

'The Roaring Twenties'. Is this a good description of the USA in the 1920s?

The pace was faster, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser and liquor was cheaper..

F Scott Fitzgerald, *Echoes of the Jazz Age* (1931)

F Scott Fitzgerald was a romantic novelist.

One way to remember the five aspects of life in America in the 1920s would be POWER:

- [Prohibition](#)
- [Organised crime](#)
- [Women's lives](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Racism](#)

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This huge topic is really five topics, each one a big subject, and - as well as a question about the 'Roaring Twenties' as a whole topic - you have to be prepared for a specific question on just one of the five topics in the exam.

On the positive side, there were exciting developments in [entertainment](#) and [women's lives](#).

On the negative side, there was [Racism](#), [Prohibition](#), and [Organised Crime](#).

1. Entertainment

If the term 'roaring twenties' applies to anything, it applies to entertainment, in which area there were many exciting developments:

a. Films:

- movie actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Rudolf Valentino and Mary Pickford became 'stars'.
- in 1927, *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, was the first 'talkie'.
- a well-known early two-colour film was *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) and two-colour films were common by the end of the 1920s; after 1932, films were produced in three-colour technicolour.
- Mickey Mouse was created by Walt Disney in 1928 (who released *Snow White* in colour in 1937).

Links

[FANTASTIC CLIP](#) of the original Charleston! [Clara Bow in 'It'](#) - clips from the film.



Clara Bow - the 'It' girl, playing self-confident shop-girl Betty Lou Spence, who *has* 'it' and *is* 'it', flirting with rich businessman Cyrus Waltham.

- by 1930, 100 million Americans went to the movies every week.
- companies like United Artists and MGM produced hundreds of films a year.
- films taught people new fashions (e.g. smoking) and new ways to behave - many girls wanted to be like It' girl, Clara Bow.

Watch the [movie 'It' on YouTube](#).

b. **Jazz:**

- Jazz was first played in New Orleans by black musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. After 1917, racist violence forced many of them to leave New Orleans, so they went north to play in the night clubs of towns like Chicago and New York.
- The invention of radio and the phonograph (record player) made it available in people's homes. The first jazz record was made in 1917 by the Dixieland Jazz Band. They were called 'race records', because they were recorded by black musicians.
- Because it was often played in speakeasies, by black musicians, it was seen as wild and exciting - which soon made it very popular.
- Jazz music contributed to many of the social developments of the age - baggy trousers and short skirts, wild dancing such as the Black Bottom, and a new kind of convention-free poetry called 'jazz poetry' (poets such as TS Eliot and ee cummings). It was part of the Harlem Renaissance, and the growth of black pride (see below).



The King & Carter Jazzing Orchestra, 1921.



[The Charleston](#)

c. **Dances:**

- The Charleston was a fast dance developed in Black communities which was adopted by flappers, who danced it alone to challenge the 'drys' who wouldn't go out to clubs. (Both Joan Crawford and Ginger Rodgers began their movie careers by winning Charleston competitions.)
- The 'Black Bottom Stomp' was first recorded by Jelly Roll Morton and named after Black Bottom - a Black neighbourhood in Detroit. After 1926 it became the most popular dance.

- The dances scandalised many Americans, who thought they were immoral.

2. Women

How significant were the changes in women's lives in the 1920s?

Argument 1 - VERY significant:

- Work:** Many women had taken over jobs traditionally reserved for men (such as manufacturing), and 1920-29 the number of working women increased by 25%; many went to be teachers and secretaries.
- Vote:** In 1920 the 19th Amendment gave women the vote. The former suffrage campaigners formed themselves into the Woman's Joint Congressional Committee, which lobbied successfully for a Maternity and Infancy Protection Act (1921), equal nationality rights for married women (1922), and the Child Labor Amendment (1925).
- Flappers:** dumped the old restrictive fashions, corsets etc. in favour of short skirts, short hair, and the flat-chested 'garconne' look. Many of them wore men's clothing. They smoked, drank, used make-up, played tennis, and danced wildly in jazz clubs. Some were openly lesbian, others were sexually active.

Argument 2 - NOT significant:

- Work:** most working women were in low-paid jobs, and they were paid less than men for the same job. 10 million women were working in 1930 ... but this was still only a quarter of the females age 15 and over; the rest worked for free in the home and on the farm.
- Vote:** Apart from exceptions such as Florence Kelley and Alice Paul, few suffrage campaigners went

Links

[Youtube of original footage](#)



The 'flapper', wearing trousers and pushing a car along with the men - or is this a posed photograph?

into politics; they gave up politics and returned to being housewives. Women campaigned in vain after 1920 for an Equal Rights Act.

- c. **Flappers:** The flappers scandalised many Americans - the Anti-Flirt Association tried to persuade young Americans to behave decently. Most girls, especially in rural America, still behaved 'decently', got married and had babies.

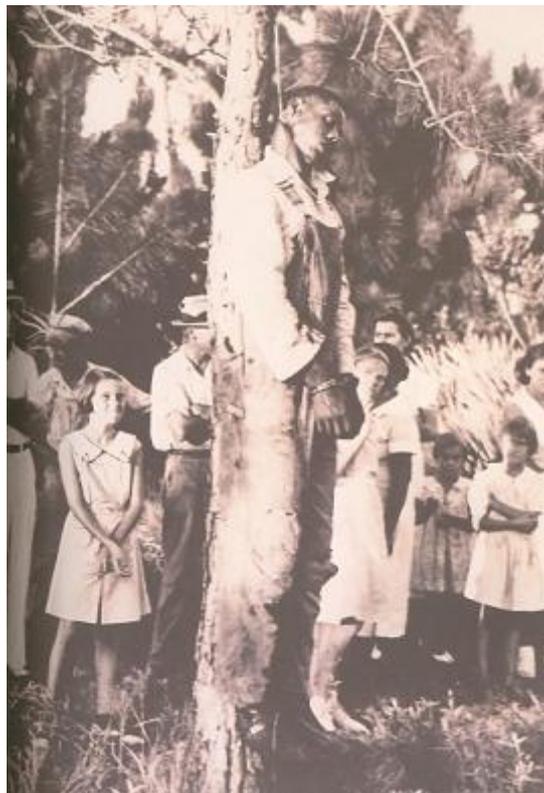
3. Race Relations

How far were the 1920s a time of racism and discrimination for Black Americans?

Argument 1 - A time of racism

[**HACKLE**]:

- a. **Hostility to immigrants:** and the 'Red Scare' - see [this page for more information](#).
- d. **American Government:** refused to pass laws banning lynchings or giving Black Americans the vote.
- c. **Jim Crow Laws:** the name for laws passed in the southern states which prevented Black Americans from mixing with whites ('segregation'), denied them equality of education and civil rights, and prevented them from voting.
- b. **Ku Klux Klan:** an organisation to maintain WASPs supremacy, which had 5 million members by 1925. Many supporters were poor whites, who did not want Black Americans to be their equals/fear they would take their jobs, but many were racism wealthy white Americans. They wore white sheets and hoods, and marched with burning crosses. They spoke with each other in a secret language which they called 'Klonversations'. They attacked, tortured and killed Black Americans, but also Jews and Catholics and 'immoral' people such as alcoholics.
- e. **Lynchings:** mobs of white people often hanged ('lynched') Black Americans whom they suspected of a crime (usually the police turned a blind eye).



A lynching (1935) - note the children.

Source A

In the morning, a Black mother sent her children to a school for colored children only. Going to town, she sat at the back of the bus, in the seats for coloreds. She went to the post office for coloreds, visited the library for coloreds, and walked in a separate park. When she went shopping, she stood in line, so White women could go in front of her.

- f. **Even in the north:** Black Americans ended up with the low-paid menial jobs, such as janitors, bootblacks, cooks, houseboys, baggage handlers, waiters, doormen, dishwashers and washroom attendants. In 1919, white Americans in Chicago rampaged through Black neighbourhoods after a drowning black man clinging to a log had drifted into a whites-only swimming area.

Her husband went to work, but he was not the boss; that was a job for a White man. He used a separate rest room, and went to a separate toilet.

John D Clare, *The Black Peoples of America* (2001)

Links

[YouTube on the Harlem Renaissance.](#)
[Harlem Renaissance women](#)

Argument 2 - A time of flowering [RHINO]:

- a. **Role models:** some Black Americans became famous - the sprinter Jesse Owens, the baseball player Jackie Robinson, the dancer Josephine Baker. They were an inspiration to other Black Americans.
- b. **Harlem Renaissance:** a cultural flowering in the New York Black neighbourhood of Harlem, based on jazz, but also excellent Black architects, novelists, poets and painters. Many of these believed in 'Artistic Action' - winning equality by *proving* they were equal.
- c. **Identity:** in 1925 Alain Locke wrote *The New Negro*, who had to smash the old image of 'Uncle Tom' and 'Sambo', and develop a new identity, 'uplift' the race and fight for equality. There were Black newspapers and magazines. This was the time when the phrase was coined: 'Black is Beautiful'.
- d. **NAACP:** Set up in 1909, it campaigned for civil rights.
- e. **One-and-a-half million** Black Americans migrated from the south to the north. Although many of them ended up in low-paid jobs, some of them formed a new Black middle class, and were educated at university.

4. Prohibition

In 1919 - as the result of a long and powerful campaign (see Source B) - the 18th Amendment to the Constitution made the manufacture, transport or

Links

[Brilliant Prohibition mindmap.](#)
[Good essay](#) arguing the traditional case that Prohibition was a failure.

sale of alcoholic drinks illegal. The Volstead Act, passed at the same time, declared any drink more than 5% proof 'alcoholic'.

Argument 1 - A failure [DAMAGE]:

- a. **Drinking continued:** impossible to enforce (not enough police - only 4000 agents, many of whom were sacked for taking bribes).
- b. **Available:** the liquor trade just 'went underground'. speakeasies (illegal bars), moonshine (illegally-made alcohol), bootlegging (smuggling alcohol to sell). It is sometimes asserted that there were more speakeasies than there had been saloons (not true, but there were 200,000 speakeasies in 1933).
- a. **Made criminals of ordinary people**
 - a. **Adverse effects:** moonshine was poor quality and sometimes killed people. 'Jackass brandy' caused internal bleeding, 'Soda Pop Moon' contained poisonous alcohol.
 - a. **Gangsterism flourished running the illegal trade:** It became hugely profitable, and led to a growth of violence, protection rackets etc. associated with the illegal trade (see '[Organised Crime](#)' below). The general flouting brought the rule of law in general into disrepute as police 'turned a blind eye'. Corruption grew.
- a. **End:** in 1933 the 21st Amendment abolished Prohibition (= 'proved' that it failed).

Argument 2 - A Success [ALE]:

- a. **Alcohol destroyed:** in 1929, 50 million litres of illegal alcohol were discovered and destroyed.
- b. **Legacy:** the actual consumption of alcohol fell, not just during prohibition, but for many years after - did not reach pre-1914 levels until 1971.
- c. **Eliot Ness and the Untouchables:** became famous as examples of the high standards police SHOULD achieve.

[This site](#) shows that Americans used many other addictive substances before 1919

 [Great student's video](#)

Powerpoint:

- Prohibition [ppt.](#)

Source B

Why Prohibition [ACRIME]

- a. **Anti-Saloon League** - campaigned that drink hurt families because men wasted money on beer, that it ruined their health and lost them their jobs, and that it led to domestic violence and neglect.
- b. **Christian organisation** - esp. Women's Christian Temperance Union - supported prohibition. (The early 20th century was a time of Christian revival.)
- c. **Rural America** - scandalised by behaviour in the towns - supported it.
- d. **Isolationism** - it was said that money spent on drink 'flew away to Germany' because much of the beer drunk in America was brewed there.
- e. **Madness**, crime, poverty and illness were seen as caused by alcohol - many (including BOTH my grandparents, 'signed the pledge' *never to drink.*)
- f. **Easy Street** - Charlie Chaplin's comic film (1917) showed how drink damaged, and Christianity nurtured, families' happiness and prosperity.

Source C

Why Prohibition Failed [NCP]

- a. **Not enough Agents** - only 4000
- b. **Corruption and bribes** - one tenth of Agents sacked for taking bribes
- c. **Public support** - most people did NOT support a ban.

5. Organised Crime

Organised crime stepped in to take over from the breweries and spirits manufacturers:

- a. They ran the speakeasies, and bootlegging.
- b. They also ran protection rackets, prostitution and drug-running.
- c. They bribed trade union leaders, police, lawyers, judges and even Senators.
- d. The most famous gangster was Al Capone, who earned \$100,000 a year from beer sales alone, ran a private army of more than 700 mobsters, and is thought to have murdered more than 200 opponents.
- e. They fought with each other for control of their 'territory' - the most famous incident was the [St Valentine's Day Massacre](#) in 1929, when 'torpedoes' from Capone's gang shot dead 7 members of Bugs Moran's gang.

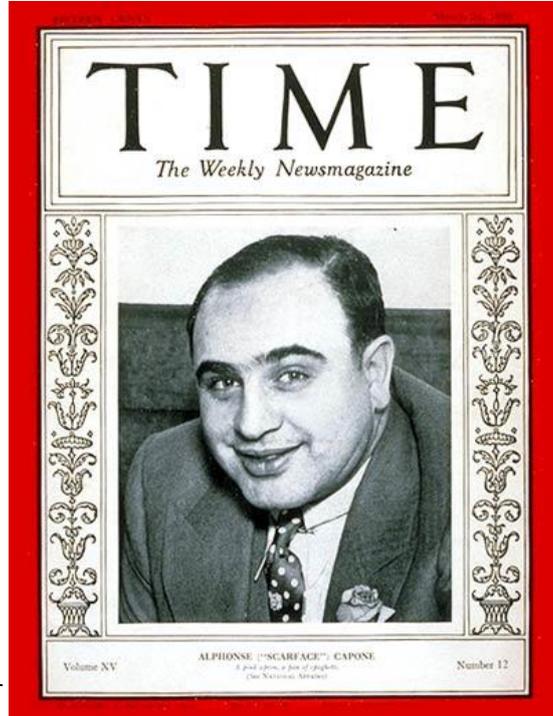
Source D

Prohibition is a business. All I do is supply a public demand. I do it in the best and least harmful way I can

Al Capone

Links

[St Valentine's Day Massacre](#) - description
[History Learning](#)
[Al Capone](#): Crime Library



In 1930, Al Capone made the front page of *Time* magazine