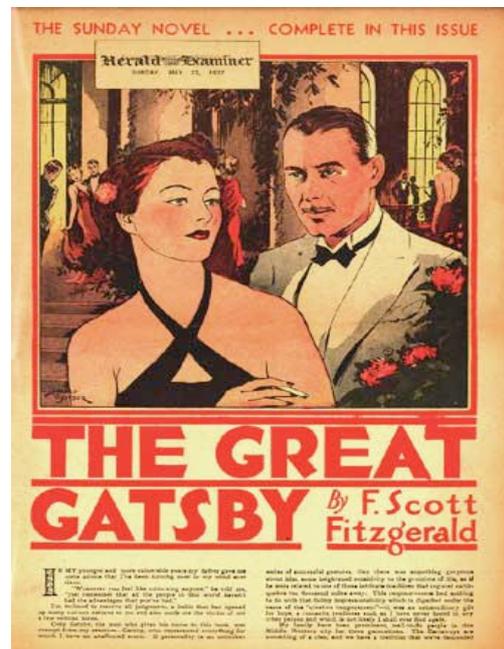


Context: America in the 1920s



The Great Gatsby has often been described as the 'definitive' or 'conclusive' representation of life in America in the 1920s. While this may be subjective, there is clearly a sense in which the novel is centrally concerned with America in the aftermath of the First World War.

Historians and economists now believe that the 1920s in the United States saw levels of economic growth seen only afterwards in the 1950s and 1990s. That is, periods of sustained economic development which brought about a general social sense of wealth and affluence for all members of US society. Indeed, the name the 'roaring twenties' - as this period is referred to in Europe - reflects the growth of wealth and materialism during this period.

That said, the greater financial and economic growth in the United States is counterpointed by a period of moral paradox. On the one hand this is the period of Prohibition: on the other, a time of greater acceptance for the Ku Klux Klan. This morally questionable counterpoint underlies the movement

towards a morally ambiguous country that appears to be dispensing with the virtues of its Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence.

However, these moral questions are further obscured by a period in which man seems to be at the forefront of invention and adventure: in 1925 the colour television is invented; in 1927 Charles Lindbergh crosses the Atlantic on his own. These moments of invention move the focus away from moral and theological abstracts to that which man can achieve materially. It is in this way that the tension between what some historians see as a spiritual decline, and others a booming decade, come to the fore.

Fitzgerald, it seems, is interested in all aspects of the 1920s in his novels, and particularly in *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby is a character who was engaged in bootlegging. At the same time, he is almost celebrated by Nick Carraway, which confuses the moral paradigm further. The novel therefore, much like America in the 1920s, is a paradox of virtue and vice; morality and materialism.