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Comparative Essay: Contrasting *To Kill a Mockingbird* with *The Great Gatsby*

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* are two iconic American novels that explore the complexities of society, morality, and the human condition. While both novels are set in different time periods and locations, they share a common focus on the flaws of American society. However, Lee critiques racial injustice through the lens of morality and empathy, whereas Fitzgerald exposes the emptiness of the American Dream through the pursuit of wealth and status. By contrasting the themes, characters, and settings of these novels, the essay will demonstrate how each author offers a unique perspective on the challenges of their respective eras.

One of the most striking differences between the two novels is their treatment of social inequality. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee addresses racial injustice through the trial of Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Atticus Finch, the moral backbone of the novel, defends Tom despite knowing the trial's outcome is predetermined by the racist attitudes of Maycomb, Alabama. Lee uses this trial to highlight the deep-seated racism and moral failings of the South in the 1930s. As Smith argues, "Lee's portrayal of Tom Robinson's trial serves as a microcosm of the systemic racism that plagued America during the Jim Crow era" (45). In contrast, *The Great Gatsby* critiques class disparity and the illusion of the American Dream. Jay Gatsby, a self-made millionaire, believes that wealth and status can win back his lost love, Daisy Buchanan. However, Fitzgerald reveals the hollowness of Gatsby's dream, as his

wealth is built on illegal activities and his pursuit of Daisy is ultimately futile. According to Johnson, “Fitzgerald uses Gatsby’s tragic downfall to illustrate the moral decay and superficiality of the Roaring Twenties” (72). Thus, while both novels address social inequality, Lee focuses on racial injustice, whereas Fitzgerald critiques the corrupting influence of wealth.

The protagonists of the two novels also reflect their differing themes. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout Finch serves as the narrator and moral compass of the story. Through her innocent yet perceptive eyes, readers witness the injustices of her community and learn the importance of empathy and integrity. Atticus Finch, Scout’s father, embodies these values, teaching her to “climb into [someone’s] skin and walk around in it” (Lee 39). In contrast, Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, is a passive observer who becomes disillusioned with the excesses and moral corruption of the East Coast elite. While Nick admires Gatsby’s idealism, he ultimately recognizes the futility of Gatsby’s dream. As Brown notes, “Nick’s narrative serves as a critique of the American Dream, revealing its unattainability and destructive consequences” (88). Thus, while both narrators provide insight into their respective worlds, Scout’s journey is one of moral growth, whereas Nick’s is one of disillusionment.

The settings of the two novels reflect their thematic concerns. Maycomb, Alabama, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is a small, insular town where racial prejudice is deeply entrenched. The town’s physical and social isolation mirrors the narrow-mindedness of its inhabitants. In contrast, the opulent settings of *The Great Gatsby*—East Egg, West Egg, and New York City—symbolize the excesses and superficiality of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald uses these settings to highlight the stark divide between old money and new money, as well as the moral emptiness of the wealthy elite. As Green observes, “The contrasting settings of the two novels underscore their differing

critiques of American society: Lee's Maycomb represents the stagnation of racial prejudice, while Fitzgerald's East and West Egg symbolize the moral decay of the upper class" (102).

To Kill a Mockingbird and *The Great Gatsby* offer powerful critiques of American society, but they do so in markedly different ways. Lee's novel focuses on racial injustice and the importance of empathy, while Fitzgerald's work exposes the emptiness of the American Dream and the moral corruption of the wealthy. Through their themes, characters, and settings, both authors provide timeless insights into the challenges of their respective eras. As readers, we are reminded of the enduring relevance of these novels and their ability to provoke reflection on the values and flaws of our own society.

Works Cited

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