

PART FIVE: CONTEXTS AND CRITICAL DEBATES

CONTEXTS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

ADVERTISING AND THE MASS MARKET

America's population more or less doubled in the fifty years before *The Great Gatsby* was published. In order to meet the basic requirements of this growing population, mass-production techniques were developed in factories. In 1913, Henry Ford first used an assembly line to produce his Model-T automobile, but the technique was already well established in the production of other goods for the mass market.

Fitzgerald's novel was written against the background of this rapid growth in consumer products, most of which were standardised – they looked the same and served the same use. Standardisation seemed appropriate to a modern democracy, where all citizens could buy items for their convenience and comfort. Manufacturing companies and large stores based in big cities produced catalogues that enabled Americans living in remote areas to purchase goods by mail order.

The whole notion of advertising changed. Instead of just letting people know what was available, advertisers in the early twentieth century set out to persuade potential customers that they needed to buy a certain product. The techniques of persuasion common in modern advertising started to be developed. Products were given brand names to make them stand out and seem attractive. Packaging became much more important, and salesmen were trained in new marketing techniques.

THE JAZZ AGE

The decade following the First World War in America has become popularly known as the Jazz Age. Jazz started to produce some very fine musicians during the 1920s, such as trumpeter Louis Armstrong (1901–71) and pianist and composer Duke Ellington (1899–1974). But wealthy young white audiences tended to like jazz simply for dancing or as a soundtrack for wild behaviour.

The 1920s were also known at the time as the Golden Twenties or the Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald portrayed these post-war years as a time of pleasure seeking and indulgence. It was a time when young women, often known as 'flappers', behaved with freedom unknown to their mothers and grandmothers. Many cut their hair short, wore relatively short skirts and used make-up to make themselves more attractive.

GRADE BOOSTER

A02

Nick Carraway is narrating in 1924, two years after the events of the story have occurred. Think about the effect this distance has on his narrative. Even only two years on, he is looking back at a time no longer his own.

CHECK THE BOOK

A04

An excellent illustrated account of the development of advertising techniques in America during this period is Susan Strasser's book *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (Smithsonian Books, 2004).



CHECK THE BOOK

A03

Fitzgerald introduced this newly liberated woman into literature, in short stories such as his early collection *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920).

STUDY FOCUS: SEARCHING FOR PLEASURE

A01

In *The Great Gatsby* the search for pleasure continues, notably through parties and drinking. But that search has an air of desperation. Momentary pleasures are soon gone, and for some of the glamorous characters in this novel life seems to have no point at all. Jordan Baker is a good example of a liberated young woman, achieving celebrity as a sportswoman. But her conversation, like that of her slightly older friend Daisy, suggests that she is tired of the world and approaches life with a jaded, cynical outlook.

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

The term 'conspicuous consumption' was coined by a social scientist named Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929). He was born in the American Midwest in 1857, and published a book in 1899 entitled *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 'Conspicuous consumption' referred to the way in which some wealthy Americans displayed their wealth through their houses and possessions. Thorstein Veblen was critical of this kind of display, as it often seemed irresponsible, extravagant and wasteful.

The Great Gatsby presents some very obvious illustrations of conspicuous consumption. Tom Buchanan, who is certainly a member of the leisure class, so wealthy that he does not need to work, has a team of polo ponies which he takes with him on his travels. He seems to keep them primarily as a status symbol.

Jay Gatsby has his mansion, lavish parties, cars, motorboats and a new hydroplane. The flamboyance of his lifestyle is remote from the dusty world inhabited by George Wilson. But their worlds collide in the accident that kills Myrtle, and the fact that Gatsby has an expensive and easily identifiable car, a blatant example of conspicuous consumption, seals his fate.

CRITICAL VIEWPOINT A02

In the context of this sense that life has lost its purpose, leaving aimless drifting as the only option, Jay Gatsby's 'extraordinary gift for hope' (p. 8) appears a truly rare quality.

REVISION FOCUS: TASK 11**A04**

How far do you agree with the statements below?

- Success, in *The Great Gatsby*, is a matter of money.
- In *The Great Gatsby*, America is a place where style is more important than substance.

Try writing opening paragraphs for essays based on these discussion points. Set out your arguments clearly.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War was fought between July 1914 and November 1918. For a few years America refused to take part in the conflict, but in April 1917 the president, Woodrow Wilson, declared that America would join forces with Great Britain, France and their allies against Germany and its allies. Nearly three million men were drafted into the American army and many of them were sent to Europe.

In this novel, Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby are said to have been amongst those soldiers sent to fight in France. Nick mentions specifically the Battle of the Argonne Forest, an offensive in northern France near the end of the war. The American Army suffered over 100,000 casualties in this battle, which lasted more than a month.

THE LOST GENERATION

Gertrude Stein, a remarkable American writer living in Paris, said that the First World War had produced a Lost Generation. The essence of this Lost Generation is captured brilliantly in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), by Fitzgerald's close friend, Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's characters wander aimlessly through Europe, feeling emotionally empty. Fitzgerald had already captured this sense of exhaustion and pointlessness when he wrote, at the end of his first novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920), of a new generation 'grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken'.



PROHIBITION AND ORGANISED CRIME

There is a lot of alcohol consumed in *The Great Gatsby*. Yet it is set during a time when the manufacture and distribution of alcoholic drinks were prohibited in America. This Prohibition commenced on 16 January 1920. Prohibition, championed by the Anti-Saloon League, was intended to raise the nation's moral standards, but to a large extent it had the opposite effect. It was difficult to enforce, as Fitzgerald's novel makes very clear.

It has been estimated that in 1925 there were around one hundred thousand speakeasies – illegal drinking dens – in New York City alone. Bootlegging, the illicit production and supply of alcohol, made rapid fortunes for criminals such as the gangster Al Capone. Bootlegging appears to be a major source of Gatsby's wealth. Prohibition was eventually repealed in 1933.

Organised crime, run by powerful gangsters, was a violent reality in American cities such as New York and Chicago during the 1920s. Actual criminals such as Al Capone, 'Lucky' Luciano, Dutch Schultz and 'Legs' Diamond provided models for the popular gangster movies of the 1930s such as *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932). Their celebrity did not conceal the fact that these were ruthless and extremely dangerous men.

In *The Great Gatsby* the criminal underworld is represented by Meyer Wolfshiem, a character based on the real-life gambler Arnold Rothstein.

CHECK THE BOOK

A03

Fitzgerald responded to the emergence of mass society by creating a figure who attempts to stand out, 'The Great Gatsby'. His contemporary, the novelist John Dos Passos (1896–1970), recognised that modern cities tend to make individuals feel anonymous. He depicted this trend in his great novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), a book about New York life with no central figure who stands out, no individual hero. It was published in the same year as *The Great Gatsby*.

MASS SOCIETY

In 1920, the national census showed that America was, for the first time, a predominantly urban nation, with more people living in cities than in the countryside. Some of the places classified as cities were actually fairly small towns, but nonetheless the trend towards an urban America was unmistakable.

The growth of population due to immigration from Europe, and the movement of African Americans from the South, where their families had in been held in slavery until the Civil War, encouraged this rapid expansion of America's cities.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photographs of a crude kind were produced as far back as the 1820s. But photography improved from the late 1880s, not least because of innovations made by a young American bank clerk called George Eastman (1854–1932). He patented a new camera, using convenient strips of film rather than bulky plates, and coined the trademark Kodak. A craze for taking photographs soon followed, and in the 1920s photography was a popular hobby.

Some photos appeared in newspapers, magazines and advertisements during the 1920s, and played a role in that decade's involvement with image, glamour and celebrity. But the technology for photojournalism as we know it today didn't really develop until the 1930s.



STUDY FOCUS: PHOTOGRAPHS**A02**

Note the role of photographs in *The Great Gatsby*. McKee shows Nick pictures he has taken. Myrtle hangs a photo of her mother on Tom's apartment wall. Gatsby carries a photo from his time at Oxford, and has a picture of Dan Cody on his wall. Henry C. Gatz carries a photo of Gatsby's mansion.

CONTEXT**A04**

Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931), American inventor of the gramophone and the electric light bulb, also invented the motion picture camera.

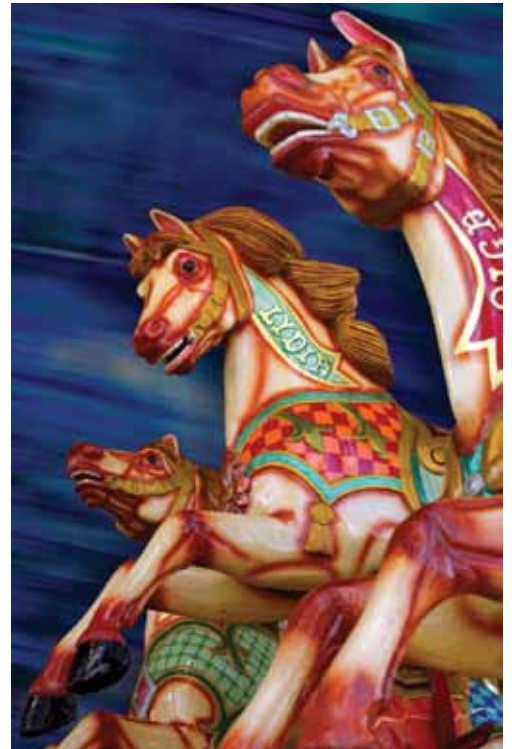
THE CINEMA

Since the early twentieth century, the American film industry has largely been based on the West coast, in and around Hollywood, California. At the time *The Great Gatsby* was written, films were still silent and in black and white, but they were nonetheless an extremely popular form of entertainment. The first film with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, was released in 1927, and a new era in cinema history began. Fitzgerald spent some time, later in his life, writing movie scripts in Hollywood. He died there, leaving an unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, about a film producer.

Jay Gatsby has the glamour of a movie star. That appearance is enhanced by the way his house and garden are lit. An actual movie director is present at Gatsby's party in Chapter 6, along with a female star, who is described as 'a gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman' (p. 101).

AMUSEMENT PARKS

Amusement parks were the precursors of modern theme parks and usually featured all the attractions of the fun fair. They were extremely popular in America between the beginning of the twentieth century and the end of the 1920s, when a major downturn in the economy led to their decline. Steeplechase Park and Luna Park, located at Coney Island, New York, which is mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*, were still attracting vast crowds.

**LITERARY BACKGROUND**

Fitzgerald published his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, in 1920. His second, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, followed in 1922. By the time *The Great Gatsby* appeared, in 1925, he had become a much more skilful and controlled writer.

JOSEPH CONRAD

Fitzgerald himself acknowledged that he had learnt a lot about **narrative** technique from reading the work of Polish-born, British novelist Joseph Conrad (1857–1924). Many of Conrad's books read like tales of adventure, and especially of life at sea; but Joseph Conrad saw the novel as a very serious art form, capable of responding to the complexity of the modern world. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and his novel *Lord Jim* (1900) had a notable influence upon Fitzgerald.

Joseph Conrad believed that there should be no word or phrase in a novel that does not contribute to its overall meaning. You can easily see from its intricate patterning that Fitzgerald shared Conrad's belief while he was writing *The Great Gatsby*. That concentration of meaning, with no wasted words, makes it a far more impressive novel than either *This Side of Paradise* or *The Beautiful and Damned*.

Fitzgerald followed the practice of Joseph Conrad, in *Lord Jim* (1900) and in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), of making his **narrator** a participant in the story. As readers, we need to pay careful attention to the character of this narrator. We can't simply accept that he is giving us the truth in a detached and reliable way. Nick Carraway is deeply involved in the story he is telling, and in some respects he is an unreliable narrator.

HENRY JAMES

This important technical issue of narrative **point of view** was explored with great sophistication by Joseph Conrad's older friend, the American-born British novelist Henry James (1843–1916). Fitzgerald was also influenced by the scenic method he found in novels by Henry James, where a series of carefully constructed dramatic scenes with **dialogue** is embedded in the narrative, so that we almost feel we are watching a play (or a film) unfold.

The scenic method was also used in novels by Henry James's American friend, Edith Wharton. Fitzgerald sent her a copy of *The Great Gatsby*, and Edith Wharton said she thought his book was a masterly achievement.

T. S. ELIOT

A number of critics have suggested that *The Great Gatsby* is indebted to T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922). The debt seems to be more in terms of its portrayal of the 'valley of ashes' (p. 26) as a physically and spiritually desolate landscape, than a borrowing of technique or form. Fitzgerald did send a copy of the novel to T. S. Eliot, inscribed to the 'Greatest of Living Poets'.

THE 'INTERNATIONAL THEME'

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), like Henry James, was an American who chose to live in England and acquired British nationality. Henry James actually made the comparison of Old World and New World cultures the central theme of his many novels and stories. He called it the 'international theme'. Fitzgerald picks up that theme in *The Great Gatsby*, weighing American against European values.

CONTEXT

A04

T. S. Eliot's challenging poem *The Waste Land* was first published in 1922. Its form, juxtaposing disparate fragments, resembles the collage forms used extensively in the visual arts during the early twentieth century.



CRITICAL DEBATES

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S REPUTATION

When F. Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940, his reputation as a writer was low. Obituaries tended to characterise him as an author who had failed to fulfil his early promise. He was working in Hollywood, as a scriptwriter, and had become an alcoholic. Some commentators suggested that his drinking problem corresponded to flaws in his later writing.

In fact, early criticism tended to view Fitzgerald as the writer of numerous entertaining but rather lightweight stories, written primarily to make money and be published in magazines. The work he himself regarded as his real achievement, notably *The Great Gatsby*, tended to be overlooked.

A little over ten years later, Fitzgerald had become recognised as one of the major writers in the history of American literature. This change in his reputation was initially due to the efforts of literary critic Edmund Wilson (1895–1972), who secured publication in 1941 for *The Last Tycoon*, the novel Fitzgerald left unfinished, and in 1945 for a collection of Fitzgerald's essays, letters and notes entitled *The Crack-Up*.



REACTION ON PUBLICATION

The Great Gatsby received more favourable reviews than any of Fitzgerald's other books. Its positive critical reception was not matched by sales, but he received letters of praise from fellow writers including Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather and Edith Wharton, and from the poet T. S. Eliot, who thought it was the first significant advance in American fiction since Henry James.

SUBSEQUENT CRITICISM

In 1945, the critic Lionel Trilling wrote an essay in which he suggested that *Gatsby* could be taken as a figure who represented America itself. In 1954, this insight was developed by Marius Bewley in another essay, 'Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America'.

The appearance of a series of biographies of Fitzgerald has encouraged some works of biographical criticism, in which certain people and events that provided Fitzgerald with raw material for his fiction are identified.

There have also been essays which have suggested literary influences on the writing of *The Great Gatsby*, notably Joseph Conrad's fiction, the poetry of T. S. Eliot and of John Keats, and a range of Christian and pagan myths. Other critics have focused upon Fitzgerald's language, and upon the formal aspects of the novel, especially the role of the narrator.

CRITICAL VIEWPOINT **A03**

Lois Tyson, in '...next they'll throw everything overboard...': A Feminist Reading of *The Great Gatsby*, takes as her starting point Tom Buchanan's reaction to his discovery that his wife has apparently taken *Gatsby* as her lover. She then proceeds to argue that despite its ostensible criticism of Tom's views, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel that actually reinforces a patriarchal standpoint, in part through its representation of women as limited and shallow.