either presented ideas that portrayed a more rebellious representation of youth and women, encouraging young women to act similarly, or a more contradicting representation that presented both the traditional and new norms among women and the youth, showing the tension between the old and new norms and essentially telling readers to embrace the new culture while still retaining responsibility. Whether the story relays ideas of the changing youth and femininity by encouraging young women to dress and act more sexually or drawing ideas from both the Victorian era and the modern youth culture, the messages that the short stories presented were received by millions of young women and encouraged them to maintain a specific lifestyle. Since my research only covers a brief snippet of silent film history, more analysis must be done on fan magazine short stories and the reception of young female audiences throughout a more extensive time period.

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