Rhetorical Strategies Abraham Lincoln Used in The Gettysburg Address

By: DeQuana Moore

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On November 19, 1863, Former U.S. President Abraham Lincoln gave one of the shortest, yet well-known speeches in known to history. Lincoln gave this speech, the Gettysburg Address, on a battlefield in Gettysburg Pennsylvania during a dedication to the fallen soldiers. This event was a ceremony to make that field a national cemetery later that year. Lincoln communicated his message while the Civil War was ongoing to both the North and South by speaking to the thousands of people in the crowd listening at the site of where one of the biggest battles of the Civil War was fought. Due to the nature of the year the speech was given, there were people of all economic backgrounds in attendance, however not of all races. There were many photographers and newspaper writers to document this historical event because the preceding speech was given by the anticipated Edward Everett. Everett was asked to give the headlining speech because many knew his eloquence and style would be able to reach the numbers while giving them something to hope for. While Lincoln was able to deliver the better speech that day at only 272 words, Everett also admitted later that he wishes that he would have been able to embody the spirit that Lincoln created that day.

The purpose of the artifact was for Lincoln to inform and simultaneously remind the public why they are in this war, as well as give everyone hope that they could unite as one nation once again. The platform, this artifact was originally written on is highly debated. There are five versions of the Gettysburg Address, all handwritten, and the version that is said to be the most similar to the one Lincoln gave that day was on the back of an envelope and was written during his train ride from Washington DC to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. While writing the speech on an envelope was informal of President Lincoln, this is the only copy of the speech that was officially signed by him. Currently, the Gettysburg Address is written inside the Lincoln memorial in Washington D.C.

I am analyzing the Gettysburg Address because it is categorized as one of the most influential speeches in American history, all while being the shortest speech former President Lincoln ever gave. By highlighting the modes of persuasion used in texts, logos, ethos and pathos, I believe I will be able to understand why this is categorized as one of the most influential speeches. Another method to analyze texts is by finding their logical fallacies. Initially, I thought Lincoln did not commit any fallacies, but any influential speech uses fallacies to deliver their opinion to the audience effectively.

The Logos

            Logos is useful in texts by presenting logic in the arguments. This is shown by the speaker inserting reasoning and facts into their texts to persuade the audience. This is common among many informational texts as well as when people want others to understand their argument. The Gettysburg address shows the logos fallacy most prominently in the very first sentence of the speech. The line states, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” (Britannica, “Gettysburg Address”, 2019) Lincoln mentions the time gap between when the Declaration of Independence was signed and when the speech was given. He chose to use the time stamps of score and years instead of writing out the numbers to convey a more eloquent version of the date. This gives the date of 1776 more prominence in his speech and the timeline of how long ago it was. The signing of the Declaration in the year 1776 was notable because the Declaration of Independence marks the birth of the United States and reflects on the unity America had when they created this document. Lincoln used the Declaration of Independence because the founding fathers looked highly on equality and wanted the audience to reflect on that. Lincoln used the Declaration of Independence because the founding fathers looked highly on equality and he wanted the audience to reflect on the standards the founding fathers left for the American people. Lincoln states this as a look to the past to inform the public why the United States broke away from Britain. He reflects on the present war by acknowledging the soldiers that died for their country. Next, Lincoln looks towards the future by creating a call to action, asking the audience to honor the dead and to really reflect on what they died for.

The Ethos

            Ethos is used in text and speeches to establish the credibility of the speaker. This conveys a bond of trustworthiness between the speaker and the audience. This can be exhibited through the tone and style of the text. Lincoln presents ethos in the phrase, “ It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure.” (Britannica, “Gettysburg Address”, 2019) Lincoln uses this phrase to evoke sadness from the crowd. He wanted everyone to understand what the soldiers of the Civil War were fighting and dying for. Lincoln wanted everyone to feel this, even if they did not have a family member fighting in the war, by saying ‘us’ frequently to give the sense of togetherness during this speech. This encouraged the audience to reflect on the morals that they share as citizens of the United States. The Gettysburg Address helped people know that they are not alone during this gruesome war, and that with unity, they should honor those who fought for their country and what they stood for. Overall, Lincoln directed this speech at the families of the fallen Union soldiers to acknowledge their sacrifice and their service to the country.

The Pathos

Pathos is when the speaker targets the emotions of the crowd. The speaker can impact the audience by using stories and giving examples that mostly everyone can relate to. While pathos was throughout the Gettysburg Address, it was especially prominent in the quoted section, “But in a larger sense, we can not dedicate- we can not consecrate- we can not hallow- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggles here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.” (Britannica, “Gettysburg Address”, 2019) This line was written as a ‘call to action’ for the audience to not forget about and reinforce the sacrifices that the soldiers  fought for. This event also goes to remind the audience of what the Union was fighting for in the previous phrase “all men were created equal." This encouraged the audience to view the main argument of the Civil War as slavery. Lincoln addressed the argument and asked the audience to make a logical decision to view the slaves as men and to think about the lives that depended upon the Union winning the war. Lincoln also plays on the audience’s emotions by mentioning ‘live’ and ‘lives’.

The Logical Fallacies

            A logical fallacy is when words or phrases are used in an argument that cause it to be invalid, not sound or weak. The Gettysburg Address commits several logical fallacies in order to help sway the audience to Lincoln’s argument. Lincoln uses parallelism by mentioning the phrase, “We can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow...” (Britannica, “Gettysburg Address”, 2019). This is similar to a false analogy because the three words: dedicate, consecrate and hallow, do not show any relationship to each other. He strings them together by using the same initial words of ‘we can not’ to show that similarity is not present. Lincoln also uses parallelism by using the phrase “Of the people, by the people, for the people.” (Britannica, “Gettysburg Address”, 2019). This time, the repetition of the latter phrase gave the trait of parallelism. The juxtaposition fallacy is when two things, normally opposites, are placed side by side to show a correlation to each other, when none is actually claimed. This fallacy is shown in the quote “living and the dead”. Finally, a type of logical fallacy known as a euphemism is used in the Gettysburg Address. A euphemism is when a different word or phrase is used instead of one that is unpleasant or offensive. Lincoln uses this when referring to the soldiers that have lost their lives by saying, “final resting place” instead of ‘the dead’. He used this so that the audience understood that he was referring to the dead soldiers without using such crude words.

Conclusion

            The Gettysburg address was known as the most influential speech during the Civil War as well as one of the shortest speeches to go down in history. The United States admired Lincoln’s ability to tell the nation that while they are still grieving, they should admire the soldier’s bravery to fight for their country. Former President Lincoln established an equal amount of pathos, logos and ethos. By remembering the past, the nation is able to reflect on it’s ugly history while not losing its vision for a future where everyone regardless of skin color, socioeconomic status, or any form of diversity are truly treated as equals.

Works Cited Page

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