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The American Dream: A Comparative Rhetorical Analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved"

In American literature, the exploration of identity and the elusive promise of the American Dream has been a recurring theme, examined through various lenses and voices. Two notable works, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved," approach these themes with distinct narrative styles and intricate symbolism. While both novels delve into the complexities of identity and the American Dream, they do so in profoundly different ways. "The Great Gatsby" employs a first-person narrative and uses the enigmatic green light as a symbol of aspiration, while "Beloved" offers a nonlinear narrative and haunting symbolism to convey the haunting pasts of its characters. This essay explores the unique approaches taken by these literary masterpieces, shedding light on how narrative style and symbolism shape the reader's understanding of these enduring themes in American literature.

## NARRATIVE STYLE

Narrative style plays a pivotal role in shaping the reader's engagement with the themes of identity and the American Dream in both "The Great Gatsby" and "Beloved." In "The Great Gatsby," F. Scott Fitzgerald employs a first-person narrative, with Nick Carraway as the central voice. Nick's narration provides readers with a close and personal view of the characters and events. As he observes the extravagant parties and enigmatic figure of Jay

Gatsby, the reader gains insight into the allure and emptiness of the American Dream. Nick's reflective voice, evident when he states, "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us," (Fitzgerald 180), underscores the idea that Gatsby's dream is unattainable, thus emphasizing the novel's commentary on the fragility of the American Dream.

In contrast, Toni Morrison employs a nonlinear narrative in "Beloved" to convey the haunting and interconnected histories of her characters. The fragmented narrative, often shifting between past and present, mirrors the fragmented identities of the characters who are deeply scarred by the legacy of slavery. Sethe's traumatic past is depicted vividly through fragmented memories, as when she reflects on her escape from Sweet Home: "She did not have the toughness for real life where ugliness and brutality were the law. Her fantasy life demanded and got the juice" (Morrison 20). This narrative style immerses the reader in the characters' traumatic experiences and underscores the theme of identity as it relates to the characters' struggle to come to terms with their past and define themselves in the face of trauma. The nonlinear structure allows Morrison to explore the layers of their histories and reveal the enduring impact of slavery on their identities.

## SYMBOLISM

Symbolism is a powerful literary device used in both "The Great Gatsby" and "Beloved" to convey deeper layers of meaning related to identity and the American Dream. In "The Great Gatsby," F. Scott Fitzgerald employs the symbol of the green light, which is situated at the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock. The green light is a beacon of hope and represents Gatsby's unrelenting pursuit of the American Dream, as it is the physical manifestation of his aspiration to attain Daisy and the life he envisions with her. Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, describes Gatsby's fixation on the green light, noting that Gatsby "stretched out his

arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily, I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock" (Fitzgerald 21). The green light's distant and elusive nature symbolizes the unattainable nature of Gatsby's American Dream and the persistent longing for something just out of reach.

Conversely, in Toni Morrison's "Beloved," symbolism takes on a more haunting and visceral quality, most notably through the symbolism of the ghostly presence that haunts Sethe's house. The eponymous character, Beloved, is a spectral and enigmatic figure who embodies the unresolved trauma of slavery. She is simultaneously a literal embodiment of Sethe's past, her deceased daughter, and the haunting legacy of slavery itself. Sethe, Paul D, and Denver are all tormented by her presence, which reflects their inability to escape the horrors of their past. Morrison writes, "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with her milk. I said her name. I lived with her. I got used to her. I could have gone anywhere, but I stayed here with her" (Morrison 192). Beloved's symbolic role underscores the idea that the past is inextricably intertwined with the present and that the characters' identities are shaped by the trauma they endured, making her a complex symbol of both identity and the enduring impact of history.

The symbolism in both novels serves as a potent tool for authors to convey the multifaceted nature of identity and the often elusive pursuit of the American Dream, whether it be the distant green light representing unattainable aspirations or the haunting presence representing the inescapable past.

## CONTRASTS IN TREATMENT OF THEMES

While "The Great Gatsby" and "Beloved" share thematic commonalities related to identity and the American Dream, they diverge significantly in their treatment of these themes. In "The Great Gatsby," F. Scott Fitzgerald paints a portrait of the American Dream as an elusive and ultimately unattainable goal. The characters in the novel, including Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, and Tom Buchanan, are driven by materialism and the pursuit of wealth, which they equate with success and happiness. However, the hollowness of this pursuit becomes evident as characters are left disillusioned and morally bankrupt. Fitzgerald's portrayal of the American Dream as a mirage aligns with Nick Carraway's realization that "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (Fitzgerald 180). Here, the contrast lies in the novel's critique of the American Dream as a shallow and unfulfilling aspiration.

In contrast, Toni Morrison's "Beloved" explores the theme of the American Dream in the context of the African American experience and the legacy of slavery. The characters in "Beloved" are haunted by the trauma of their pasts, and their dreams are often intertwined with memories of suffering and loss. Rather than pursuing traditional markers of success, such as wealth or social status, they are seeking freedom from the emotional and psychological scars of slavery. Sethe's dream is not one of material wealth but of emotional healing and reconciliation. Morrison's treatment of the American Dream in "Beloved" underscores the idea that for marginalized communities, the dream is not a quest for prosperity but a longing for agency, self-definition, and a sense of belonging. This contrast with "The Great Gatsby" highlights how the American Dream can have different meanings and implications for individuals based on their social and historical contexts.

In summary, while both "The Great Gatsby" and "Beloved" grapple with themes of identity and the American Dream, they offer contrasting perspectives on the nature and attainability of these ideals. "The Great Gatsby" critiques the shallow materialism associated with the American Dream, while "Beloved" redefines the dream in the context of the African American experience, emphasizing the quest for healing and self-determination in the face of historical trauma. These contrasting treatments of the same themes showcase the rich diversity of perspectives within American literature.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved" stand as two distinct yet compelling narratives in American literature. Through the lens of narrative style and symbolism, they each offer profound insights into the themes of identity and the American Dream. While "The Great Gatsby" critiques the hollowness of the pursuit of wealth and material success, "Beloved" redefines the Dream within the context of African American history, emphasizing the longing for healing and self-determination. These novels demonstrate the versatility of American literature, highlighting how the same themes can be explored in contrasting ways. As readers, we are left with a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of identity and the complexities of the American Dream, which continue to resonate in the ever-evolving tapestry of American culture and history.

Works Cited

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Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2004.

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