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ANSWER SHEET
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If a great book is published and doesn't affect the world at all, is it still a great book? Context - or, at least, awareness thereof - can solve this dilemma for would-be writers. Most great books were very much products "of their times" and the histories of their writing, publishing and reception are as telling and informative as the books themselves. In the two texts we studied "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald and "A Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen, historical, cultural and social contexts all greatly influenced the way the books were written and received - in "their times" and since.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's seminal masterpiece, all sorts of context greatly affected the book's content and style. Fitzgerald himself was known as the "king" of the Jazz Age (along with his "Queen", Zelda Sayre), and "The Great Gatsby" itself was about a slightly different sort of Jazz Age "king." Jay Gatsby was a newly-rich 'made man' in the suburbs of New York City, who acquired his wealth in the recently illegalized alcohol

plot/
Context



trade. Nick Carraway, the "other" main character, is an ambitious young rake from an Ivy League college who came to New York to try and make a living in the booming finance industry. The themes of "new money," organized crime, prohibition and exploding prosperity were all characteristic of the United States in the 1920's, when Fitzgerald wrote the book. Details such as Carraway's education, characters' experiences in the First World War and the hopeless romance at the center of the story all come partly from Fitzgerald's personal life story and partly from the historical context of the time period. Gatsby's optimism and determination in wooing Daisy Buchanan (now married with child) can easily be interpreted as a very particular substrain of the wider social optimism of America in the 1920's, as wealth and immigrants flowed to the continent after the devastation of the 1910's. Gatsby's insistence on "changing" the past certainly holds interesting implications when retroactively interpreted as a product of society as a whole. The book's themes were not alone in their shaping by context. The gaudy and literary tone of the book could only have been written by a Princeton kid like Fitzgerald who missed the Great War (notably unlike another famous author of the 1920's, Ernest Hemingway, who participated and became the literary opposite of Fitzgerald - cynical and sparse) and

Clear
reference to
context





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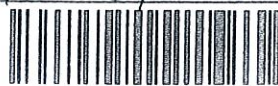
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subsequently found himself in a culture overflowing with sex, booze, crime and money. Fitzgerald uses allusions to ancient rich men (e.g. Midas, Trimalchio) throughout the text, conveying to the audience an upper-class man's sense of taste. His vivid and colorful literary style further heightens this sense — passages where he describes Gatsby ~~mind~~ as "romping like the mind of God," or describes bustling New York City as "warm and pastoral" are indicative of the book's general tone and use of stylistic features, which happily confuse or obscure the meaning of actual events in the plot for the sake of a gilded and practically fantastical vibe. At the time, it was precisely what struck chords in Americans' hearts.

style

Unfortunately for Fitzgerald, this was not to last. Although "The Great Gatsby" was not terribly received, it did not ~~receive~~ ^{achieve} the same level of popularity as his earlier works of the same genre, as ~~the~~ Gatsby was already meeting an audience experiencing the dust and gloom of the Great Depression, and no longer in any mood for sex, alcohol, crime, romance, wealth or obfuscative



novels. This shift in context was decidedly dramatic. In the space of a couple years, American society swung from a prosperous, naively optimistic one that simultaneously harbored a desire for state-enforced temperance and a thriving criminal underworld based off bootlegging alcohol, to one without either desire for temperance or crime, and without money or optimism besides. This change in context rudely affected reception for Fitzgerald's work, as he became an outsider to public hopes and dreams — the "American Dream" was replaced by the "New Deal." A public half-starring could not find meaning in a story about obscenely wealthy people cheating on each other. Fitzgerald's use of metaphors at the end of "Gatsby" ("...ships have ceaselessly lurch into the port.") conveyed to the audience a sense of wonder and trust in the 1920's, but seemed pretentious and empty soon thereafter. When Fitzgerald crafts tense scenes using extensive temporal references and description of the heat (when Gatsby and Tom "face off" over Daisy in ~~the~~ a hotel), the effect is lost on audiences who live tense everyday lives! Finally, while making Gatsby a molster was an understandable aesthetic choice for the general debauch of the 1920's cities, audiences in the 30's would have found little sympathy for a purposely wasteful criminal trying to seduce another man's wife!

Another text that was deeply affected by context is the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's

historical
contrast
noted

insightful
comparisons
further
details
regarding
the plot/characters
is needed





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short play "A Doll's House" (adorably known in Danish as "Ett Dukketejstykke"). Much like Fitzgerald was a product of the United States in the 1920's, Henrik Ibsen was a product of 19th-century Europe. A notable difference, however, is Ibsen's status as an innovator and pioneer in his field, not simply as an expert. Ibsen's work in drama was considered revolutionary for the ways it depicted the struggles and stories of ordinary people, and the unavoidable revolutionary implication that the struggles of average people were worthy of plays next to the comedies, historical and tragic dramas who had graced the stages since antiquity. Revolutionary movement was, however, very much a persistent theme of 19th century Europe, which itself began with the continent under the fist of the French revolutionary Empire and Napoleon Bonaparte. As the century went on, many nations implemented forms of democracy, slowly expanded franchise, extended political and economic rights and saw the development of many social movements such as the



women's rights movement. Religion and monarchy gradually ceded power and social standing to the common people, their troubles, worries, votes, opinions and petty nationalisms. Henrik Ibsen's play featuring entirely new subjects for theatre, new approaches to plot and dialogue and displaying a very forward and explicit contradiction of traditional norms at the time can thus be understood in the context of the social changes in Europe over the century. The content of the play is the most obvious connection to historical context. Ibsen's depiction of a young wife as intelligent, partaking in secret financial and personal issues and eventually redefining "love" and "marriage" to justify her abandonment of her family could not have ever been thought of prior to the late 19th-century, for obvious reasons! His decision to end the story the way it did is emblematic of the liberation of the common person (over the century) of the responsibilities and obligations of religion, monarchy, tradition, etc. and the imposition of the new burdens of individualism, independence and democratic governance. Nora's actions and decisions bespeak an understanding of her not as a wife or mother, invidiously connected to her children and family, but as an individual engaging in consensual contractual behavior, who is justified in "ending" the "contracts" of marriage and family





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when she interprets them to be harmful to her independence and self-interest. This understanding of social relations was uniquely new in the 19th-century, and Ibsen was both an early adopter as well as a proponent of it. It is also evident in the tone, theme and style of the text. While choosing "family matters" over "religion" was a bold move to begin with, Ibsen did not shy either from using colloquial and simple language to make his points instead of the more theatrical and grand language expected of someone like Shakespeare. This too was an expression of the historical trend towards empowerment of the common and the colloquial over the elite and the ancient. The point of view represented in the play are interesting to note, as Nora spends an inordinate amount of time in monologue (alone), but speaking in everyday language about her personal issues. This conveys to the audience the Ibsen's designation of Nora and her issues as important and weighty, despite their un-dramatic nature. Her husband Torvald is also a source of regular speech - his nearly

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style
examples needed - connect this to the characters/ their conflicts

Better



pathological and definitely humorous usage of terms of endearment for Nora ("little person," "squirrel," and so forth, nauseatingly) make the audience feel as though they are actually watching a scene play out in somebody's home, not sitting in a theater, and the generous repetition of these terms both emphasize and remind the audience of this fact as well as discredit Tordal as a representative of traditional authority and morality through his inability to recognize that Nora is not actually a "little squirrel" at all. Tordal's obliviousness is frequently contrasted with Nora's secretive actions, and this contrast bolsters Ibsen's championing of the individual over authority (in this case, said individual's husband).

exactly!

The reception of "A Doll's House" was also very much dependent on historical and social context. While today the play is generally accepted as uncontroversial, at the time, conservative and traditional critics greatly degraded the play both due to its new non-traditional tone and diction but also due to its depiction of scandalously immoral and non-traditional people and their actions. True to the rising tides of consumerism, materialism and individualism, however, this did not prevent the play from gaining Ibsen fame and money after people flocked to theaters to see performances of this brand-new





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subvertir spectacle. Anecdotes such as the German actress who played Nora's refusal to perform the original "immoral" ending demonstrated the latent societal resistance to the play, but undermined as well the triumph of sensationalism over restraint, as the play had a 10+ year international run.

Both of these texts were highly context-dependent. "The Great Gatsby" was a product of America's lecherous age of prosperity after the First World War, as well as a product for that age, and its reception was muted once that age ended. Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House" was a revolutionary play in terms of theatrical norms and social & historical progress, but ultimately itself a product of a century that saw many social changes. Characteristically, it was simultaneously celebrated and reviled, but ultimately accepted societally as time went by. As both the children of their eras and examples of outstanding literary achievement of those eras, these two works demonstrate the importance of context in the interpretation and comprehension of great books.

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nice reference

at least refer to your introductory remarks

