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Maelee Fleming

Western Kentucky University, maelee.fleming454@topper.wku.edu

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Lincoln the Profiler: Combining a Poet's Voice and a Rhetorician's Argument to Unite a Nation and Strive for Progress

Maelee Fleming

“Lincoln acquired his power by exacting obedience from words, and this discipline he acquired in only two ways known to man – by reading and writing,” asserts Jacques Barzun in his *Lincoln: the Literary Genius*.¹ While from humble farming beginnings, President Abraham Lincoln cultivated his writing abilities into a tool for satisfying his ambitions, which far exceeded those of his forefathers, and those ambitions would eventually lead him to the White House. Complimentary to his success was Lincoln’s ability to write in a way that catered to the auditory, as well as the logical, senses, thus producing works that left the page and imprinted themselves on his audience’s minds. Though he was president during a particularly tense time in American history, the Civil War era, President Lincoln still wrote his own speeches, and he employed a technique consisting of prewriting, perfectionism, and revision to convey his message, clearly and concisely, to a variety of audiences.² President Lincoln’s writing may have initially been born of a combination of natural affinity and a desire to move away from his roots, but he developed his skills into a powerful tool for his rise in politics and, eventually, to his election to the office of President of the United States.

“Writing was a form of refuge for Lincoln, a form of intellectual retreat” asserts Douglas L. Wilson in his *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*.³ The sanctuary Lincoln found in writing was just one facet of his love of learning overall, something nourished through his love of reading.⁴ Lincoln’s interest in learning would further enlarge the distance failures.⁵ In spite of his affinity for learning and writing, Lincoln’s formal education only totaled one year.⁶ “Lincoln was basically a self-taught

¹ Jacques Barzun, *Lincoln the Literary Genius* (Evanston, Illinois: The Schori Private Press, 1960; Champaign: University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2012), 26, <https://archive.org/details/lincolnliteraryg00barz>.

² Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 2.

³ Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 7.

⁴ Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln* (New York: Random House, 2009), 53.

⁵ White, 22 and 53.

⁶ Roy P. Basler et al., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:62.

man,” asserts James M. McPherson, in his “How Lincoln won the War with Metaphors.”⁷ His drive to further his education is a further indication of his need to separate himself from his father’s failures and become a success in his own right. Though Lincoln’s literary accomplishments are immense, crafting one of the greatest speeches in American history in *The Gettysburg Address*, he was embarrassed about his lack of formal education.⁸

That he is ashamed of both his lack of education and his humble beginnings, is best demonstrated in his autobiographies, as Ronald C. White, Jr. describes, in his *A. Lincoln*, “[Lincoln was] remarkably brief about certain periods of his life, ... [his] spare account tells us as much as he wanted the public to know.”⁹ Lincoln even goes so far to distance himself from his past by writing his second autobiography, published in 1860, in the third person, referring to himself as “A” or “Mr. L.”¹⁰ The short length of this autobiography and lack of detail concerning his early years suggests that once beginning his political life, Lincoln was determined to leave his humble roots behind and focus on his political aspirations. Lincoln viewed writing as the key to progress, and thus he honed his natural talent for writing, combined with his self-taught literary knowledge, to develop a pathway, not only out of his familial background, but to his position as President of the United States.¹¹

“So memory will hallow all/ We’ve known, but know no more,” wrote Lincoln in his “My Childhood-Home I See Again.”¹² Though Lincoln’s speeches demonstrate his true writing genius, Lincoln did attempt to expand his writing ability from speeches to poetry, having been a fan of poetry since his adolescence.¹³ Lincoln’s poems however, while possessing potential, were tempered by both political overtones and social constraints of the

⁷ James M. McPherson, “How Lincoln Won the War with Metaphors,” in *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, ed. James M. McPherson (New York: 1990), 94.

⁸ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 21.

⁹ White, 7-8.

¹⁰ Basler et al., 4:60-67.

¹¹ D. Wilson, 40.

¹² Basler et al., 1: 368

¹³ Kaplan, 29.

time period that did not allow him to fully develop this skill into an art form, and as Roy P. Basler states in his “Lincoln’s Development as a Writer,” “in Lincoln we have a literary artist, constrained by social and economic circumstances, ... yet motivated by a love of words ... and ... [a] craving ... to create beauty.”¹⁴ Therefore, while his attempts at poetry were ill fated, Lincoln’s practice with writing poetry later proved beneficial to his skill as a speech writer, as he incorporated the lyrical quality of poetry into his speeches.

Edmund Wilson describes, in his *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, the benefit of Lincoln’s early work with poetry as granting Lincoln the ability to “always be able to summon an art of incantation with words.”¹⁵ Combined with his study of poetry, Lincoln also wrote from a perspective of hearing, rather than simply reading, his words. Lincoln grew up reading aloud, and he continued this practice into adulthood.¹⁶ Thus, he was acutely aware of the necessary cadence of spoken word that was required to make hearing language an enjoyable experience, and he wrote with this knowledge in mind. These traits ability to, as Douglas L. Wilson writes, “[say] ordinary things in an extraordinary and memorable way.”¹⁷

Lincoln employed both his experience with the rhythm, timing, and literary devices associated with poetry and his knowledge of how appropriately to orate in his writing, which gave his speeches a quality that was pleasing to the mind and the ears, a quality many other writers lacked. Lincoln knew how to write in a way that would not only convey his message accurately and completely but also in a way that would ensure his audience would enjoy the experience. As McPherson asserts, “here lies one of the secrets of Lincoln’s success as a communicator: his skill in the use of figurative language.”¹⁸ Lincoln employed this tactic in

¹⁴ Roy P. Basler, “Lincoln’s Development as a Writer,” in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 11-12.

¹⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 122.

¹⁶ D. Wilson, 90.

¹⁷ D. Wilson, 11.

¹⁸ McPherson, 95.

his “House Divided” speech, writing “I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved* – I do not expect the house to *fall* – but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided.”¹⁹ Lincoln’s stress on certain words, demonstrated through his use of italics in his written copy, showcased the intensification he would employ when giving his speech aloud. Lincoln presented stress in his writing, anticipating the stress that would be placed on those words when read or heard, to ensure his meaning was completely absorbed by his audience, as his audience would hear the infliction on words and instinctually pay closer attention. “Lincoln’s greatest speeches have the kind of resonance that we associate with poetry, a reverberation through multiple levels of experience, both public and private,” proclaims James Hurt in his “All the Living and the Dead: Lincoln’s Imagery.”²⁰ Thus, when Lincoln wrote he wrote in such a way to provide his audience with an experience that audience would not only process his message but also remember what he had said.

“The present finds me at the White House, yet there is as good a chance for your children as there was for my father’s,” Lincoln stated in his “Speech to One Hundred Forty-eighth Ohio Regiment.”²¹ Lincoln was concerned with reaching the common people in his writings, as demonstrated by his encouragement to the troops.²² From his declaration, Lincoln implied that the troops fought not just for the nation or for their states, but they were fighting for their children’s futures, as well, and the possibility of progress. One of Lincoln’s greatest strengths as a writer, particularly a political writer, was his ability to relate to his audience, to gage their attitudes and feelings, and then design his works to appeal to his audience effectively enough to gain their support, even if those appeals did not necessarily reflect his own beliefs.

“As a president, he was to have no objection to the rhetoric of Christianity as a vehicle

¹⁹ Basler et al., 2: 461.

²⁰ James Hurt, “All the Living and the Dead: Lincoln’s Imagery,” *American Literature* 52, no. 3 (1980): 353, <http://jstor.org/stable/2925278>.

²¹ Basler et al., 7: 528.

²² McPherson, 99.

to assist in the nation's redemption, and he encouraged all churches to rally to the Union," writes Kaplan.²³ However, Kaplan goes on to assert that while he called on Christian support, Lincoln's own religious views were that God should only be referenced as a formality or that God was distant and thus not involved in the war for either sides' benefit.²⁴ Therefore, while Lincoln was not a religious man, he was able to use his knowledge of the Bible, particularly the language within that was able to captivate and sway readers, to add a layer of depth to his speeches that could reach his audiences.²⁵ Lincoln's use of religion in his writing is demonstrated in his "Second Inaugural Address" where he stated, "The Almighty has His own purposes," referencing why the Civil War was still ongoing.²⁶ Lincoln also referenced God again in his "Second Inaugural Address," when he combated American's growing war weariness by declaring that the war would continue so long as God willed that it should continue and they continued to fight.²⁷ Thus as followers of God, it was the Northern people's duty to fight and to fight to the best of their abilities against the Southern threat. Lincoln thereby gained support for his call to keep supporting the Union by using a rhetorical appeal that was not entirely aligned with his own beliefs on religion, correctly judging the best way to connect with his audience. Furthermore, he understood that given the cost, both monetarily and in lives lost, the American people needed to cling to a belief in a greater meaning beyond their suffering and a hope for tomorrow.

"If there shall be any novelty, it will be in the mode of presenting the facts, and the interferences and observations following that presentation," introduced Lincoln on the uniqueness of his "Address at Cooper Institution."²⁸ In his "Address to Cooper Institution," Lincoln hoped to appeal to his audience in his writing, as he recognized this speech's diverse audience. Lincoln knew his listeners (and later readers) consisted of both

²³ Kaplan, 71.

²⁴ Kaplan, 71.

²⁵ Kaplan, 70.

²⁶ Basler et al., 8: 333.

²⁷ Basler et al., 8: 333.

²⁸ Basler et al., 3: 522.

Northerners and Southerners, a group that was growing more distant from one another in the turbulent pre-Civil War years, and so he shifted his diction in an attempt to convey a sense of unity through his description of the signers of the Constitution as “our fathers.”²⁹ Lincoln further endeavored to conveying a sense of cohesiveness by addressing that President Washington was one of the Constitution’s signers and supported a bill that reduced the spread of slavery into the Northwestern territory.³⁰ Through this reference, Lincoln aimed to showcase that an American hero, to both the North and the South, supported Lincoln’s stance on the slavery issue. Lincoln up the founders of the United States as true Americans and the progenitors of American values. Lincoln further stated in his Address, “I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly our fathers. [To] do so, would be ... to reject all progress— all improvement.”³¹

Recognizing that many of the Founding Fathers were slave owners, Lincoln believed that Americans should not directly follow all the methods of these men, but to incorporate their spirit into the progress of the current era, a progress that should move away from the institution of slavery. Thereby, Lincoln sought to create a picture of unity among Americans, in both the North and the South, and protect his argument from the possibility of slavery supporters citing the Founding Fathers’ status as slave owners for their pro-slavery agendas. However, Lincoln’s speech did not achieve its goal of uniting the North and South, as Lincoln failed to win the support of his local Democratic New York audience, but he did gain national recognition.³² As his speech was recopied in print sources across the nation, Lincoln was heard by Republican voters across the North and subsequently became the nominee for the party and later President.³³ After gaining support in the North, Lincoln sought to foster this growing connection with Northern voters through his subsequent speeches. He did not

²⁹ Basler et al., 3: 523.

³⁰ Basler et al., 3: 527.

³¹ Basler et al., 3: 534-535.

³² Harold Holzer, “The Speech That Made the Man,” *American Heritage* 59, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 14, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost, accession number: 47035154z.

³³ Holzer, “The Speech That Made the Man,” 14.

maintain and increase his support through improvisation or rash thought, however, but through careful planning and revision.

“Lincoln was a careful and conscientious reviser of his own writing,” argues Douglas Wilson, as well as pre-writer.³⁴ Lincoln planned out his writing, often writing down thoughts as they came to him on scraps of paper and then collecting them for his drafting process.³⁵ Once he had drafted a piece, it would undergo revisions to ensure the work conveyed precisely what Lincoln wanted said and how he wanted it said.³⁶ Lincoln demonstrated this attention to detail and perfectionism when he wrote his “First Inaugural Address.” In the first draft of his “First Inaugural Address,” Lincoln wrote a drawn out account of why it was not necessary for him to review his political platform, citing that the platform had been expressed during his campaign.³⁷ However, in the final draft, Lincoln summarized the three paragraph explanation in his first draft on his omission of his political views, into one concise statement: “I do not consider it necessary ... for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety, or excitement.”³⁸ This shorter transition allowed Lincoln to launch directly into the more important topic occupying the minds of most Americans, the growing tensions between the North and the South and the looming threat of war.

Lincoln referred to the sectional controversy in his “First Inaugural Address” stating that “apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern states.... There has never been any reasonable case for such apprehension.”³⁹ This passage is the same in two drafts of his address, the original and the final.⁴⁰ This suggests that Lincoln spent a significant amount of time contemplating what he needed to address in his work to most effectively

³⁴ D. Wilson, 162.

³⁵ D. Wilson, 162.

³⁶ D. Wilson, 162 – 163.

³⁷ Basler et al., 4, 250.

³⁸ Basler et al., 4: 262.

³⁹ Basler et al., 4: 262.

⁴⁰ Basler et al., 4: 250 and 262.

reach his audience and do so in a manner that quickly, directly, and concisely assuaged the fears of Southerners. Given the edits that exist on this subject between the first and the final drafts, word insertions and deletions, Lincoln seems to have focused most of his attention on this section of his address, as it dealt with a subject that was at the forefront of American mindset during this era.⁴¹ However, Lincoln did change his phrasing from the first to the last draft when he said, “I therefore consider that the Union is unbroken; and ... I shall take care that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States,” in the first draft to “in view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken; and ... I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States,” in the final draft.⁴² Thus Lincoln has shifted the focus to an interpretation of the Constitution that holds secession as illegal to simply and directly professing that the Constitution explicitly makes it illegal. He followed this assertion by stating that it was his duty to ensure the Constitution would be followed, and that he would perform that duty “unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means, or in some authoritative manner, direct the contrary.”⁴³

Furthermore, this put forth the idea of the perpetually of the Union. Lincoln tried to calm fears by pointing out that while a president’s term in office is relatively short, the Constitution of the United States is lasting. Thus, Lincoln demonstrated his belief, and the North’s belief, in the perpetuity of the Union, once again exercising his talent for rhetoric by drawing attention to a shared document of fundamental law, the Constitution. Furthermore, Lincoln’s “First Inaugural Address,” highlights his ability to assess his audience, interpret its mood, and shape his writing accordingly. As Don E. Fehrenbacher points out, “Here was an ear keenly turned to the music of the English language... here, in short, was the mastery that

⁴¹ Basler et al., 4: 250-253 and 262-265.

⁴² Basler et al., 4: 253 and 265.

⁴³ Basler et al., 4: 265.

we associate with genius.”⁴⁴

“Nothing that Abraham Lincoln would write as president would be more celebrated or considered more important ... than the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863,” maintains Douglas L. Wilson.⁴⁵ While celebrated, Lincoln’s writing in the *Emancipation Proclamation* differs greatly from his other writings, because it lacked the flowing elegance and lyric quality that his other pieces, such as his First and Second Inaugural Addresses, possessed.⁴⁶ Lincoln’s failure to write with the poetic quality most often found in his other major writings could have been due to Lincoln’s own beliefs relating to slavery and the military nature of the bill. In his first debate with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln stated that he did not support slaves becoming equal with white people, nor did expect Southerners to feel that way.⁴⁷ Therefore, while Lincoln supported abolishing slavery, as slavery contradicted the Constitution and in the Western world popular attitudes advocated the wrongness of slavery, he did not view slaves as his equals, or even view that they had the potential to be his equals. Thus because the bill concerned a group of individuals that he did not see as equals, it did not require the same pomp and circumstance that other writings more applicable to white people would have garnered. This bill affected the status of blacks, most of who would not read it or hear it directly from him, thus it did not need the same descriptive, flowing language of his other works.

Also this bill, unlike his other writings, was crafted as a military measure to reduce Southern resources. Lincoln described his reasons for freeing slaves in some areas of the South at the beginning of the *Emancipation Proclamation* “as a fit and necessary war measure for repressing said rebellion.”⁴⁸ Thus while Lincoln freed some slaves in the United

⁴⁴ Don E. Fehrenbacher, “The Words of Lincoln,” in *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 286.

⁴⁵ D. Wilson, 105

⁴⁶ D. Wilson, 105 – 106.

⁴⁷ Basler et al., 3: 15.

⁴⁸ Basler et al., 6: 29.

States, his actions did not necessarily reflect his own opinion on abolition, but rather reflects his ability to make decisive military decisions for Northern benefit. This is also demonstrated in his unrevised draft of the *Emancipation Proclamation*, as in his final draft only certain areas in the south are listed in the bill for having their slaves freed, while in the original Lincoln wrote, “slaves within any state ... wherein the constitutional authority of the United States shall not ... be ... recognized, submitted to, and maintained, shall ... henceforth, and forever, be free.”⁴⁹ Thus, while his revised version will list only certain areas in the south where slaves are freed, this first draft demonstrates that Lincoln meant to cripple all of the Southern labor force by freeing all Confederate slaves. Lincoln, rather than issuing a piece of legislation on the basis of a humanitarian cause, issued the order to end the Civil War and preserve white lives. Therefore, rather than writing on a topic of immense personal nature to Lincoln, such as when he argues the permanency of the Union, he wrote the *Emancipation Proclamation* as a direct military measure to further Union chances of victory in the Civil War and as a response to world progress as the institution of slavery was fading on a global scale.

“[These] dead shall not have died in vain...this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” wrote Lincoln in the second draft of his *Gettysburg Address*.⁵⁰ What eloquence he may have lacked in his *Emancipation Proclamation*, Lincoln more than made up for in his short dedication at the Gettysburg Cemetery. As Garry Wills, in his *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, writes “Lincoln found the language, the imagery, the myths that are given their best and briefest embodiment at Gettysburg.”⁵¹ Composed of only 272 words, Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* combines all the qualities that showcase Lincoln’s mantle as a brilliant writer:

⁴⁹ Basler et al., 5: 337.

⁵⁰ Basler et al., 7: 19.

⁵¹ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 40.

imagery, diction, form, flow, rhythm, and lyricism.⁵² “[We] can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow this ground. The brave men who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract,” wrote Lincoln on their reason for gathering at the cemetery.⁵³ Lincoln, rather than focusing on defeating the South or the Civil War, instead focused his speech on the driving idea of the Union army, the right for self-government.⁵⁴ As he stood on the battlefield, Lincoln did not promote policy or praise the Union but rather focused on the war’s cost and why the weary Union army must continue fighting and win the war.

Lincoln believed in the perpetuity of the Union, and that the American peoples’ right to self-government was directly connected to the continued existence of the Union. Lincoln realized that the North must win, not to just bring the nation back together, but to uphold the fundamental ideology of the United States of America, the right of self-government. Lincoln understood that the United States could not be a nation of self-governing people if black people were owned by white people. The US was founded on the principle that all men are equal, which included the most basic right of self-possession, thus no man can be property.⁵⁵ As Wills states, “their equality cannot be denied if the nation is to live by its creed, and voice it, and test it, and die for it.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the North had to continue fighting and, for many, dying for their victory because the North was not fighting just to stop a rebellion or because slavery was morally wrong but for the very foundation of the country, of the Union, the right of self-government for all people.

President Abraham Lincoln, rather than attempting to solely relate to fellow politicians or elite Northerners, focused his writing to relate to all Northerners and supporters of the Union. Thorough extensively planning and revising his works, Lincoln was able to

⁵² Wills, 40.

⁵³ Basler et al., 7: 19.

⁵⁴ Wills, 90.

⁵⁵ Wills, 120.

⁵⁶ Wills, 120.

convey his pro-Union, pro-united, rhetoric through drawing on the shared pasts of Americans and, especially, the shared belief in the right of self-government. When he wrote, Lincoln referenced the Constitution, the law codes of the United States, and the cost of American lives resulting from the continued fighting during the war years. Lincoln crafted his works to match the attitudes of his audience, and he wrote with a style that allowed him to convey his own messages in a way that would be most acceptable to his diverse audiences. Lincoln understood that the separate cultures in the North and the South that had developed in the years leading up to the Civil War required each side remembering the very essence of the United States of America, the right of all men to determine their lives. Thus, he used this shared history, and his own innate sense of what Americans expected to hear from the president, to convey his arguments for the perpetuity of the Union and the necessity for America to strive for progress.

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