

THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



— “The Age We Live In” —

Published two days before the end of 1929, the cartoon above was titled “When the Historians Meet to Name the Dying Decade” (full cartoon, p. 10). How did the decade’s “residents” view the age they lived in, one in which the daily use of words like *new*, *modern*, and *amazing* did not seem like hyperbole. What did they welcome and praise? What did they resist and fear? What questions did they ask? Here we peruse Twenties’ commentary on “the age we live in,” from witty one-liners and contest entries to newspaper editorials and intellectuals’ analysis—offered by journalists, novelists, politicians, clergymen, cartoonists, and the general public. Before you begin, subtract 1920 from the current year; as you read, note statements that could appear in commentary today.

The people of every age think theirs is the “golden age” of the world—and they think aright. The age we live in is the alivest and best that mankind has ever known. For instance:

Wednesday afternoon on Daytona Beach in Florida, a daring automobile driver seeking the absolutely inconsequential feat of racing a motor monster faster than the world record for such speed, met a frightful death in his wrecked machine and macerated a bystander. The aftermath was promptly photographed by an Associated Press cameraman, the films developed, rushed by airplane to Atlanta to the *Constitution*, and the gruesome engraved pictures were printed in Thursday’s editions of this newspaper.

This was an illustrative example of the combined twentieth-century marvels of discovery, invention, and enterprise, the news value of which can be appreciated by every newspaper reader. The wild theory of such actual accomplishments would have almost caused the proclaimer of it be strapped in a strait-jacket only twenty years ago!

In this day of wireless telegraphy, transoceanic telephony, round-the-world radio speech and music, radio photograph transmission, and incipient television, who can name an age more golden and galvanic?

Since men and women of thirty birthdays were born, the physical sciences have produced more human ameliorations [improvements] than all the ages behind us. Life has been lengthened, made more livable and comfortably equipped, the globe has been shrunken into easy comprehension, and the sum of popular happiness enriched beyond the Utopian dreams of More and the phantasmagoric romances of Jules Verne.¹ We moderns get out of our common factories the aids to intellect, information, and achievement which would have seemed “gifts of the gods” by our fathers and mothers.

“The Age We Live In”

Editorial

The Atlanta Constitution

March 15, 1929

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¹ Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516. Jules Verne, *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, 1864; *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, 1870; and other works.

The newspaper of today, such as yesterday's issue of the *Constitution*, is the modern Puck² who puts a harvesting girdle around the earth in less than forty minutes. It is the periscope through which the masses everywhere may sweep the far horizons and see the events of forming history before the actors have wiped the sweat of action from their brows.

Talk about golden ages—"we are living, we are dwelling in a grand and awful time, in an age on ages telling; to be living is sublime!"³

"The Rhythm of the Age"

Editorial, *The Chicago Tribune*
October 23, 1927

The secretary of the Illinois Music Teachers' Association announces that superheated jazz is on the wane. He predicts that we shall soon be in the attic digging up [sheet music of] "The Good Old Summer Time," "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree," and tunes of the past, having deposited all the works of tin-pan alley⁴ in the ash can.

May we venture an opinion that the secretary of the Music Teachers' Association is in error? We suspect he is deceived by a very common longing for a return of his youth. We share it and sympathize. Our fathers and mothers felt a similar preference for a similar reason for "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower," "Shells of Ocean," Roll On, Silver Moon," "Larboard Watch," and "O, Susannah." But they didn't pass them on nor are we going to infect our youngsters with our sentimental yearnings for the favorites of our youth. Our youth belongs to us. Theirs belongs to them. Fair enough, we say.

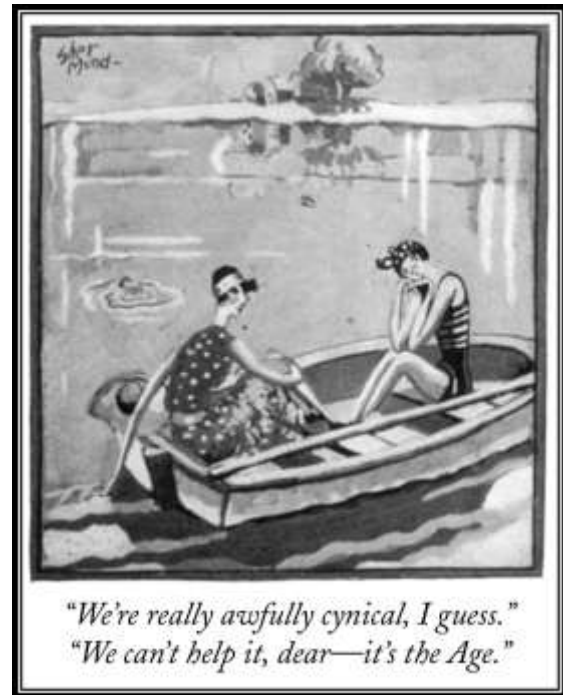
And there is another reason, a special reason, why jazz is not going to be replaced by the old tunes. Jazz is the rhythm of today. It is the rhythm of the internal combustion engine and nothing can drown that out. There are several million automobiles playing jazz and our nerves are keyed to them. We older folks may tire of it and yearn for the long swing of the waltz, but not our young folks. You can't drive a nifty roadster to waltz rhythm nor yet the airplane you are just learning to let out at one hundred miles the hour.

Rev. Fred Merrifield

"Literature for a New Age Supplementing the Bible"
The Chicago Tribune, April 3, 1927

Is this really a new age? Of course we like to flatter ourselves that we have something new and unique to contribute to history and that no previous generation has ever quite equaled us in its grasp of reality or its sense of the vital oneness of the parts with the whole of life. If it takes something more than bobbed hair, short skirts, the hiking habit, and the unblushing reassurance of youth to convince the skeptical that this is really a new age, we offer other evidence. There is undoubtedly an increasing hunger for scientific knowledge and a willingness to take the trouble of absolutely remodeling our world of thought socially, religiously, economically, and philosophically.

In addition, as if by magic, there are springing up in all parts of the educated world organizations, leaders, and literatures which seem destined to render the newer modes of thought and life more



Cartoonist: Barbara Shermund

The New Yorker, August 27, 1927
Reproduced by permission.

Rev. Merrifield was a professor of the New Testament in the University of Chicago Divinity School. In this piece he recommended recent works to address man's spiritual quest in modern times.

² Puck: in folklore, a mischievous fairy, a sprite of the woods. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck sets off to "put a girdle round about the earth" in search of a magic flower.

³ Traditional Christian hymn, "We Are Living, We Are Dwelling."

⁴ Tin Pan Alley: New York City music publishers associated with popular music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

permanent, effective, and inspirational. Here, almost as dramatically as in the movies, one may read his own higher thoughts, see his ambitions fulfilled in the faces of noble characters, and find tempting opportunity to give expression to the desires for service which well up in him. Right here in a day, which so many imagine they despise because it moves so rapidly and so lightly, are the foundations of a much finer future than any we have yet experienced. . . . we have within our immediate reach a wonderful golden literature which will keep us alert to the needs and dangers of our times.

Modern literature lays bare the human heart. It reveals the vital defects of the average man and woman. It also points the way for us to realize the innate qualities of divinity with far greater warmth and color than of any previous literature of any age whatsoever.

“Where the Car Has Helped the Church”

The Literary Digest

July 16, 1921

In an article on the automobile and church attendance, *The Literary Digest* quoted an unnamed Episcopal minister who responded to a survey on the question conducted by *The American Motorist*.

The automobile is only one of the many factors that have changed the whole world in which we live. The movie, the auto, the lure of the city, the opening of industrial opportunity to women and girls, the telephone, the telegraph, the inexpensive daily paper, the increase of tenantry [rental housing], the passing of the individual home and the coming of the apartment and flat, the increase of ready-to-wear, ready-to-eat, ready-to-use products, and many other factors have changed our world. Our psychology has changed. Our sense of values is in a state of flux. Great social and industrial problems have entered the field of our common experience. Men’s interests have widened. Men’s ideals of religion have changed. . . .

Anonymous author
“Fear in Small-Town Life”
Harper’s, August 1926

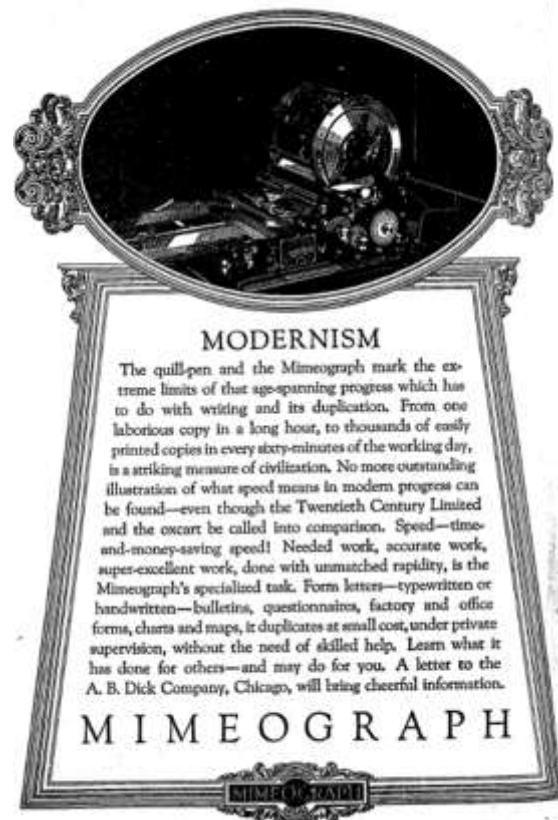
What is the need for thinking, anyway, when the newspapers, the movies, the radios, the motors will hand one the news and the thrills, absorb all time and leisure? There are few empty hours, solitary days in

modern life, days when the mind can retreat within itself and assay [assess] its own resources. We are so busy buying things, going to all the places that everyone goes to, and doing all the things that everyone does, that it is hardly necessary to think. It is easy to escape, therefore, by any of these mechanized diversions, that insistent, pressing demon within each of us which asks and asks and insists upon an answer, “What are you good for and what are you making of your life?”

Edward S. Martin
“The War against Prejudice”
Harper’s, September 1924

A co-founder of *Life* (1883-1936), Martin wrote occasional essays for other journals.

These are very extraordinary times. It is a mere truism to say that. Everybody sees it. Things move very fast. Life changes while you wait. New inventions and new developments of inventions constantly press in. The people of the world are daily being drawn nearer together by increased rapidity of communication. No nation can be a laggard in such times as these. Every nation that hopes merely to keep its place, much more to forge ahead, must find its job and do it with all its power.



Life, Feb. 22, 1929

Walter Lippmann
A Preface to Morals
1929

One of America's preeminent journalist-philosophers, Lippmann aimed his discerning eye at whatever was called "modern" to offer a long-viewed perspective on the "novelties" of the age.

Novelties crowd the consciousness of modern men. The machinery of intelligence—the press, the radio, the moving picture—have enormously multiplied the number of unseen events and strange people and queer doings with which he has to be concerned. They compel him to pay attention to facts that are detached from their backgrounds, their causes and their consequences, and are only half known because they are not seen or touched or actually heard. These experiences come to him having no beginning, no middle, and no end, mere flashes of publicity playing fitfully upon a dark tangle of circumstances. I pick up a newspaper at the start of the day and I am depressed and rejoiced to learn that anthracite miners have struck in Pennsylvania, that a price boost plot is charged, that Mr. Ziegfeld has imported a blonde from England who weighs 112 pounds and has pretty legs, that the Pope, on the other hand, has refused to receive women in low-necked dress and with their arms bare, . . .

Now in an ordered universe there ought to be a place for all human experiences. But it is not strange that the modern newspaper reader finds it increasingly difficult to believe that through it all there is order, permanence, and connecting principle.

Rev. William Palmer Ladd
"Christian Attitude toward Labor"
The Forum, August 1923

An Episcopal clergyman, Ladd was dean of Yale Divinity School.

[It] may be well to recall the fact that the complexity of modern social and industrial order has created a problem not only for the Church but for society as a whole, and a problem for which society as well as the Church has not yet found a solution. Our material development has outrun our thinking. How to integrate the political and the industrial order is the statesman's greatest problem. How to escape from a machinery-ridden world, or rather how to spiritualize that world, is the problem of humanity, and not only of the Church.

Reinhold Niebuhr
Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, 1929

Niebuhr, one of the most influential American Protestant theologians, pastored a small Detroit congregation in the 1920s.

Mother [Niebuhr's wife] and I visited at the home of ——— today where the husband is sick and was out of employment before he became sick. . . . The man is about 55 or 57, I should judge, and he is going to have a desperate time securing employment after he gets well. These modern factories are not meant for old men. They want young men and they use them up pretty quickly. Your modern worker, with no skill but what is in the machine, is a sorry individual. After he loses the stamina of youth, he has nothing to sell.

"WHAT IS MODERN?"

Definition Contest, *The Forum*, 1930

Inviting readers' definitions for terms looming large in contemporary discussion was a regular feature of the periodical The Forum. In April 1930, four winning definitions selected by the editors were published.

The definitions submitted this month have brought out clearly the fact that the word *modern* has many meanings. To the historian it refers to time. To the painter and the poet it means an attitude and technique. To the builder it means plumbing. With so many meanings, dependent upon the whim of the user, there is some question as to whether *modern* really means anything anymore. . . .

In entering the contest [writer] Upton Sinclair disposed of the word in his usual acid manner: "Modern is the word used by the self-satisfied people of today to ridicule the self-satisfied people of yesterday."

The following definitions have been awarded prizes.

Modern is a word used by any age to describe the products and the practices of that age, especially when they are sharply and favorably distinguished from those of earlier origin and vogue.

—Howard E. Fuller, Loxley, Alabama

Modern is anything of, pertaining to, and in spirit with contemporary civilization.

—Ruth M. Zicke, New Hampton, Iowa

Modern is anything that bears the stamp of contemporary life or the most recent past, and which portrays some special features that are more or less characteristic of the time we are living in.

—Assen Nicoloff, Evanston, Illinois

That is **modern** which emanates from a mind in sympathy with the spirit of its own times, and which clearly mirrors and understandably interprets those times to the contemporary world. Such a mind may live in any age and work in any medium. Its product may be a thing or an idea, a phrase in music or a skyscraper, a motor car, or a musical concept.

—Ralph Richmond, Syracuse, New York

Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd
Middletown: A Study in American Culture, 1929

Selected in 1924 as typical town of "middle America," Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists' research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s.

The more sophisticated social life of today has brought with it another "problem" much discussed by Middletown parents, the apparently increasing relaxation of some of the traditional prohibitions upon the approaches of boys and girls to each other's persons. Here again new inventions of the last thirty-five years have played a part. In 1890 a "well-brought up" boy and girl were commonly forbidden to sit together in the dark, but motion pictures and the automobile have lifted this taboo, and once lifted, it is easy for the practice to become widely extended. Buggy-riding in 1890 allowed only a narrow range of mobility; three to eight were generally accepted hours for riding, and being out after eight-thirty without a chaperon was largely forbidden. In an auto, however, a party may go to a city halfway across the state in an afternoon or evening, and unchaperoned automobile parties as late as midnight, while subject to criticism, are not exceptional.

Hooper Lewis
 "Progress," *The Forum*, December 1928

Lewis, a Texas resident, submitted this poem to the *Forum* for its monthly "What IS—?" definition contest. The question was "What is progress?"

Trial marriage, television,
 Taxes, taxies, prohibition,
 Propaganda, profiteering,
 Radio and racketeering,
 Boards of Temperance and Morals,
 Modern-Fundamental quarrels,
 Alienists and aviation,
 Sex and Shaw and sanitation,
 T.N.T., synthetic food,
 Halitosis, Hollywood,
 (Ye gods, *now* they give us noises!)
 Mencken, mediumistic voices,
 G.M.C. and K.K.K.,
 B.V.D., Y.M.C.A.—
 Heavens, who's this Orful Ogress?—
 Hush! She's calmly christened "Progress."

Profiteering: charging exorbitantly high prices for goods, usually in war or emergencies

Racketeering: organized crime

Modern-Fundamental quarrels: theological debate among Christians

Alienists: physicians testifying in criminal trials on mental illness and insanity

George Bernard Shaw: influential and controversial Irish playwright and socialist

Halitosis: "bad breath," a staple of often-satirized Listerine ads

Noises: i.e., talking pictures

H. L. Mencken: sardonic journalist-satirist

Mediumistic voices: referring to interest in spiritualism and communicating with the dead

G.M.C.: General Motors Corp., manufacturer of Chevrolet, Cadillac, etc.

B.V.D.: widely advertised brand of men's underwear

Orful Ogress: "awful ogress" [i.e., female ogre]



Al Posen, *Them Days Is Gone Forever*, *The Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 1922

Life is just a joyous song through the happy land. Jazz and ginger everywhere—gosh! hain't it grand?



*Mother's at the beauty parlor
Running up a bill—*



*Father's in the cellar
Working at the still.*



*Sister's at a picture show;
Hopes to be a star—*



*Brother's slightly jingled
In his racing car.*



*Uncle's learning dance steps
At the cabaret—*



*Cousin's at a petting party
Hic! Hic! Hooray!*



*Auntie's in the runabout,
Stepping on the gas—*



*Granny's at the phonograph,
Cranking out the jazz.*



*Gran'pa's at the radio
Cussing out the static—*



*Sonny's at the roadhouse
With his automatic.*



*Daughter's at the court-
house,
Getting her decree—
Hopes to have another try
Soon as she is free.*



*Baby, in the bathroom,
Eats a poison pill.
Buddy's drinking bootleg
Guaranteed to kill.*

“The Happy Family”

Chicago Daily Tribune, April 13, 1924

Cartoonist: John T. McCutcheon

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Henry Louis Mencken
"Appendix from Moronia"
Prejudices: Sixth Series, 1927

Famed for his sardonic commentary on everything he deemed lowbrow, Mencken excoriated modern film in this essay first published in *Photoplay*.

The first moving pictures, as I remember them thirty years ago, presented more or less continuous scenes. They were played like ordinary plays, and so one could follow them lazily and at ease. But the modern movie is no such organic whole; it is simply a maddening chaos of discrete fragments. The average scene, if the two shows I attempted were typical, cannot run for more than six or seven seconds. Many are far shorter, and very few are appreciably longer. The result is confusion horribly confounded. How can one work up any rational interest in a fable that changes its locale and its characters ten times a minute?

William Allen White
"Cheer Up, America!"
Harper's, March 1927

White was a widely read midwestern newspaper editor, commentator, and progressive spokesman for middle-class America.

That which America has done with humanity is to make the dynamic man—the man eager for change. Throw the whole kit of modern inventions, from steam engine to the radio, into the African jungle or into the midst of Asia, or even into the European peasantry, and these inventions would bring no hope, would change no social or economic status, would bring no relations of man based upon the faith of man in his fellows. Somewhere in a laboratory, working with his tubes and fires, a scientist in an apron in weighing, measuring, trying, changing, poking his fingers into a place along the dead wall that impedes our further progress, and maybe tomorrow, maybe next month, or next year or the next decade or the next century he will find the thing that will upset and revolutionize the world. Where will he go with it? It will affect mankind first and surest and in the broadest way in America, because America accepts change. In the golden quest of the ages, the quest for self-respect, we have built actually a new kind of man in America.

Aldous Huxley
"The Outlook for American Culture:
Some Reflections in a Machine Age"
Harper's, August 1927

A prolific English intellectual, Huxley is known foremost for his futuristic novel *Brave New World* (1932).

The future of America is the future of the world. Material circumstances are driving all nations along the path in which America is going. Living in the contemporary environment, which is everywhere becoming more and more American, men feel a psychological compulsion to go the American way. Fate acts within and without; there is no resisting. For good or for evil, it seems that the world must be Americanized.

LOOKING BACK

F. Scott Fitzgerald embodied the "Jazz Age" in his personal life as well as his fiction. In later years he mused on the period that ended abruptly in 1929.

That America [of his childhood] passed away somewhere between 1910 and 1920, and the fact gives my generation its uniqueness—we are at once prewar and postwar. We were well-grown in the tense spring of 1917, but for the most part not married and settled. The peace found us almost intact—less than five percent of my college class were killed in the war, and the colleges had a high average compared to the country as a whole. Men of our age in Europe simply do not exist. I have looked for them often, but they are twenty-five years dead.

So we inherited two worlds—the one of hope to which we had been bred, the one of disillusion which we had discovered early for ourselves. And that first world was growing as remote as another country, however close in time. My father wrote the old-fashioned *s* for "s" in his youthful letters and as a boy during the Civil War was an integral part of the Confederate spy system between Washington and Richmond. In moments of supreme exasperation he said, "Confound it!" I live without madness in a world of scientific miracles where curses or Promethean cries are bolder—and more ineffectual. I do not "accept" that world, as for instance my daughter does. But I function in it with familiarity, and to a growing extent my generation is beginning to run it.

"My Generation," *Esquire*, October 1968

The uncertainties of 1919 were over—there seemed little doubt about what was going to happen—America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history and there was going to be plenty to tell about it.

"Early Success," *American Cavalcade*, October 1937

Somebody had blundered and the most expensive orgy in history was over.

It ended two years ago, because the utter confidence which was its essential prop received an enormous jolt and it didn't take long for the flimsy structure to settle earthward. And after two years the Jazz Age seems as far away as the days before the War. It was borrowed time anyway—the whole upper tenth of a nation living with the insouciance [lack of worry] of grand ducs [dukes] and the casualness of chorus girls. But moralizing is easy now and it was pleasant to be in one's twenties in such a certain and unworried time.

"Echoes of the Jazz Age," *Scribner's*, Nov. 1931

Henry Seidel Canby
Everyday Americans
1920

A literary editor and writer, Canby offered *Everyday Americans* as “a study of what that typical American product, the college and high school graduate, has become in the generation which must carry on after the war.”

We [Americans] who are just now so afraid of internationalism are more likely than any other single agency to bring it about. Our habits of travel, our traverse of class lines, our American way of doing things, are perhaps the nearest approximation of what the world seems likely to adopt as a modern habit if the old aristocracies break down everywhere, if easy transportation becomes general, if there is widespread education, if Bolshevism does not first turn our whole Western system upside down. Already in newspapers and books, in theaters and politics, in social intercourse and in forms of music and language, one sees all through Western Europe (and, they say, also in the East) the American mode creeping in, to be welcomed or cursed according to circumstances. And those great international levelers, the movies, are American in plot and scene and idea and manners from one end to the other of a film that stretches round the world.

Stuart Chase
Prosperity: Fact or Myth?
1929

An early consumer activist, Chase was a cofounder of Consumers Research, Inc., the first product-testing organization in America.

There is just a chance that America might whirl itself into the most breathtaking civilization which history has yet to record. . . . But to date the chief exhibit is activity. Manners, due mainly to speed and congestion, are growing steadily worse. Statesmanship, rendered impotent by the businessman, stumbles determinedly downhill. Civic comeliness [attractiveness] emerges in noble courthouses, schools, hospitals, and university groups, only to be completely canceled by a plague of signboards, pop [soft drink] stands, filling stations, sky signs [airplane advertising banners], and the rotting skeletons of abandoned motor cars. Skyscrapers would be far more appealing if one could see them. We cannot yet brave a contrast with much of Europe. Zurich [Switzerland], for instance, is a manufacturing center, and lovely to look upon. Fall River [Massachusetts] is a manufacturing center in a beautiful natural setting, and hideous to look upon.

By all odds the noblest aspect of our civilization is found in our engineering works. The turbines of a great power station, the Roosevelt dam, an airplane in flight, the new Hudson River Bridge, the sweep and curve of cement highways, the speeding arrows of interstate transmission lines, the clean smack of racing motorboats, the grain elevators of Minneapolis—all may or may not signify spiritual attainment, but still stubbornly attest to the great glory of man’s mind and hand. In this department we have achieved a nobility of sorts, but current American civilization, as a total phenomenon, hardly deserves more than the credit of being hectically alive. Which is better after all than being beautifully dead, but still a long march from Attica [region of ancient Athens, Greece].

President Herbert Hoover
Inaugural Address
March 24, 1929

Defeating Democratic candidate Al Smith in the 1928 presidential election, Hoover was president from March 1929 to March 1933, encompassing the end of the Roaring Twenties and the onset of the Great Depression.

We have emerged from the losses of the Great War and the reconstruction following it with increased virility and strength. From this strength we have contributed to the recovery and progress of the world. What America has done has given renewed hope and courage to all who have faith in government by the people. In the large view, we have reached a higher degree of comfort and security than ever existed before in the history of the world. Through liberation from widespread poverty we have reached a higher degree of individual freedom than ever before. The devotion to and concern for our institutions are deep and sincere. We are steadily building a new race—a new civilization great in its own attainments. The influence and high purposes of our nation are respected among the peoples of the world. We aspire to distinction in the world, but to a distinction based upon confidence in our sense of justice as well as our accomplishments within our own borders and in our own lives.

F. S C O T T F I T Z G E R A L D

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

1920

Fitzgerald's first novel, written when he was 22 and a recent Princeton graduate, explored the postwar angst and quests of the young generation through Amory Blaine, Fitzgerald's semi-autobiographical protagonist



Here was a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds, through a reverie of long days and nights; destined finally to go out into that dirty grey turmoil to follow love and pride; a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken. . . . [ellipsis in original]



"Modern life," began Amory again, "changes no longer century by century but year by year, ten times faster than it ever was before—populations doubling, civilizations unified more closely with other civilizations, economic interdependence, racial questions, and—we're dawdling along. My idea is that we've got to go very much faster."



"Why shouldn't you be bored," yawned Tom. "Isn't that the conventional frame of mind for the young man of your age and condition?"

"Yes," said Amory speculatively, "but I'm more than bored; I'm restless."

"Love and war did for you."

"Well," Amory considered, "I'm not sure that the war itself had any great effect on either you or me—but it certainly ruined the old backgrounds, sort of killed individualism out of our generation."

Tom looked up in surprise.

"Yes it did," insisted Amory. "I'm not sure it didn't kill it out of the whole world. Oh Lord, what a pleasure it used to be to dream I might be a really great dictator or writer or religious or political leader—and now even a Leonardo da Vinci or Lorenzo de Medici couldn't be a real old-fashioned bolt in the world. Life is too huge and complex. The world is so overgrown that it can't lift its own fingers, and I was planning to be such an important finger——"

"I don't agree with you," Tom interrupted. "There never were men placed in such egotistic positions since—oh, since the French Revolution."

THE GREAT GATSBY

1925

Now revered as an American classic, Fitzgerald's third novel portrayed the loss of hope in the American Dream among the rootless "Jazz Age" generation. In its final scene, Nick Carraway, the narrator, visits Jay Gatsby's abandoned mansion before returning to the Midwest. Among the most renowned literary finales, the scene must have a place amidst 1920s commentary on "the age we live in."



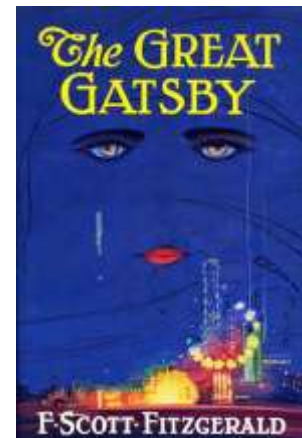
On the last night, with my trunk packed and my car sold to the grocer, I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight, and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspily along the stone. Then I wandered down to the beach and sprawled out on the sand.

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning——

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.



first edition cover



“When the Historians Meet to Name the Dying Decade”

Chicago Daily Tribune, December 29, 1929

Cartoonist: John T. McCutcheon

The Corridors of Time: 1880-1890: The Terrible Eighties. 1890-1900: The Gay Nineties. 1900-1910: The Roosevelt Decade.
1910-1920: The Tragic Decade. 1920-1930: The

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