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## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

*The Maltese Falcon* was written in the late 1920s, the close of a decade known as the Roaring Twenties, a period of prosperity halted by the stock market crash in October 1929. During this decade, writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald captured the disillusionment of the Lost Generation. In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the main character struggles between riches and happiness. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* captures the life of an American soldier, fighting for another country, adrift in Europe.

At the same time, American pulp magazines were at the height of their popularity. The publications were an inexpensive way for readers to enjoy new stories each month. Hammett's style, developed while writing for pulps like *Black Mask*, dealt indirectly with such serious themes as alienation and the allure of the American dream. Foremost, Hammett wrote captivating mysteries to entertain the reader, and any grand aesthetic goals or existential dilemmas shadowed along behind. With the coming of the Depression, this entertaining fiction was just what the nation would need.

### Discussion Activities

Read and discuss Handout One and Handout Two and the Reader's Guide essay "Hammett and Detective Fiction" (pp. 8-9). Discuss the trends covered on the audio CD and in these essays. What major facts from these resources might inform your reading of the novel?

### Homework

Have students read Chapters 4-6 (pp. 32-60). Ask them to consider the voice of the narrator. Who is telling the story? Is the narrator objective or biased? How does this contribute to the tone of the novel?