**1920’s America**

**New Culture**

In addition to the political and social transformations brought about by prohibition, fundamentalism and nativism, the 1920s also witnessed a cultural transformation. In this postwar decade, many citizens, especially in larger urban areas, were embracing new forms of entertainment, discovering new recreational activities, and adopting the culture of consumerism. Literature and music were taking adventurous new strides, and the women rights movement was making slow progress. In light of all these events, the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed this postwar period the “Jazz Age.”

In an era that saw a number of advances for women, the battle for the right to vote finally found closure. In 1918, President Wilson asked Congress to approve a Constitutional amendment to allow women the right to vote, but the Senate failed to pass it by two votes. The National Suffrage Association, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, continued to lobby and petition Congress. On June 4, 1919, the issue went before Congress once again, and this time it passed. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was not ratified until August 21, 1920, and by that time the National Suffrage Association had changed its name to the League of Women Voters.

On the labor front, women found more opportunity for work, but the jobs were limited to a few fields such as clerical, teaching, or roles in the service industry. These were jobs that many men considered too “womanly” to actively pursue for themselves. Wages for women typically remained low, especially when compared to the salary of a male performing the same job. In 1920, more than eight million women worked outside the home, and that number increased to well over ten million by the end of the decade.

A drastic alteration in appearance and values helped to distinguish the “new woman” of the 1920s. Known as “flappers,” their look and attitude was characterized by knee-length or higher dresses, rolled down stockings, smoking, ample use of makeup, and even dancing the “Charleston.” The traditionalists, of whom a majority of women still considered themselves, looked down on flappers for what they felt was a disregard for morality. Traditionalist were also alarmed by a rising divorce rate, which was fueled by relaxed divorce laws and a new sense of independence among women. This rate started to decline at the end of the decade due to the Great Depression.

Coinciding with the gains made by women during the 1920s, was a revolution in African American culture. The artistic, political, and literary achievements were due in part to a massive migration of blacks from southern states to northern cities. This move began in 1915 when northern industries were experiencing labor shortages due to the war. In New York City alone the black population more than doubled between the years of 1920 to 1930. Living in the northern states, blacks found they were able to speak out and act more freely, and thus their political and cultural influence started to expand. Jazz music, the creation of black musicians working together in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century, started to gain widespread national popularity. Caucasians and African Americans alike were drawn to jazz’s nontraditional rhythms and melodies.

The musical roots of jazz can be traced to post-Reconstruction traditions, such as spirituals, ragtime, and stringbands. Blending these musical forms with European influences resulted in a distinctive, improvisational sound, which spread across the country as African Americans moved northward. Louis Armstrong, who moved from New Orleans to Chicago to join Joseph Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band in 1922, is praised as one of the fathers of the jazz movement and an extraordinary musical talent. Edward “Duke” Ellington, a significant innovator of early jazz, moved from Washington D.C. to New York City. Ellington started playing at Harlem’s Cotton Club in 1927, during which time his compositions, including large ensembles of twelve to fourteen instruments, foreshadowed the 1930s swing movement.

It was in the same New York City borough where the Cotton Club enjoyed its fame that the African American cultural revolution found its center. The “Harlem Renaissance” gave rise to such figures as Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. These artists found their voice through the patronage of white Americans who found such creativity inspirational in times when many were becoming increasingly disillusioned.

Garvey was an influential political leader whose platform was based on promoting black expressionism and racial pride, ending imperialism in Africa, and unifying the dispersed black populations. Garvey came to New York from Jamaica in 1916, bringing with him the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an organization he started two years earlier. The purposes of the UNIA were to help black citizens relocate to Africa (the “Back to Africa Movement”), to sponsor black businesses, and to help fund the Black Star Line Steamship Company. Most of Garvey’s financial endeavors were unsuccessful and ultimately failed, and he was eventually sent to prison in 1925 for defrauding investors. In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge pardoned Garvey and had him deported back to Jamaica.

McKay, one of the first literary standouts during the Harlem Renaissance, published a collection of poems called *Harlem Shadows* in 1922. Some of McKay’s poem titles included “If We Must Die” and “To the White Fiends.” Langston Hughes, considered to be one of the best poets of the period, described his feelings during his first visit to Harlem by saying “Harlem! I dropped my bags, took a deep breath, and felt happy again.” Hughes published his first compilation in 1926, titled *The Weary Blues*.

Many African American women also found their voice during the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston, considered by many to be the most prolific African American writer of her time, explored themes of female identity and love in her books *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

The literary revival of the 1920s extended well beyond Harlem. In fact, the postwar era seemed to influence many young writers who had become disillusioned by the hopeful optimism before the war, the harsh realities of the war itself, the tactics of the fundamentalist, and Klan brutality. Some of the more prominent American writers became expatriates, while many others were happy to just travel abroad, gathering cultural and life experiences.

Gertrude Stein, an expatriate living in Paris, is credited as being one of the first writers to popularize a modernist writing style starting with her 1906 book *Three Lives*. Stein also helped to name this new generation of authors when she wrote to Ernest Hemingway saying, “All of you young people who served in the war, you are the lost generation.” The idea of a “lost generation” took hold, and no one typified the epithet more than F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald was an almost overnight success, with his 1920 novel *This Side of Paradise*, which became very popular with the young flapper culture. Fitzgerald’s second novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), achieved much critical acclaim, but by the end of the decade Fitzgerald’s personal life fell into ruin. He became an alcoholic and his wife was “prone to fits of madness.” Eventually, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood to find work as a scriptwriter, but he never regained the level of success he enjoyed in the 1920s.

Ernest Hemingway, a WWI veteran, moved away from traditional writing styles and instead developed his own lean, declarative style. The publication of his first two novels, *The Sun also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) marked the beginning of a writing career that would include a Pulitzer Prize for his 1952 novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The writers of the lost generation also included William Faulkner and T. S. Eliot. Among Faulkner’s contributions to early modernist literature were the harsh war novels *Soldier’s Pay* (1926), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). The poet T. S. Eliot exemplified the modernist ideal in much of his work. In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot’s disenchantment and sense of helplessness were palpable and his work became a benchmark for modern literature.

Despite all of the turmoil following WWI, including the disillusioned works of the lost generation, America saw great economic prosperity. The 1920s witnessed a spectacular growth in industrial output, business expansion, and consumerism. Helping to sustain this growth, the Federal Reserve Board allowed interest rates to remain low and the Federal government assumed a firm *laissez-faire* attitude toward business.

Many other factors also contributed to the economic expansion, including the mass production of electricity. More electricity was being generated in America by 1929 than the combined output of the rest of the world. This helped to spur the mass production of automobiles, refrigerators, heavy building equipment, vacuum cleaners, and radios. Between 1921 and 1929, industrial output was doubled, and a finished automobile was rolling off the Ford assembly line in Rouge River Michigan every ten seconds. The Ford Motor Company, founded in 1903, and its Model T automobile greatly contributed to the social and economic impact the car had on the nation. When the Model T was introduced in 1908, its price tag was $850, but by 1924 the car was selling for no more than $290. Frederick Taylor developed a method to standardize the manufacturing process through a step-by-step analysis and factories that applied his methodology were increasing their production.

The mass production of the car was perhaps one of the more important economic advents during the 1920s. No longer a novelty of the wealthy, the efficient assembly line lowered the cost of a car enough that over 30 million were owned in America by 1930. Fast transportation, revenue generating gasoline taxes, and growing dependency on the automobile gave rise to suburb expansion in cities nationwide. The auto industry’s success also drove economic expansion in other areas. It created a need to manufacture more tires, glass, and petroleum products. The proliferation of gas stations soon followed, along with the people needed to staff them, and tourism flourished.

A multitude of willing consumers were also eager to experience other forms of leisure. Heroes such as baseball’s George (“Babe”) Ruth, boxing’s Jack Dempsey, and swimming’s Gertrude Ederle encouraged a growing fan base and huge ticket sales for professional sports. Ederle held eighteen world records by the time she was seventeen, and in 1926 swam the English Channel on her second attempt. The new home entertainment center of the era, the radio, also helped popularize sports. Staring in 1921, radios began appearing throughout American homes, even though long-ranged broadcasting was not viable until late in the decade.

Motion pictures, mostly a novelty until WWI, found a purpose in war propaganda with the “Hang the Kaiser” films. Earlier films, including 1903’s *The Great Train Robbery*, were shown in five-cent theaters, known as “nickelodeons.” In the 1920s, movies began to show their true potential, reflecting the social climate, adapting to new technologies, and giving rise to a shared experience nation-wide. Unlike radio broadcasts that varied from region to region, people going to “picture palaces” to watch movies saw the same show. The first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*, was released to a delighted public in 1927, marking the end of silent films.

The popularity of the film was also attracting the nation’s attention to another novelty—the movie star. At many times more recognizable than the nation’s leaders, top movie stars were popular enough to demand salaries that eclipsed the salary of the President of the United States. Stars such as Rudolph Valentino and Clara Bow began to wow audiences. Valentino, one of the first film idols and considered to be consummate “Latin lover”, captured the attention of millions with his silent films *The Sheik* and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.* Bow, one of the first sex symbols of the movies, attracted the flapper filled audiences in mass. Her films such as *Mantrap* and *It* demonstrated her depth and range, and inspired many young to emulate her.

Film production was soon big business, and during the 1920s it was under the control of a few large companies. Production, distribution, and advertising were all business aspects that were handled internally by companies such as Paramount, MGM, and Warner Brothers. Mostly, the headquarters of each of these media giants was in New York City, but the actual filming process was taking place in Hollywood-taking advantage of the warm, sunny southern California climate. The rise of Hollywood signaled the beginning of a new industry that continues to influence American culture and imagination to this day.

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