

Context: The Jazz Age

The Jazz Age is the period that began in the 1920s and gave way to the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States. The advent of the radio made possible the upsurge in popularity of dance and Jazz in the US.



The birth of Jazz in the US is widely accredited to the African American population but, during the Jazz Age, the white middle classes adopted it as their own, recalibrated the genre.

Cities like New York and Chicago became the cultural centres for the upsurge in popularity amongst the white middle classes of the time. However, on the fringes of these major cities, the birth of the radio made it possible for members of all communities to have experience of the newly-popularised form.

The Jazz Age is important for all kinds of symbolic reasons: primarily, the sense of 'fun' that it came to represent. This led to a cultural realignment: of generation against generation, of women against men. In turn, what we see when we look at the Jazz Age is a period in which old assumptions are being questioned, which is to say that many young Americans came to rebel against their elders; the subject of women's sexuality came to the fore and was celebrated once more. These were times – in the urban areas at least – of great social change.

However, this period is also a creature of its economic condition: as social wealth and mobility increased because of greater wealth and aspiration, so too did the sense of freedom and hope enjoyed by the middle and upper classes.

Fitzgerald takes these ideas as central to his narrative: the proliferation of parties in the novel reflects the sense of celebration and fun that is a characteristic of the time. Equally, the complicated sexual relationships of the characters, and the male desire for Daisy Buchanan, reflects the emerging acceptance in the New York of the time, that women could be sexually powerful and confident women.

However, it is also interesting to consider the impact of the ending on the characters: all of the partying and joviality is replaced with a sense of foreboding and disappointment. Indeed, we come to see that all of the hollowness of the decadence and materialism comes to bear on the characters of Fitzgerald's novel, much in the same way as it does on their real-life counterparts in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash.