The Great Gatsby

by

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Born in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in 1896, Francis Scott Fitzgerald eventually settled in New York City. His writings frequently deal with the East Coast social circles and are best known for documenting the 1920s “jazz age” and the era of Prohibition. His novel *The Great Gatsby* deals with this period, and its literary and commercial success helped make him one of the most prominent literary figures of the time. From gangsters to Prohibition to contemporary social customs, Fitzgerald’s work portrays a slice of New York during the 1920s.

Events in History at the Time of the Novel

**New York in the 1920s.** In the aftermath of the first world war, the United States experienced a rush of prosperity and optimism. Perhaps nowhere else did this social and economic change evidence itself more clearly than in New York City. Wall Street hosted the fervor of an unprecedented “bull”—or prosperous—market. People from all walks of life, from businessmen to teachers to clerks, began buying stocks “on margin.” Instead of buying the stocks outright, they would deposit with a broker a percentage of money or other security as a provision against loss on the deal. In other words, without actually having enough money to back the stock, a person could own shares and speculate on the future of a corporation. These people were convinced of the unbridled prosperity of America’s future—and with it—their own.

During this era, oil magnate John D. Rockefeller purchased a tract of land from Columbia University on which he began construction of an entertainment plaza that would be named Rockefeller Center. A rash of skyscrapers arose on the New York skyline. The old Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, a long-time monument of the elite New York social scene, fell to make room for a 102-story office building—at the time the tallest building in the world. Meanwhile, blocks away, construction began on the new Waldorf-Astoria, a magnificent 47-story structure that filled one square block. Attracted by all this construction, some of the wealthier New Yorkers left their old mansions for trendy penthouse apartments where they planted gardens on their terraces. Others moved out of their mansions into opulent hotels.

Afternoon hotel-room cocktail parties became the newest form of hospitality. The most infa-
mous of these parties developed common attributes. Says one historian, “You might find your hostess installed in a five-room furnished suite at a luxurious hotel, its walls practically invisible under her aggregated Vermeers, Rembrandts, and Italian primitives” (Morris, p. 297). The parties arose with seemingly little or no effort. Guests would generally show up with one or two friends who had not received an invitation. People who became sick from alcohol overindulgence found themselves cordially led to bathrooms, and those who passed out were generally ignored. Often these cocktail parties began at or before 6:00 p.m., sometimes continuing into the next morning. The novel’s narrator, Nick Carraway, attends such a gathering when he accompanies Mrs. Wilson and Tom Buchanan into New York City.

Women especially enjoyed the new freedoms of the 1920s. World War I had served as a liberating event in many ways. Through the National League for Women’s Service, women took over jobs for the men who fought overseas. Following the war, many women were loathe to relinquish the feeling of financial independence their jobs had given them. Throughout New York City one found “flappers”—the young, trendy women flaunting short skirts, short hair cuts, feather boas, and jewelry. Conservative elements were shocked when the Waldorf-Astoria announced in the early 1920s that it would begin serving food to any woman unaccompanied by a man at any of its restaurants, and at any time of the day or night. Such a breach in protocol was the result of a century-long reform movement. Spurred by the Protestant churches during the 1880s and the 1890s, organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Movement and the National Prohibition Party lobbied for the restriction of alcohol sale and consumption. These organizers viewed alcohol as a dangerous drug that disrupted lives and families. They felt it the duty of the government to relieve the temptation of alcohol by banning it altogether.

In January of 1919, the United States Congress ratified the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” on a national level. Nine months later, the Volstead Act passed, providing the means of enforcing such measures. Much to the dismay of Prohibitionists, however, the act had little effect on the alcohol-fueled hedonism of the American public.

The public reacted to Prohibition with a last night of binge drinking on January 15, 1920. For some time people had been stocking up on supplies of alcohol. But given the soaring prices, not even the wealthiest could afford to garner a lifetime reserve. New Yorkers crowded into their favorite bars, cafes, and restaurants in melancholy anticipation of the midnight hour, which would bring an end to their drinking. At the Waldorf-Astoria bar, one man sang “Auld Lang Syne” as a bartender wept. Few, however, foresaw the upcoming era of bootlegging, rumrunning, and speakeasies.

**VOLSTEAD ACT**

Passed in October 1919, the Volstead Act defined intoxicating liquor as drink that was more than 0.5 percent alcohol, determined penalties for selling liquor, called for injunctions against hotels, restaurants, and other establishments that sold liquor, and included a search and seizure clause.

A speakeasy was a place where the illegal alcoholic beverages were sold. One generally gained admission to a speakeasy through a sponsored membership by a trustworthy customer. Some provided membership cards, while others merely asked for passwords. This exchange of passwords at the door gave the “speakeasy” or “speak” its name. They existed everywhere and generally were easy to find. In fact, policemen were known to guide out of town visitors to the nearest speak, and sometimes even provide them with the password. At a typical speakeasy, a customer would wait for a light to come on above the door, a grill or small opening in the door would open, and the eye of the watchman would appear. If admitted, the customer might then entail pass through a series of locked doors, and at the final destination, the bartender provided a variety of watered-down scotches or gins.

Imbibers usually had little trouble obtaining alcohol without the benefit of a speakeasy. Rural distillers manufactured liquor, and “rumrunners” smuggled it into the city for resale. In the novel, Jay Gatsby has absolutely no difficulty in pro-
viding gallons of alcohol for his famous parties. Eventually the government realized that its Prohibition measures were pathetically ineffective. In 1933 Congress passed the Twenty-First Amendment, annulling Prohibition altogether.

Urban corruption. Ironically, the era of Prohibition fostered a huge underworld industry in many big cities, and New York was no exception. For years the city was under the control of the Irish politicians of Tammany Hall—a popular name for the small set of elected or appointed officials who dominated city politics. With the help of the local police force—again, mostly drawn from the Irish American community—the politicians of Tammany Hall virtually controlled New York law.

Charles Murphy headed Tammany Hall in 1922, the year the novel is set, and transformed it into a relatively incorrupt organization that supported major social legislation. He died just two years later, however, and by the time the novel was published, Tammany Hall had reverted to its previous ways. Authorities once again turned a
profit on the dealings of the underworld, which in this decade included bootlegging, gambling, and prostitution. Police took money from shady operators engaged in these activities and, in return, "overlooked" the illegalities.

A major player in the Tammany Hall era went by the name of Arnold Rothstein (in the novel, he appears as Meyer Wolfsheim). Through campaign contributions to the politicians, Rothstein bought the protection of Tammany Hall. This assured him a virtual monopoly over prostitution and gambling in New York during the 1920s. He maintained his position until he was murdered in 1928.

A good friend of Rothstein's, Herman Rosenthal, suffered a similar fate. Fitzgerald refers to this incident in his novel. During a lunch with Gatsby and Nick, Wolfsheim remarks, "The old Metropole...I can't forget so long as I live the night they shot Rosy Rosenthal there." (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 74). While the author does not go into great detail about the events leading up to Rosenthal's murder, many readers at the time the novel was published would have remembered the incident. Through Rosenthal's various illegal activities, the mobster was a major force in New York corruption. To avoid trouble with the law, he regularly made "campaign contributions" to his political boss, Tim Sullivan. When Lieutenant Charles Becker, the head of police on New York's East Side, began laying claim to some of Rosenthal's payoffs, Rosenthal complained to a reporter for the New York World. On July 13, 1912, the World published an expose of the corruption of Tammany Hall and the New York police force. Two days later, Becker's men murdered Rosenthal on the steps of the Metropole. Unfortunately for Becker, Tammany Hall washed its hands of him. He and four of his men went to the electric chair for their part in the crime.

Other big-city criminals influenced Fitzgerald's novel as well. When Fitzgerald moved to Great Neck, Long Island, in the early 1920s, the trial of one of his neighbors was headline news. Edward Fuller had run a brokerage firm that went bankrupt in June of 1922. He and his partners were convicted of gambling away millions of their customers' dollars. Fuller had risen to power on Wall Street through the aid of C. A. Stoneham. Owner of a racetrack, a casino, a newspaper, and the New York Giants, Stoneham's power stretched across the entire state. In an attempt to help Fuller out of his debt, Stoneham raided the Giants' cash box. Throughout the trial, incriminating papers disappeared, and witnesses were kidnapped. Fuller eventually served only twelve months of a lenient five-year sentence. The type of fatherly benevolence shown to Fuller by Stoneham surfaces in *The Great Gatsby*. As a young man, Gatsby learned his way around the law through the mentoring advice of Dan Cody, a miner, drinker, and gambler. Fitzgerald used this criminal character and others to create the aura of corruption and intrigue that pervades his novel.

**The Black Sox Fix of 1919.** The 1919 World Series was the center of a scandal that reverberated throughout the sports world. At the time, the Chicago White Sox led baseball in both talent and victories. Set to play the Cincinnati Reds in the World Series, the White Sox entered as the heavy favorites.

As a result of low game attendance during World War I, players' salaries had suffered cutbacks in the 1918 season. The owner of the White Sox, Charles Comiskey, had especially favored the cutbacks. Although he retained some of the best and biggest names in baseball, he paid them as poorly as the worst players in the league. The players complained and even threatened to strike, but Comiskey would not be persuaded to raise their pay. Three weeks prior to the start of the 1919 World Series, the White Sox first baseman, Arnold "Chick" Gandil, approached a bookmaker and gambler, Joseph Sullivan, with an offer to intentionally lose the series.

For some time Gandil had been formulating his plan. He had even managed to involve the Sox's star pitcher, Eddie Cicotte. Although Cicotte had to be won over through a great deal of persuasion, with his reluctant agreement, Gandil went into action. Six other players agreed to the fix. In addition to Gandil and Cicotte, they were Shoeless Joe Jackson (left fielder), George "Buck" Weaver (third baseman), Charles "Swede" Riskeberg (shortstop), Oscar "Happy" Felsch (center fielder), Fred McMullin (infielder), and Claude "Lefty" Williams (relief pitcher). The athletes fully expected their plan to succeed. Baseball in 1919—along with many other sports—was intimately connected to gambling. It was almost common knowledge that players sometimes "threw" games, or lost them on purpose.

Sullivan realized that on his own he would not be able to raise the $100,000 demanded up front by the eight White Sox players. He knew he would require the services of the "number one gambler-sportsman in America," Arnold Rothstein (Asinof, p. 24). Rothstein put up his own...
money to pay the players, and then began placing his own bets. Prior to the start of the series, rumors circulated about the legitimacy of the game. Losing the series five games to two, the Chicago White Sox caused one of the biggest sports upsets that the world had seen.

Casualties of the scandal mounted. In south-side Chicago courts, there were an astounding number of civil cases for failure to pay alimony, bills, and mortgage payments. Each of the defendants claimed to have lost his life's savings by betting on the White Sox. This signaled authorities, and within months, the plot was exposed. For their part in the crime, the eight players were banned from baseball for life, and they earned the nickname the "Chicago Black Sox." The American public suffered disenchantment. In fact, the expression "Say it ain't so, Joe" refers to the public's disbelief that a well-known sports hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson, could have participated in the scandal.

In the novel, Gatsby introduces Nick to Meyer Wolfsheim, telling Nick, "He's the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919" (The Great Gatsby, p. 78). Stunned, Nick thinks to himself, "It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe" (The Great Gatsby, p. 78). Arnold Rothstein not only gambled with the faith of fifty million, but on this occasion he also won.

The plot. Ironically, the title character of Fitzgerald's work does not appear until page fifty-two of the text. The author instead uses a minor, mostly unbiased narrator, Nick Carraway, to deliver his first-person tale. New to the upper-crust West Egg Village of Long Island, New York, Nick calls on his only friends in the area, his second cousin Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom. He had known Daisy quite well when the two of them lived in the Middle West. Nick soon suspects that the Buchanans' marriage totters on the brink of failure. This impression is solidified the next afternoon when Tom takes Nick to meet his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, a woman married to a local mechanic. During their outing in New York City, Nick, Tom, and Mrs. Wilson enjoy an afternoon of drinking with friends. All but Mrs. Wilson hail from wealthy families and spend much of their time socializing.

The title character in the novel, Jay Gatsby, excels in the art of socializing, and he soon becomes important to both Nick and the Buchanans. With only a solid reputation for hosting lavish soirees, Gatsby remains a mystery to all who know him. No one quite knows how he amassed his fortune nor how he maintains this wealth, thus the rumors run rampant. Some accuse him of murder; others claim he's a bootlegger; Gatsby himself insists that he found his fortune with Dan Cody, a famous silver miner. The only fact concerning Gatsby that Nick learns for certain is that he is in love with Daisy Buchanan.

While growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, Daisy had been the town beauty and led the life of a socialite. Never in need of a date, she was held in high regard by the army officers at the nearby Camp Taylor. After one officer in particular, Jay Gatsby, captured her heart, Daisy had no further interest in the others. She remained with him until he shipped out to fight overseas in World War I. For some time after Gatsby's departure, Daisy seemed reluctant to see other suitors. In time, however, she began socializing and eventually became engaged to Tom Buchanan. On the eve of her wedding, Daisy received a letter from Gatsby that almost prevented the marriage. Although Daisy did walk down the aisle the following morning, it was not without hesitation. She nevertheless returned from her honeymoon a happy bride. The marital bliss, however, did not last, as Tom's infidelity prevented any true happiness.
Gatsby discloses his affections toward Daisy during a lunch engagement with Nick. Although he lives in the same area, he has shied away from approaching his former sweetheart. Gatsby implores Nick to set up a meeting, and the following afternoon Nick arranges a tea party for the three of them. After spending only a few short hours with Gatsby, Daisy’s feelings of love are rekindled. The two begin to meet secretly.

Soon Tom becomes suspicious of his wife’s affair. During a group outing to New York, Tom unleashes the rage of his jealousy. In a drunken fury, he accuses Gatsby of stealing his wife and insists that Daisy will not divorce him. Gatsby and Daisy depart together. Nick, Tom, and the others then follow in a different car, and turning a bend in the road, they come upon the scene of an accident. Apparently a car fitting the description of Tom’s had just hit a female pedestrian and sped away. The dead victim was Myrtle Wilson.

For some time George Wilson had entertained his own suspicions concerning his wife’s fidelity or lack thereof. After the accident, he mistakenly assumes that Gatsby was the object of her desires and locates him through Tom. As retribution for his wife’s death, George confronts Gatsby at his home. Within a few minutes two shots ring out.

Both men are found dead by Nick and the household staff; it becomes apparent that George has shot Gatsby and then killed himself. Perhaps one of the most tragic events in the novel’s conclusion occurs at Gatsby’s funeral. For a man who had been the toast of New York’s upper class, only one friend—Nick, the narrator—cares enough to show up at the grave and pay his last respects.

Gatsby, the accepted hoodlum. Perhaps one of the most unique aspects of Jay Gatsby’s character is his unidentified connection with the underworld. A good friend to the notorious criminal Meyer Wolfsheim, Gatsby is tied to possibly shady dealings throughout the course of the novel. He repeatedly takes mysterious phone calls and steps aside for private, undisclosed conversations. Although Fitzgerald never reveals the sources of Gatsby’s wealth, Gatsby’s friends argue that he is possibly a bootlegger and that “one time he killed a man who had found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil” (The Great Gatsby, p. 65). Nonetheless, prominent citizens continue to associate with him.

Real-life personalities were highly esteemed for their alleged bootlegging under Prohibition, and it was actually quite difficult for authorities to enforce the Volstead Act. Only 1,500 agents were assigned to the Prohibition task force, making it nearly impossible to patrol the 25,000 miles of coastlines and borders across which goods could be smuggled. At the onset of Prohibition, a bootlegging industry flourished from the start, and drinking became more in vogue than ever. Upper-class citizens gained prestige by offering outlawed alcohol to their house guests and by taking friends to popular speakeasies. According to one Fitzgerald biographer, “The bootlegger entered American folklore with as much public complicity as the outlaws of the Old West had enjoyed” (Le Vot, p. 129). The American public not only embraced customs that fell outside the arm of the law, but it also admired figures who lived without restraint. One such character is Gatsby, who flaunts the law with his business dealings and socializes with seemingly endless funds. Fitzgerald’s novel, however, does not appear to champion this lifestyle, for Gatsby dies without a genuine friend.

Sources. F. Scott Fitzgerald set out to write a novel wholly representative of his era. It is little wonder then, that many characters and events in The Great Gatsby stem directly from real life. Fitzgerald’s own biography shares details with the lives of his characters. Like Nick and Daisy, the author grew up in the Midwest. Fitzgerald lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he attended St. Paul’s Academy during his high school years. Although his own family did not claim any great wealth, several of his academy friends, especially those with whom he took dancing lessons, did hail from wealthy backgrounds. They introduced him to a lifestyle that included parties, chauf-
feurs, and elite social circles. Like Nick, Fitzgerald did not have the means to become a part of these circles but was included as a gesture of friendship. In a move that paralleled that of his narrator's, Fitzgerald too left the Midwest and moved east. He attended college at Princeton University in New Jersey and lived most of his adult life in New York. While on the East Coast, Fitzgerald, like his characters, would become caught up in a whirlwind of endless parties.

In 1917, with the United States becoming involved in World War I, Fitzgerald enlisted as an army officer. While stationed for training at Camp Sheridan in Alabama, he met the love of his life, Zelda Sayre. Like Daisy, Zelda reigned as the princess of the Montgomery social scene. She had been voted “prettiest girl in class” during high school and was a favorite date among the young men at Alabama State University, Auburn University, and Camp Sheridan.

On October 26, 1918, Fitzgerald’s unit left Montgomery for New York. From there they were scheduled to sail out to France. While they awaited departure, however, the war ended and an armistice was signed. The author’s frustration in not being able to participate in the Great War evidences itself in the character of Gatsby. Unlike Fitzgerald, Gatsby did fight overseas. He is even rumored to have been “a German spy during the war” (The Great Gatsby, p. 48).

Fitzgerald also drew on newsworthy personalities from his era. Already mentioned is the “czar” of the New York underworld Arnold Rothstein, transformed into the novel’s character Meyer Wolfsheim. In real life, as in the fictional portrayal, this man was credited with the fixing the Chicago White Sox World Series of 1919.

Reception. After sending the manuscript of The Great Gatsby to Maxwell Perkins at Scribner’s, his publisher, F. Scott Fitzgerald received this reply: “I think you have every kind of right to be proud of this book. It is an extraordinary book, suggestive of all sorts of thoughts and moods” (Perkins in Fitzgerald, p. 199). Unfortunately not all of the critics agreed. The novel’s publication in April of 1925 was met with mixed reviews. The headline in the New York World read, “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Latest a Dud,” while the Brooklyn Eagle stated that it could not find “one chemical trace of magic, life, irony, romance or mysticism in all of The Great Gatsby” (Fitzgerald, p. 202). Most critics, nevertheless, recognized it as the finest novel crafted by Fitzgerald to that point, and Gilbert Seldes of the Dial went so far as to maintain that it put Fitzgerald far ahead of all other young writers and most of the older ones in the United States. The initial sales of The Great Gatsby were, however, disappointing. It reached sales of only about 20,000 copies during his lifetime, which fell far short of the 75,000 the author expected.

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