A Rhetorical Analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address

In a very reverent, yet quick, address, Abraham Lincoln not only honorably bestows a farewell to the soldiers who gave their lives for the livelihood of their country, but through his rhetorical usage of juxtaposition, repetition, and parallelism, Lincoln unites his speech together, and this in turn transfers into his central message of unity as a nation.

Lincoln’s usage of juxtaposition, the comparison of two ideas, gives life to how two completely different ideas, the North and the South, should become one, just as he juxtaposes life and death under the same pen. The main purpose of juxtaposition is to place two ideas or phrases which may be completely opposite such as the “living and dead,” together and allow the reader to see them side by side. Lincoln goes the extra step and conveys his juxtaposed ideals to coincide with his uniting tone. Lincoln’s remorse for the Civil War, which was in a downhill phase, comes out as he mourns the loss of a fellow American, not making it matter whether he was a Union soldier or a Confederate. Lincoln also encourages the audience to not let their deaths be made in vain, but rather remember how two separate ideas, or notions, can coexist unless under a similar structure. His final statement, almost a third of the entire piece, creates one final juxtaposition of a “new birth” and the prevention of a “perished” nation. This patriotic appeal enthralls the audience to action, because the American people know how vital liberty is. This final statement surely left a mark on the reader, mostly because of the burning patriotism and zeal which typifies the average American. Lincoln’s usage of juxtaposition allows him to transfer that zeal into action, by uniting the American people.

Two concrete examples of repetition lie in the opening statement of Lincoln’s speech, both of which set a precedent for the repetitious nature of the entire address. One of these...

Organization of the Gettysburg Address

The Organizational pattern of this speech is chronological, suggesting a metaphor of organic growth pattern analogous to that of a single human life. The first part, which provides the basis on which the remainder of the speech depends, is identified as the birth of the nation (an event in the past.) The second part covers the present, or just completed, testing of that nation, which has now grown to young manhood. This period is characterized as a time of sacrifice (by individual young men) for the protection of the child-nation. The third, and final, part sets forth the task for the listeners (and for the future)...the nation (like a young adult) has survived its first major test, now we must work to see its resurrection from the ashes of the battlefields, an d to realize its growth to the full promise of maturity.

Arguments of the Gettysburg Address (I list them here. In your paper, you must write them out in paragraph form. That means each argument should be stated, then interpreted (explained)

1. This nation was a new creation...a child of the age of enlightenment and social compact. This 18th century ideal must survive the test of time if it is to prove viable. (argument by analogy)

2. Anything worthy of survival is worth fighting for...so, with this country. (an enthymeme)

3. Deeds count more than words...but a sacred oath, dedicating ourselves to a task, aligns words with deeds. (argument by structure and style)

4. Those who have died can (and have) "passed the torch" to those who survive, who then owe a duty to continue carrying it. (this is not a metaphor used in the speech! I am giving a parallel example. It is an argument based on the need for tradition and continuity through deductive reasoning: if there are givers and receivers, the receivers must eventually be givers in their turn, or the tradition/learning/growth/responsibility will die.)

5. Finally: the speech is very short: in essence saying that we shouldn't be taking attention away from the really important event here, which was the sacrifice for the cause. (stylistic argument)

Stylistic Analysis of the Gettysburg Address

"Fourscore and seven years ago This is a Biblical reference: analogous to "three score year and ten," which was the "allotted span" of a human life. This nation has outlived the life of one human, but is still young...at the end of the speech we will see the rebirth, or regeneration of the country. our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. The preceding metaphors depict the founding of the nation in terms of a birth, with the framers of the constitution the fathers,
and liberty the mother. This implies that the nation is alive...and a child, still growing and learning, and in need of protection. Thus, the further implication is that the secession of the southern states is tantamount to child murder!

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. Here, the religious terminology is fitting for the occasion, which is indeed a dedication/consecration; but it also identifies the deaths as a sacrifice (note the same root as sacred!) given to ensure the safety of the nation/child.

The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. "But" sets the two clauses of the sentence in direct opposition to one another, unlike the earlier draft, which used "while" indicating that both clauses are parallel. "while" therefore implies that the world responds similarly to both "say" and "did," though more strongly to the latter. "But" frames the two clauses in contrast, so implying that the world's response is equally contrasted between the word and the deed. Further, the contradiction inherent in the "but" implies that the world considers deeds more important than words...an irony, since we actually tend to forget deeds that are not commemorated in words!

It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be heredirected to the great task remaining before
us (passive voice here!) Also note the repetition with reversal above, the second phrase gaining strength from repetition and also from association of incremental proportions: (first) with unfinished work, (second) from great task—that from these honored dead we take) increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion (we take—they give. we are still passive, they are the heroes who commit great deeds)—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." These metaphors (in purple) redirect the deed of sacrifice to the "task" of devotion to the cause...certainly a lesser demand than giving one's life, so it is something that can justifiably be demanded of the audience for the speech, but will ensure the survival of the child...and thus everyone in the audience now becomes the parents of that child..

http://www.esu.edu/~godich/getty.htm

Thematic analysis
Lincoln employed many rhetorical devices in his artistry with words, but his mature speeches are especially characterized by:
· grammatical parallelism
· antithesis
· alliteration
· repetition
He would use all four strategies in his Nov. 19 address.
Notably, the voice in the Gettysburg Address is not a first-person singular individual. The address is full of first-person references, but everyone is plural. Ten times Lincoln uses the plural "we," and three times "us." The "speaker" is, in effect, Americans and Unionists, not the president.

Without naming the South or the Confederates, the speech makes no reference of the rebels as enemies. Their dead are not omitted from the speech, as though Southerns could look back after the abolition of slavery on the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War and the address as a dedication to their dead as well, the cost in blood had to be paid to remake a free nation.

The sheer coincidence of the battle's cost — estimated at just over 23,000 on each side — seemingly suggests both sides paid almost equally, rather than a rout like Fredericksburg the first and second battles of Bull Run, or the bloodbaths Union Gen. Ulysses S Grant would use to win battles of attrition toward the end of the war.
First Paragraph

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.

Sets time and place to establish the scene and directly references the Declaration of Independence, considered a sacred document to both the Unionists of the North and Secessionists of the South. Confederates referred to the Civil War as the second war of independence.

“Four score and seven” was not a simple way to say 87. Lincoln was asking his audience to calculate backward to discover that the nation’s starting point was not the Constitution in 1787 nor the election of Gen. George Washington in 1789 as the first president, but the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and its sine qua non declaration of equality:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The main overt reference is the “all men are created equal” line in both.

Scores, i.e., 20 years, are also a shorthand way of measuring generations. While stating 87 years would have been felt an a long time to people whose life expectancy was an average of around 60 years, Lincoln’s reference shows that only a short time in human terms had passed; assuming that most people in the 1860s became parents in their late teens or early 20s, a 40-year-old listener or reader could have a grandparent who lived at the time of the county’s birth, a relatively short time, in which to create a new nation based on a social experiment in liberty and equality. The shortness of time also pointed to the fragility of the nation.

Poetically, the cadence began with two rhyming words: “four score.” The line also contains a rhythm of alliteration, “fathers … forth” and “new nation.”

The Hebrew cadence, rendered in Elizabethan English, would have been stated slowly: “Four . . . score.” The biblical ring of his opening words was rooted in Psalm 90: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; And if by reason of strength they be fourscore years."

Lincoln never named verse or quoted directly from the Bible in his speeches, although he did do so in his Second Inaugural Address, when his speech included allusions to Matthew 18:7, Luke 17:1 and Psalm 19:9. Lincoln’s whole address was suffused with both biblical content and cadence.

Lincoln built the Gettysburg Address upon a structure of past, present, and future. The three parts of the speech, broken into their composite parts, relate a brief summation of history, a reflection on the current struggle and how the choices of the present dictate the future course.

Thematically, Lincoln started in the past by placing the battlefield at Gettysburg and the “insignificance” of the dedication in the context of American history. His opening words highlighted historical continuity. His biblical allusion accented permanence — keep in mind that
the Bible was not merely seen as an unassailable document, but the wisdom of God and God’s chosen people passed on to believers, a concept most Americans accepted without question — while noting that the continuity of the United States had surpassed the biblical time frame of life and death, in turn making the United States and its constitution a sacred document ordained by God as part of a divine plan for both Americans specifically and humanity in general.

In speaking of “our fathers,” Lincoln invoked the common heritage of the Founding Fathers for both Northerners and Southerners. At the same time identified himself, not with the “leaders of the American people,” but with his audience as children of their great experiment. The trajectory of the crucial, first sentence underscored the timeless American truth that “all men are created equal,” which, although had been controversial among the landed leaders of the republic in 1776, had been accepted as common fact by the 1860s.

Whether a man — women and blacks still had no voting rights in most electorates — owned thousands of acres or merely worked a farm as a hired hand, in the American social landscape, they were equal both before the law as they were before God. All white men had been given the right to vote regardless of property ownership beginning in 1820 and by 1850, this right was almost universal. Free blacks in the North also had suffrage. When Lincoln reaffirmed this truth he asserted that the war was about both liberty and union.

Lincoln began by invoking the Declaration of Independence, but his use of the word “proposition” — theory — spoke to a different certainty than Thomas Jefferson’s “truths,” which were “self-evident.” Through the address, Lincoln emphasized at Gettysburg that the United States was not a completed entity at the time of the Declaration, but still an experiment still in process. He implied through “proposition” that Jefferson’s language had to be proved as fact through the country’s minor and major struggles. The Civil War and Gettysburg specifically were tests of that proposition, tests which had to be overcome to prove them as true as Jefferson had “theorized” with the Declaration. Because of the war, Lincoln had understood the fragility of the Union and sought to expose them through the architecture of his speech.

“Proposition” was the turning point of the speech wherein Lincoln shifted his from past ideas to present realities.

**Second paragraph**

*Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.*

The first line of the second paragraph establishes the moment of the speech in its precise political context. At the beginning of the body of his address he used two perfect parallels: “that nation so conceived” and “any nation so dedicated.”

Lincoln directly references the aforementioned “proposition” as being tested by “a great civil war.” Its success or failure, i.e., reunification or division after the war, will prove or disprove Jefferson’s proposal.

As Lincoln spoke about the dimensions of the past, he constructed the content of his political purposes by repeating key words: “great civil war,” “great battlefield,” “so dedicated,” and “come to dedicate.” Lincoln’s use of repetition allowed him to underscore his rhetorical purpose.
We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.

The funerary oration has longstanding tradition. Funerary orations date back to ancient Greece, one of the best known is Pericles’ Funeral Oration spoken in 410 B.C.E. during the Peloponnesian War and recorded in Thucydides’ (460-395 B.C.E.) “History of the Peloponnesian War.

Pericles’s speech acknowledges Athens’ predecessors: “I shall begin with our ancestors: it is both just and proper that they should have the honor of the first mention on an occasion like the present”; then praises Athens’ commitment to democracy: “If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences”; honors the dead and their sacrifices, “Thus choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face”; and turns to the living to continue the struggle: “You, their survivors, must determine to have as unfaltering a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier issue.”

Later accounts of Lincoln’s life strongly suggest that he had not read that part of Thucydides’ history. Battlefield dedications have been visited by leaders throughout history. Lincoln’s statement that he, as the nation’s leader, should perform this duty was more of an accepted fact among the political leaders of the time. The unusual nature of this specific dedication was that it was happening during active wartime and the battle had happened so recently. Another point was that Everett, as a classicist, not Lincoln, would have been more likely to impart Pericles’ sentiments. Lincoln’s references lean toward Biblical ones, as his speeches often drew on scripture for allusions.

It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

The line establishes the justification for the audience to be at the event, while the following sentence immediately contradicts the importance by shifting the emphasis on the dead.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground.

His words, “But in a larger sense,” were his clue to the audience that he was about to expand the parameters of his intentions. He was announcing his purpose to speak to a “larger” subject.

Stating the negative “but” served to first prepare the audience to agree with his evocation of what each person in the audience could do, both following the speech, in the larger scope of the war, and in the larger sense of America’s history years and decades after the war became just a memory. These three parallel clauses focused on the present space: “this ground.”

The importance of “hallow”
"... We can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow ..."

What is most notable in a poetic sense is the use of two Latinate root words, — “consecrate” and “dedicate” — contained in parallel with a distinctly English root, “hallow.”
Most native English speakers invariably attribute more weight to words with inherent “Englishness” to them, be they original words, imported word with an “English sound” or more recent portmanteaus. The structure of the English language was slowly re-ordered and restructured after the Norman invasion of 1066 by using a Latinate languages, specifically French, but the lexicon of English remained based with the roots of Old English.

As a linguistic aside, for instance, veal, beef, venison and poultry are the common names for prepared dishes, names imported from the Norman French, whose French-speaking lords dined on meat from animals tended to by Old English-speaking farmers who used the words calves, cows, deer, ducks, chickens and turkeys. Playwrights and poets, such William Shakespeare and his contemporaries, often used this fact to make characters seem “lower” on the social strata by having them speak more “English” words while kings and nobles spoke with more Latinate-root words.

Lincoln used this linguistic abnormality as a parallel. While “consecrate” and “dedicate” are synonyms, “hallow” carries more weight because it is more “English” and more “emotionally sincere” for the mood. The structure of the sentence itself subtly suggests that Lincoln is perhaps searching for the “right” word for the moment. “Consecrate” and “dedicate” are not sufficient, but as he hits on the third word, it seems as though he has found the exact word for the moment, one that “consecrate” and “dedicate” are too formal, too lofty, too unemotional to properly express the emotional mood. It also seems as though Lincoln is actively thinking of synonyms to properly express his emotional connection to his duty, a scratching out “consecrate” and “dedicate” before committing to “hallow.”

_The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract._

Note that the audience of the speech is at the event to consecrate the battlefield, but trivialized by the actions of those who died on the field. Coincidentally, this is also the theme of Pericles’ funeral oration, which draws the comparison.

At this point, Lincoln employed a dramatic antithesis. He contrasted “the brave men” with “our poor power.” He simultaneously framed “living and dead” at the beginning of the sentence, and “add or detract” at the end of the sentence, in another parallelism.

_The Final Paragraph_

In the last three sentences of the address, Lincoln shifted the focus a final time. In the architecture of his address, Lincoln had recalled the past and what the nation did at its beginning, recited what the soldiers did in the near present, and now prepared to open out the future and speak to the responsibility of the listeners.

_The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here._

The line trivializes his own importance while again adding to the emphasis of the dead. Lincoln pointed away from words to deeds. He contrasts “what we say here” with “what they did
Of course the irony is that Gettysburg Address is engraved in stone on the south wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

*It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.*

The initial words of the sentence achieved energy from contrasts: “It is for us the living,” contrasted with “those who gave their lives here”; “the unfinished work which they who fought here,” was an invitation to finish the work.

The line continues to empowers the audience to take inspiration from the deeds of the dead and continue the struggle for union. Although the “work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced,” Lincoln’s subtle point is that the dead gave all they had but can go no further. The emphasis shifts from what they did to the audience to continue to struggle with all they have — that is the true way, Lincoln argues, to honor their sacrifice, not simply in winning the war, but in rebuilding the nation in the Declaration of Independence’s proposed vision afterward.

**Last line**

Lincoln’s closing sentence, in a speech ironically known for its brevity, is a long, complex sentence of 82 words.

*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 of devotion —*

This part of the sentence emphasizes the passion of the dead to have fought and died for a mere cause. Lincoln continued repetition: “to be dedicated we take increased devotion,” and “to be here dedicated the last full measure of devotion.” His repetition rhetorically reiterated the accountability of the audience.

“Dedicate” and “devotion” are both religious words which conjured the call to commitment in the revival services of the Second Great Awakening and in the churches Lincoln attended in Washington during the war.

“The last full measure of devotion” is far more poetic than simply “death,” as it immediately, eloquently and metaphorically postulates that the dead died for a purpose, struggling toward a goal which they failed to reach but which we must continue to pursue. Lincoln seems to suggest that the died knew their purpose was not to take a hill or prevent a charge, but to reunite the nation and remake the country as it should have been, almost as though the soldiers had heard the Gettysburg Address before the battle and knew the costs they would have to pay.

*that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom —*
Note the use of “in vain” which in the context of “under God” has Biblical implications. The line "under God” is only found in three of the five original manuscripts, but in neither of the two first drafts. Lincoln most likely used the second draft at the speech itself. The other three manuscripts were written later at the request of contemporary historians and “under God” may have been added even though it was not spoken at Gettysburg.

Regardless of the reference, poetically, “under God” continues the theme of past and future. Lincoln felt the United States and its special place as the birth of democracy had both religious and political parents. He consistently invoked God in most of his major speeches as president.

"Under God” also aims at the future in “shall have a new birth of freedom.” Without the twin guidance of God and the liberty and unity of the nation, Lincoln argues that freedom isn’t possible. In the first years of the Civil War, Lincoln found himself wrestling in new ways with the purposes of God in history. The death of so many soldiers brought him face to face with the meaning of life.

"A new birth of freedom” was layered with political and religious definitions.

The metaphor first contrasts with the old. The “new birth” which emerged in the context of the war and Lincoln’s leadership meant at Gettysburg he was no longer defending an old Union, like he did in his First Inaugural Address in 1861, but proclaiming a new Union. The old Union tried to deal with the hypocrisy of slavery and the ideal that “all men are created equal” by ignoring slavery in the interest of national unity and survival. Now with the country at war, maintaining that duality was politically pointless and metaphorically dead as it hadn’t keep the country together peacefully, but driven it to civil war. Lincoln was declaring that the new Union would fulfill the Jefferson’s promise of liberty for all, the crucial step the founders were too afraid to take in 1776.

The “new birth” in Christianity and evangelical movements was a spiritual birth made by the choice of the believer. In essence, through the horrors of war the United States is “born again” as it should have been. In this context, the cost to make an America a nation of liberty and equality was paid at Gettysburg in 1863 not Lexington and Concord in 1776 nor at Yorktown in 1781.

The “new birth” was a paradox in both politics and religion. Lincoln and scholars since had come to see the Civil War as a ritual of purification. The old Union had to die just as the old man had to die. In death there was preparation for a new Union and a new humanity.

and that government
of the people,
by the people,
for the people,
shall not perish from the earth.

"Government of the people, by the people, for the people," is a perfectly parallel structure that essentially sums up the American democracy in 10 words. These 10 words have been used by Americans and American politicians ever since as the justification for the United States’ existence and the moral rightness in its cause — the inherent "rightness” of representative democracy.

It also forms an if-then summary conclusion for the entire address: If we honor the dead here by
fighting to preserve the union at all costs, like they did, and if we ensure liberty for all, our experiment — then democracy — will be born again — in the way it should have been, without slavery — and never die.

While it inspires certain inevitability in victory and immortality in the United States as a nation, the use of a negative in the last line demonstrates the threat of annihilation if they fail. Lincoln was putting fate of the war in his listeners’ hands. They weren’t putting down a small rebellion that could have been won or lost with little consequence — they were fighting for their very survival. The grand experiment of representative democracy, universal liberty and the nation’s existence were on the line.

In peacetime, Lincoln could said “will live forever,” or “flourish for all time,” but the struggle of the Civil War put the importance on victory. If the Union failed to defeat the Confederacy, the United States could have Balkanized and broken up over time, so the use of “shall not perish” implied that the nation was potentially on its deathbed.

Lincoln’s opposition to slavery was not overtly stated in the address. In his 1860 presidential campaign, he was willing to accept slavery for the sake of union. However, as the Civil War became less of an issue of a state’s right to secede and more about liberty and freedom of all the country’s citizens, Lincoln turned his attention toward emancipation, in as much as its morality as its ability to hurt a rebellious South. In 1862, after the Battle of Antietam, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect in January 1863.

In turning the war against an political contention and into a issue of morality, he galvanized the North and drummed up support for the effort on moral grounds, even as the war was stalled.

Although the wording of “Government of the people, by the people, for the people,” was Lincoln’s, the sentiment was not.

Lincoln’s law partner William Herndon had given him sermons of abolitionist minister Theodore Parker, who had written in “The Effect of Slavery on the American People:” “Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people,” a line which Parker later wrote Lincoln had especially liked. Lincoln pared the wording down to its constituent words into a more succinct and poetic rendition.

In the immediate aftermath of the speech, Lincoln was uncertain about how it was received. He reportedly turned to another person on the platform and commented, in effect, that the speech fell on its face. Journalists were mixed, some complaining the the speech was too short, so short they had thought the address was only an opening remark before a larger and more political speech. Other journalists commented on its poetry, eloquence and brilliance. The address has become one of the best known, most repeated, and beloved speeches in American history, so the latter group eventually won out.

As proof, Everett, the great orator, wrote a note to Lincoln the next day: "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes."

Through the address, Lincoln created the idea of a unified nation in which states’ rights were
subject to the rights of the nation as a whole. The issue of states' rights valued over national common good had were a determent to military capacity in the war.

The South, which placed the value of individual states over the central government of the Confederacy stayed true to this cause and often refused to allow their brigades and regiments to be commanded by colonels and generals from other states, which contributed to inefficiency in movement and on the battlefield, and the occasional military blunder.

The North, which valued union over all, didn't suffer from this single-mindedness. The North's blunders were due to the general incompetence of some of its leaders alone.

After the war ended, the idea of national unity expressed in the address also contributed to a dramatic shift from provincial to national political identity.

No longer would citizens refer to themselves as a "Virginian in America" or a "New Yorker in America" but "an American from Virginia" or "an American from New York." Before the American Civil War and the Gettysburg Address, we were A united states of America, but afterward, we were The United States of America.