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AP English 11 – Miller Hosey

Non-fiction Essay – Sample

3/28/11

Prompt: Both Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama are presidents who have set milestones in the course of American history. The former abolished slavery, the latter proved that a man of color could hold the highest office in the country. Analyze Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and Obama's Inaugural Address for rhetorical devices and argumentative styles that each uses to achieve their rhetorical purpose.

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The inaugurations of both Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama have marked turning points in the course of American society and politics. The former oversaw the bulk of the Civil War, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and delivered the Gettysburg Address—some of the most influential pieces of rhetoric in American politics. Barack Obama was inaugurated over two years ago as the first African-American president in United States history, initiated some of the most sweeping reforms in healthcare and welfare in the past century, and has frequently been lauded for the eloquence and construction of his speeches. Both have led the nation through times of crisis—the former political, the latter economic—a common trait that is reflected in their respective inaugural addresses. Though separated by over a century of time and vast differences in the social and political landscape, Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama both allude to external sources and use parallel structure and anaphora in order to inspire

their audience and to give their respective speeches and causes a sense of greater historical, social, and moral relevance.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address was delivered near the end of the Civil War—a war that had begun when Lincoln took office four years prior, a war that revealed the United States to be a house divided. The prose itself speaks not only of Lincoln's personal exhaustion—a result of being a wartime president—but also of the nation's grief. Obama entered the White House in many ways a novice in the wheeling and dealing of Washington politics, but he also entered with concrete goals and a timeline for achieving them. Lincoln's Second Inaugural exudes a certain world-weariness, whereas Obama's Inaugural is moderate and pragmatic but tempered with hope. Yet both speeches attempt to inspire the masses and to restore faith and hope in a cynical populace, and because Lincoln and Obama's rhetorical purposes are so similar, an analysis of the text of both of these speeches provides an interesting insight into how two men living in vastly different circumstances used very similar strategies to achieve the same ends.

Both Obama and Lincoln make a clear show of their knowledge of external subjects in their speeches, but the allusions made with greatest frequency in their inaugural addresses are biblical, usually while prefacing a discussion of morality. This conscious choice of allusion is interesting in its intent so far as constitutional theory holds church and state separate in U.S. government, yet holders of secular office still make reference to a religious work. It is likely that many listeners in Lincoln's time would have been familiar with the multiple biblical passages to which Lincoln refers throughout his speech. "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be

not judged,” the former of which is a paraphrase of Genesis 3:19 and the latter portion of which is an oft-quoted phrase from Matthew 7:1 (Lincoln). This allusion to the Bible is the preface to a larger discussion about the ethics of war and the invocation by opposite sides of the war of divine will and favor. By quoting the Bible, Lincoln is able to frame his discussion of the war and his actions within it in the greater context of Judaeo-Christian morality, a connection his predominantly Christian audience would have easily understood. Though Obama delivered his inaugural address to a crowd far more diverse than that of Lincoln’s, his explicit reference to Scripture in the line from 1 Corinthians 13:11 “the time has come to set aside childish things,” is a clearly-worded statement not only of personal faith but of a greater sense of morality (Obama). Obama uses biblical text as Lincoln does to frame a longer discourse on America’s past experiences with hardship and its future road to prosperity and its moral obligation to rise up to meet the demands of the future. Again, the Bible functions as a proxy for morality in Obama’s speech, likely because it is an easily recognizable source, to which thoughtful speech commonly alludes. Even though not all people are Christians, biblical allusions are texts familiar to many audiences, and are therefore used by many speakers, Lincoln and Obama included, to connote morality and moral justification.

Though both men display the breadth of their moral knowledge through allusions, the inspirational nature of their speeches stems from the fact that both Lincoln and Obama make extensive use of parallel structure throughout the works. In Lincoln’s time, this sort of grammatical construction would hardly be abnormal, but in a modern context, the parallelism of both inaugural addresses is a far cry from our rather relaxed grammatical usage. Parallelism in both speeches provides structure to the prose and a

sense of grandness that stems from the organization that parallelism belies. “[L]et us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations,” with which Lincoln ends his Second Inaugural Address (Lincoln). By combining asyndeton and polysyndeton with parallel structure, Lincoln provides a clear outline of the path that he feels the nation is obligated to follow in an attempt to inspire a demoralized populace to continue the work of rebuilding the Union, which had barely begun. Though Obama entered office during a time of war, much of the horror of combat remained half a world away, behind the sanitized television broadcasts and thousands of miles of land and sea. Nevertheless, Obama also had to contend with the burdens of an ailing financial sector that had mere months before threatened the integrity of the entire American economy. “Their memories are short, for they have forgotten what this country has already done, what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage,” Obama says in response to cynics who question the scale of his administration’s ambitions (Obama). His use of parallel structure in conjunction with zeugma evokes both historical events and future expectations and acts as both reminiscence and motivation. Because both presidents faced significant hardship during their terms, the language of both inaugural addresses uses parallelism to restore faith in the people and motivate the masses to move forward.

Anaphora can be used to convey a sense of size and greatness as parallelism is used by extending an idea beyond its usual scope or by linking several ideas together with a common thread. In the closing lines of his inaugural address, for example, Lincoln

says, “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right...” (Lincoln). His anaphora of the word “with” at the beginning of the sentence, as well as the parallel construction of the prepositional phrases, emphasizes the multitude of moral justifications for the course of action he proposes later on in the sentence, as was discussed previously. Obama also makes frequent use of anaphora to achieve a somewhat different purpose—that of concretely outlining some of America’s policy objectives in the future. One of the many instances of extended anaphora (as well as apostrophe) in his inaugural address reads:

To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict... know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist. To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect (Obama).

By creating extended anaphora, Obama is able to enumerate his objectives in a way that makes the magnitude and import of his intentions immediately clear to his audience, giving it a sense of grandeur beyond the simple content of its words. Thus both Obama

and Lincoln make extensive use of anaphora to create a sense of greatness to inspire their people to continue fighting the fight, as it were.

Though Lincoln and Obama lived in dramatically disparate time periods, both are landmark presidents in their own ways. Because both lived through times of struggle and upheaval in America and abroad, much of their work, their inaugural addresses in particular, reflects a similar rhetorical purpose—that of inspiring the people to continue on—by using similar rhetorical devices, whether by placing their proposed work in a greater historical, social, and moral context or by creating a sense of grandeur that surrounds the work ahead. As dissimilar as their lives were, Lincoln and Obama are unquestionably alike in their skillful use of the English language.

Works Cited

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