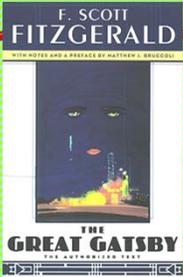


Cultural Context of *The Great Gatsby*



AP English Lang
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Introduction

Understanding the times helps to understand the novel

World War I

- World War I ended in 1918.
- Disillusioned because of the war, the generation that fought and survived has come to be called “the lost generation.”

The Roaring Twenties

- While the sense of loss was readily apparent among expatriate American artists who remained in Europe after the war, back home the disillusionment took a less obvious form.
- America seemed to throw itself headlong into a decade of madcap behavior and materialism, a decade that has come to be called the Roaring Twenties.



The Jazz Age

- The era is also known as the Jazz Age, when the music called jazz, promoted by such recent inventions as the phonograph and the radio, swept up from New Orleans to capture the national imagination.
- Improvised and wild, jazz broke the rules of music, just as the Jazz Age thumbed its nose at the rules of the past.



The New Woman

- Among the rules broken were the age-old conventions guiding the behavior of women. The new woman demanded the right to vote and to work outside the home.
- Symbolically, she cut her hair into a boyish “bob” and bared her calves in the short skirts of the fashionable twenties “flapper.”

Prohibition



- Another rule often broken was the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, or Prohibition, which banned the public sale of alcoholic beverages from 1919 until its appeal in 1933.
- Speak-easies, nightclubs, and taverns that sold liquor were often raided, and gangsters made illegal fortunes as bootleggers, smuggling alcohol into America from abroad.

Gambling



- Another gangland activity was illegal gambling.
- Perhaps the worst scandal involving gambling was the so-called Black Sox Scandal of 1919, in which eight members of the Chicago White Sox were indicted for accepting bribes to throw baseball's World Series.



The Automobile

- The Jazz Age was also an era of reckless spending and consumption, and the most conspicuous status symbol of the time was a flashy new automobile.
- Advertising was becoming the major industry that it is today, and soon advertisers took advantage of new roadways by setting up huge billboards at their sides.
- Both the automobile and a bizarre billboard play important roles in *The Great Gatsby*.

Critical Overview of the Novel

- How has the reception changed over the decades?

The 1920s

- Novel published in April, 1925
- While fellow writers praised Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, critics offered less favorable reviews.

Newspaper Reviews

- The *Baltimore Evening Sun* called the plot "no more than a glorified anecdote" and the characters "mere marionettes."
- The *New York Times* called the book "neither profound nor durable."
- The *London Times* saw it as "undoubtedly a work of great promise" but criticized its "unpleasant" characters.

The 1930s

- Fitzgerald's reputation reached its lowest point during the Depression, when he was viewed as a Jazz Age writer whose time has come and gone.
- *The Great Gatsby* went out of print in 1939.
- When Fitzgerald died a year later, *Time* magazine didn't even mention *The Great Gatsby*.

The 1940s

- Interest in Fitzgerald was revived with the posthumous book, *The Last Tycoon*.
- A literary critic was the first to point out that *Gatsby*, despite its Jazz Age setting, focused on timeless, universal concerns.

The 1950s

- Fitzgerald's reputation soared with a new biography entitled *The Far Side of Paradise*.
- The *London Times* affirmed that *Gatsby* is "one of the best-if not the best-American novels of the past fifty years."

What is the reputation today?

- *The Great Gatsby's* place as a major novel is now assured.
- Most high schools teach this novel

It's time for you to decide,
Old Sport...



End