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## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*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 the best way to a decisive and quick 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) decided 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 Audio Guide, Track Two. Maureen Corrigan explains that in this novel, “you can’t get at the truth.” Ask students the following questions: From what you heard on the Audio Guide, what do you think Corrigan means? Is there any indication, in the first twenty-one pages, that we will not “get at the truth”?

Go to NEA’s Jazz in the Schools Web site, [www.neajazzintheschools.org](http://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 1920s?

### Writing Exercise

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

### Homework

Have students 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?