

THE ROARING TWENTIES

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR *THE GREAT GATSBY*

OVERVIEW

The 1920s were an age of dramatic social and political change. For the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The nation's total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929, and this economic growth swept many Americans into an affluent but unfamiliar "consumer society." People from coast to coast bought the same goods (thanks to nationwide advertising and the spread of chain stores), listened to the same music, did the same dances and even used the same slang! Many Americans were uncomfortable with this new, urban, sometimes racy "mass culture"; in fact, for many—even most—people in the United States, the 1920s brought more conflict than celebration. However, for a small handful of young people in the nation's big cities, the 1920s were roaring indeed.

Take a look at these facts to see how they compare with our contemporary society:

- During the 1920's there were approximately 106,521,537 people in the United States
- During the 1920's there were about 2,132,000 people unemployed; the unemployment rate was 5.2%
- Life expectancy in the 1920's was 53.6 for males and 54.6 for females
- The United States military had 343,000 members in the 1920's, which was down from 1,172,601 in 1919
- The average American's annual earnings in the 1920's was \$1236; the average teacher's salary was \$970
- The illiteracy rate in the 1920's reached a new low of 6% of the population
- In the 1920's, gangland crime was rampant and included murder, swindles, and racketeering
- It took 13 days to reach California from New York in the 1920's
- There were 387,000 miles of paved road in the United States in the 1920's

A DECADE OF PROSPERITY

Following a postwar recession from the middle of 1920 to the end of 1921, the economy picked up again and remained strong until the end of the decade. This prosperity, combined with tax cuts for the rich, led to a rising consumer culture. The very nature of consumerism changed during this period, as new products filled the market. Electrical appliances grew rapidly in popularity as electricity reached almost two-thirds of American homes by the mid-1920s. Refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners flew off the shelves. The vast reach of the newly invented radio created a national market and spurred advertising to unprecedented levels. Three years after the first commercial radio station hit the airwaves in 1920, there were more than 500 stations in the nation. By the end of the 1920s, there were radios in more than 12 million households. People also went to the movies: Historians estimate that, by the end of the decade, three-quarters of the American population visited a movie theater every week.

However, the automobile was the most important consumer product of the 1920's. Low prices (the Ford Model T cost just \$260 in 1924) and generous credit made cars affordable luxuries at the beginning of the decade; by the end, they were practically necessities. In 1929, there was one car on the road for every five Americans. Meanwhile, an economy of automobiles was born: Businesses like service stations and motels sprang up to meet drivers' needs.

PROHIBITION

During the 1920s, some freedoms were expanded while others were curtailed. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1919, had banned the manufacture and sale of "intoxicating liquors," and at 12 A.M. on January 16, 1920, the federal Volstead Act closed every tavern, bar and saloon in the United States. From then on, it was illegal to sell any "intoxication beverages" with more than 0.5% alcohol. This drove the liquor trade underground—now, people simply went to nominally illegal speakeasies instead of ordinary bars—where it was controlled by bootleggers and racketeers. Organized crime controlled the distribution of alcohol in major American cities, and mobsters such as Chicago gangster Al Capone, made a fortune while law enforcement looked the other way. Capone reportedly had 1,000 gunmen and half of Chicago's police force on his payroll. In 1927, Capone's income was reportedly over \$1 million, while the average American's income was below \$2,500.

To many middle-class, white Americans, Prohibition was a way to assert some control over the unruly immigrant masses who crowded the nation's cities. Drinking was a symbol of all they disliked about the modern city, and eliminating alcohol would, they believed, turn back the clock to an earlier and more comfortable time. Prohibition fueled much debate within the United States until its repeal in 1933.

THE "CULTURAL CIVIL WAR"

According to one journalist in 1920, Americans were "weary of being noble" after a decade of intense progressive reform, morality, and self-righteousness. The 1920s saw a restless culture, spearheaded by America's youth rebelling against the moral restrictions of past generations. During the 1920s, some Americans—especially young college students—challenged traditional notions of proper behavior. Buoyed by the decade's prosperity, young people threw raucous parties, drank illegal liquor, and danced new, sexually suggestive steps at jazz clubs. The traditional bastions of American morality lamented these developments, and especially criticized the new dances and college students' proclivity for drinking and smoking. These critics, however, soon found themselves facing much larger opposition as the older generations began to adopt some of the socially liberated practices of their children.

With new social thinking and activities came new social conventions. Most prominently among the youth of the 1920s, sex became far less taboo than it had been previously. Sex was more openly discussed and premarital sex more common. Such activity led naturally to the promotion of birth control, though it was still widely illegal. The sexual revolution brought with it changing ideas about women. Female sexuality was less suppressed, skirt hems were worn higher, and makeup became more common. It is important to note that although the Roaring '20s and its attendant characters and events came to symbolize the decade, these stereotypes fit only a small segment of society. Traditional values, especially outside the cities, were not discarded completely, or even much changed.

THE "NEW WOMAN"

The most familiar symbol of the "Roaring Twenties" is probably the flapper: a young woman with bobbed hair and short skirts who drank, smoked and said what might be termed "unladylike" things, in addition to being more sexually "free" than previous generations. In reality, most young women in the 1920s did none of these things (though many did adopt a fashionable flapper wardrobe), but even those women who were not flappers gained some unprecedented freedoms. They could vote at last: The 19th Amendment to the Constitution had guaranteed that right in 1920. Millions of women worked in white-collar jobs (as stenographers, for example) and could afford to participate in the burgeoning consumer economy. The increased availability of birth-control devices, such as the diaphragm, made it possible for women to have fewer children. New machines and technologies like the washing machine and the vacuum cleaner eliminated some of the drudgery of household work. Although few women actually fit the flapper image, it was and is used widely in journalism and advertising to represent the rebelliousness of the period.

THE JAZZ AGE AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The rise of the automobile gave young people the freedom to go where they pleased and do what they wanted, and what many young people wanted to do was dance: the Charleston, the cake walk, the black bottom, the flea hop. Jazz bands played at dance halls like the Savoy in New York City and the Aragon in Chicago; radio stations and phonograph records (100 million of which were sold in 1927 alone) carried their tunes to listeners across the nation. Some older people objected to jazz music's "vulgarity" and "depravity" (and the "moral disasters" it supposedly inspired), but many in the younger generation loved the freedom they felt on the dance floor.

The 1920s also saw the flowering of African American culture in the arts. In music, black culture expressed itself through jazz, an improvisational and spontaneous musical form derived in part from slave songs and African spirituals. Jazz first emerged in the early 1900s in New Orleans then spread to Chicago, New York City, and elsewhere. The 1920s is often called the Jazz Age because jazz flourished and gained widespread appeal during the decade. The improvisational character of the music was often associated with the "loose" morals and relaxed social codes of the time. Among the famous jazz performers of the period were Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Duke Ellington.

The blossoming of black literature in the Northeast, especially in Harlem in New York City, was known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a period between World War I and the Great Depression when black artists and writers flourished in the United States. While Harlem was the definite epicenter of black culture during this period, and home to more blacks than any other urban area in the nation in the years after World War I, other cities, such as Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, also fostered similar but smaller communities of black artists. Black artists explored the African American perspective through poetry and novels. One of the most famous authors of the time was the poet Langston Hughes, who published "The Weary Blues," in 1926. Harlem was the site of social activity as well as intellectual activity, as prominent and wealthy blacks hosted extravagant gatherings for Harlem Renaissance figures.

THE "LOST GENERATION"

During the 1920's, a group of writers known as "The Lost Generation" gained popularity. The term "The Lost Generation" was coined by Gertrude Stein, who is rumored to have heard her auto-mechanic while in France to have said that his young workers were, "une generation perdue". This referred to the young workers' poor auto-mechanic repair skills. Gertrude Stein would take this phrase and use it to describe the people of the 1920's who rejected American post World War I values.

The "Lost Generation" defines a sense of moral loss or aimlessness apparent in literary figures during the 1920s. World War I seemed to have destroyed the idea that if one acted virtuously, good things would happen. Many good, young men went to war and died, or returned home either physically or mentally wounded (for most, both), and their faith in the moral guideposts that had earlier given them hope, were no longer valid – they were "Lost."

The three best known writers among "The Lost Generation" are F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. Others among the list are: Sherwood Anderson, Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, Ford Maddox Ford and Zelda Fitzgerald. Ernest Hemingway, perhaps the leading literary figure of the decade, would take Stein's phrase, and use it as an epigraph for his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Because of this novel's popularity, the term, "The Lost Generation" is the enduring term that has stayed associated with writers of the 1920's.

The literary figures of "The Lost Generation" criticized American culture in creative fictional stories which had the themes of self-exile, indulgence (care-free living) and spiritual alienation. For example, Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* shows the young generation of the 1920's masking their general depression behind the forced exuberance of the Jazz Age. Hemingway's novels pioneered a new style of writing which many generations after tried to imitate. Hemingway did away with the florid prose of the 19th century Victorian era and replaced it with a lean, clear prose based on action. He also employed a technique by which he left out essential information of the story in the belief that omission can sometimes strengthen the plot of the novel. The novels produced by the writers of "The Lost Generation" give insight to the lifestyles that people lead during the 1920's in America, and the literary works of these writers were innovative for their time and have influenced many future generations in their styles of writing.

MODERNISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The 1920's Lost Generation of American writers brought Modernism to the United States. For writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, World War I destroyed the illusion that acting virtuously brought about good. Like their British contemporaries, American Modernists rejected traditional institutions and forms. Generally, modernists were driven by the belief that the assurances once provided by religion, politics, or society no longer sufficed. This belief intensified after World War I, when it seemed to many that history itself was coming to an end and that modern life was horrific, chaotic, and ultimately futile. Some modernists, notably T. S. Eliot, expressed a deep sense of loss and despair. However, others responded with a fresh sense of both the freedom and the responsibilities of the artist in a new age. Ezra Pound, in particular, envisaged the possibility of a new society to which artists would contribute meaningfully. Many modernists shared an ambitious, aspirational belief in the role and place of the artist in contemporary life, believing that art had replaced religion in providing coherence, guidance, and insight into the human condition. For some writers, this meant a fresh sense of the possibilities of ancient myths, and a reevaluation of the contemporary meanings of myth was typical of high modernism. Others, especially Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Ernest Hemingway, were less convinced by the relevance of myth, believing that the creation of meaning and coherence was the task of the writer, performed in opposition to false and damaging external impositions of order.

The modernist period also saw a radical experimentation in literary form and expression. In part, this developed in response to new insights provided by recently established disciplines such as psychology. This was certainly true of the stream-of-consciousness technique, and in many respects modernist prose narrative begins with the complex later novels of Henry James. Experimentation was also partly a response to the new forms of expression that were developing in painting, sculpture, and music; another of modernism's characterizing features was the intense interaction between literature and the other arts. A further reason for modernist experimentation lay in technological innovations, such as the telephone and the cinema, which were changing the forms and the very meaning of communication. New forms were needed, as was the reinvigoration of established forms. Pound's famous exhortation "Make it new" is rightly considered one of modernism's mottoes, but as well as demanding novelty he was urging writers to apply new energy to established forms. A considerable amount of Pound's earlier poetry was written in antiquated forms as part of his attempt to revitalize and update tradition. At the same time, most modernists believed that literature should challenge and unsettle readers, and much modernist work may be demanding and difficult, alluding to a wide range of learning.

WHAT IS MODERNISM?

Modernism:

- Is marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition. This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views.
- Illustrates the belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it, or the world is what we say it is.
- Contends that there is no such thing as absolute truth – all things are relative.
- Has no connection with history or institutions. The modernists' experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.
- Believes in championship of the individual and celebration of inner strength.
- Supports the idea that life is unordered.
- Is concerned with the sub-conscious.

BOOKS THAT DEFINE THE ROARING 20's

- *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot
- *The New Negro* by Alain Locke
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- *Strange Interlude* by Eugene O'Neill
- *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway
- *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis
- *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

THE ROARING 20's



A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

**"You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say."
—F. Scott Fitzgerald**



Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896, the namesake and second cousin three times removed of the author of the National Anthem. Fitzgerald's given names indicate his parents' pride in his father's ancestry. His father, Edward, was

from Maryland, with an allegiance to the Old South and its values. Fitzgerald's mother, Mary (Mollie) McQuillan, was the daughter of an Irish immigrant who became wealthy as a wholesale grocer in St. Paul. Both were Catholics.

Fitzgerald attended the St. Paul Academy; his first writing to appear in print was a detective story in the school newspaper when he was thirteen. During 1911-1913 he attended the Newman School, a Catholic prep school in New Jersey, where he met Father Sigourney Fay, who encouraged his ambitions for personal distinction and achievement. As a member of the Princeton Class of 1917, Fitzgerald neglected his studies for his literary apprenticeship. He wrote the scripts and lyrics for the Princeton Triangle Club musicals and was a contributor to the *Princeton Tiger* humor magazine and the *Nassau Literary Magazine*. On academic probation and unlikely to graduate, Fitzgerald joined the army in 1917 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry. Convinced that he would die in the war, he rapidly wrote a novel, *The Romantic Egotist*; the letter of rejection from Charles Scribner's Sons praised the novel's originality and asked that it be resubmitted when revised.

In June 1918, Fitzgerald was assigned to Camp Sheridan, near Montgomery, Alabama. There, he fell in love with a celebrated belle, eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre, the youngest daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge. The romance intensified Fitzgerald's hopes for the success of his novel, but after revision it was rejected for a second time. The war ended just before he was to be sent overseas; after his discharge in 1919 he went to New York City to seek his fortune in order to marry. Unwilling to wait while Fitzgerald succeeded in the

advertisement business and unwilling to live on his small salary, Zelda Sayre broke their engagement. Fitzgerald quit his job in July 1919 and returned to St. Paul to rewrite his novel as *This Side of Paradise*. It was accepted by editor Maxwell Perkins of Scribners in September. Set mainly at Princeton and described by its author as "a quest novel," *This Side of Paradise* traces the career aspirations and love disappointments of Amory Blaine.

Toward the end of 1919, Fitzgerald commenced his career as a writer of stories for the mass-circulation magazines. Working through his agent, Fitzgerald interrupted work on his novels to write money making popular fiction. *The Saturday Evening Post* became Fitzgerald's best story market, and he was regarded as a "Post writer." His early commercial stories about young love introduced a fresh character: the independent, determined young American woman who appeared in "The Offshore Pirate" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." Fitzgerald's more ambitious stories, such as "May Day" and "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," were published in *The Smart Set*.

The publication of *This Side of Paradise* on March 26, 1920, made the twenty-four-year-old Fitzgerald famous almost overnight. A week later, he married Zelda Sayre in New York. They embarked on an extravagant life as young celebrities. Fitzgerald strove to earn a solid literary reputation, but his playboy image impeded a proper assessment of his work.

After a riotous summer in Westport, Connecticut, the Fitzgeralds took an apartment in New York City; there he wrote his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, a naturalistic chronicle of the dissipation of Anthony and Gloria Patch. When Zelda Fitzgerald became pregnant they took their first trip to Europe in 1921 and then settled in St. Paul for the birth of their only child, Frances Scott (Scottie) Fitzgerald, who was born in October 1921.

The Fitzgeralds expected to become affluent from his play, *The Vegetable*. In the fall of 1922, they moved to Great Neck, Long Island, in order to be near Broadway. The political satire subtitled "From President to Postman" failed at its tryout in November 1923, and Fitzgerald wrote his way out of debt with short stories. The distractions of Great Neck and New York prevented Fitzgerald from making progress on his third novel. During this time, his drinking increased. He was an alcoholic, but he wrote sober. Zelda Fitzgerald

regularly got "tight," but she was not an alcoholic. There were frequent domestic rows, usually triggered by drinking bouts.

Literary critics were reluctant to accord Fitzgerald full marks as a serious craftsman. His reputation as a drinker inspired the myth that he was an irresponsible writer; yet he was a painstaking reviser whose fiction went through layers of drafts. Fitzgerald's clear, lyrical, colorful, witty style evoked the emotions associated with time and place. The chief theme of Fitzgerald's work is aspiration, the ideal he regarded as defining American characteristic. Another of Fitzgerald's major themes was mutability or loss. As a social historian, Fitzgerald became identified with the Jazz Age: "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire," he wrote in "Echoes of the Jazz Age."

Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald went to France in the spring of 1924. That summer and fall, Scott wrote *The Great Gatsby*, which he revised while in Rome that winter. The Fitzgeralds were en route to Paris when the novel was published in April. *The Great Gatsby* marked a striking advance in Fitzgerald's technique, utilizing a complex structure and a controlled narrative point of view. Fitzgerald's achievement received critical praise, but sales of *Gatsby* were disappointing.

In Paris, Fitzgerald met and befriended Ernest Hemingway, whose personality and genius he admired. The Fitzgeralds remained in France until the end of 1926. During these years, Fitzgerald made little progress on his fourth novel and Zelda's unconventional behavior became increasingly eccentric.

The Fitzgeralds returned to America to escape the distractions of France. After a short, unsuccessful stint of screen writing in Hollywood, Fitzgerald rented a mansion in Delaware in the spring of 1927, before returning to France in 1929. Zelda's failing health was contributing to the couple's estrangement, and in April 1930, she suffered her first breakdown. She was treated at a clinic in Switzerland until September 1931. While living in Swiss hotels, Scott wrote short stories to pay for his wife's psychiatric treatment.

While Fitzgerald's peak story fee of \$4,000 in 1929 had the purchasing power of \$40,000 in present-day dollars, the view of his affluence is distorted. Fitzgerald was not among the highest-paid writers of his time. His novels earned comparatively little; most of his income came from 160 magazine stories. During the 1920s, Fitzgerald's income from all sources averaged under \$25,000 a year, which was good money at a time, but not a fortune. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald spent money faster than he earned it. Ironically, the author who wrote so eloquently about the effects of money on character was unable to manage his own finances.

In the fall of 1931, the Fitzgeralds returned to America and rented a house in Alabama. Fitzgerald made a second unsuccessful trip to Hollywood in 1931. The following year, Zelda suffered a relapse and entered Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. She spent the rest of her life as a resident or outpatient of sanitariums.

In 1932, while a patient at Johns Hopkins, Zelda Fitzgerald rapidly wrote *Save Me the Waltz*. Her autobiographical novel generated considerable bitterness between the Fitzgeralds, for Scott regarded it as pre-empting the material that he was using in his novel-in-progress. Fitzgerald rented a house outside Baltimore and completed his fourth and most ambitious novel, *Tender Is the Night*. Published in 1934, the book was a commercial failure, and its merits were matters of critical dispute. Set in France during the 1920s, *Tender Is the Night* examines the deterioration of a brilliant American psychiatrist, during the course of his marriage to a wealthy mental patient.

The period of Fitzgerald's life from 1936-1937 is called "the crack-up" from the title of an essay Fitzgerald wrote during this time. Drunk, ill, in debt, and unable to write commercial stories, Fitzgerald lived in hotels in North Carolina where in 1936, Zelda Fitzgerald entered Highland Hospital.

Fitzgerald went to Hollywood alone in the summer of 1937 with a six-month Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) screenwriting contract. Fitzgerald ultimately earned \$91,000 from MGM, which was a great deal of money during the late Depression years. However, while Fitzgerald paid off most of his debts, he was unable to save money. He travelled back east frequently to visit Zelda in the hospital, but the trips were disastrous. Scott soon fell in love with a movie columnist, Sheilah Graham. Their relationship endured despite his benders.

In 1939, after being dropped from MGM, Fitzgerald began his Hollywood novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. He had written more than half of the novel when he died of a heart attack in his mistress' apartment on December 21, 1940. Eight years later, in 1948, Zelda Fitzgerald perished at a fire in Highland Hospital.

F. Scott Fitzgerald died believing himself a failure. His obituaries were condescending, and he seemed destined for literary obscurity. The first phase of the Fitzgerald resurrection "revival" does not properly describe the process that occurred between 1945 and 1950. By 1960, he had achieved a secure place among America's enduring writers. *The Great Gatsby*, a work that seriously examines the theme of aspiration in an American setting, defines the classic American novel. More than any other writer, Fitzgerald captured the glittering, desperate life of the 1920s.