F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Jazz Age

The 1920s have many names in America: the Roaring Twenties, the Boom, the Jazz Age (the name Fitzgerald himself invented). It was a period of wild economic prosperity, cultural flowering and a shaking up of social mores. It was also the defining era of Fitzgerald's life as a writer. He reached the peak of his fame with the 1925 publication of *The Great Gatsby*, a book that perfectly captured the era's moods and styles. The fun lasted for ten years and then, as Fitzgerald so eloquently put it, "leaped to a spectacular death in October 1929." Two years after the crash Fitzgerald eulogized the period in an essay entitled "Echoes of the Jazz Age," writing that "the present writer already looks back to it with nostalgia. It bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War."6

The 1920s dawned on an America ready for peace and prosperity. The evil of war had been defeated, and the next great threat in Europe was not yet visible on the horizon. A booming stock market contributed to a huge growth in consumer spending, as investors saw their wealth (on paper) soar. This infusion of new money brought with it a new morality for the young social set, one less concerned with the traditional values of past generations and more interested in individualism and modernism. Policy changes in the U.S. unwittingly encouraged this new culture. Prohibition drove America's drinking population into speakeasies, underground clubs where people could enjoy their booze and the newly popular jazz music. Sexual mores loosened. Youth-centric culture flourished. Women bobbed their hair (see Fitzgerald's story "Bernice Bobs Her Hair") and traded floor-length skirts for the flapper dresses that live on today as Halloween costumes. The Nineteenth Amendment guaranteed women the right to vote, and (probably more important to Fitzgerald's fiction) the speakeasies were the first place in America where it became acceptable for a woman who wasn't a prostitute to drink and smoke in public. Psychoanalysis became fashionable among the wealthy, who happily shed their inhibitions with Sigmund Freud's approval. The critic H.L. Mencken defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

"It was an age of miracles," Fitzgerald wrote of the Jazz Age. "[I]t was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire." The Twenties gave Fitzgerald the settings for his greatest works. All of his novels are set in locations where Fitzgerald himself lived for a substantial period of time. From 1920 to 1921, he and Zelda lived in New York City, which became the setting for the 1922 novel *The Beautiful and Damned*. Following that book's publication, the couple and their baby daughter Frances Scott "Scottie" Fitzgerald rented a house in Great Neck, Long Island; the town had no idea that it would soon host one of the most famous fictional parties in literary history. The excesses of the time would later be criticized, but Fitzgerald defended them: "It is the custom now to look back ourselves of the boom days with a disapproval that approaches horror. But it had its virtues, that old boom: Life was a great deal larger and gayer for most people, and the stampede to the spartan virtues in time of war and famine shouldn't make us too dizzy to remember its hilarious glory. There were so many good things. These eyes have been hallowed by watching a man order champagne for his two thousand guests, by listening while a woman ordered a whole staircase from the greatest sculptor in the world, by seeing a man tear up a good check for eight hundred thousand dollars."9
F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Lost Generation

In 1924, shortly before the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, the Fitzgeralds moved to Paris to join a growing community of American artists and writers drawn to France for its inexpensive cost of living, liberal sexual codes, great bars, numerous presses and magazines willing to publish them. Living cheaply in Paris, writers could sell their work to the growing numbers of magazines and publishers back in the U.S., which were hungry for new talent and willing to pay handsomely (at his peak, Fitzgerald earned the equivalent of $40,000 in today's dollars for a single story in *The Saturday Evening Post*.) Together, scholars have noted, this group of expatriates presided over arguably the greatest Renaissance in American literature. In addition to Fitzgerald, Paris-based American writers who published during the 1920s included Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and a young chap named Ernest Hemingway, about whom Fitzgerald wrote to his editor Maxwell Perkins at Scribners, "I'd look him up right away. He's the real thing." Fitzgerald and Hemingway had a complicated relationship that started in friendship, progressed to rivalry and ended in bitter resentment. Zelda and Hemingway hated each other, and both criticized Scott for hanging out with the other.

*The Great Gatsby* was published by Scribners on 10 April 1925. The quintessential tale of the glory and tragedy of American aspiration won Fitzgerald great critical respect. It also helped create a caricature of the era that continues to this day. "The popular impression of the Twenties as a time of hedonism, alcoholic orgies, and high jinks is in some part based on misreadings of Fitzgerald's fiction," wrote Matthew J. Bruccoli, a Fitzgerald scholar. "Gatsby's party has become the quintessential Twenties party. Fitzgerald's characters have become confused with the cartoons of sheiks in raccoon coats and flappers in short skirts. . . . Fitzgerald's view of the Twenties was serious and complex, for he recognized the glamour as well as the waste, the charm as well as the self-destruction."[10]

Fitzgerald's writing brought in a solid income, but the couple's lifestyle took a toll. They drank heavily—him more than her—and fought viciously. Both flirted with other people. Zelda was also creative, pursuing both dance and writing, but her unique personality was starting to seem more unbalanced than charming. The couple—like the rest of the nation—was living on borrowed time. In October 1929 the stock market crashed, triggering the Great Depression. Six months later, Zelda suffered her first nervous breakdown. Things would never be so good again, for Fitzgerald or for his characters. In Fitzgerald's 1931 story *Babylon Revisited,* a newly-sober American expatriate named Charlie navigates the streets of Paris, reflecting on the good times of just a few years earlier, and thinks, "I spoiled this city for myself. I didn't realize it, but the days came along one after another, and then two years were gone, and everything was gone, and I was gone."[11]

Material was gathered from: [http://www.shmoop.com/f-scott-fitzgerald](http://www.shmoop.com/f-scott-fitzgerald)