

Historical Context: The Great Gatsby

EXPLORING Novels, 2003

The [Jazz Age](#) and the Roaring Twenties

The Jazz Age began soon after World War I and ended with the 1929 stock market crash. Victorious, America experienced an economic boom and expansion. Politically, the country made major advances in the area of women's independence. During the war, women had enjoyed economic independence by taking over jobs for the men who fought overseas. After the war, they pursued financial independence and a freer lifestyle. This was the time of the "flappers," young women who dressed up in jewelry and feather boas, wore bobbed hairdos, and danced the Charleston. Zelda Fitzgerald and her cronies, including Sara Murphy, exemplified the ultimate flapper look. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan Baker is an athletic, independent woman, who maintains a hardened, amoral view of life. Her character represents the new breed of woman in America with a sense of power during this time.

As a reaction against the fads and liberalism that emerged in the big cities after the war, the U.S. Government and conservative elements in the country advocated and imposed legislation restricting the manufacture and distribution of liquor. Its organizers, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, National [Prohibition](#) Party, and others, 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, 1919, the U.S. Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution that outlawed the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" on a national level. Nine months later, the Volstead Act passed, providing the enforcement means for such measures. Prohibition, however, had little effect on the hedonism of the liquor-loving public, and speakeasies, a type of illegal bar, cropped up everywhere. One Fitzgerald critic, Andre Le Vot, wrote: "The bootlegger entered American folklore with as much public complicity as the outlaws of the Old West had enjoyed."

New York City and the Urban Corruption

Prohibition fostered a large underworld industry in many big cities, including Chicago and New York. For years, New York was under the control of the Irish [politicians](#) of [Tammany Hall](#), which assured that corruption persisted. Bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling thrived, while police took money from shady operators engaged in these activities and overlooked the illegalities. A key player in the era of Tammany Hall was Arnold Rothstein (Meyer Wolfsheim in the novel). Through his campaign contributions to the politicians, he was entitled to a monopoly of prostitution and gambling in New York until he was murdered in 1928.

A close friend of Rothstein, Herman "Rosy" Rosenthal, is alluded to in Fitzgerald's book when Gatsby and Nick meet for lunch. Wolfsheim says that "The old Metropole.... I can't forget so long as I live the night they shot Rosy Rosenthal there." This mobster also made campaign contributions, or paid off, his political boss. When the head of police, Charles Becker, tried to receive some of Rosenthal's payouts, Rosenthal complained to a reporter. This act exposed the entire corruption of Tammany Hall and the

New York police force. Two days later, Becker's men murdered Rosenthal on the steps of the Metropole. Becker and four of his men went to the electric chair for their part in the crime.

The Black Sox Fix of 1919

The 1919 World Series was the focus of a scandal that sent shock waves around the [sports](#) world. The [Chicago White Sox](#) were heavily favored to win the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. Due to low game attendance during World War I, players' salaries were cut back. In defiance, the White Sox threatened to strike against their owner, Charles Comiskey, who had refused to pay them a higher salary. The team's first baseman, Arnold "Chick" Gandil, approached a bookmaker and gambler, Joseph Sullivan, with an offer to intentionally lose the series. Eight players, including left fielder Shoeless Joe Jackson, participated in the scam. With the help of Arnold Rothstein, Sullivan raised the money to pay the players, and began placing bets that the White Sox would lose. The Sox proceeded to suffer one of the greatest sports upsets in history, and lost three games to five. When the scandal was exposed, due to a number of civil cases involving financial losses on the part of those who betted for the Sox, the eight players were banned from [baseball](#) for life and branded the "Black Sox." In the novel, Gatsby tells Nick that Wolfsheim was "the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919." Shocked, 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." Gatsby himself is tied to possibly shady dealings throughout the course of the book. He takes mysterious phone calls and steps aside for private, undisclosed conversations. It was said that "one time he killed a man who found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil."

The Cover Artwork

Fitzgerald's editor, Maxwell Perkins, commissioned a full-color, illustrated jacket design from the Spanish artist Francis Cugat. Cugat had worked previously on movie poster and sets and was employed as a designer in Hollywood. The Art Deco piece that he produced for the novel shows the outlined eyes of a woman looking out of a midnight blue sky above the carnival lights of Coney Island in Manhattan. The piece was completed seven months before the novel, and Fitzgerald may have used it to inspire his own imagery. He calls Daisy the "girl whose disembodied face floated along the ark cornices and blinding signs" of New York.

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