

Sample Summary, Quote, and Rhetorical Analysis

(note: this sample was done using a short speech; more lengthy speeches will require more summary, etc.)

The Gettysburg Address has a simple, three-part structure. Its first sentence, “Fourscore and seven years ago...” is about the past. The next six sentences, primarily focusing on the battlefield made sacred by the men who died there, are primarily about the present. The final three sentences are about the future and the task ahead. In addition, the speech is structured by contrasting words and images of life and death (Wills 62), for example “...those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.” Also, the speech is structured so that the final sentence, a long one of 85 words in five clauses with the repetition of “that” to introduce each clause, builds up to a powerful crescendo, a quotation of the Declaration of Independence and the idea that this government “shall not perish.” The result is a complex, multi-layered structure that combines pairs of life and death images, a three-part movement, drumbeat repetition, and a resounding trumpet call to action at the end.

Lincoln’s careful choice of words also shows his intent to sway his audience with phrases that evoke emotion. Examples are “conceived in Liberty,” “those who here gave their lives that a nation might live,” “the world...can never forget what they did here,” and “the nation, under God, have a new birth of freedom.” The use of such “absolute” words such as “death,” “live,” “never forget” and “birth of freedom” denote patriotism, and a love of one’s country, but also a connotation that this love is all-important, unifying, and final.

Even more interesting is what Lincoln does not say that would have been expected in such a speech. The word “Gettysburg” is not used, nor “Union soldiers,” “Confederate soldiers,” “slavery,” “victory,” nor any mention of the generals or brigades who fought and died there. It is true that Lincoln did not need to repeat the specifics Everett trudged through in his oration, but it is more important to note Lincoln’s thesis is not about the battle; it is about preserving freedom and a particular government. H.L. Mencken criticized the speech by writing “It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in the battle actually fought against self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of their people to govern themselves (Mencken 1). Such criticism, however, completely misinterprets the meaning of “self-determination.” It does NOT mean, “If I don’t win the election or have the votes to pass a law I want, I’ll just start my own government.” Freedom and self-determination mean that all must be free, not just a few states who disagree with legally passed and binding laws. It is true that Lincoln’s speech says,

“all men are created equal,” but that limited statement is in the section of the speech that is about the past, and in other writings, Lincoln certainly favored eventual suffrage for women and enfranchisement of freed slaves as far back as his Illinois days (Donald 59). More important is that he ends his speech with “the people,” a term that must certainly include freed slaves and women, not “some people,” not “white people,” nor “male people,” but “the people.” That was the task Lincoln set before his listeners, a reinterpretation of what the Civil War and all government was about, an idea that changed history.