**The Great Gatsby, Prohibition, and Fitzgerald**

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The Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, and what F. Scott Fitzgerald would later describe as “the greatest, gaudiest spree in history” have all come to describe America under the influence of Prohibition. In Fitzgerald’s novel The Great Gatsby, we are introduced to the opulent lives of wealthy east coasters during one of the rowdiest periods in American history. How accurate is this portrait of Prohibition America, and what influences led our country into an era of drunken excess?

In the early 1920’s World War I had just come to an end. A new generation flocked from small towns to big cities in search of excitement, opportunity, and a “modern” way of living. Electronics like radios became more common, particularly in metropolitan households. Flashy new car designs rolled down city streets. Women had finally earned the right to vote, and their hard-fought equality and independence was reflected in their fashion– shorter haircuts, higher hemlines, less curvy silhouettes. Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin were creating names for themselves on the big screen. It was an era of change—and that change was not welcomed by all. Alcohol flowed like water in homes across the country, and drunkards filled America’s prisons and poorhouses. A powerful group of activists made it their mission to eradicate liquor in an effort to help the country return to simpler times. The movement, known as Prohibition, may well go down as one of the biggest legislative backfires in American history.

Alcohol dependence was a growing problem in the U.S. for over a century before Prohibition came into law. In 1830, American boys and men aged 15 and older drank an average of 88 bottles of whiskey per year, 3 times what Americans drinks today. Drinking wasn’t a new thing; alcohol had been an important part of the American food culture since Colonial times. Americans routinely drank at every meal– breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In the early 1700’s, the most common drinks were weak beer and cider, which were only mildly intoxicating (around 2% alcohol content, compared to today’s beers which average between 4-6%). By the 1800’s, as American farmers began cultivating more grains, increasingly potent forms of distilled liquor became available, including rum and whiskey. Americans replaced weaker ciders and beers with these more potent distilled liquors. Before long, alcohol dependence became a widespread epidemic. Men lost their jobs and neglected their families, under the spell of “demon liquor.” Societies dedicated to sober living formed in several major cities. A movement began, and the groundwork was put in place for outlawing alcohol at the national level. A constitutional amendment to ban alcohol sales and production became law in 1920.

While Prohibition was meant to eradicate the temptation of liquor, it had the unintended effect of turning many law-abiding citizens into criminals. By barring liquor from the masses, the government unwittingly made it more desirable, more fashionable, and something eager consumers had to get their hands on. Prohibition gave birth to bathtub gin, cocktails, finger food and the elusive speakeasy. If you were able to provide your guests with an endless stream of libations, your popularity was assured. Better yet, if you were brave enough to invest in the illegal bootlegging business, your fortune might very well be sealed… as long as you didn’t lose your life in the process.

As the demand for illegal liquor increased, so did the methods for masking its production and consumption. Cocktails gained popularity—heavily flavored concoctions assembled to disguise the taste of potent bathtub gin with juices, herbs, sweeteners and syrups. Finger food became fashionable, which helped to increase liquor tolerance by ensuring that party-goers weren’t drinking on an empty stomach. Bootleggers, forced to produce liquor in secret, used questionable methods to ferment gin and other types of alcohol in their homes. Often poisonous ingredients, such as methanol (wood alcohol), were used. A government report from 1927 stated that nearly all of the 480,000 gallons of liquor confiscated in New York that year contained some type of poison. Jamaica ginger extract, also known as Jake, was sold in pharmacies as a headache remedy. It didn’t taste great, but it did contain high amounts of alcohol. Over time, more toxic ingredients were added that could result in paralysis, a condition often referred to as Jake Leg.

Despite the reality of the situation, overall it seemed like Americans were having a lot of fun during Prohibition. No book captures this wild and carefree time period quite like Fitzgerald’s novel The Great Gatsby. The character of millionaire Jay Gatsby represents the extremes of 1920s wealth and decadence. Gatsby devotes his life to accumulating riches in order to attract the attention of his romantic obsession, the lovely but spoiled Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby’s fortune is evident in the raucous parties he throws from his mansion on Long Island’s north shore. These decadent bashes, free flowing with food and liquor, represent the indulgent excesses of the “flapper” period:

“At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby’s enormous garden. On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d’oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from the other.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Gatsby character represents “new money;” he’s a seemingly overnight success with no known ties to family wealth. It is heavily inferred that Gatsby earned his fortune, at least in part, through bootlegging. How else could he afford his lavish parties with bottomless cocktails to spare? Daisy’s husband Tom gives voice to these suspicions during a heated argument, when he accuses Gatsby and his business partner Meyer Wolfsheim of illegally selling liquor through the drug stores they own. This fictional subplot is based in fact. For a small fee, doctors would prescribe their patients whiskey for just about any ailment, and sometimes no ailment at all. Crooked pharmacists would even sell forged prescriptions to their customers. As for Gatsby’s partner Meyer Wolfsheim, a character described as the man behind fixing the 1919 World Series, he was clearly influenced by a real gangster named Arnold Rothstein. The novel, at least in part, provides a reflection of the social issues and attitudes of the time period.