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The Writer: Mr. Abraham Lincoln

By Bonnie Jones

I hesitate as I open the small paperback book. I peruse the front and back covers. I search for the Table of Contents and skim the chapter headings. I flip the pages of the book, glancing at the layout and looking for familiar words or phrases. I return to the back cover and read the four paragraphs there. One sentence reassures me: "An invaluable reference for history students, this important volume will also fascinate admirers of Abraham Lincoln, Americana enthusiasts, Civil War buffs, and any lover of the finely crafted phrase."¹ I love a phrase crafted finely. Maybe this will be okay. So I open the book to the first speech and read.

Imagine my surprise when I find myself caught up in some of the most descriptive and rhythmical language I've ever read. I'm reminded of Shakespeare-Lincoln's prose begs to be read aloud. He is both logical and imaginative. I am drawn in by the passion and imagination in his writing and linger to admire his logic. I know I can become a better writer by following his lead and integrating into one style, as he did, what most of us see as two distinct writing personalities.

Imagination

Abraham Lincoln's imagination is expressed in his use of analogy, alliteration, and rhythm—acquired by reading good literature, observing life, and writing often. In *Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style*, Daniel Kilham Dodge quotes Lincoln's associate, Noah Brooks:

Lincoln was a close observer of nature, as well as of men. Into

the wonderful alembic of his mind everything was received, to be brought forth again as aphorism, parable, or trenchant saying.²

Lincoln had a fascination with words. Dodge says Lincoln biographers John C. Nicolay and John Hay state young Lincoln would read the dictionary as long as he could see in the twilight. Later, “[i]n the search for words Mr. Lincoln was often at a loss. He was often perplexed to give proper expression to his ideas; first because he was not master of the English language; and secondly, because there were, in the vast store of words, so few that contained the exact coloring, power and shape of his ideas.”³ About the written word, Lincoln said, “to it we owe everything which distinguishes us from savages. Take it from us, and the Bible, all history, all science, all government, all commerce, and nearly all social intercourse, go with it.”⁴

Lexicography, word choice, was very important to Lincoln the writer. The government printer wished to change a phrase in his first message to Congress. He confidently replied, “That word expresses precisely my idea, and I am not going to change it.”⁵ He chose words, as any great writer does, for their emotional, as well as literal, meaning. For example, in this sentence in the *Letter to Mrs. Bixby*, the connotation of the word ‘beguile’ adds depth of meaning: “I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming.”⁶ In our minds, we see Lincoln as the serpent trying to lure Mrs. Bixby from her well-deserved grief.

Lincoln wrote for an audience and a purpose. Dodge says, “He not only found it difficult to speak when he had nothing to say, but he was unable to find anything to say unless his sympathies were engaged.”⁷ Passion to communicate is a strong motive for great writing.

Metaphor

Perhaps because of this need to express himself concisely, Lincoln used imagery. Imagery helped him sketch a picture in the minds of his listeners. For example, he uses a construction metaphor throughout *The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions*. He speaks of the founders

and their task to “uprear... a political edifice of liberty and equal rights”.⁸ He goes on to talk about the props that supported it that are now decaying and crumbling away, and those who cannot be satisfied “in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others.”⁹ He describes the men who fought in the war of independence as “living history,” a “fortress of strength,” and the “pillars of the temple of liberty” that used to be in every family, but have now “crumbled away.” And, he says, “that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.” He builds this metaphor throughout, asking that materials for these pillars “be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality, and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.”¹⁰ We imagine the former ‘edifice’ and what he is trying to rebuild.

Lincoln used classical and colloquial metaphors, comparisons his audience could understand and see. If they were humorous, so much the better—people remembered them longer. He loved to poke fun. General Cass feels the brunt of Lincoln’s satire in *The Presidential Question*. His last dig at General Cass is this memorable metaphor:

Mr. Speaker, we have all heard of the animal standing in doubt between two stacks of hay, and starving to death; the like of that would never happen to General Cass. Place the stacks a thousand miles apart, he would stand stock-still midway between them, and eat them both at once; and the green grass along the line would be apt to suffer some too, at the same time. By all means, make him President, gentlemen. He will feed you bounteously—if—if there is any left after he shall have helped himself.¹¹

In his *First Inaugural Address*, Lincoln gives listeners a familial comparison—the sections of the country compared to husband and wife. “Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of

each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them.”¹² Then Lincoln plays a musical theme in this last great sentence:

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.¹³

We can almost see the flying notes and hear this nationwide song. Dodge says of his figurative imagery, “Lincoln’s figures almost always serve a useful purpose in making an obscure thought clear and a clear thought still clearer.”¹⁴

Alliteration

Most of these writings were delivered orally. Lincoln wrote them to be read out loud. William Barnhart, in a speech to the Chicago Literary Club, encourages the members to read Lincoln’s work aloud:

Obtain copies of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and the Gettysburg Address. Copy them on your computer word processor, if no wooden boards are handy. Recite phrases several times aloud, like students in an Indiana blab school. You will be walking in Lincoln’s footsteps. You will mimic and by doing so understand Lincoln’s discipline and achievement as an artist.¹⁵

The artist Lincoln uses alliteration either for flow or, conversely, for emphasis. If one reads his writing aloud, some passages flow smoothly and quickly—the words fly off the tongue. Others, however, cause the reader to slow down. The sounds of the words either emphasize these slower phrases or facilitate the flow of the quicker passages. Consider the last paragraph of the *Letter to Mrs. Bixby*:

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the

cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.¹⁶

The beginning *a* sound of *assuage* and *anguish* forces the reader to slow down physically and mentally, emphasizing these important words. In the next phrase, the *l* sounds smooth the flow, but then we are stopped at the *ch* and the *d* in *cherished* and the *d* in *loved*—words that should be stressed. In the last two phrases, *solemn pride*, *costly*, and *altar*, beg to be recognized, because of the *p*, *d*, and *t* sounds. These poetic phrases are key to the writer, and to the reader, of this beautiful tribute to a family of patriots.

Logic

Herbert Edwards and John Hankins noticed that Lincoln was studying Euclid and writing poetry at the same period of his life. Barnhart quotes from their 1962 paper, *Lincoln the Writer*:

At the very time when Lincoln carried his pursuit of lucidity and logic to its ultimate in Euclid, his power of imaginative sympathy was growing most strongly. At the time (in 1849) when he was issued a patent for perfecting a device for buoyant chambers for steam boats’ to help them over shoals, he was not only reading more and more poetry, but he was interested in writing verse. It was a special paradox of his nature that the two streams, a passion for lucidity and a passion for imaginative thought and feeling, should run side by side until, under the stress of great events, they should be joined and pour forth in the Gettysburg Address.¹⁷

Lincoln used both logic and imagination, tone and lexicography to convince, entertain, and arouse passion, depending on the circumstances. Lincoln’s associate Leonard Swett writes, “The force of his logic was in conveying to the minds of others the same clear and thorough analysis he had in his own, and if his own mind failed to be satisfied, he had little power to satisfy anybody else.”¹⁸ Isn’t that the truth with any author? He must believe and be changed by what he is

writing first, before presenting it effectively to his audience.

Barnhart shows an example of Lincoln's logic:

Lincoln's cold dialectic resonates from a fragment believed to have been written in the summer of 1854: 'If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A.? You say A. is white and B. is black. It is color, then; the lighter have the right to enslave the darker. Take care. By this rule, you are to be a slave to the first man you meet with a fairer skin than your own. You do not mean color exactly? You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be the slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.'¹⁹

Lincoln's logic is evident in everything he writes. He reasons his way through each argument. Dodge says "he habitually studied the opposite side of every disputed question, of every law case, of every political issue, more exhaustively, if possible, than his own side."²⁰

As an adult, Lincoln memorized the first six propositions of Euclid as an adult to improve his thinking. He used Euclidian logic in many of his political speeches. As Mlodinow puts it:

'The most important contribution of Euclid's Elements was its innovative logical method: first, make terms explicit by forming precise definitions and so ensure mutual understanding of all words and symbols. Next, make concepts explicit by stating explicit axioms or postulates so that no unstated understandings or assumptions may be used. Finally, derive the logical consequences of the system employing only accepted rules of logic, applied to axioms and previously proved theorems.' This was Lincoln's primary method of elevating his writing above typical political harangue.²¹

Among the political speeches, *A House Divided* is one of Lincoln's most famous because of the biblical metaphor used. But his logic should be admired as well. He begins with the metaphor, leads the listeners through his propositions, laid out and proven, point by point, as Euclid might have done, and concludes with a plea for action.

All of his political speeches share this similar outline. This paragraph in the *Address at Cooper Institute* becomes a microcosm of the entire speech:

Now, and here, let me guard a little against being misunderstood. I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience—to reject all progress—all improvement. What I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand; and most surely not in a case whereof we ourselves declare they understood the question better than we.²²

Lincoln, both before this paragraph and after, considers all the arguments, along with their history, to prove his thesis to his fellow Republicans and to the Southerners. Again he closes with a rallying call to action.

Tone

The tone of Lincoln's writing, Jacques Barzun believes, also derives from his practice of legal thought, which "encourages precision through the imagining and the denial of alternatives. The language of the law foresees doubt, ambiguity, confusion, stupid or fraudulent error, and one by one it excludes them."²³

Compare the tones of the *Farewell Address at Springfield*, all the proclamations, and the *Annual Message to Congress* in 1862.

The *Farewell* is a fond tribute to his neighbors and fellow-citizens. Lincoln generates a spirit of gratitude and gravity by mentioning the passing

of time, the death of his child, and situation of the country. He then invokes the blessings of God on himself and the people he is leaving behind.²⁴

On the other hand, the *Annual Message to Congress* is a work of pure logic. Lincoln calmly outlines the major international and national concerns of the day. He quotes facts and figures to prove his points and propose his plan. Then in the last two paragraphs, he makes an impassioned plea to Congress and the American people to “do better”, “think anew, and act anew.”²⁵

The proclamations are not fond farewells to friends or logical pleas to approve specific plans. Dodge says, “The Proclamations, from their very nature, are far more imaginative than the messages.”²⁶ He believes Lincoln was influenced in his tone and writing of the proclamations by the *Book of Common Prayer*. Lincoln shows a tendency to pair his words and phrases, as does the author Cranmer.

Therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do appoint the last Thursday in September next, as a day of humiliation, prayer and fasting for all the people of the nation. And I do earnestly recommend to all the people, and especially to all ministers and teachers of religion of all denominations, and to all heads of families to observe and keep that day according to their several creeds and modes of worship, in all humility and with all religious solemnity, to the end that the united prayer of the nation may ascend to the Throne of Grace, and bring down plentiful blessings upon our Country.²⁷

Lincoln was influenced by his reading, as are all writers.

Barzun applauds Lincoln’s “lucidity and motion.” He contends “style is independent of attractive subject matter.” Lincoln’s style “has the eloquence which comes of the contrast between transparency of medium and density of thought.”²⁸

A great writer himself, Barzun pays Lincoln the ultimate compliment when he says, “In

youth, Lincoln tried to be a poet, but found he lacked the gift. What he could do was think with complete clarity in words and imagine the workings of others’ minds at the same time. One does not read far in his works before discovering that as a writer he toiled above all to find the true order for his thoughts—order first, and then a lightning like brevity.”²⁹

Barzun assumes that Lincoln was a slow writer physically. “Lincoln wrote before the typewriter and the dictating machine, and wanting to put all his meaning into one or two lucid sentences, he thought before he wrote. The great compression came after he had, lawyerlike, excluded alternatives and hit upon right order and emphasis.”³⁰

Lincoln’s biographers and critics mention not only his logic, but his ambition, self-discipline, and will. He was self-educated and persistent in his business and political aspirations. He pressed himself to achieve in his personal life and his public life—including his writing.

Revision

Barzun describes Lincoln as the artist—creator of a new style in American literature:

For his style, the plain, undecorated language in which he addresses posterity, is no mere knack with words. It is the manifestation of a mode of thought, of an outlook which colors every act of the writer’s and tells us how he rated life. Only let his choice of words, the rhythm and shape of his utterances, linger in the ear, and you begin to feel as he did—hence to discern unplumbed depths in the quiet intent of a conscious artist.³¹

Barnhart agrees that Lincoln’s genius came from the hard work of thought and revision. He quotes English professor Kathryn Whitford of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee: “Lincoln was not a natural or unconscious author of fine prose. The manuscripts which survive demonstrate a consistent concern for rewriting and polishing sentences to achieve balance and cadence. No writer who writes and rewrites as Lincoln did is writing unselfconsciously.”³²

Douglas Wilson, University of Illinois

professor and Lincoln researcher, praises Lincoln's writing. "'As is often observed,' he wrote, 'Lincoln had a way with words and was undoubtedly gifted with a natural talent for writing, but what is not so well recognized is that he had learned along the way the importance of revision. It is not too much to say that rewriting had become for him an essential part of deliberate expression. Although he had originally made his mark in politics speaking extemporaneously on the stump, he had come to rely more and more on what he could write out and revise ahead of time.'"

He goes on to say that Lincoln's skills in revision "testify to Lincoln's formidable skill as a writer. Subtle though the changes might be, they are the mark of an astute writer, one who knew that the difference between the merely good and the memorable is often in the details."³³

Peroration

Most public speakers speak to put forth a message and draw a response from the listener. Barnhart notes that Lincoln was no different. "Many of his speeches ended with a peroration and [sic] emphatic, emotional conclusion designed to implant the message of the speech and incite listeners to action... At the end, came the peroration, wherein Lincoln let loose of calculation and moved to partisan exhortation:

Two year ago the Republicans of the nation mustered over thirteen hundred thousand strong. We did this under the single impulse of resistance to a common danger, with every external circumstance against us. Of strange, discordant and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought the battle through, under the constant hot fire of a disciplined, proud and pampered enemy. Did we brave all then to falter now? now, when the same enemy is wavering, dissevered and belligerent? The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail if we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsel may accelerate or mistake delay it, but sooner or later the victory is sure to come.³⁴

Lincoln's speeches were powerful because he pulled the listener in with images, proved his arguments logically, and challenged listeners to a passionate response with peroration.

Lincoln the Artist

Barnhart says, "The finest examples of Lincoln's argument and art came with the presidency. Eventually in Lincoln's writing logic, metaphor and peroration blended seamlessly... But Lincoln's punctuation, as well as the words themselves, tells an important tale."³⁵ He quotes Roy Basler, editor of *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, as saying: "Lincoln above all was an artist. Exposition has never been reckoned a form conducive to the highest flights of literary expression; yet Lincoln demonstrated that it could be so beautifully and austere sculptured that the very solidness of solid matter would vie with the ethereal."³⁶

To some people, Abraham Lincoln was an unsuccessful backwoods lawyer who split rails and entertained farmers at the general store. He is remembered by others as a self-educated man, studying by firelight, or as the Great Emancipator and the author-poet of the *Gettysburg Address*. In my reading and research, I found that all are correct. Lincoln was president, politician, and pragmatist. He was also artist, romantic, and philosopher. His writing exemplifies many facets of this remarkable man—sometimes within the same piece.

By studying Lincoln's writing and doing what he did—reading widely, observing closely, and striving to be both logical and imaginative in my writing, I can also become a more effective writer.

Bonnie Jones loves "the finely crafted phrase." She teaches her two children, ages thirteen and eleven, at home. She is a graduate student at George Wythe College, Cedar City, Utah.

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(Endnotes)

¹ John Grafton, historical notes, Abraham Lincoln: Great Speeches (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), back cover.

² Daniel Kilham Dodge, Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1900 and 2000), p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

⁴ William E. Barnhart, Four Score, unpublished speech presented to The Chicago Literary Club, Monday, October 7, 2002, copyright 2002 by Bill Barnhart.

⁵ Dodge, p. 27.

⁶ Speeches, p. 105.

⁷ Dodge, p. 53.

⁸ Speeches, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ Dodge, p. 27.

¹⁵ Barnhart.

¹⁶ Speeches, p. 105.

¹⁷ Barnhart.

¹⁸ Dodge, p. 41.

¹⁹ Barnhart.

²⁰ Dodge, p. 41.

²¹ Barnhart.

²² Speeches, p. 42.

²³ Jacques Barzun, On Writing, Editing, and Publishing: Essays Explicative and Hortatory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 67-68.

²⁴ Speeches, p. 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-97.

²⁶ Dodge, p. 49.

²⁷ Speeches, p. 77.

²⁸ Barzun, pp. 66-67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, page 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, page 58.

³² Barnhart.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*