

*"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."*

F. Scott Fitzgerald "Echoes of the Jazz Age"

The 1920s in America were times of great change. Coming out of the despair of the World War I, society exploded in a million of different directions. The 1920s emphasized the period's social, artistic, and cultural dynamism.

The spirit of the Roaring Twenties was marked by a general feeling of discontinuity associated with modernity, a break with traditions. New technologies, especially automobiles, movies and radio proliferated "modernity" to a large part of the population. Formal decorative frills were shed in favor of practicality, in architecture as well as in daily life. At the same time, amusement, fun and lightness were cultivated in jazz and dancing, in defiance of the horrors of World War I, which remained present in people's minds. During this period the jazz music blossomed, the flapper redefined modern womanhood, Art Deco peaked, and finally the 1929 Wall Street Crash served to punctuate the end of the era, as The Great Depression set in.

The life styles of young men and women in the 1920s shocked their Victorian parents practically in the same manner the 1960s "hippie" generation shocked the Americans who came of age during World War II or as "Generation Next" shocked their parents who grew up in the 1970s. In reaction to the uncontrollable forces around them (war, science, society), young people everywhere sought answers in places once considered unthinkable, both morally and physically. In their attempt to come to terms with their place in this new world, young people began testing their new boundaries with more and more outrageous forms of behavior. Wilder music, faster cars and shorter skirts were just a few symptoms of this strange postwar era called *The Jazz Age*.

Immortalized in movies and magazine covers, young women's fashion of the 1920s was both a trend and a social statement, a breaking-off from the rigid Victorian way of life. These young, rebellious, middle-class women, labeled "flappers" by older generations, did away with the corset and donned slinky knee-length dresses, which exposed their legs and arms. The hairstyle of the decade was a chin-length bob. Make-up, which until the 1920s was not typically accepted in American society because of its association with prostitutes, became for the first time extremely popular. Although 1920s fashions (especially for women) tend to be thought of as mannish, skimpy and flamboyant (bobbed hair, long pearl necklaces, cloche hats, knee-length

and thin dresses, etc), the styles were also elegant, sexy, and even contemporary. It was a romantic era for fashion, which is why people look back at it with great fondness and still emulate its style. Flappers and Jazz Babies generally disdained convention and did as they pleased. Though many cartoonists portrayed the Flapper as ditzy, empty-headed and shallow, most were educated young women who were dealing with the disillusionment of postwar America and trying to forge their own paths in a new society.

With the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women finally attained the political equality that they had so long been fighting for (the right to vote). The “new” women began to desire not only successful careers of their own but also families. The 1920s saw the emergence of the co-ed, as women began attending large state colleges and universities. In an increasingly conservative post-war era, it was common for a young woman to attend college with the intention of finding a suitable husband. Fueled by ideas of sexual liberation, dating underwent major changes on college campuses. With the advent of the automobile, courtship occurred in a much more private setting. “Petting”, sexual relations without intercourse, became the social norm for college students.

The musical forms that most impacted the 1910s and 20s (ragtime, blues and jazz) rose from the African-American community and are recognized as distinctly original American art forms. Originally played in saloons and bawdy houses, ragtime was a worldwide craze for years. Blues music, much of it from the southern United States, was slower and more introspective. Both were immensely popular, but the music that accompanied the age of the Flapper was jazz. Jazz was very different from any music that these young people's parents had ever listened to: loud and syncopated, featuring the sultry sounds of the saxophone. Unlike other popular music of the day, jazz was considered an evil influence on America's young people. With its offbeat rhythms and strange melodies, jazz was blamed for everything from drunkenness and deafness to an increase in unwed mothers. But despite such opinions (or maybe because of them), jazz was immensely popular. The wild rhythms of the Jazz Age brought dozens of new steps to the dance floors of America, including the Charleston, Black Bottom, Cubanola Glide and Tango Argentino, plus a host of shimmies, toddles and trots.

The 1920s was a period of literary creativity, and works of several notable authors appeared during this period. Books that take the 1920s as their subject include: “The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald is often described as the epitome of the “Jazz Age” in American

literature; "All Quiet on the Western Front" by Erich Maria Remarque recounts the horrors of World War I and also the deep detachment from German civilian life felt by many men returning from the front; "This Side of Paradise" by F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays the lives and morality of post-World War I youth; "The Sun Also Rises" by Ernest Hemingway is about a group of expatriate Americans in Europe during the 1920s.

The book that best characterized the 1920s would most likely be F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby." Fitzgerald, writing of the 1920s in the 1920s, proves to be an accurate judge of American character. "The story winds through flashbacks of moments never to be relived, inane conversation, and bouts of frustration with the culture of the Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald's book proves to be an astute observation of the time, capturing the angst and sadness lurking beneath the roar."¹ Arnold Weinstein asserts in "Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby" that "the book seems to be imbued with excess: the tawdry excesses of the Flapper Age, the wild parties, the flashy and not-so-flashy materialism of Gatsby, the excesses of capitalism, the sentimental and blinding excesses of the rags-to-riches story itself, the American Dream."²

The story takes place on Long Island, near New York City. It is the 1920s, a period where times are "swinging"³ and life is prosperous. The community is separated by class rank into two different sections of town: West Egg and East Egg. East Egg represents the old establishment and aristocracy while in West Egg lived the poor and middle class. Fitzgerald attempts to show this contrast between the establishments in an attempt to describe this separation that actually occurred during the twenties. Following the war, the nation was spiritually tired. Massive public corruption reflected the public mood. With this time came the fast pace of money and business and instant millionaires, which brought the loosening of morality. With these instant millionaires came the new morality and this immoral way of life. This brought the separation of the upper class between the old and more traditional establishment and the new and more immoral establishment. Each had different beliefs. They both lived different lifestyles. Fitzgerald incorporates this into his book in order to give the reader first hands look at the Jazz era in which he was a member of. Between the two is the Valley of Ashes where the giant billboard of Dr.

¹ Associated Content "F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby' and Reflections on the Roaring Twenties", March 30, 2006 (www.associatedcontent.com/article/26412/f_scott_fitzgeralds_the_great_gatsby.html)

² Weinstein, Arnold "Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby", (NOVEL: "A Forum on Fiction", vol. 19, no. 1, Autumn 1985), page 22

³ "The Great Gatsby" Penguin Books 1994

Eckleburg hangs, watching over the fight for money in the city. Daisy and Tom Buchanan live in East Egg and Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby live in West Egg.

The third chapter presents Gatsby's party that brings 1920s wealth and glamour into full focus, showing the upper class at its most lavishly opulent. Jay Gatsby is known for his extravagant parties in his mansion for the rich and famous. Although he only holds these parties to get to Daisy, they accentuate his riches and show the public that he is living his American Dream. These parties are a key component in the life of Gatsby, they represent the fact that he is living the hard earned dream he looked forward throughout his life, as well as sharing his riches with the public.

The symbols of the food served at Gatsby's party represent and personify the people of the 20's. Gatsby's house frequently receives crates of oranges, which demonstrates the wasteful character of people in the 1920's. "Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York-every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves."⁴ This incredible wastefulness is representative of people who lived in the 1920's. They were wasteful to the extreme because they assumed that they deserved to be wasteful and carefree. During the war, they were forced to ration everything, so the twenties were the time to gain back their selfishness. Their personalities are also symbolized by the colossal food buffet served at the party. "On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold."⁵ These symbols all personify the people of the 20's. The people garnished themselves in glistening jewels and clothing just to impress the people that they met. They are all spiced implying that they have made themselves into something that they are not by spicing up their lives with fancy clothing and costumes which hide who they really are. They design themselves as they think they will be most accepted, and are bewitched by the brightness and glow of popularity and richness. The symbol of the two women dressed identically in yellow at Gatsby's party depicts the values of the people of the 20's. The two women in yellow meet Jordan and Nick at one of Gatsby's party and are entirely self-involved.

Gatsby's parties are also a site of class issues, which appear variously throughout the story. Gatsby's guests are mostly of the higher class of New York City who come to the party to

⁴ "The Great Gatsby" Penguin Books 1994, page 45

⁵ "The Great Gatsby" Penguin Books 1994, page 45

socialize. "There was dancing now on the canvas in the garden; old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably, and keeping in the corners..."⁶. Even Nick notices the class issues of the time that seem to be prominent at the parties. He becomes aware of the superior couples as he watches them dance in the garden, keen to their social status, seeming desperate and predatory, hoping to make connections that will make them rich.

Unlike the other settings in the book, the valley of ashes is a picture of absolute desolation and poverty. It lacks a glamorous surface and lies fallow and gray halfway between West Egg and New York. The valley of ashes symbolizes the moral decay hidden by the beautiful facades of the Eggs, and suggests that beneath the ornamentation of West Egg and the mannered charm of East Egg lies the same ugliness as in the valley. The valley is created by industrial dumping and is therefore a by-product of capitalism. It is the home to the only poor characters in the novel.

Another setting presented in the novel is New York City which is in every way the opposite of the valley of ashes—it is loud, garish, abundant, and glittering. To Nick, New York is simultaneously fascinating and repulsive, thrillingly fast-paced and dazzling to look at but lacking a moral center. While Tom is forced to keep his affair with Myrtle relatively discreet in the valley of the ashes, in New York he can appear with her in public, even among his acquaintances, without causing a scandal.

In comparison to Gatsby's party, Myrtle's party in chapter two is one example of Fitzgerald's use of juxtaposition to contrast the two atmospheres. Some of these contrasting ideas include the difference in the two hosts' lifestyles and wealth. However, the two parties also share some similarities such as the shallow tendencies of the people involved and the endless drinking which ends in fights in both settings. One main difference of Myrtle's party is its size. Not just the number of people, but the size of her surroundings. Her place is described as "...a small living-room, a small dining-room, a small bedroom, and a bath."⁷ The entire place gives the feel of being closed in and too small for its contents: "The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it..."⁸ Even the photograph on the wall is labeled as being "over-enlarged." The guests begin to drink and eventually a state of awkward

⁶ "The Great Gatsby" Penguin Books 1994, page 48

⁷ "The Great Gatsby" Penguin Books 1994, page 33

⁸ "The Great Gatsby" Penguin Books 1994, page 33

drunkenness falls over the crowd. They spoke of marriage and marrying the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Then the plot gets cloudy and it seems as though the narrator passes out due to major consumption of alcohol. When he awakes, he witnesses Myrtle childishly chanting Daisy's name in front of Tom's face. Tom retaliates by breaking her nose with one swipe of an open hand. A couple people help Myrtle stop the bleeding. However this incident does not seem important to the characters.

“The Great Gatsby” is a highly symbolic meditation of the 1920s America as a whole, in particular the disintegration of the American dream in an era of unprecedented prosperity and material excess. As Arnold Weinstein states, “the living truth of the novel is centrifugal rather than centripetal, projected outwards rather than homing in, generating reality rather than proving it”⁹. Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed and empty pursuit of pleasure.

⁹ Weinstein, Arnold “Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby”, (NOVEL: “A Forum on Fiction”, vol. 19, no. 1, Autumn 1985), page 24

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