

Shades of Being Human

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are two contemporary African-American writers. Although almost a generation apart in age, both women display a remarkable similarity in their lives. Each has written about her experiences growing up in the rural South, Ms. Walker through her essays and Ms. Angelou in her autobiographies. Though they share similar backgrounds, each has a unique style which gives to us, the readers, the gift of their exquisite humanity, with all of its frailties and strengths, joys and sorrows.

Tragedy struck both of these women at the age of eight. Ms. Walker lost her sight in one eye. Ms. Angelou was raped. Each described the incident as part of a larger work. Ms. Walker related her experience in the body of an essay published in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Ms. Angelou told her story as a chapter in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Although both wrote about their traumatic experience, the way each depicted the incident was distinct and seemed to be told for very different purposes.

Alice Walker reports the facts to the reader with short sentences written in the present tense. She chooses words which elicit a forceful emotional response from her audience. For example, in telling how her brothers were given BB guns and she was not, Ms. Walker writes, "Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly, I am relegated to the position of Indian." The word "relegated" causes the reader to be irate and indignant. Most people do not like being "relegated" to anything. Another illustration of Ms. Walker's use of dynamic words can be found in her description of the encounter with her parents following the accident. She speaks of being "confronted" by her parents. "Confronted" is a combative word. When people are confronted by others, they want to launch an attack. Her style and choice of words make the reader aware that she is alone and fearful. She is left to fight her battles by herself.

Maya Angelou narrates her account in a conversational tone. She uses the past tense which tells her audience "it's over" for her. Her words are free from severity. They encourage the reader to see hope in the midst of sadness. Instead of trying to elicit a particular emotional response, Angelou invites her audience to share in her thoughts and feelings. For instance, having given an account of the rape, she writes, "I thought I had died--I woke up in a white-walled world, and it had to be heaven." The reader feels a connection with her pain, yet realizes redemption lies close at hand. Whereas Walker tells how she was confronted by her parents, Angelou explains, "she [mother] picked me up in her arms and the terror abated for a while." There is no impression of combativeness. There is only tenderness and care. Once again, she invites the reader in. Walker wants the reader to feel for her; Angelou wants her audience to feel with her. They achieve their objectives by directing the reader's attention to specific emotions.

The emotional focus of Alice Walker's story is rage, red-hot and isolating. As I read this piece, I became livid, not only at the thought of her devastating injury and her family's apparent disassociation, but also at Ms. Walker herself. It appeared to me that she never let go of it. Instead, she seemed to embrace her anger. On the other hand, Ms. Angelou's anger is subtle and short-lived. Though I was incensed by what happened to her, she quietly insisted that I leave it behind. She concentrated less on her anger and more on the warmth and support of her family.

It would be impossible not to address the ways in which both women refer to the intense physical pain each of them suffered as little girls. Ms. Walker gives little description of her anguish, but I clearly felt it. When I read, ". . . I feel an incredible blow in my right eye . . ." and, "my eye stings, and I cover it with my hand," my immediate response was to quickly cover my eye with my hand. My body reacted to her pain.

Ms. Angelou's description produced another effect. She wrote, "Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart." Instead of a physical reaction, I felt a wrenching of the heart. Ms. Walker focused my attention on the injury to her body, while Ms. Angelou focused on her emotional scars.

My most powerful emotional response throughout both stories was one of incredible sorrow. I felt the tremendous weight that sadness and despair can fold around a heart, not only for a child's trauma, but also for the devastating repercussions that tragedy can produce - loss of dignity, self-esteem, and childhood itself. I wanted to comfort them both. However, by the end of Ms. Walker's account of the incident, I not only wanted to comfort her, I wanted to shield her as well. Her wounds were still open. At the end of her narrative, she wrote, "Now when I stare at people - a favorite pastime up to now - they will stare back. Not at the 'cute' little girl, but at her scar. For six years, I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head." I wanted to intervene and help her.

Although in Ms. Angelou's story I yearned to comfort the child, it was obvious that the adult Maya Angelou did not need my protection. She ended her account with these words:

"I would have liked to stay in the hospital the rest of my life. Mother brought flowers and candy. Grandmother came with fruit and my uncles clumped around and around my bed, snorting like wild horses. When they were able to sneak Bailey in, he read to me for hours."

Her family loved her all the way through her trauma, and she moved from despair to hope with their help.

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are both extremely courageous writers. From each we receive a rare and poignant gift. As her book suggests, Alice Walker challenges us to search for resolution in the face of loneliness and despair. Maya Angelou, who "knows why the caged bird sings," reminds us that loneliness and despair never have the last word. She gently points us to a window of hope. Both women bless us with shades of being human.

WRITING A COMPARISON/CONTRAST ESSAY

A BRIEF REFRESHER

To write a comparison or contrast essay that is easy to follow, first decide what the similarities or differences are by writing lists on scrap paper. Which are more significant, the sims. or the diffs.? Plan to discuss the less significant first, followed by the more significant. It is much easier to discuss ONLY the sims. or ONLY the diffs., but you can also do both.

Then for organizing your essay, choose one of the plans described below, whichever best fits your list. Finally, and this is **important**, what **main point** (thesis) might you make in the essay about the two people/things being compared? Do not begin writing until you have a point that the sims or diffs you want to use help to prove. Your point should help shape the rest of what you say: For example, if you see that one of your sims or diffs is unrelated to the point, throw it out and think of one that is related. Or revise your point. Be sure this main point is clearly and prominently expressed somewhere in the essay. I cannot stress too strongly that **a good thesis** is the most important part of a comparison/contrast essay. It is not enough to say that the two things you are comparing have some sims and some diffs. That is a fact, not a thesis, which should be your opinion as to WHY those sims/diffs exist. See the [Model Student Essay](#) below for a good example of a thesis statement.

Plan A: Use Plan A if you have many small similarities and/or differences. After your introduction, say everything you want to say about the first work or character, and then go on in the second half of the essay to say everything about the second work or character, comparing or contrasting each item in the second with the same item in the first. In this format, all the comparing or contrasting, except for the statement of your main point, which you may want to put in the beginning, goes on in the SECOND HALF of the piece.

Plan B: Use Plan B if you have only a few, larger similarities or differences. After your introduction, in the next paragraph discuss one similarity or difference in BOTH works or characters, and then move on in the next paragraph to the second sim. or diff. in both, then the third, etc., until you're done. If you're doing both sims. and diffs., juggle them on scrap paper so that in each part you put the less important first ("X and Y are both alike in their social positions ..."), followed by the more important ("but X is much more aware of the dangers of his position than is Y"). In this format, the comparing or contrasting goes on in EACH of the middle parts.

Model Student Essay

Here is an answer that does a good job of comparing/contrasting two characters. In answer to the following question, a student in Lit. 230, Fall, 2002, wrote the following contrast of Achilles from Homer's *Iliad* and Rama from the *Ramayana*. I have put the **thesis in bold**.

"A hero does what's right." Is this true for Achilles and Rama? Compare/contrast Rama's reason(s) for fighting Ravana with Achilles' reason(s) for fighting Hector.

Rama and Achilles in Battle

"A hero does what's right." That statement is one that is accepted throughout basically every culture in human history. Would a hero do what is wrong? The real question to be considered is: what do these cultures consider to be "right"? **Rama and Achilles do what is right in their respective cultures. In that respect both Rama and Achilles are heroes who do what's right.** Today an Islamic fanatic could be considered a hero who does the right thing in their culture by killing 2,800 working class civilians. **Achilles, in ancient Greece, did the right thing by being individualistic and questioning authority. But Rama, in ancient India, did the right thing by listening to authority and being concerned with dharma.** To determine the "right thing" many different variables must be considered. One important consideration would be their reasoning for fighting their own personal wars and arch enemies.

Achilles goes after Hector only after his best friend Patroclus is murdered by Hector. This is similar to the reasoning of why Rama goes after Ravana. Rama goes after Ravana because Ravana steals Rama's wife Sita. Both characters go after their arch enemy because of something the enemy did to a loved one. However, this is where the similarities stop. To understand why each hero goes after their arch enemy the different sequence of events that led to both events must be analyzed. Sita got stolen from Rama as an indirect result of Rama accepting his father's wishes. Rama replies to his father's commands for him to be exiled into the forest for fourteen years by saying, "I will follow out his wishes without question" (page 48). On the other hand Patroclus is killed as a direct result of Achilles' actions. If Achilles had accepted Agamemnon's decision to take away Briseis the way Rama accepted his father's wishes, Patroclus might never have been killed. The thing that is interesting is that these differences are a huge reason why both Rama and Achilles are considered heroes in their society. Rama is heroic for the ancient Indian reader because he is obedient to his father and always seems to follow dharma. This correlates to the beliefs of the ancient Indian culture of the time. In fact, these beliefs of hierarchy are still widely accepted today in Indian culture. On the opposite side of the spectrum in the more individualistic society of ancient Greece Achilles is heroic because he does not listen to hierarchy, he questions his superiors. In western society, which is heavily influenced by ancient Greek society, this ideology of heroism is still accepted. In contrast to Rama's acceptance of his father's wishes, Achilles says in response to Agamemnon's offer of apology, "So report back to him everything I say, And report it publicly--get the Greeks angry, in case the shameless bastard still thinks he can steal us blind" (book 9, lines 380-383). Could you imagine if Rama responded this way to his father when his throne was taken away? Rama, with his denial of the throne, had just as much of a grievance as Achilles but he accepts his father's word. How Achilles reacts to Agamemnon, and how Rama reacts to king Dasaratha are both considered heroic even though they are based on totally different principles. These different reactions show what the culture of ancient India taught to be right, and what ancient Greece taught to be right. Even though they are completely different, both Rama and Achilles did the right thing in accordance with their society's beliefs. Furthermore, they are both go along with the popular notion that "A hero does what's right."

The actual fight scenes could also be brought up to show the differences in each culture. Rama and Achilles share in common outrageous feats in battle. One outrageous display could be shown in Rama and Ravana's fight scene when Narayan writes, "After circling the globe several times, the dueling chariots returned, and the fight continued over Lanka" (page 155). This passage shows how like the Iliad, the Ramayana exaggerates the conditions of battle. Also, it is similar to Hector and Achilles' battle in which there is also a chase. One important difference between Achilles' final battle and Rama's is the different roles each plays. Achilles is the aggressor in his fight with Hector, while Ravana is the more aggressive in his battle with Rama. This also shines a light on the cultural differences of ancient Greece and ancient India. Again, the differences do not take away from either one's status of being a hero and "doing the right thing." In Greece it would be considered heroic to be the one in a rage and the aggressor, while in India it would be considered heroic to be calm and collected when in battle.

Both Rama and Achilles are heroes, even though the factors that make them heroes are very different. It is a

simple matter of aesthetics. It has nothing to do with one culture being right with their ideology of what makes someone a hero and the other being wrong. The world is vastly diverse in terms of people, land, and ideology. It would be unfair to claim that either Rama or Achilles did not do the "right thing." To do so would be wrong because everyone has a different idea of what the right thing is, and everyone has a different idea of what the qualifications are for being a hero.

- Due to Singapore's large Muslim population and its proximity to predominately Muslim countries, the availability of Halal food is much more widespread than Trinidad, even though Trinidad does have a significant Muslim population

Compare and Contrast Essay: PUTTING ESSAY TOGETHER

<p>[1] In the middle of the cold Canadian winters, have you ever thought about escaping to somewhere warm to get away from all the cold and snow? [2] Singapore, nicknamed "Lion City", and Trinidad, also known as the land of soca, calypso, and the steel pan, come to many people's minds when thinking of a warm place to escape to. [3] While both Singapore and Trinidad are tropical island paradises with dynamic and vibrant cultures, there are many differences between the two which makes each one unique. [4] The geography, people, and food of both Singapore and Trinidad show many similarities, yet many differences as well.</p>	<p>1st Paragraph – Introduction [1] General topic sentence(s) [2] Brief background information</p> <p>[3] Thesis statement</p> <p>[4] Brief overview of the three features</p>
<p>[5] First, [6] there are many similarities and differences between the geography of Singapore and Trinidad. [7] Both Singapore and Trinidad are island nations located in tropics close to the equator. The climate in both countries is warm all year round and it never snows. Furthermore, they are relatively small compared to countries like Canada, China, and the United States. [8] However, Singapore is located in Southeast Asia, close to Malaysia and Indonesia, while Trinidad is located in the Caribbean off the coast of South America near Venezuela. Although both island nations, Trinidad's land area is about seven times as large as Singapore's. Trinidad is also more mountainous while Singapore is relatively flat. Furthermore, Singapore is mostly urban and built-up, while Trinidad is not.</p>	<p>2nd Paragraph – Discuss 1st Feature [5] Transition word/phrase [6] State 1st feature that will be discussed [7] State similarities</p> <p>[8] State differences</p>
<p>[9] In addition to geography, [10] the people of Singapore and Trinidad share many things in common, but each still retain their unique differences as well. [11] Singapore and Trinidad are both multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious countries. Historically, tensions existed between the various ethnic groups in both countries. However, presently relations are much better between the various ethnic groups. As a result of their ethnic diversity, both Singapore and Trinidad have statutory holidays which honour the cultures and religions of its various ethnic groups. [12] Despite the similarities, they are some key differences. Singapore's population is almost exclusively Asian, with Chinese, Indians, and Malay Muslims forming almost the entire population. Trinidad's population is equally split between Africans and Asians, which mostly consists of Indians and Chinese. Trinidad also has a very large mixed-race population as well. While Singapore honours its diversity with having four official languages (Chinese, Tamil, Malay, and English), Trinidad only has English as its official language, although Hindi, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic are also spoken on the island.</p>	<p>3rd Paragraph – Discuss 2nd Feature [9] Transition word/phrase [10] State 2nd feature that will be discussed [11] State similarities</p> <p>[12] State differences</p>
<p>[13] Finally, [14] the food of Singapore and Trinidad are quite similar in many ways, yet they each remain distinct from each other. [15] Spicy food is very common in Singaporean and Trinidadian cuisine. Both countries' cuisines are strongly influenced by Indian and Chinese cuisine due to the large local Indian and Chinese populations. Curry is very popular in both countries. Due to Singapore's and Trinidad's British colonial past, British customs and foods are also very common. [16] Nevertheless, Singapore's cuisine has a stronger Chinese and Indian influence compared to Trinidad's cuisine, which has a stronger African and European influence. Singapore's cuisine is also highly influenced by that of its neighbouring countries of Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Due to Singapore's large Muslim population and its proximity to other predominately Muslim countries, the availability of Halal food is much more widespread than Trinidad, even though Trinidad does have a significant Muslim population.</p>	<p>4th Paragraph – Discuss 3rd Feature [13] Transition word/phrase [14] State 3rd feature that will be discussed [15] State similarities</p> <p>[16] State differences</p>
<p>[17] As illustrated, [18] despite the many similarities between Singapore and Trinidad, each of those tropical paradises</p>	<p>5th Paragraph – Conclusion [17] Transition word/phrase</p>

contain many unique aspects as well. [19] While the geography, people, and food share many similarities, the differences between make each of these tropical islands unique from each other. [20] If you are still thinking about escaping the cold Canadian winters to a tropical island paradise, you have to make sure you visit because Singapore and Trinidad both have a distinct and vibrant culture that you must experience.

[18] Re-state thesis statement

[19] Briefly summarise the three features

[20] Closing sentence