

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Arts and Culture

The Great Gatsby is set in the mid-1920s, a prosperous time at home and abroad. The United States had joined World War I in 1917, three years after its eruption. The 1919 Peace of Paris established accord between nations that ended the war. Many considered American intervention to be decisive, leading to an Allied victory.

Prohibition at home led to a growing world of organized crime as the sale of alcohol went underground. Even the 1919 World Series was affected, as members of the White Sox (the team favored to win) were convinced to “throw” the series, creating larger profits for those gambling against the Sox. In Harlem, the northern migration of African Americans created an artistic expansion of literature, music, plays, political tracts, and visual art. And around the country, technology produced new opportunities for Americans, including radio, motion pictures, automobiles, and electric appliances.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD, Track Two. Maureen Corrigan explains that in this novel, “you can’t get at the truth.” From what you heard on the CD, what do you think Corrigan means? Is there any indication, in the first 21 pages, that we will not “get at the truth”?

Go to NEA’s Jazz in the Schools Web site at www.neajazzintheschools.org. Enter the Web site and click on the “Listen” heading. Here you will find samples of legendary jazz recordings. Play King Oliver’s “Chimes Blues,” which includes Louis Armstrong’s first recorded solo. Move on to Armstrong’s “Sugar Foot Stomp” and “West End Blues.” How does Armstrong’s music change from 1923 to 1928? Before you answer, listen to each piece again. How does this music capture the spirit of the ’20s?

Writing Exercise

Read Handouts One and Three. After reading these handouts and listening to the Big Read CD and/or Louis Armstrong’s music, write a one-page summary of the arts and culture of the era. In the first 21 pages of the novel, is Fitzgerald’s depiction consistent with what you have learned? Why or why not?

Homework

Read Chapter 2 (pp. 23-38). What does Nick learn about Tom at the end of Chapter 2? How does Tom’s treatment of Mrs. Wilson affect Nick?