A Study in Contrasts

Read the following passages, and note differences in diction, tone, and syntax.

General George Armstrong Custer

It is difficult to find a starting place for describing Custer. Those who have already formed opinions about the man have done so with such vehemence that it is hard to believe that the two sides are talking about the same person. To one group, he remains the brave and gallant soldier and peerless Indian fighter who died heroically and gloriously battling against hopeless odds; to the other he was a big-mouthed braggart and incompetent who blundered away the lives of more than two hundred men by rushing joyfully into a deadly situation without taking the simplest precautions demanded by military prudence. On one point all agree: Custer was a man of supreme physical courage who apparently did not know what it was to feel fear. Beyond that, there is agreement on very little.

Custer graduated at the bottom of his class at West Point, in large part for demerits received for what his admirers like to describe as "boyish pranks and escapades," although a good part of his bad record was the result of slovenly habits. This last was highly ironic because no officer would demand more later from his men in the way of snap and polish and taut discipline than he. He received his commission just in time to get into the First Battle of Bull Run.

He had a dash about him and a vivaciousness, to say nothing of his courage, which could not help but attract the attention of his superiors, and he received choice assignments for such a young officer. He had a superb confidence that fortune was always working for him; "Custer's luck," he called this continual smile of the gods, and for a number of years it appeared that he was right and that it actually existed. As it turned out, "Custer's luck" was not an inexhaustible commodity.

Some points in his career remain hazy. He was, for instance, jumped all the way from first lieutenant to brigadier general after having played only minor parts in engagements where he performed in no manner worthy of such recognition. Even Custer's luck could not explain such a promotion; it seems possible that political influence was also involved. In any event, at twenty-three, he was (and still is) the youngest man ever to have held the rank of brigadier general in the United States Army; two years later he was breveted major general and so became the youngest ever in that rank—with the single exception of the Marquis de Lafayette during the Revolution.

He was a flamboyant leader. He designed his own uniform which consisted of a wide-brimmed hat, trousers with a double stripe running down the seam, a sailor's wide-collared shirt, a red cravat, and on the sleeves of his jacket an intricate arabesque of interlacing loops of gold braid. Add to this golden hair grown long and lying in ringlets on his shoulders and the man becomes rather overpowering in his gaudiness and glitter.

However, these were personal things; the important thing in a solider is whether he can fight. General Custer could fight all right, but there was a great deal of question about his competence as a commander. During the war, he two or three times showed a disconcerting habit of forgetting his main responsibility to go whooping off under some side issue that was more exciting—as the time he entered a Virginia town and spied a Confederate locomotive and cars about to make their escape; he left his command to take care of itself and made a wild dash to capture the train. Such actions can turn disastrous, and it was perhaps only Custer's luck that saved him each time.

Because of his impulsive nature, he was not a good tactician. His joy was leading a cavalry charge, saber swinging, yellow hair streaming in the wind, the field behind him thundering with hundreds of men and horses answering to his command. He had not enough patience for the careful reconnoitering, the consideration of alternatives, the working out of plans that make a good commanding officer.

Custer had been a teetotaler since the day when, a young and arrogant lieutenant home on furlough, he had been staggering under more than he could carry and had met Elizabeth Bacon. Miss Bacon, the future Mrs. Custer, was not amused; young Custer took the pledge and never drank again. He appeared not to know the meaning of weariness; he could spend a day campaigning on the plains that exhausted the men with him, and then come back to his tent and spend most of the night writing a long letter to Mrs. Custer. On occasion, if no operations were scheduled for the next day, he would be up early and out on an all-day hunt after getting only one or two hours of sleep. He seemed completely unable to understand that his men could not do likewise: the result was over-strict discipline—and a "bring-none-back-alive" incident. Add miscellany on Custer: he carried hound dogs with him, sometimes as many as two or three dozen, and let them share his tent and—within capacity—his bed.

The preceding, and all other facts about Custer, add up to a man of supreme courage and boundless energy who had retained the enthusiasm of a youth at the cost of never quite attaining the judgment of a man. His inability to accept the harsh restraints of discipline had shown itself on occasion during the war; now it came to the surface once again when he received orders from General Hancock to move farther west and make his base at Fort Wallace.
My Average Uncle

He stood out splendidly above all my uncles because he did not stand out at all. That was his distinction. He was the averagest man I ever knew.

You would never pick him out in a crowd. He became just another man the minute he was in one. So many more pounds of man. Good solid pounds, but just pounds. You would never remember his hair or his chin, or the shape of his ears. If he said something, you would agree with it, and, an hour later, you would be sure you had said it yourself.

Sometimes I think men like that get along about the best. They are the easiest on their houses, their wives, and their children. They are easiest on the world. They slide along without having to do anything about it as small boys do on their breeches after they have slid on them enough to wear them down smooth. The world is all so much pine needles under them.

Uncle Amos was easy on his wives and children. He had three of them, in all. Wives, I mean. I never did get the count of his children straight, there were too many assortments of them. Three wives. It seemed surprising to me at the time. With all the trouble I had, myself, having to stand on my head and work my legs, or bung stones at cherrybirds, to keep the attention of just one girl for a month. I often wondered how Uncle Amos, who never stood on his head or whittled out even a butterpat, could attract so many women as he did. With hair a little thin on his head, and legs that could not possibly do more than three and a half miles an hour on the road, there he was, with three families behind him. Of course, he had the families spaced. The wives of Uncle Amos did not come all at once. They were drawn out. One batch of children grew pretty well up by the time the next batch hove in sight, waddling and falling on their faces—to save their hands—as waddling children do.

I knew my Bible, especially the marital parts, in which I took deep interest. I had read the Bible through many times under the eye of one particular aunt. I knew a lot about matrimony from that. But Uncle Amos had me puzzled. He had broken no commandments. All his marriages were open and above-board. He wasn’t like the patriarchs who didn’t always wait for one wife to go before another came. Yet Uncle Amos’s status and his children’s status were rather complicated.

The women must have been drawn to him because he was so much like what an average fair husband would seem to a woman to be.

This man made no flourishes to attract anybody. He never drove a fast horse. He never wore trousers with checks any larger than an inch square—which, for the time, was conservative. His house never got afire and burned down just after the fire insurance had run out. Not one of his boys and girls ever got drowned or run over by the steam-cars. The few that died growing up died of diphtheria or scarlet fever, which were what children died of then, the usual ways.

Uncle Amos never had a fight.

* * *

Uncle Amos never lost a pocketbook. At least not one with much money in it.

Uncle Amos never went even as far as Boston.

But there he was, never making much money, but with all the comforts of home around him, eating his stewed eels, sitting in his galluses out in the orchard in the cool of the evening, with a plump baby to climb up on his lap, whenever he felt like having a baby on his lap and had his old trousers on and didn’t care much what happened to him. There he was, shingling his house only when it got to leaking so it put the kitchen fire out. Drinking a little ale now and then, when he came by it easy. No big hayfields to worry about. No wife that craved more than one new dress a year, and that one she generally ran up herself on her sewing machine. One best pair of trousers to his name which the moths got into, but not so deep but what they could be healed up with a needle. Not many books to excite him and keep him awake nights, or put ideas into his head and make him uneasy. No itch ever spreading out upon him to go out and take the world by its horns. There he was, in clover!

Amos was a Republican. But then, most everybody around was. It was an average condition. Uncle Amos didn’t have much to do except carry a torchlight when the Republican Presidents got elected, as they did regularly. And if Uncle Amos got grease on him, it never was very much grease, and his current wife took it out of him with her hot iron. Politics passed him by. Great events passed him by. And big taxes.

But we nephews did not pass him by. We were strangely drawn to him. Especially when some of our specialist uncles wore us down with their crankiness and difference. I spent some of the quietest Sundays of my life in Uncle Amos’s yard, lying under apple trees and listening to bees and not listening to Uncle Amos who was bumbling away at something he did not expect me to listen to at all. And caterpillars came suddenly down on fine wires shining like gold, and hit Uncle Amos on his bald spot, and he brushed them off and went on bumbling. The heat was a burden, and the apple blossoms fell to pieces and drifted down on me, and I could see the roof of the world over the black twigs they came from. These were my soldest hours of pure being. I did not have to do anything to live up to this quiet, friendly man. He did not expect me to stand on my head and show off, or go after his pipe, or keep the flies from lighting on his bald spot. And he always had lemon drops somewhere deep in his roomy pockets, fore or aft, and he liked to give them to me.

The only trouble Uncle Amos had in his life was after he had got through with it. When they came to bury him, they could not fix it so he could lie next to all his three women. He had liked them all equally well. But there was not enough of Uncle Amos to go round. So they put him on the end of the row.

Uncle Amos did not mind, I am sure. I am sure he sleeps average well.²

Diction, Tone, and Syntax

Directions: Respond to the following questions about the selections on Handout 26.

General George Armstrong Custer

1. Notice the following word choices: vehemence (paragraph 1), glitter, arabesque (paragraph 5), disconcerting, whooping (paragraph 6). These words probably did not appear in the early drafts of the writing. Can you think of words that might have been used in the early drafts? Which choices do you prefer? Why?

2. In paragraph 3, the author uses the allusion “the continual smile of the gods.” How do you evaluate its effectiveness?

3. In considering syntax, a good rule to observe is that the idea constructs the sentence. Reread paragraph 5. Notice the variety in sentences. What differences do you notice, and how does the rule for writers apply to these sentences?

4. Find an example in paragraph 1 of balance. Try imitating this balance using your own experiences (rock music—country music, news via television—news via newspapers, health food restaurants—fast-food restaurants).

My Average Uncle

1. The author uses concrete description to convey the attributes that make his uncle a special person. Name a few of these attributes, and cite a few phrases in which the precise, concrete language helps the reader to identify the attributes.

2. Reread the part of the passage where the author describes his quiet Sundays in Uncle Amos’ yard. Notice the range of images from small insects to the expanse of the sky. List a few examples of concrete language from the passage.

3. How does the allusion to the Bible help to create the author’s tone? How would you describe that tone?

4. Writers have different techniques for placing emphasis on certain ideas or concepts. Sentence length is one way, and the use of single-sentence paragraphs is another way. Cite some examples of each.