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The Rhetoric of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"

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Advertisements on television, newspaper and magazine articles, websites, conversations, speeches, songs—we are bombarded daily with rhetoric vying for our attention. Whether we realize it or not, within these daily situations lie the three proofs of rhetoric: the appeal to emotion, the use of character, and the appeal to reason (pathos, ethos, and logos, respectively). On the other hand, sometimes we can immediately know that a piece of rhetoric contains each of the proofs. One well-known speech that readily incorporates each of them is the address President Abraham Lincoln gave at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, commonly known as the "Gettysburg Address."

In *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address*, Charmichael suggests, "Greatness in a speech, like greatness in men, or in events, is usually recognized only when seen through the haze of distance which the passing years bring" (67-68). It is often only in retrospect that great speeches are recognized as just that. Though the "Gettysburg Address" is already commonly—and quite deservedly—held in high regard, the analysis of its rhetorical proofs will only speak further to its importance.

Although the situation was itself emotional, Lincoln did appeal to the audience's emotion in his address. At two years into the war that caused the greatest number of American servicemen deaths (more than the world wars and the Vietnam War combined), the audience was already filled with grief—perhaps even anger—at the devastating loss of so many people. They were perhaps weary of this long and trying war. Lincoln first acknowledges this emotional state by referencing the difficulty even a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" might have in enduring a long, drawn-out war. Lincoln then uses this emotional state as a springboard to inspire hope in that same audience. He eloquently encourages the listeners to continue the fight for the sake of those who already gave the ultimate sacrifice; he evokes confidence in the nation's ability to survive. Both these emotions are important ones as identified by Aristotle (Crowley 205). Although Lincoln did not use any *enargeia* (the vivid picturing of events), he speaks of the "final resting place" that those gathered on that day came to consecrate. That phrase carries much emotion in itself because the people were actually there; they were standing that day on that battlefield where so many others gave their lives. Lincoln was not required to describe the field through *enargeia* when his audience could simply look around them and see it quite literally—a very powerful experience.

Though most of the speech uses small common words, much honorific language is contained in the "Gettysburg Address," adding to its effectiveness through the powerful emotions it too evokes (Kunhardt 222). Examples of this honorific language include the many references to dedication and the repetition of consecration; words like "nobly," "devotion," "hallow," and "honored" also add to the emotional appeal. Lincoln is passionately insistent of the importance that the audience continue "the great task" begun by "the brave men, living and dead, who struggled" there; this imploring is effective through Lincoln's pathos. The President wanted his audience to feel the weight of the great responsibility that had fallen to them; he wanted them to be filled with the pride in and gratitude for the sacrifices that their fellow countrymen had made. As one historian stresses, "There can be little doubt that the address was recognized from the first as an unusual utterance, even though time, alone, with the perspective which it brings, could give it that unique place of honor in the world's esteem which now it holds" (Carmichael 83).

The second proof Lincoln establishes in his "Gettysburg Address" is ethos. Although he does not invent any ethos directly in this speech, Lincoln's position as President lends him situated ethos. Further, he was very well acquainted with the subject about which he was speaking, an important concept when speaking. Lincoln was also well known for his kindness and caring, characteristics that added to his good character (Kunhardt 223). By using the collective "we," Lincoln closed the distance between him and his audience. He made them feel the persuasive sense of belonging: "We [must] take increased devotion," "it is for us [. . .] to be dedicated," "we here highly resolve." As the book *A New Birth of Freedom: Lincoln at Gettysburg* states:

Only 271 words—that was the final count in the version that would emerge as the authorized and official one. And 202 of them so short and simple: only one syllable to them. Common words—pronouns, prepositions, articles, conjunctions—little helpful words, Lincoln would have called them: the, eleven times; that, thirteen; we, ten times; to and here, eight times apiece; a, seven times; and, six; of, have, can, for, not, it, coming up five; and a good sprinkling of they, this, these, and is, are, so, along with but, in, us, and who. Only seven words of four syllables, thirteen of three. (Kunhardt 222)

But what is so significant about these little words? Lincoln chose the shorter words intentionally; instead of appearing more intelligent than his audience, he spoke simply though eloquently. These 271 little words were strung together in such a way that they will not be forgotten, despite what Lincoln predicted. Instead of using fancy or arrogant language, Lincoln appealed to everyone equally by choosing words that can easily be understood by all. Through this, he also created good will towards his audience; he wasn't condescending or above their level. Lincoln spoke as one of his audience, closing the rhetorical distance further and being considerate of their needs. Additionally, shorter sentences are often more effective and powerful, as is indeed the case with Lincoln's address. Each of these techniques helps build Lincoln's ethos.

In addition to pathos and ethos, Lincoln used logos in his "Gettysburg Address" (though to a lesser extent). He calls upon the audience's sense of reason and logic through stating some commonly held beliefs. Most reasonable people would agree that the battlefield could not be consecrated better to the degree it deserved by any other but those who fought there. Most would also agree that it was now their duty to finish the work begun by those who died. By using deductive reasoning, Lincoln makes the major premise that equality and liberty in a nation are worth fighting for. A minor premise found in the "Gettysburg Address" is that fighting (and dying) for what you believe in is honorable. Forming an enthymeme, the conclusion that Lincoln wants his audience to draw is that if equality and liberty are the honorable characteristics that others fought and died for, then they are the qualities worthy enough for which to continue fighting. Lincoln's fundamental goal through this conclusion was to encourage his North to persevere in its struggle for freedom and equality; through this address, he also sought to preserve the value of these qualities and, ultimately, his Union.

Abraham Lincoln was very effective in his "Gettysburg Address." By using ethos, pathos, and logos, he appeals to the audience's reason and emotions, while relying upon his situated ethos. Kunhardt summarizes it well:

Aside from a poetic element, two characteristics mark Lincoln's literary style, and these stand out preeminent in his Gettysburg Address. In the first place there is the comprehensive and perfect grasping of great ideas; then these ideas and their logical relations are expressed in language that is condensed, crystalline, and perfectly simple. (98)

Lincoln was a great speaker, and one of his greatest speeches was the "Gettysburg Address"; the analysis of this speech's ethos, pathos, and logos is an evidence of Lincoln's persuasiveness. And unlike some of the rhetoric that we see every day in which we must search for the three proofs, they can be easily identified and analyzed in Lincoln's address. Though his original audience was limited to those gathered on the battlefield at Gettysburg that day in 1863 and though Lincoln predicted that no one would remember his simple address, the "Gettysburg Address" remains one of the most powerful speeches in history.

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