Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts

Bruce Catton (1899–1978) was a respected journalist and an authority on the American Civil War. His studies were interrupted by his service during World War I, after which he worked as a journalist and then for various government agencies. Catton edited American Heritage magazine from 1954 until his death. Among his many books are Mr. Lincoln’s Army (1951); A Stillness at Appomattox (1953), which won both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award; and Gettysburg: The Final Fury (1974). Catton also wrote a memoir, Waiting for the Morning Train (1972), in which he recalls listening as a young boy to the reminiscences of Union Army veterans.

Background on Grant and Lee “Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts,” which first appeared in a collection of historical essays titled The American Story, focuses on the two generals who headed the opposing armies during the Civil War (1861–1865). Robert E. Lee led the Army of Northern Virginia, the backbone of the Confederate forces, throughout much of the war. Ulysses S. Grant was named commander in chief of the Union troops in March 1864. By the spring of 1865, although it seemed almost inevitable that the Southern forces would be defeated, Lee made an attempt to lead his troops to join another Confederate army in North Carolina. Finding himself virtually surrounded by Grant’s forces near the small town of Appomattox Court House, Lee chose to surrender to Grant. The following essay considers these two great generals in terms of both their differences and their important similarities.

When Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee met in the parlor of a modest house at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, to work out the terms for the surrender of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, a great chapter in American life came to a close, and a great new chapter began.

These men were bringing the Civil War to its virtual finish. To be sure, other armies had yet to surrender, and for a few days the fugitive Confederate government would struggle desperately and vainly, trying to find some way to go on living now that its chief support was gone. But in effect it was all over when Grant and Lee signed the papers. And the little room where they wrote out the terms was the scene of one of the poignant, dramatic contrasts in American history.

They were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision.

Back of Robert E. Lee was the notion that the old aristocratic concept might somehow survive and be dominant in American life.
Lee was tidewater Virginia, and in his background were family, culture, and tradition. . . . the age of chivalry transplanted to a New World which was making its own legends and its own myths. He embodied a way of life that had come down through the age of knighthood and the English country squire. America was a land that was beginning all over again, dedicated to nothing much more complicated than the rather hazy belief that all men had equal rights and should have an equal chance in the world. In such a land Lee stood for the feeling that it was somehow of advantage to human society to have pronounced inequality in the social structure. There should be a leisure class, backed by ownership of land; in turn, society itself should be keyed to the land as the chief source of wealth and influence. It would bring forth (according to this ideal) a class of men with a strong sense of obligation to the community, men who lived not to gain advantage for themselves, but to meet the solemn obligations which had been laid on them by the very fact that they were privileged. From them the country would get its leadership; to them it could look for the higher values — of thought, of conduct, of personal deportment — to give it strength and virtue.

Lee embodied the noblest elements of this aristocratic ideal. Through him, the landed nobility justified itself. For four years, the Southern states had fought a desperate war to uphold the ideals for which Lee stood. In the end, it almost seemed as if the Confederacy fought for Lee; as if he himself was the Confederacy. . . . the best thing that the way of life for which the Confederacy stood could ever have to offer. He had passed into legend before Appomattox. Thousands of tired, underfed, poorly clothed Confederate soldiers, long since past the simple enthusiasm of the early days of the struggle, somehow considered Lee the symbol of everything for which they had been willing to die. But they could not quite put this feeling into words. If the Lost Cause, sanctified by so much heroism and so many deaths, had a living justification, its justification was General Lee.

Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was not. He had come up the hard way and embodied nothing in particular except the eternal toughness and sinewy fiber of the men who grew up beyond the mountains. He was one of a body of men who owed reverence and obeisance to no one, who were self-reliant to a fault, who cared hardly anything for the past but who had a sharp eye for the future.

These frontier men were the precise opposites of the tidewater aristocrats. Back of them, in the great surge that had taken people over the Alleghenies and into the opening Western country, there was a deep, implicit dissatisfaction with a past that had settled into grooves. They stood for democracy, not from any reasoned conclusion about the proper ordering of human society, but simply because they had grown up in the middle of democracy and knew how it worked. Their society might have privileges, but they would be privileges each man had won for himself. Forms and patterns meant nothing. No man was born to anything, except perhaps to a chance to show how far he could rise. Life was competition.
Yet along with this feeling had come a deep sense of belonging to a
national community. The Westerner who developed a farm, opened a shop,
or set up in business as a trader, could hope to prosper only as his own
community prospered — and his community ran from the Atlantic to the
Pacific and from Canada down to Mexico. If the land was settled, with
towns and highways and accessible markets, he could better himself. He
saw his fate in terms of the nation’s own destiny. As its horizons expanded,
so did his. He had, in other words, an acute dollars-and-cents stake in the
continued growth and development of his country.

And that, perhaps, is where the contrast between Grant and Lee be-
comes most striking. The Virginia aristocrat, inevitably, saw himself in re-
lation to his own region. He lived in a static society which could endure
almost anything except change. Instinctively, his first loyalty would go to
the locality in which that society existed. He would fight to the limit of en-
durability to defend it, because in defending it he was defending everything
that gave his own life its deepest meaning.

The Westerner, on the other hand, would fight with an equal tenac-
ity for the broader concept of society. He fought because everything he
lived by was tied to growth, expansion, and a constantly widening horizon.
What he lived by would survive or fall with the nation itself. He could not
possibly stand by unmoved in the face of an attempt to destroy the Union.
He would combat it with everything he had, because he could only see it as
an effort to cut the ground out from under his feet.

So Grant and Lee were in complete contrast, representing two diametri-
cally opposed elements in American life. Grant was the modern man emerg-
ing; beyond him, ready to come on the stage, was the great age of steel and
machinery, of crowded cities and a restless burgeoning vitality. Lee might
have ridden down from the old age of chivalry, lance in hand, silken banner
fluttering over his head. Each man was the perfect champion of his cause,
drawing both his strengths and his weaknesses from the people he led.

Yet it was not all contrast, after all. Different as they were — in back-
ground, in personality, in underlying aspiration — these two great soldiers
had much in common. Under everything else, they were marvelous fight-
ers. Furthermore, their fighting qualities were really very much alike.

Each man had, to begin with, the great virtue of utter tenacity and
fidelity. Grant fought his way down the Mississippi Valley in spite of acute
personal discouragement and profound military handicaps. Lee hung on
in the trenches at Petersburg after hope itself had died. In each man there
was an indomitable quality . . . the born fighter’s refusal to give up as
long as he can still remain on his feet and lift his two fists.

Daring and resourcefulness they had, too; the ability to think faster
and move faster than the enemy. These were the qualities which gave Lee
the dazzling campaigns of Second Manassas and Chancellorsville and won
Vicksburg for Grant.

Lastly, and perhaps greatest of all, there was the ability, at the end, to
turn quickly from war to peace once the fighting was over. Out of the way
these two men behaved at Appomattox came the possibility of a peace of reconciliation. It was a possibility not wholly realized, in the years to come, but which did, in the end, help the two sections to become one nation again. . . . after a war whose bitterness might have seemed to make such a reunion wholly impossible. No part of either man’s life became him more than the part he played in this brief meeting in the McLean house at Appomattox. Their behavior there put all succeeding generations of Americans in their debt. Two great Americans, Grant and Lee — very different, yet under everything very much alike. Their encounter at Appomattox was one of the great moments of American history.

Comprehension

1. What took place at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865? Why did the meeting at Appomattox signal the closing of “a great chapter in American life” (1)?
2. How does Robert E. Lee represent aristocracy? How does Ulysses S. Grant represent Lee’s opposite?
3. According to Catton, where is it that “the contrast between Grant and Lee becomes most striking” (10)?
4. What similarities does Catton see between the two men?
5. Why, according to Catton, are “succeeding generations of Americans” (16) in debt to Grant and Lee?

Purpose and Audience

1. Catton’s purpose in contrasting Grant and Lee is to make a statement about the differences between two currents in American history. Summarize these differences. Do you think the differences still exist today? Explain.
2. Is Catton’s purpose in comparing Grant and Lee the same as his purpose in contrasting them? That is, do their similarities also make a statement about U.S. history? Explain.

Style and Structure

1. Does Catton use subject-by-subject or point-by-point comparison? Why do you think he chooses the strategy he does?
2. In this essay, topic sentences are extremely helpful to the reader. Explain the functions of the following sentences: “Grant . . . was everything Lee was not” (7); “So Grant and Lee were in complete contrast” (12); “Yet it was not all contrast, after all” (13); and “Lastly, and perhaps greatest of all . . .” (16).
3. Catton uses transitions skillfully in his essay. Identify the transitional words or expressions that link each paragraph to the preceding one.

4. Why do you suppose Catton provides the background for the meeting at Appomattox but presents no information about the dramatic meeting itself?

**Vocabulary Projects**

1. Define each of the following words as it is used in this selection.

   | Pignant (2) | Obiessance (7) | Tenacity (14) |
   | Chivalry (5) | Implicit (8)   | Fidelity (14) |
   | Department (5) | Inevitably (10) | Indomitable (14) |
   | Sanctified (6) | Diametrically (12) | Reconciliation (16) |
   | Embodied (7) | Burgeoning (12) |            |
   | Sinewy (7) | Aspiration (13) |            |

2. Go to the online thesaurus at dictionary.com, and look up **synonyms** for each of the following words. Then, determine whether each synonym would be as effective as the word used in this essay.

   | Department (5) | Obiessance (7) | Indomitable (14) |
   | Sanctified (6) | Diametrically (12) |            |

**Journal Entry**

Compare your attitudes about the United States with those held by Grant and by Lee. With which man do you agree?

**Writing Workshop**

1. Write a “study in contrasts” about two people you know well — two teachers, your parents, two relatives, two friends — or about two fictional characters you are very familiar with. Be sure to include a thesis statement.

2. Write a dialogue between two people you know that reveals their contrasting attitudes toward school, work, or any other subject.

3. **Working with Sources.** Write an essay about two individuals from a period of American history other than the Civil War to make the same points Catton makes. If you do research, make sure you document your sources and include a works-cited page. (See Chapter 18 for information on MLA documentation.)

**Combining the Patterns**

In several places, Catton uses **exemplification** to structure a paragraph. For instance, in paragraph 7, he uses examples to support the topic sentence “Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was
not.” Identify three paragraphs that use examples to support the topic sentence, and bracket the examples. How do these examples in these paragraphs reinforce the similarities and differences between Grant and Lee?

**Thematic Connections**

- “Ground Zero” (page 182)
- “Fame-iness” (page 511)
- The Declaration of Independence (page 553)
- “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (page 566)