

Chapter 2

The Roaring Twenties

Many people believe that the 1920's were like a great party – everybody was having fun, making good money, buying stocks, drinking bath tub gin, dancing the Charleston, and driving a new Ford. Of course, we know this is an exaggeration. Most people lived normal, humdrum lives, not the glamorized existence of movie stars and sports heroes. This chapter examines some of the social changes which took part during the 1920's, with an emphasis on the poetry of African-Americans.

Roaring During the Twenties

When most of us think of the 1920's, we imagine people having a good time. As was said in the last chapter, people had gotten tired of making sacrifices and 'saving the world for democracy'. There were wild times for many with much partying and foolishness. The dance craze was the Charlestown and skirts went up to the knees. Drinking alcohol was made illegal by the eighteenth amendment, but rather than reduce drinking, and with only 1,500 Federal agents to enforce the new law, it created huge problems for the police and encouraged organized crime.

Aided by profits from illegal liquor, organized crime came into its own in the 1920's. Names of big time mobsters like Al Capone made the headlines. Everyone knew of the St. Valentine's day massacre in Chicago when seven disarmed members of a rival gang were murdered in an empty garage. The FBI was unable to get Capone for the massacre or the 250 other deaths attributed to his Chicago based gang of 1,000 mobsters. In 1930, Big Crime took in far more money than the Federal government collected in taxes! But the Depression and the end of Prohibition did more to temporarily stop criminal organizations, than the police or FBI, and Capone was arrested in 1931 on income tax evasion and eventually died of syphilis.

American Women

The 1920's was a time of female emancipation. After years of struggle women, won the right to vote in 1920. Daring women, known as flappers, smoked in public, danced till three, and discovered the romantic possibilities of the automobile. Birth control devices such as the diaphragm were widely available, for the first time in history and the pioneering feminists, led by Margaret Sanger advocated their use. Dresses showed the knees and bathing suits were even more revealing. American women participated in professional sports. Helen Willis won tennis championships at Wimbledon, and Gertrude Ederle swam the English Channel. Women writers included Edna St. Vincent Millay, Pearl Buck, and Willa Cather. More women than ever completed high school and attended colleges. But for the vast majority, careers still meant keeping house and raising children. Labor saving household helpers like the refrigerator, washing machine, and vacuum cleaner made the home chores easier for middle class women still confined to their traditional roles. And though women had gained the right to vote, they were unable to amend the Constitution to guarantee themselves equal rights in other areas.

Entertainment

The movies made big news in the 1920's. Over 100 million Americans went every year. They saw Clara Bow the "It" Girl. Women swooned when Rudolph Valentino crossed the silver screen. Men imitated his sideburns and hairstyle, hoping to capture his sex appeal. When Valentino died, crowds lined up for a mile to file past his coffin. Al Jolson sang "Mammie, how I love you," while appearing blackface in *The Jazz Singer*, and from then on a movie was not a movie unless it talked. A hundred million Americans could not be wrong.



Babe Ruth

The 1920's was a big time for sports – the "Babe" George Herman Ruth set a record of 59 homeruns in a season in 1924, and 60 in 1927. He made more money than the president of the United States. [He claimed to have had a better year (in 1929 than the President.) Jim Thorpe. America's first Olympic hero and the greatest Native American athlete in history, won gold medals for his country and played professional baseball and football as well. Sam Tilden became America's greatest tennis player. Jack Dempsey held the world heavy weight boxing crown between 1919 and 1925. Boxing fans paid over 2.5 million dollars in 1927 to see the highly publicized Dempsey – Tunney fight.

Intellectual Currents

The writers popular during the Twenties generally had little good to say about America. The famous H.L. Mencken opposed democracy because he thought most Americans were ignorant boobs. He said, "all the known facts lie flatly against it." Other writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of tired, disillusioned upper-crust Americans. Fitzgerald's best-known book was *The Great Gatsby*. Its hero, Gatsby, pursued a vain and empty dream, in a life that otherwise had little meaning. Sherwood Anderson (in *Winesberg, Ohio*) wrote of the emptiness of the lives of small town Americans. And Sinclair Lewis (in *Babbit* and *Main Street*) criticized the concern of middle class Americans with making money. William Faulkner, wrote of an American Southland inhabited by ghostly figures at war with themselves and society. Ernest Hemmingway wrote of the disillusionment of war in *A Farewell to Arms*, and Eugene O'Neil, perhaps America's greatest playwright, struck notes of despair in *Strange Interlude* and and T.S. Elliot epic poem, *The Wasteland* was equally bleak.

In contrast to the writers of the 1920's, most people of that era believed in conservative ideas. They admired wealth and those who made themselves rich. They read authors who gave tips on making millions by buying stocks. They believed politicians who told them the good times would never stop.

Racism During the 1920's

The 1920s was a time of racial turmoil. Returning Negro soldiers from World War I found they were met by a wall of hostility in the South where many whites feared they might have forgotten their roles as racial underdogs. Led by the revived Ku Klux Klan, Southerners lynched over 70 Negroes in the year following World War I, including 10 returning soldiers. But racial repression was not confined to any one section of the country. A race riot in Chicago started with the stoning of a young black swimmer who had strayed into waters customarily reserved for whites. The riot lasted 13 days and resulted in 38 deaths

and over 1,000 homeless families. • Meanwhile the Klan grew into a national organization, claiming over 4 million members by 1924. The Klan's largest chapter was in Indiana – and its program for ethnic hatred was extended to Jews, Catholics, and even to white Protestants deemed guilty of such misbehaviors as sexual promiscuity and habitual drunkenness.

Ending an era of an open immigration policy, the 1920's was marked by a successful attempt to impose racial quotas for immigrants. The National Origins Acts of 1921 and 1924 limited the number of immigrants to a fixed percent of the number of people from that country who were in the US by 1910 and 1890 respectively. These laws directly discriminated against Asians and people from southern and eastern Europe whose countrymen were not in the United States in significant numbers. In 1929, the total number of immigrants allowed to enter the US was reduced to 150,00, and because the law already discriminated against the underrepresented populations, even half of this quota was often not fulfilled. Thus the new restrictions in immigration reduced the number of people coming to the US from a pre-World War I average of 800,000 to about 75,000 per year. •

The 1920's was also marked by a resurgence of religious fundamentalism. Reacting to inroads of modern science and declining morality, fundamentalists located primarily in rural and isolated communities made a concerted effort to assert their religious beliefs. Their legislative efforts focused on prohibiting the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution because it contradicted teachings of the Bible that God had created Adam in his image and fashioned Eve from one of his ribs. This attempt to legislate a religious interpretation of creation resulted in the arrest and trial of John Scopes, a young biology teacher in the state of Tennessee, for teaching the scientific interpretation. The ensuing trial in a circus-like atmosphere attracted national attention and was lampooned in the 'eastern elite' press as the 'monkey trial'. It ended with Scopes' fine of \$100 overturned by a higher court based on a legal technicality. But the trial did not end the struggle between those who interpret the bible literally and those who adopt a more metaphorical interpretation of the scriptures or completely dismiss biblical teachings.

African-Americans and the Harlem Renaissance

While discrimination against black Americans intensified during the 1920's a new pride and self-awareness in the black community was evident in many different ways. One was the flowering of black



Langston Hughes

poetry and music called the Harlem Renaissance. African-American poets such as Langston Hughes wrote of the pain as well as the unique genius of African-Americans. His poetry was read by whites who he helped sensitize to the black experience. Whites also flocked to the famous Cotton Club in Harlem and to other black night-clubs in large cities. Here whites heard the best music in the country played and sung by the men and women who invented jazz and the blues. It was played by musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and sung by such greats as Bessie Smith and Ella Fitzgerald. But an indication of the racism that still existed at the time, African-American customers were often barred from attending the same clubs where others of their ethnic background served as waiters and kitchen helpers or sang and played their instruments.

- Because black Americans fought back, over one-third of the dead and some of the homeless were white.
- Racial immigration quotas continued until the 1960's.

Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance

The meaning of the African-American experience was often not understood by Americans of European and Asian descent. The poems that follow, written by black writers during the 1920's, contain thoughts and images as meaningful today as they were the day they were first written.

No Images

by Waring Cuney

She does not know
Her beauty,
She thinks her brown body
Has no glory.

If she could dance
Naked,
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know,

But there are no palm trees
On the street
And dishwater gives back no images.

Mother to Son

by Langston Hughes

WELL, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
Its had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the bare floor.
But all the time
I's been a climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turning corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you find it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now-
For I's still goin', honey,
I's still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal
stair

To A Dark Girl

by Gwendolyn B. Bennet

I love you for your brownness
And the round darkness of your breast.
I love you for the breaking sadness in your
voice
And shadows where your wayward
eye-lids rest.

Something of the old forgotten queens
Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk
And something of the shackled slave
Sobs in the rhythm of your talk

Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's
mate,
Keep all you have of queenliness,
Forgetting that once you were a slave,
And let your full lips laugh at Fate!

Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem

by Helene Johnson

You are disdainful and magnificent-
Your perfect body and your pompous gait,
Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with
hate,
Small wonder that you are incompetent
To imitate those whom you so despise-
Your shoulders towering high above the
throng,
Your head thrown back in rich, barbaric
song,
Palm trees and mangoes stretch before your
eyes.
Let others toil and sweat for labor's sake
And wring from grasping hand their mead
of gold.
Why urge ahead your supercilious feet?
Scorn will efface each footprint that you
make.
I love your laughter arrogant and bold.
You are too splendid for this city street!

Minstrel Man

by Langston Hughes

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held
My pain
So long.

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter,
You do not hear
My inner cry,
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing,
You do not know
I die.

We Wear the Mask

by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,-
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask

If We Must Die

by Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot
While round us bark the mad and
hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot
If we must die, Oh let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be
shed
In vain; then even the monster we defy
Shall honor us though dead!

O kinsmen! We must meet the common
foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show
us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal
one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open
grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous,
cowardly
pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting
back

Suggested student exercises:

1. What is the message of these poets about a. the beauty and grandeur of being black, and b. the pain and difficulty of the black experience. Your answers should include specific phrases from the poems?
2. Try to divide the information in this chapter into two parts - what seems modern and looking toward a better world in the future, and b. what seems old, looking more to recapture or hold on to the past. Give reasons for your choices.
3. Based upon all the information in this reading, can you make a coherent statement about the culture of the 1920's?