

# Jazz age a clash of cultural values history essay



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“ Cultural civil war” (Digital History), Symbolizes the era of the 1920’s.

Author F. Scott Fitzgerald labeled this decade the Jazz Age. In his novel, *The Great Gatsby*, he criticized the exterior and possessive lives of Americans after the war. The traditional lifestyles were fading away while the luxurious, party lifestyle flourished. Throughout the 1920’s Americans continually tested the universal image of desired behavior. The decade was shaped by wealth, parties, moonshine, and sexually expressive dancing. The changing lifestyles developed major cultural conflicts within America. Alcohol, music, immigration, racism, and flappers of the 1920’s illustrate the changing lifestyles brought about by the jazz age.

During the 1920s, alcohol was the greatest contributor to the lifestyle changes and cultural conflicts. These changes eventually became noticed by the governing power, and on January 16, 1920 the 18th Amendment came into effect. The 18th Amendment, known as prohibition, was the forbidding by law of manufacture, transport, and sale of alcohol. Along with 18th Amendment, congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce the new prohibition on alcohol. The mob and gangsters took advantage of the opportunity and began smuggling and bootlegging liquor, and became quite profitable. Alcohol was smuggled in from Mexico and Canada, also being shipped from abroad to the U. S. from Europe and the Caribbean. Canada was exporting roughly a million gallons of alcohol to the United States a year. Bootleggers made their own drinks with wood, alcohol and medical supplies, sometimes causing blindness, paralysis, or death. In *The Great Gatsby*, and in the 1920s, bootlegging was sociably acceptable. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, Nick comments on Gatsby’s house after his huge party,

telling him that his house party glowed immensely like the “ world’s fair” (Fitzgerald 86). All of Gatsby’s guests knew he was involved with organized crime, but yet seemed to attend all of his parties without hesitation. Because of the Prohibition law, Gangsters developed secret drinking establishments, Speakeasies; which provided an entertaining atmosphere, jazz music, food, and alcohol. The illegal bars were called speakeasies because you had to speak the password to enter. With the flood of liquor expanding, the government created the Prohibition Bureau, which always fell short of men and money. The mob, due to the amount of money they were making, were able to expand their influence on bribe public officials; many judges, law makers, police, and Prohibition Bureau members were on various crime organizations payrolls. Alphonse “ Scarface” Capone was one of the famous bribers of the Jazz Age. Capone essentially owned Chicago, and in 1927 he made around \$60 million by bootlegging. In the End, “ The idea behind Prohibition was to reduce crime and poverty, and generally improve the quality of life in America-by making it impossible for people to get their hands on alcohol. But this so called ‘ Nobel Experiment’ was a colossal failure” (Speakeasies, Flappers & Red Hot Jazz: Music of the Prohibition). Lasting roughly thirteen years, Prohibition ended with the ratification of the 21st Amendment, on December 5, 1933, legalizing alcohol.

In addition to alcohol parents, teachers, and pastors blamed the lifestyle changes on the musical changes of the Jazz age. The Harlem Renaissance was a movement where black authors, musicians, and artists showcased the talent that African Americans had to offer, marked the beginning of the musical changes. It was F. Scott Fitzgerald who called the 1920’s the “ Jazz

Age”, but it was the African Americans who gave the era its jazz. Jazz is a musical form, native to the United States, creatively mixing different forms of music, including African American blues and rag time, and European-based popular music. As slaves African Americans learned few European cultural traditions. Becoming popular in the late 1920s, jazz was very “addictive” to people because of its unusual beat and rhythm. In *The Great Gatsby*, when Nick, Daisy, and Tom are walking to their car, Daisy is drawn back inside by the music, tuning all other surrounding sounds out (Fitzgerald 115). Jazz was so distinct it didn’t just spread among the U. S., but around the world. Some of Jazz’s most famous artists within the 1920s were Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and Louis Armstrong. Jazz along with the beat and rhythm developed new dance styles, such as the Charleston, becoming so popular that it still symbolizes the Jazz Age. Along with Jazz, other musical forms and changes emerged, such as Blues, Hillbilly, and boogie woogie music. Of the 1920s, Bessie Smith was the best and most influential classic blues singer. Hillbilly music, also known as country music, was best represented by musician Jimmie Rodgers. Pianist Cow Cow Davenport developed the trademark tune “cow cow blues”, giving life to boogie woogie piano style. The Roaring twenties, known as the Jazz age because of Jazz’s unusual beat and rhythm, became the most popular music of the era. The invention of the radio “drew the nation together by bringing news, entertainment, and advertisements to more than 10 million households by 1929” (*The Formation of Modern American Mass Culture*). The newly invented radio contributed to the flourishing of jazz, and gained widespread appeal during the decade, even among the whites.

Another Contributor to the lifestyle changes in the 1920s was immigration. 4, 107, 209 immigrants immigrated into the United States from 1921 to 1930. Immigrants brought along their lifestyles and culture; thus forming a culture clash. This is exemplified in *The Great Gatsby* when those from the Midwest - Nick Carraway - were fair, honest, and straight forward, while those living in the East for sometime - Tom and Daisy Buchanan - were unfair, corrupt, and materialistic. Many immigrated to America hoping for the American Dream, social advancement, freedom, and endless opportunities. Main issue with immigration was the competition for jobs. In 1921 a quota system for immigrants was developed by congress. A quota system is an arrangement that limited the number of immigrants who could enter the U. S. from specific countries. In 1924 the National Origins Act, states that the number of immigrants of a given nationality each year could not exceed 2% of the number of people of that nationality living in the United States in 1890. By the middle of the 1920's one out of every four people was an immigrant. The Quota Law of 1924 and 1929 act limited the number of immigrants to 150, 000 to be distributed among people of various nationalities in proportion to the number of their compatriots already in the United States in 1920. Many Americans viewed these immigrants as a threat to American religious and social values, as well as economic opportunities.

Due to the number of immigrants, racism peaked during the 1920s. The Ku Klux Klan, a hate group, reached nearly 4-5 million members in the 1920s, spreading throughout the U. S. The KKK aimed at killing non-whites and other religious groups, harassed and promoted hatred towards African Americans, but also aimed at the new America forming within the cities. They targeted

Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. One center of Klan strength was Indiana, where leader David Stephenson was strict and controlled few politicians. In the darkness of night the KKK burned crosses, boycotted business owned by Jewish, Catholics, and Africans, terrorizing the citizens. The Klan wore masks to conceal their identities, waved flags and preached hate. Famous leaders of the Klan during this era include Grand Dragon and Imperial Wizard. Behind the hard, hateful exterior, were just Americans fearful of change.

Flappers, directly illustrate the changing lifestyles and cultural battles within the Jazz Age. Many of the young unmarried women of the twenties rebelled against the conventional patterns of behavior and became known as flappers. Flappers often cut their hair short, wore it in a bob, and wore short straight dresses that would flap around when they would dance. Flappers flaunted their independence from parents by going away to college or moving to the city. They also abandoned social taboos that said women shouldn't drink, smoke or become sexually active. Daisy and Myrtle from *The Great Gatsby* embody the flapper image by drinking and their party lifestyles. Both of them also cheated on their husbands, having love for more than one man. Flappers were known to hang out in speakeasies and night clubs where they danced - with bare arms and legs flying. Flappers flaunted their sexuality; this marked the 1920s individuality of the modern woman.

The 1920s was a decade of deep cultural conflict (*The 1920s - An Overview*). The cultural conflicts of the twenties were between a more metropolitan culture, and a more traditional culture. Americans were no longer interested in politics, but entertainment. Because the 1920s produced a breed of artists, musicians, and writers, who were among the most ingenious and

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clever in American history, the 1920s developed into one of the most crucial periods in the countries cultural history (The Formation of Modern American Mass Culture). Author F. Scott Fitzgerald called the 1920s the Jazz Age - and the decade was truly was Jazz's golden age. " The stock market crash of 1929 signaled the end of the party. The roaring 20s came to a close in economic chaos and the lighthearted atmosphere of the Prohibition era fizzled out with the end of the decade" (Roaring Twenties). The changing lifestyles brought about by the 1920s Jazz Age was embodied by alcohol, music, immigration, racism, and flappers.