

Disillusionment as
common thread
during period of
1920-1950 essay
sample



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Perhaps the most distressing attribute that binds the decades between 1920 and 1950 in America is the growing disillusionment in the overall *zeitgeist*. This common theme runs deep and is quite evident via literature and music from the period; furthermore, this estimation finds validation simply through the overall climate created by everyday civilians. That is to say, that this feeling of disillusionment manifests itself in the lives of the so-called norm, and simply understanding those events that seem significant should provide a better understanding of said emotion.

It is important to note that the 1920s were born of earlier times and events. The decade cannot stand alone, as time does not begin here. That said, looking to key events in the vicinity of this timeframe, like the Great War, and various foreign revolutions, becomes of the utmost importance.

The experiences of the war led to a sort of collective national trauma afterwards for all the participating countries. The optimism of the 1900s was entirely gone, and those who fought in the war became what is known as “the Lost Generation” because they never fully recovered from their experiences. For the next few years, much of Europe began its mourning; memorials were erected in thousands of villages and towns. The soldiers returning home from World War I suffered greatly, since the horrors witnessed in that war had never been seen before in history. Although it was then commonly called shell shock, it is now known that many returning soldiers suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder[1].

After World War I, America experienced social change on a scale that was arguably greater than any other in its history. Many men returned home

from Europe with new ideas and new concepts contrary to what previous generations of Americans subscribed to.

In fact, of course, much of the revolution in moral standards owed its origins to the influence of World War I, rather than to Freud. Millions of American men who might otherwise never have left their counties or boroughs were transported to Europe and exposed to experiences only the more wealthy had heretofore been absorbed[2].

What may appear to have been a time marked with rollicking frivolity is conceivably the most tumultuous decade of American history. Despite the ready abundance of gin, flappers and jazz music, the beginnings of turmoil and social upheaval were brewing. A certain loss of innocence, as well as a change in traditional gender roles forced America into a modern era, for better or for worse.

That experience, summed up by the very popular song lyrics “ how ya gonna keep ‘ em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree?” meant profound changes in the attitudes of a large percentage of a whole generation of American males. To this must be added equally momentous changes in the lives of women during the war years when many were called upon to take jobs in industry vacated by men in uniform, and to work in new jobs created by the war[3].

In addition to the impact felt by the war, it is imperative to note the power of the sweeping hand of industrialization and mechanization on the people of America. Jobs that were once performed by many individuals were replaced by cheaper, more efficient processes that often hinged on the use of
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machinery. This put many people out of a job, and those who remained employed often lost their sense of identity as the job they once did, was now done for them at the push of a button or the pulling of a lever.

...much of the frivolity of that decade was the product of a sense of desperation not far removed from that of the 1930s. Unrevealed by most works of the decade is the extent of the stress and uncertainty that prevailed as a result of a variety of factors that combined to produce a profound sense of change and to cast many Americans adrift in a sea of normlessness. At the root of many of the changes was the sudden onrush of the machine in the 1920s, or perhaps one should say the monkey-driven machine, the impact of which cannot be overstated[4].

Many turned to alcohol as an escape from a system, a government they no longer trusted nor respected. Feelings of betrayal were pervasive throughout the generation, citing the senseless violence of the Great War as cause for this sentiment. This is captured in the works of expatriate writers F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gilda Klein and Ernest Hemingway.

World War I, rather than raising up public heroes who were swept into office, as previous wars had, instead disillusioned youth and kindled a spirit of revolt against the generation responsible for the war. Prohibition, meanwhile, had engendered disrespect for authority and encouraged in youth a belief that nothing compulsory deserved respect[5].

This outlook continued to creep into popularity throughout the decade, and met an even wider audience as Americans faced the effects of the Great

Depression of the 1930s. Traditional values crumbled, in part as a response
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to a lack of resources, but largely for a graver matter: a lack of trust in one's government and a lack of hope for the future.

For Americans, the 1930s will always summon up images of breadlines, apple sellers on street corners, shuttered factories, rural poverty, and so-called Hoovervilles (named for President Herbert Hoover), where homeless families sought refuge in shelters cobbled together from salvaged wood, cardboard, and tin. It was a time when thousands of teens became drifters; many marriages were postponed and engagements were interminable; birth rates declined; and children grew up quickly, often taking on adult responsibilities if not the role of comforter to their despondent parents. It was a time when the number of women in the workplace actually increased, which helped needy families but only added to the psychological strain on the American male, the traditional "breadwinner" of the American family[6].

For Americans, this was a time marked with doubt and despair. Ideas about how things were supposed to be gave way to distrust in the government and a realization that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better. People formerly considered politically conservative now endorsed sweeping socialist programs, like Roosevelt's so-called New Deal and the Civilian Conservation Corps. It seemed now, that the general populous was now in agreement with those in the minority just a few years previous. Finally, everyday people began to understand the sort of strife and disillusionment experienced by the Lost Generation.

Many American intellectuals in the 1920s, disillusioned by what they considered the pointless carnage of World War I, had shown little interest in

politics or social movements. Nor did they display much affection for life in the United States. Indeed, most American novelists, poets, artists, composers, and scientists continued to believe, as they had since the 19th century, that the United States was culturally inferior to Europe. So, to learn the latest modernist techniques in literature, painting, or music, or to study the most advanced theories in physics or psychoanalysis, they assumed they had to go to London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, or Copenhagen[7].

Following this, came the wartime boom that pulled the US economy out of the proverbial gutter. Factories that once produced cars, busted by the Great Depression, reopened their doors and now manufactured military aircraft, tanks and light trucks. Further conversions took place across nearly all fields of industry and once again, men and women could find gainful employment. However, it is essential to remember that though the country experienced a significant economic upturn during this time period, the reason behind it was indeed ominous. The threats of fascism and Nazism were the driving force behind this economic revolution.

This sort of tension is mimicked in the following decade of the 1950s. Though often portrayed as an idyllic period in American history, this assumption is shortsighted to say the least, as this was certainly not the case for many citizens.

The 1950s [are] often mistakenly painted as the pinnacle of American prosperity. The '50s were supposed to be a time of the " Affluent Society". In reality however, more than a fifth of Americans lived in poverty during this

time, compared with roughly an eighth at the beginning of the 21st century[8].

It is true that a large number of families prospered during this time period, largely in response to the GI Bill and other government sanctioned programs aimed at assisting a postwar transition into family life. Those people most distressed by the events surrounding the Great Depression and the Second World War nurtured a social climate of conformity and routine.

The United States, thanks to the GI Bill, low-entry-cost housing, and a booming economy, experienced a cultural shift as people acquired spacious housing, kitchens, and washing technologies that gave a higher quality of life[9].

This dichotomy of extreme growth and welfare for a large portion of Americans plays against an equally significant cross-section of citizens who felt disenfranchised and forgotten by their government. Juvenile crime rose to unprecedented levels and homelessness really became an issue for the first time in America since the Civil War as a result of this well-disguised social upheaval.

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