

The Jazz Age: The Lost Generation

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ABSTRACT: It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of success, and it was an age of satire, wrote F.Scott Fitzgerald and he nostalgically looked back to the jazz age-the period that began about the time of the May Day riots in 1919, and leaped to a spectacular death in October 1929. The old values were in a state of disintegration and new values were taking their place. The process was accelerated both by the war itself and postwar developments. The American success reached its climax in the Nineteen-Twenties. The years between 1919 and 1929 were declared as a unique era, a period of paradisaal bliss. The Americans had been feeling highly comfortable and the American mood was usually optimistic and up beat. People talked of a new era and a new Eldorado. 'The Aspiring Age' 'the Roaring Twenties', 'the Gay Twenties', 'the Jazz Age', 'the Era of Excess', 'the Mad Times', 'A time of Fords', 'Flappers and Fanatics'- these are but a few of the labels pasted on the decade of the 1920's in America. The years between 1919 and 1929 were years of change. Though all American history is a record of change, the change in the early years of the Twenties is especially remarkable because it was sudden, shocking, and stimulating.

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I. INTRODUCTION

It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of success and it was an age of satire, wrote F.Scott Fitzgerald. The handsome Minnesota born author, an alcoholic Princetonian became a sensation with his tale uninhibited bewildered youth in the jazz age. Francis Scott Fitzgerald, American short story writer and novelist was famous for his depictions of the Jazz Age, his most brilliant novel being, "The Great Gatsby", in which affluent disillusioned youth living in a dissipated and morally ambivalent society grapple with issues of identity. It is quite obvious that Fitzgerald the barometer of his generation's extremes, cannot be separated in either his life or his work from the time which formed him its magic glamour, its poverty of faith and at the end, its sickness and ruin. There is thus the closest correspondence between, on the one hand, Fitzgerald's personal psychic compulsions and the predominant aspirations evident in his protagonists, and these aspirations and the pattern of American life and culture, on the other. These aspirations stem from a lofty, unrealized conception of self-a conception central to Fitzgerald's psychic economy.

F. Scott Fitzgerald appeared on the literary scene of America in what has been termed as 'the Jazz Age', and soon became one of its most famous writers. He sketched a perfect picture of the paradise that was America, but sketched it in such a way as to reveal the other side of this paradise too.

The 'new era' was an era of rapid industrialization and mechanization in America. Accordingly there came an unprecedented industrial boom during this period. This industrial growth during the period was accompanied by a rapid accumulation of the financial resources of the American people. Bankers, security promoters and salesmen and managers of other financial institutions had never been as numerous or prosperous and had never received such a large share of the national income. The American people had never seemed so economically healthy as in the postwar decade.

It was an age that believed in money and power and established the thesis that beauty is a concealed form of money. In this age of materialism men bowed down and worshipped at the altar of goddess success while seeking quick something for nothing riches. This was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually over-reached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste-the whole race went hedonistic deciding on pleasure. All the changes that were forced on a rigid society were a direct result of the war. The disenchantment behind the flamboyant and hedonistic lifestyle of the Jazz Age is portrayed in the works of the lost generation, a group of American Writers that included F.Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and others.

F. Scott. Fitzgerald appeared on the literary firmament of America in the Jazz Age. The world of the Jazz Age was a glittering superstructure of paradoxes, on the one hand there was industrialization, all round progress, cultural revolution, social security, prosperity and happiness, and on the other, spiritual depravity, moral anarchy, personal insecurity, mass depression and more serious neurosis.

However, beneath the surface glamour and glitter lay the moral corruption and spiritual frustration. The society was dominated by materialism and sex promiscuity, envy and ambition, and greed and lust. All means were considered justified to attain private and selfish ends. There was no value for human sentiments and virtue had lost its meaning. Born and brought up in such an age many sensitive souls lived in an acute state of mental and emotional torment. While they had physically to live and work against the old moral values of life, their conscience did not approve of it. The destruction of old value by their own hands bruised their souls. The excess of materialism destroyed their mental peace and isolated them from themselves. They appeared to have found themselves in a bottomless pit from which they could neither escape nor redeem themselves. They knew that the lane through which they were passing would lead them nowhere. They realized that they had sunken in a condition which could be called 'lost' and there was no way out of it.

F. Scott Fitzgerald stands apart in an alienation both as a person and a writer. The psychologists define alienation as the division of self. It certainly prevents one from feeling at home with oneself, as each soul eyes the other as a stranger. Fitzgerald suffered from this division of self. He was a split personality. The tension of this 'double vision' from which Fitzgerald suffered is apparent in his heroes also whom he rightly called his brothers.

Two opposite thoughts persisted in his mind at the same time; two opposite feelings existed in his heart together. Though it may sound paradoxical and unconvincing, he loved and hated his milieu simultaneously. Behind the devotion to glitter is also the sense of illusion of the felicity which it represents. The trait of double mindedness, the presence of a love of American dream of success and a constant disillusionment with it is too apparent in both Fitzgerald himself and his work to be overlooked.

Fitzgerald was aware of vanity and vulgarity in the lives of rich; he was highly critical of it, yet, he was lured by the glitter of money. Among, Anthony (*The Beautiful And Damned*), Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*) and Dick (*Tender is the light*), all his heroes have a fascination for wealth. However the remarkable point in that Fitzgerald never depicts them as successful people. They are defeated men who have fallen victims of society, the norms of which are impossible to be followed by them.

However, the stories of his disenchantment acquired a wider significance as Fitzgerald's personal crisis matched with the prevalent mood of his time. In his own crisis Fitzgerald found the underlying reasons of collapse of a whole age. Fitzgerald portrayed the life of his generation in its true colours a generation which looked all lost in enjoyment and merry-making on the surface, but was wounded from inside because the war had destroyed all its hopes and shattered all its values. No writer of the period pictured the Lost Generation more vividly or more lastingly than Fitzgerald, and it is a most suggestion whether Fitzgerald did not perhaps, create the Jazz Age and the league of despairing youth.

Thus the intellectuals became increasingly alienated from the rest of the American society. The writes of the time pictured America as a land of puritan intolerance, materialistic values, crudity of manners, emotional frustration, and contempt for culture. To William Carlos Williams America appeared as 'the most lawless country in the civilized world, a panorama of murders, perversions, a terrific unorganized strength, excusable only because of the beauty of its great machines.' Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken were the most savage critics of America in the 1920. America had become, perhaps all of them agreed, a moral wasteland.

The Jazz Age was also called the time of a ten-year-long weakened party whose hangover never really started till the stock market crash. In a very real sense F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had been in the vanguard of those establishing the Jazz image of the Twenties, helped to make it a permanent view.

Though the Jazz Age is generally remembered as a period of hedonism and insouciance, it was also paradoxically an age marked by an outburst of creative activity, so vigorous that we are still stunned by it. It was a remarkable age of literary effervescence and efflorescence – a stimulating and exciting period in fiction, drama and poetry written mostly by the young Americans who had left the shows of their country. Despite the superficial gaiety and ease of the decade, its major literary scenes were often grim and tragic. The intellectual life of the Twenties was therefore, at once tragic and profound. It was from the disillusionment, discontent and sense of alienation in the intellectuals that there sprang the most marvellous flavouring of American literary achievement. H. L. Mencken, Ring Lardner, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dresier, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, all appeared at this important moment of American History.

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