

# Redefining Femininity: American Women in Paris in the 1920s

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## Introduction

**Background Information:** During WWI, many Western countries valued nationalism and conformity, common of wartime eras. The generation that reached early adulthood during or directly after the war was raised on these values. However, once the war ended, these values were not as meaningful, leaving this generation feeling lost and needing to develop their own values. This social context provided women the opportunity to redefine the feminine experience.

**Research Question:** How did American women residing in Paris during the 1920s seek to redefine femininity?

**Thesis Statement:** The women of the Lost Generation sought to redefine femininity through speaking out on gender inequality and exemplifying independence in their own lives.

Gertrude Stein, Josephine Baker, and Zelda Fitzgerald represent the variety of female experiences in Paris at the time, and each intentionally contributed to a reimagined femininity

## Zelda Fitzgerald

**How is Fitzgerald Remembered?**

"Zelda Fitzgerald's writings, of course, were easily surpassed by her husband's, both in quantity and quality. Still, she possessed an authentic, though meagerly-trained, minor talent."

(Henry Dan Piper, *Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald: A Check List*)



**Evidence That Fitzgerald Sought to Redefine Femininity:**

"My dear, you are my princess and I'd like to keep you shut forever in an ivory tower for my private delectation."

Alabama responds in anger.

(Zelda Fitzgerald, *Save Me the Waltz*)

**Evidence of Fitzgerald's Impact on Women:**

Helen Josephy and Mary Margaret McBride, "Paris is a Woman's Town" 1929.

## Traditional Femininity

**Definition of Femininity:** "Qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of women."

Women were expected to lead a domestic life, based on the ideology of the 'Cult of Domesticity.'



## Josephine Baker

**How is Baker Remembered?**

Baker is far too frequently remembered as "a sort of inconsequential stage alien, untethered to the world around her." She is polarized "either as a fetish or as a feminist icon."

(Brent Hayes Edwards, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*)

(Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*)

**Evidence That Baker Sought to Redefine Femininity:**

Baker wrote a letter to President John F. Kennedy before speaking at the March on Washington, saying, "it is our duty to open the doors to true freedom for all Mankind in general."

(White House Central Subject Files, Kennedy Library)

**Evidence of Baker's Impact on Women:**

Bennetta Jules-Rosette; UCSD professor and director of African American Studies, author of *Josephine Baker* biography, and French dual-citizen.



## A New Femininity

**Redefined Femininity:** The ability and desire to achieve academic, career, and personal successes, where the support of a husband or father is not necessary



## Gertrude Stein

**How is Stein Remembered?**

Stein's work is "almost impossible to read" and "is only meaningful to the extent that it defeats making meaning."

(Tanya Clement, *A Thing Not Beginning and Not Ending: Using Digital Tools to Distant-Read Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans*)

**Evidence That Stein Sought to Redefine Femininity:**

"Stein...though unmarried and childless, enthusiastically endorsed the concept of the superwoman who would unite the new mind and old body...The role of women, Stein proclaimed, had to change. Women were 'over-sexed' economic dependents, a betrayal of the past, a danger to the future...She announced that education would help women expand their lives."

(Catharine Stimpson, *The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein*)

**Evidence of Stein's Impact on Women:**

Women only earned 19% of bachelors degrees in America in 1900, but by 1930 that number doubled to 40%.

