

Lincoln and Douglass: Struggle between Freedom and Slavery

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During the Civil War era there existed many factions seeking to dramatically change America. Remarkable speakers spread their ideas through oratory, thrilling their audiences through powerful speeches that appealed to both emotion and logic. Frederick Douglass, a black American, fought for black civil rights through compelling speeches like "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" depicting the terrors of slavery in graphic detail. Abraham Lincoln, on the other hand, spoke peacefully and optimistically during his Second Inaugural Address to demonstrate his desire for peace and reconciliation with the Confederate states. Both speakers captivated their audiences through compelling diction, tone, and argumentative methods to win them over and gain their support.

Lincoln's sole desire before, during, and after the Civil War was to maintain national unity. This was his job as president and the entire reason for fighting the Civil War. During his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln reaffirmed the purpose of the war through choice diction. He stated that the South would "...make war rather than let the nation survive..." and though he "...deprecated war..." he would accept it "...rather than let the nation perish..." Furthermore, during the course of the war, Lincoln freed all the slaves with his Emancipation Proclamation in order to weaken the South. However, he did not want the American people to think that he had altered the original objective of the war: preserving the Union. In order to demonize slavery and gain support for destroying it, Lincoln described slavery as a "...peculiar and powerful interest..." Lincoln persuaded Americans that slavery was the cause of their problems and the nation's Northern and Southern sectional differences. Furthermore, Lincoln made an effort to unite himself with his audience. He addressed the nation, Northerners and Southerners

alike, with the words “Fellow-countrymen...” to make himself socially equal with his audience. This removed the typical formalities between president and citizen and allowed him to speak to the Americans at a more personal level. Like Lincoln’s diction, his tone conveyed harmony, reconciliation, and unyielding unity. Lincoln encouraged peaceful Reconstruction “...with malice toward none; with charity for all, with firmness in the right...” Throughout his speech, he remained positive and hopeful for the future. Lincoln calmed and reassured the Americans that the nation’s wounds would eventually heal and peace would once again return to the United States. Lincoln appealed to Northerners, Southerners, and foreigners as well, by offering optimism and “high hope” to everyone. He isolated no one and reached out to everyone in his audience. Furthermore, Lincoln used appeal to emotion as a means to reach out to his audience and unify the nation. His subjective arguments stirred up his audience’s religious zeal. Lincoln stated, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” to support the almost-certain victory of the North. This pleased Northerners because it justified the ethics of the war and cleared any lingering doubts in their consciences. Lincoln also drew on his audience’s compassion for human suffering in order to further justify the war when he said, “...[it would be righteous if the war continued] until every drop of blood drawn with the lash...[was] paid by another drawn with the sword...” Lincoln used the imagery of a slave being lashed with a whip to touch his audience’s emotions and make them empathize with the slaves’ dire situation. Finally, he made numerous allusions to the Bible and God in order to stir up religious excitement and fervor. Through the skilled use of diction, tone, and appeal to emotion in his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln gained enough support from the American citizens to win the Civil War and successfully reunite the Union.

Like Lincoln, Douglass had a very clear, singular purpose in making his speech: to gain civil liberties for blacks. Douglass believed in the equality of all men, regardless

of skin color. As a former slave who had experienced the terrors of slavery firsthand, Douglass gained credibility and even sympathy from his audience during his speech "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?". Because of his personal experiences, Douglass was able to use condescending diction and pessimism in his speech to describe how he and his fellow black Americans felt. Douglass even admitted in his speech, "I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man...shall not confess to be right and just." This genuinely grabbed the audience's attention and forced them to listen to what he had to say. Unlike Lincoln who tried to sooth and calm his audience, Douglass used inflammatory language and even derogatory remarks to force his audience to contemplate the issue of slavery from his perspective. He called the Fourth of July "...a day that reveals [to the American slave]...the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim." He went on to call the celebration a "...sham..." and his audience "...unholy...", "...empty...", "...heartless...", "...impudent...", "...savage...", "...mocking...", and "...deceptive..." The primary purpose of Douglass' insulting diction was to shock the audience and awaken them to the reality of the situation. In this way, Douglass was able to reach out to his white audience (who might have otherwise shrugged him off) and communicate his message extremely effectively. Like his diction, Douglass' tone was also very denigrating and even ostentatious at times. In spite of this, his tone worked to his advantage and served as a call to action for Northerners in the pre-Civil War era. Douglass' tone caused his audience to question their beliefs and consider Douglass' standpoint seriously. So, like Lincoln, Douglass used tone to influence his audience's emotions. Further akin to Lincoln, Douglass used appeal to emotion to make his audience empathize with the slaves' dismal situation. However, because of Douglass' status as a former slave, he also used logical arguments so he could appeal to his skeptical white audience. Douglass combined subjective and objective details to appeal to both their emotional

and logical sides. He subjectively argued that it was wrong "...to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons..." but objectively stated "...Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it." In this way, Douglass caused his audience to question slavery on both emotional and logical grounds. Additionally, his vivid diction and understandable hyperbole caused the white audience to realize the error in their ways—or at least consider his point of view. He further hammered home the point by isolating himself from the audience with words like "...you...", "...us...", "...yours...", and "...ours..." By choosing to argue his point in this manner, Douglass highlighted the drastic discrepancy between the lives of slaves and white men. Through his carefully selected diction, tone, and argumentative style Douglass directly contributed to the pervasive abolitionist movement of the 1850s.

In conclusion, Lincoln and Douglass' speeches come from entirely different time periods and perspectives and communicate entirely distinct purposes. However, the speeches are similar because they both use powerful diction, tone, and argumentative methods to draw on their audience's emotions and religious fervor to call them to action. Lincoln and Douglass, both great American patriots, reached out to their audiences to eventually change the world.

Works Cited

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