

## Inner-thoughts tell a story: Comparing William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* - Sample compare and contrast essay

*How do you describe a character? This sample college compare and contrast essay looks at two different approaches: the first, employed by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* utilizes a polyphonic style in which each character self narrates their portion of the novel. The second approach, employed by Tennessee Williams in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, uses action and dialogue to reveal more about the characters. This example English literature comparative essay would be a good reference for a student who wants to compare a novel and play.*

### ***Actions Speak Louder than Words***

In William Faulkner's novel, *As I Lay Dying*, the story is presented in a polyphonic style where each character's thoughts are revealed by their own descriptions. Whereas in the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams, the thoughts and ideas of each character are conveyed through their actions and words. These two great American stories, although different in structure, both focus on the inner feelings and thoughts of the characters presented. Despite their differences, each story is able to effectively offer access into the character's way of thinking. Though the form of the play and the polyphonic novel are quite distinct and focus on separate styles of character development, each method is equally able to reveal the thoughts and true nature of each character.

Faulkner uses the polyphonic style in his novel to give every character a distinct voice and opinion. Therefore, the book feels a little more like a play, because there is no universal narrator to describe the action from either a single point of view or from an omniscient position. Instead, Faulkner has each character describe their own views and narrate the book. This helps the reader better understand the thoughts and nature of each individual through their views and opinions, which are revealed through their descriptions. Each character describes their thoughts about others and in doing so; they reveal their personal character through how they look upon certain situations and others. Faulkner allows the reader to see into the thoughts of the characters in order to create a complete understanding of each individual within the novel, based on their own thoughts. Overall, Faulkner's polyphonic novel is quite successful at providing insight into the characters way of thinking and true nature.

Where *As I Lay Dying* relies on individuals describing their thoughts, Williams' play gets its insight from character's actions and dialogue. The interaction between Stanley, Blanche, and Stella reveal a lot about their personal values and thoughts through their words and actions. Williams uses the different ways in which the characters interact with one another to show what is important to them, and how they go about getting it. Although the reader is never told the personal thoughts of the characters, their thoughts are clearly demonstrated through the actions they take to obtain their wants. Therefore, while *A Streetcar Named Desire* never gives direct views into character's thoughts, the conversations and motivations of each individual allow the reader to understand the characters.

In the beginning of *As I Lay Dying*, Darl tells that he and Jewel are walking back to the house, and then begins to describe Jewel. However, he doesn't simply describe Jewel by his features and personality, instead he lets Jewel's actions reveal a great deal about his character. In addition to the descriptions about Jewel, he describes Cash and Anse in the same manner, emphasizing the idea that the characters

actions expose a great deal about their inner thoughts. Throughout Faulkner's novel, much is learned about people through the description of others. Darl's description of Jewel, Cash, and Anse reflects the book's tendency to reveal the nature of individuals through the descriptions of others. However, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, character's thoughts are revealed through their speech and mannerisms. When Blanche first arrives at the Kowalski's apartment in New Orleans, and is talking to Eunice, her thoughts are illuminated in her surprise, and reluctance to believe that she has arrived at the correct address. By stuttering and seeming so surprised, the reader is able to see Blanche's way of thinking through her words. Rather than having Stella tell the reader about Blanche, Williams lets the character reveal their own nature through their dialogue. Moreover, when Blanche first enters the apartment and is alone she immediately finds the whiskey and takes a drink. This action basically tells the reader that she has some problems and is quick to rely on alcohol to solve them. Although Blanche later says that she isn't a drunkard, her initial action of drinking reveals her true character to the reader.

Although in *As I Lay Dying* characters generally describe what others are like, we learn more about them through their descriptions of others. While in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, individuals show their own thoughts in the way they handle events and interact with others. When characters voice their opinions of others in *As I Lay Dying*, they tend to disclose more about themselves. When Cora describes the way the Bundren's treat Addie, she actually exposes her own views that she is better because she has consistently visited Addie. Her descriptions of the others divulge her arrogance and feelings of superiority. Faulkner uses Cora's account of the other characters to show her way of thinking to the reader. In Williams' play, rather than having the characters describe one another, he uses their reactions to access their thoughts. The way Stanley responds to the loss of Belle Reve and then his sudden change in attitude convey his thoughts. Although Stanley doesn't tell how he feels, his reaction clearly demonstrates what he is thinking, and thus, what he values.

In both *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *As I Lay Dying*, character's are sometimes misrepresented by others evaluations. While the play and the novel are structured differently, characters are constantly being judged by others in both. Stanley makes numerous evaluations about Blanche. Though many of them are accurate, some are false, which shows, only through character's words and actions can their thoughts adequately be revealed. Cora makes many judgments about the Bundren family. She says that Darl is the only one who loves Addie, saying that he begged not to leave his mother's bedside when it was actually Jewel who didn't want to leave. Furthermore, neither the polyphonic novel nor the play is better or worse at accessing the character's way of thinking. However, Faulkner and Williams use these false evaluations to reveal the character of the people making the judging in their stories.

Faulkner and Williams use the words of the characters within their stories to convey their thoughts and personality to the reader. In *As I Lay Dying*, the thoughts and ideals of each character are used to show their values. Faulkner reveals characters qualities through their beliefs; "When he aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man" (Faulkner 36). Faulkner uses this quote by Anse to show the reader that Anse is lazy and does not like to be moved. Through his words about men's nature to stay put, Anse reveals his way of thinking to the reader. Faulkner is able to demonstrate exactly how Anse thinks, and therefore help the reader understand why Anse acts the way he does, and foreshadows that there will be problems associated with moving for Anse. Similarly, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams uses the characters words to expose their true nature. "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't

