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### Mass Culture as an Effect of World War I

The 1920s are seen as a monumental decade in the cultural and social growth of the United States. The time was characterized by a devout commitment to celebration and enjoyment. This had been seen in eras before, especially after periods of economic growth and thriving. These post-success booms were typically characterized by an explosion of inventions, the dominance of Capitalism and the rise of corporations, and a growth in art and pop culture. Eras like these generally stimulate the growth of infrastructure and launch a nation forward into its next stage of progress. However, the 1920's was different. It included all of these things, but alongside the celebration and progress was a distinct mass culture that emerged during the decade as a response to the psychological questions posed by World War I. Although this is often overlooked and hidden by the prosperity and frivolity of the decade, the war had a profound impact on the American psyche that would transform society. The evidence for the origins of this shift has been preserved through the new movement of Modernism in artwork and literature of the time, proving that the mass culture of America can be traced back to a crisis of purpose after World War I. This new culture, composed of art and music but also the boom of consumerism and materialism, would shape the next century of American life.

The culture of the 1920s was characterized by a release of morals, an appreciation for wealth, and a growing feeling of connection within the nation. The classic novel *The Great*

*Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, portrays the vanity and love for beauty that the age is often remembered for. Parties were extravagant and racy, partially because of the need to hide them from the public after the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment, more commonly known as the Prohibition. However, as always, the rich and famous made up only a small percentage of the population. What made the 1920s special was that common, middle class people could experience the same type of culture that was appreciated by the wealthy. Although recreation was lavish and opulent, the advance of technology in the fields of transportation communication made it possible for the new culture to be shared even with everyday people. Because of this and the advent of mass culture that occurred, the roaring twenties were a time of mass participation in popular culture that created a unique society of shared media and values.

Parallels can be drawn between the 1920s and other ages of prosperity such as the late 1800s, which came to be characterized by wealth and a craze for it, as well as a celebratory sentiment much like the 1920s. Both decades came off the back end of conflict; the roaring twenties began after World War I, and the “Gilded Age” of the late 1800s came to fruition after the reconstruction and progressive era in the United States following the Civil War. Similarities include the popularity of music, high crime rates, and a rush for money. The musical scene in America during the Gilded Age involved a growing jazz genre, particularly the appearance of ragtime music, which had roots in African and Caribbean melodies and had formerly been dismissed as low class. Also like the Gilded Age before it, the 1920s were cut by a severe economic depression that paralleled the Panic of 1893. The unbridled prosperity and boom of business in both time periods led to these inevitable economic crashes, which were explained by economists like John Maynard Keynes through theories like “boom and bust cycles”. In

addition, corruption and crime flourished in both eras. In the Gilded Age the emergence of huge, powerful, rich corporations and greedy businessmen led to white collar crime and fraudulence. This mirrored the lack of moral attention in the 1920s, which was characterized by the gangster subculture, underground clubs called “speakeasies”, and an overall release of strict ethical standards. However, the roaring twenties were different from the Gilded Age and any other age before them for one huge and looming reason. The first world war, which preceded the era, was like no other. It had psychological and cultural impacts that reached to every inhabited edge of the globe. Although America reacted far differently than Europe because of the distance from the conflict as well as societal differences, the effects still had crushing influence on the advance of the nation.

World War I was the first war to involve so many nations, produce so many casualties, and yield so much destruction on such a large scale. It’s often seen as the war that changed war. With the advancement of technology and strategical techniques, combat became much more impersonal and much less honorable. While less than two decades beforehand, the U.S. had been eager to go to war with Spain, president Wilson hesitated several years before becoming involved with the warfare in Europe. One of the reasons for this was that America didn’t have a direct reason to fight. No longer pulled by the promise of more territory or personal freedom, the country was reluctant to go to war when citizens weren't sure what it was about. The war started as a dispute between European countries over boundaries and power, but quickly spread due to the network of alliances and tensions already in place. By the time America got involved, the reasons for fighting were unclear. According to propaganda, the war was being waged against Germany. The Axis powers and the Allies were pitted against each other in a struggle for

territory, power, and moral supremacy. Such a grand web of agendas was confusing even for government officials and national leaders. For the common person, the motivation to fight came solely from propaganda and xenophobic stigmas.

Many argue that World War I was a war that unified the country, bringing together women, children, and all races to fight for a common purpose. But the problem lies in the fact that no one really knew what this purpose was. The one question that was left in everyone's mind after the Treaty of Versailles was "*Why?*". In America victory was initially celebrated as a patriotic and nationalistic affirmation of the American identity. However, Europe was much closer to the fighting and started to ask that question after seeing the destruction on such a large scale, the killing of so many, and the division of the world into sides. Eventually this mindset made its way to America, and slowly but surely became an influential part of society. The global nature of World War I also meant that any action taken by a country affected far more than just another country or two. There was an immense responsibility felt as the result of a "world" war that made the combat about more than just victory or loss. Questions like "*why?*" and "*is it worth it?*" were in everyone's minds, and this ultimately led to a new quest for purpose that spread into every level of society.

Mass culture emerged as an attempt to answer this question and create a purpose. The term "mass culture" refers to a shared set of ideas and values that develop in a society through exposure to the same media, news, music, and art. Though culture itself was definitely present in America before the 1920s, World War I brought it to a new level that would come to define the country. Many people felt that if they could be part of something bigger or could leave their mark on society, then maybe they had a purpose. The constant progress, the advance in search of

something that is never quite found, and the desperate celebration were all part of this pursuit. The American people wanted an answer to the “*why?*” This was something, for once, that their government couldn't give them. So they created their own world through pop culture and the media. People turned from the pursuit of survival and even the pursuit of empty success and looked for something that would cement their place in the world. Some people achieved this through creation, some through sharing their art or music or movies, some through being rich, and some simply through being part of the movement that consumed these expressions. When it came to pop culture, one thing was true for all classes and types of people. The art, the music, the style all mattered immensely in some unexplainable way.

Mass culture also manifested itself in the new entertainment industry. The birth of Hollywood secured yet another facet of mass media. Film had existed since the turn of the century, but movies were all silent until the mid-twenties. However, with the progression of technology in the 1920s, movies reached new levels of quality and popularity. First, the actual process for making movies became much more detailed and streamlined. Studios became more sophisticated and production broke into departments: writing, costume, makeup, direction, etc. The luxury and fame involved in movie making was characteristic of the time. But more importantly, the films acted as an appeal to the mass culture of the U.S. With communication booming as it was, movies connected the generation in a new way, while simultaneously attempting to answer that old question *Why* through the exploration of expression and art.

Modernist art and literature is often seen as an attempt to express this questioning of purpose. While the movement began in Europe, specifically Paris, it spread to the U.S. in the mid-twenties. For example, Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* describes the

experience of the American World War I soldier who goes to fight for the sake of fighting, and ends up questioning the reason behind the fight and decides he'd rather run off with his lover. The book is often described as a love story, but also as a war story. This represents the ambiguity of purpose that was created by the war. Europe's art more directly expressed this. Paris, for example, was the hub for a group of writers that called themselves the "Lost Generation." These were the people who had missed their crucial years that would have been spent growing up and spent them at war. This group, however, represented a bigger picture story about the loss of innocence and purpose through war that applied to the world on a larger scale. Hemingway's novel, first published in 1929, was an example of these effects reaching America.

Another manifestation of this search for meaning can be seen through American Modernist painting. In the 1920s, artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, and Andrew Dasburg began to paint in more abstract styles, abandoning the representational methods that for the most part had characterized art until this point. Movements such as romanticism, realism, and even surrealism all attempted to represent objects and scenes from the world around people. Suddenly, after World War I, visual art took on a dramatic change. Abstract art was an attempt to give meaning to space, color, and form without using existing objects. It was a direct manifestation of the desire to probe for a further meaning or deeper understanding of life that doesn't exist in everyday scenes. In addition, many artists utilized abstract ideas while still representing known objects. Modernist painter Charles Demuth's work is an example of this. His piece *My Egypt*, painted in 1927, depicts a grain elevator that would have been common to see near his home of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. However, instead of a realistic interpretation of the image, the building is painted in a block-like style with rigid edges, and the light falls in shafts that are divided by

criss-crossing lines, giving a sort of stained-glass effect. The image is clearly an extension of the original object. Demuth belonged to a sub-movement of painters in the 1920s called “Precisionists.” These artists admired the power and sleekness of the industrial age and were drawn to paint machines with smooth edges and geometric shapes. *My Egypt* in particular was named to represent the parallel between these great, looming machines and the great pyramids in Egypt. Demuth’s interest in these tomb structures likely stemmed from his illness at the time. The painting was completed in 1927, only eight years before he died from diabetes. This exemplifies one form of the search for meaning that characterized Modernist art and began during the roaring twenties.

Demuth, like many others in his time, took a concrete and well known image and warped it to fit a more abstract style. With this new style, many artists broke the barriers of representation and started being more creative and imaginative in their work. Shapes and colors could now speak for themselves. In fact, they began to say things that had never been said before about life, death, love, loss, pain, and destruction. These pieces are evidence of the mass psychological shift to a widespread search for meaning after the confusion and devastation of World War I.

World War I’s effect on the psyche of the modern civilian was profound. The first world war was far different than any before it in size, reasoning, and level of destruction. The effects of the conflict were obvious in Europe, where many countries were devastated and stopped to reassess the world around them. However, the United States, cut off from this world by not only an ocean but also by their singular economic prosperity after the war, reacted much differently. It wasn’t that the war didn’t affect the citizens of America; in fact it did, possibly in a much deeper way - but these affects were covered by feelings of happiness, extravagance, and celebration.

Underneath this facade, however, the American people were beginning to question their purpose for the first time. Such a proud and goal-driven country has always had a purpose in the world - from Manifest Destiny to the Industrial Revolution. Much like the Gilded Age, the 1920s were a time of economic and social prosperity caused by the resolution of conflict, and ultimately ended by an economic crash. These eras would continue throughout the 20th century. However, the 1920s were the first time that America saw a mass culture emerge alongside its fortune. Driven by the desire to answer questions about the purpose of World War I and events involved with it, the United States formed a new system of universal media and shared values. New technology enabled this progress, and ultimately the shift was explained and captured by the new types of expression explored through Modernist art and literature. This new culture would characterize the United States for years to come, and would become the foundation for social movements that now define the nation.



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