

## **A Reading on the social and cultural background of The Great Gatsby**

### **1. Terms associated with Modernism in American Literature:**

Social and cultural aspects of any society have a great impact on writers. In order to understand something about writers' works, we often need to get some information about their life and society. Modernist writers tended to tackle issues that really reflect their social environment. The terms mentioned below are often associated with modernism in America.

- **The Roaring Twenties**

The Roaring Twenties was a period in history of dramatic social and political change. For the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The nation's total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929, and this economic growth swept many Americans into an affluent but unfamiliar "consumer society." People from coast to coast bought the same goods (thanks to nationwide advertising and the spread of chain stores), listened to the same music, did the same dances and even used the same slang! Many Americans were uncomfortable with this new, urban, sometimes racy "mass culture;" in fact, for many—even most—people in the United States, the 1920s brought more conflict than celebration. However, for a small handful of young people in the nation's big cities, the 1920s were roaring indeed

- **The flapper**

The most familiar symbol of the "Roaring Twenties" is probably the flapper: a young woman with bobbed hair and short skirts who drank, smoked and said what might be termed "unladylike" things, in addition to being more sexually "free" than previous generations. In reality, most young women in the 1920s did none of these things (though many did adopt a fashionable flapper wardrobe), but even those women who were not flappers gained some unprecedented freedoms. They could vote at last: The 19th Amendment to the Constitution had

guaranteed that right in 1920. Millions of women worked in white-collar jobs (as stenographers, for example) and could afford to participate in the burgeoning consumer economy. The increased availability of birth-control devices such as the diaphragm made it possible for women to have fewer children. And new machines and technologies like the washing machine and the vacuum cleaner eliminated some of the drudgery of household work

- **Prohibition**

The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—which banned the manufacture, transportation and sale of intoxicating liquors—ushered in a period in American history known as Prohibition. Prohibition was ratified by the states on January 16, 1919 and officially went into effect on January 17, 1920, with the passage of the Volstead Act. Despite the new legislation, Prohibition was difficult to enforce.

- **The Jazz Age**

The Jazz Age was a cultural period and movement that took place in America during the 1920s from which both new styles of music and dance emerged. Largely credited to African Americans employing new musical techniques along with traditional African traditions, jazz soon expanded to America's white middle class

## **2. F. Scott Fitzgerald and his depiction of the American society.**

We as reader often get to know people and cultures through reading their literatures. Philip Stevick in *The Theory of The Novel* states:

The novel, more than any other genre, is capable of containing large, developed, consistent images of people, and this is one of the reasons that anyone reads novels. The novel, more than any

other genre can give form to a set of attitudes regarding society, history, and the general culture of which the novel is a part. ( 1967)

F. Scott Fitzgerald as one of the modern American writers is highly praised for his craftsmanship in writing. He is the writer who voiced the Jazz Age and its hilarious and gay time during the Twenties. Many critics regard him as the spokesman of the age. He was the most important and representative writer of the 1920's.

In his book, *Understanding Fiction*, Francis Conolly says:

We read because of a hunger for information, or amusement, or solace, because of an appetite for truth that seems to grow by what it feeds on. Men read to discover themselves in their world, to assert special roles in the universe, to learn the meaning of the personal struggles in which they are engaged. ( 1955 )

Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* can be considered as a mirror of the downfall of the American dream and American society as a whole.

The novel looks at America in the 1920s and gives insight into the culture in which Gatsby's behavior takes place. There were many changes in American society around that time, with more freedom in some areas and restrictions in others, particularly related to social class; how this affects Jay Gatsby is examined.

The novel tackles issues such as class stratification, war, the American bohemian lifestyle criminality and love.