



*F. Scott Fitzgerald and his family. Car ownership tripled in the 1920s, and *The Great Gatsby* features several important scenes involving cars.*

further away from their homes, such as athletic events, movie theaters, and public musical performances.<sup>4</sup> *The Great Gatsby* features several important scenes involving cars, with crucial plot points revolving around the size, shape, and operation of luxurious automobiles. Twenty years earlier, these scenes would have been exotic to readers; in 1925, they spoke to the country's fascination with the car as a status symbol and as an everyday means of getting around. Consumer culture, or a national emphasis on spending money and acquiring material goods, was officially "in," and many novelists, including Fitzgerald, sought to represent, explore, and critique the nation's newfound obsession with consumption.

With new inventions came new opportunities for employment, and many Americans now found themselves employed in manufacturing sectors producing new domestic conveniences like early forms of refrigerators and washing machines. The rapid electrification of the nation during the early twentieth century also brought with it new jobs, and increasing consumer demand for leisure items like radios and phonographs helped create new industries related to the creation and distribution of entertainment. For most Americans, these technological developments, along with significant cultural changes, were really what made the decade "roar." Other than two major constitutional amendments (which will be discussed later), the two presidential administrations of the period—those of **Warren G. Harding** from 1921–23 and **Calvin Coolidge** from 1923–29—were ideologically and administratively consistent. In other words, unlike some historical periods in which major political upheavals altered a country's make-up, the 1920s were defined more by technological, cultural, and demographic

changes. An increased access to disposable income and consumer goods for many (but not all) Americans was one of the most transformative of these changes.<sup>5</sup>

## URBANIZATION, THE GREAT MIGRATION, AND THE GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN CITY

1920 not only represented the beginning of a gradual improvement in the nation's economic outlook. It also represented the arrival of a new period of urbanization, or the concentration of more and more Americans in cities. For the first time in American history, over half of the country lived in what the U.S. Census defined as "urban" areas, or any place with a population over 2,500.<sup>6</sup> This means that not all Americans lived in what we think of as big, bustling metropolises like New York City or Chicago. But it does mean that, for the first time in the nation's existence, more people than not lived in areas where they were surrounded by many other people rather than in isolated smaller towns or rural communities. Further, many Americans *did* live in bustling cities: New York City, for example, had a population of 5.6 million in 1920—1.5 times larger than the entire population of the United States in 1790.<sup>7</sup> Popular literature still frequently recounted the lives of rural Americans, but more and more novels portrayed the lives of city-dwellers as they tried to navigate the complicated realities of the newly dominant urban lifestyle. [Claude McKay's](#) *Home to Harlem* (1928), [John Dos Passos's](#) *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and [Nella Larsen's](#) *Passing* (1929) detail the complex and occasionally violent daily lives of African Americans and immigrants in New York City, while Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) explores the city's wealthy upper class.

Cities were getting bigger as well as more diverse. Substantial numbers of Black Americans moved from the South to major cities such as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit, often to escape the violence and institutionalized discrimination of the Jim Crow Era or in pursuit of work in northern industrial centers. This is often referred to broadly as the "**Great Migration**," and some historians refer separately to the period of 1910–40 as the "First Great Migration" and the period of 1940–70 as the "Second Great Migration."<sup>8</sup> This massive influx didn't just bring people. It also brought customs, culture, and art, and as a result the Roaring Twenties serve as one of the