

F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Age of Excess

by Joshua Zeitz

F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, were guilty of many things. They were impetuous, they were known to drink too much, and they were prone to bouts of serious depression and self-destructive behavior, but no one could ever accuse them of frugality. In 1923 the young couple (he was twenty-seven, she was twenty-three) set sail for France. Hauling along seventeen pieces of luggage and a complete set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, they rented an enormous stone villa that rested 2.5 kilometers above St. Raphaël, “a red little town built close to the sea,” Scott explained to a friend, “with gay red-roofed houses and an air of repressed carnival about it.” Their villa was studded with balconies of blue and white Moorish tiles and surrounded by a fragrant orchard of lemon, olive, and palm trees that gave way to a long gravel road—the only passageway out of their Mediterranean castle. Ironically, it was there—some thousand miles away from home, in his comfortable perch in the French Mediterranean—that Scott wrote what was arguably the most important American novel of the age: *The Great Gatsby*.



Flapper on the cover of *Puck* magazine, 1916. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

A tale of love and betrayal, Fitzgerald’s novel told the story of Jay Gatsby, a poor boy of obscure origins who rises to great wealth and prestige. In many ways, the novel was emblematic of its time. For as the book’s narrator, Nick Caraway, discovers, Gatsby’s money and fame were built on a lie. (If you want to know what that lie was, read the novel!) In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald exposed the excesses of the 1920s—a prosperous age in which many Americans came to enjoy the blessings of consumerism and excess, only to see it all crash around them with the Great Depression that arrived in 1929. Caraway described the opulence of Gatsby’s beachside mansion on Long Island and the extravagance of the parties he threw. “There was music from my neighbor’s house through the summer nights,” he confides. “In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. At high tide in the afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft, or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach . . . On week-ends his Rolls Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city . . . And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden shears, repairing the ravages of the night before.” Much like the Roaring Twenties, life in the shadow of Jay Gatsby was a wonder.

Consider the context in which Fitzgerald was writing: America in the 1920s was undergoing dynamic changes. Between 1921 and 1924 the country’s gross national product jumped from \$69 billion to \$93 billion while aggregate wages rose from roughly \$36.4 billion to \$51.5 billion. The United States had entered World War I a debtor nation and emerged as Europe’s largest creditor, to the tune of \$12.5 billion. From a relative standpoint, America was rich, and it showed. When a prominent Philadelphia banking family raised eyebrows for installing gold fixtures in its bathrooms, a spokesman for the clan shrugged off the criticism, explaining simply that “[y]ou don’t have to polish them you know.”

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To be sure, most Americans didn't have gold faucets, and very few enjoyed anything approximating Jay Gatsby's wealth, but ordinary Americans still shared in the general prosperity. Whereas only 16 percent of American households were electrified in 1912, by the mid-twenties almost two-thirds had electricity. This meant that the average family could replace hours of manual toil and primitive housekeeping with the satisfying hum of the electric vacuum cleaner, the electric refrigerator and freezer, and the automatic washing machine, all of which came into wide use during the twenties. By the end of the 1920s over 12 million American households acquired radio sets. All the while, the number of telephone lines almost doubled, from 10.5 million in 1915 to 20 million by 1930.

Wealth seemed to breed innovation. It took over one hundred years for the US Patent Office to issue its millionth patent in 1911; within fifteen years it issued its two millionth. Scores of new factory products flooded the burgeoning consumer market, bearing soon-familiar brand names like Scotch tape, Welch's grape juice, Listerine mouthwash, Wheaties cereal, Kleenex tissue paper, the Schick electric razor, and the lemonade Popsicle.

If most people couldn't travel to the south of France for repose and inspiration, they did come to enjoy a new range of public amusements that were scarcely imaginable twenty years before: dance halls; movie palaces like Chicago's Oriental Theater and New York's Rialto; amusement parks like Luna and Steeplechase at Coney Island, each magnificently lit by as many as 250,000 electric bulbs; inner-city baseball stadiums like Ebbets Field and Shibe Park, easily accessible by public transportation.

Americans were also able to buy vast quantities of mass-produced glassware, jewelry, clothing, household items, and durable goods, which blurred the distinctions between rich and poor. Just as Nick Caraway could not discern the lie behind Gatsby's wealth and upbringing, many wealthier Americans now had trouble discerning between social classes. "I used to be able to tell something about the background of a girl applying for a job as stenographer by her clothes," remarked a businessman in Muncie, Indiana, "but today I often have to wait till she speaks, shows a gold tooth, or otherwise gives me a second clue."

Americans in the 1920s were also obsessed with a new cult of celebrity. The decade gave rise to sports legends like Babe Ruth, who was just as renowned for his voracious appetite as for his homerun record, and Jack Dempsey, the heavyweight champion who by the mid-1920s appeared in almost as many films as he did title fights. Whereas the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers* combined published an average of thirty-six biographical profiles each year between 1901 and 1914, in the decade after World War I that figure climbed to about sixty-six profiles annually. Before 1920 almost three-quarters of these articles featured political and business leaders; now, over half concerned key figures in entertainment and sports. The genius of F. Scott Fitzgerald was his ability to cultivate his own image in the media. The genius of his signature character, Jay Gatsby, was his ability to create a veil of celebrity that masked his true origins.

But for all the dynamism of the age, Americans did not unqualifiedly embrace the Jazz Age. If they enjoyed its prosperity, they also feared its social consequences. The rise of premarital sex, the entry of women into the workplace, the breakdown of traditional religious mores, and the influx of millions of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe gave rise to a powerful backlash. Thus, the same decade that gave rise to Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald also witnessed a powerful backlash. In towns and cities throughout America, a revitalized Ku Klux Klan railed against African Americans, immigrants, Catholics, and "loose women." Supporters of prohibition drove through a restrictive law that banned the sale or production of liquor (judging by Fitzgerald's novel, that ban was of limited effect). Conservative Christians formed Fundamentalist churches and sought to restore God to his traditional place in homes and schools. There was, in short, a deep and pervasive contradiction—and many Americans sensed it.

Fitzgerald was a perfect chronicler of his time. He was both an avid participant in, and a stringent critic of, the culture of prosperity that marked the 1920s. In *Gatsby*, his alter ego, Nick Caraway, recalls wistfully the America of his youth. In Nick's mind, the Middle West embodied a lost age—a simpler time before telephones and movie palaces and department stores. Setting out by train from Chicago, “when we pulled into our winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild embrace came suddenly into the air.” This was “my Middle West,” he explains in the closing pages of the novel, “not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows. I am part of that . . . I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.”

But if the West represented for Fitzgerald an older America, it was clear from his novel that the country's train was moving eastward. By 1920, a majority of Americans lived in cities. The world was quickly changing and becoming modern, and the prairies of Nick Caraway's youth were slowly but surely becoming the stuff of national memory.

The world that Fitzgerald chronicled came crashing down on October 29, 1929. That was Black Tuesday, when the stock market collapsed. The boom economy went bust. And America's Jazz Age was officially over.

Actually, the stock market crash had very little to do with the onset of the Great Depression. Very few Americans in the 1920s owned stocks or securities. In reality, the nation's most prosperous decade had been built on a house of cards. Low wages, high rates of seasonal unemployment, chronic stagnation in the agricultural sector, and a hopelessly unequal distribution of wealth were the darker story that lurked behind 1920s-era prosperity.

There was a price to pay for so lopsided a concentration of the nation's riches. Good times relied on good sales, after all. The same farmers and workers who fueled economic growth early in the decade by purchasing shiny new cars and electric washing machines had reached their limit. By the late twenties, when advertisers told them that their cars and washing machines were outdated and needed to be replaced, the working class simply couldn't afford to buy new ones. Unpurchased consumer items languished on the shelves. Factories cut their production. Workers were laid off by the millions. The good times were over.

The Great Gatsby continues to fascinate and grip Americans today. In an era much like the 1920s—one in which we have come to enjoy new levels of comfort and convenience, in which we celebrate celebrity and opulence, but in which there remain glaring inequalities of wealth and privilege—*Gatsby* is more relevant than ever. “So we beat on,” as Fitzgerald wrote, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

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