

The main ideas of catton's essay grant and lee: a study in contrasts

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In the essay "Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts", by Bruce Catton, Catton discusses what made two strong war generals, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, different. Catton contrasts the two generals' backgrounds, characteristics, and beliefs. Catton goes into detail when talking about where the two first met and why they were meeting in the parlor of a modest house at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. Catton discusses how each man's background represented a social philosophy, how Grant and Lee differed as men and generals, and how they possessed similar virtues.

In Catton's essay, he talks about how Lee and Grant represented the strengths of two conflicting currents. When talking about Lee in paragraph five, Catton states, "In such a land Lee stood for the feeling that it was somehow of an 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."

By this, he means that Lee believed that land was the country's key source of wealth, and that the lower class provided the work force which brought in income for the country, essentially thinking slavery was a must have for the country to be economically stable and successful. On the other hand, Grant "was one of a body of men who owned 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." This quote shows that Grant was mainly concerned with the country's future and what was best for the country in the long run. Each of their backgrounds represented a social philosophy because

Lee being born in the South, grew up with slavery being a social norm, and with his old-fashioned mindset, he supported it. Grant on the other hand, growing up in the West, grew up working for his success and being more self-reliant, not relying on the work of others.

In Catton's essay, he also contrasts the two generals. He starts off by contrasting the backgrounds of the two generals, saying, " Lee was tidewater Virginia, and in his background were family, culture, and tradition ..." and " Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was not." By this, he is saying Lee was from the aristocratic South, which had great wealth and stability. Grant though, was raised in the Western frontier, where he experienced poverty and an unstable life. The two generals differ in personality as well, Lee seeing himself as entitled and holding a high importance in society, whereas Grant, because of the way he was raised, is more self-reliant and motivated to pursue goals. When it comes to being a general, they differed in this way; Lee did things an " old fashioned" way so to speak and Grant did things in a more modern way, with more ruthlessness. We see this when Catton discusses Lee's ways when saying, " He embodied a way of life that had come down through the age of knighthood and the English country squire" and Grants ways when he says, " 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."

This quote when saying “knighthood and the English country squire” is referring to Lee’s antique, backward looking ways, and when referring to Grant it says he “...cared hardly anything for the past but who had a sharp eye for the future” which is talking about Grants modern, new ways.

Throughout Catton’s essay though he is typically contrasting the two generals, he does compare them in two main ways, and that is they were both “marvelous fighters” and had similar fighting qualities. Catton when talking about their fighting qualities states:

“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.”

This quote talks about how the two generals were both perseverant and were able to move and think before the enemy acted. They both still pushed for the win when defeat was around the corner. The virtues they both possessed were “tenacity and fidelity.” They both had determination to win and support their beliefs.

I think that Catton’s purpose in writing this essay was to show that though people may hold different beliefs, it does not mean that they can’t share similarities as well. As discussed in the paragraphs prior, Catton talks about the differences of Lee and Grant. The two both had different ideas of what

they thought was best for society, Lee's being slavery and Grant's being achievement through personal success and opposition of slavery. The two were thought of as "representatives of diametrically opposed elements in American life", but by further examination we see that they did share similarities, such as their virtues, perseverance, and elite fighting abilities. I think that this still holds true to modern day because we typically see that when people hold two different beliefs, such as who should be president for example, they tend to see the other person as lesser or lacking common features or traits. I think Catton wants people to be more open minded to others views or beliefs, so they can discover what they have in common, versus judging one another based on their personal beliefs or opinions.