

In the elegy “O Captain, My Captain,” Walt Whitman lamented the untimely demise of Abraham Lincoln, who fell after leading his nation through its time of direst peril. Without Lincoln, some felt that the nation, without its great “captain,” would also lose its course. Fortunately, before his assassination, Lincoln left his beloved country with deep reflections and sage advice in his Second Inaugural Address. In this moving speech, Lincoln’s parallel structure, religious references, and appeals to his audience all served to instill the country with a sense of hope and new beginnings.

Though the speech is short, it is filled with contrasting images. Indeed, it was a time of contrasts – North against South, slave or free. Lincoln uses parallel structure to compare these opposites and to ready his countrymen for a shift between war and peace. Comparing the north and the south, he says, “one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.” In the closing months of the war, this would have served to strengthen his moral position as leader of the north. Later, he implores that, “if God wills...every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid with another drawn by the sword.” Again, he contrasts the justice of the northern effort with the injustice of slavery. These parallel contrasts also reflect a broader parallelism – that between the old and the new. As the war ends, Lincoln is sending a hopeful message to his people. By referencing “the occasion corresponding to this” (his first inaugural address), Lincoln is inviting comparison between the hellish years behind his country and the hopeful ones ahead. Lincoln’s use of parallelism serves not only to strengthen his position, but also to inspire his followers to hope.

After the bloody years of war, however, hope seemed pretty far off. In order to encourage his people, Lincoln makes wide use of religious references. As the Union seemed on the verge of reunification, it was imperative that Lincoln try to reconcile the two warring factions. He uses religion to do this, noting that “Both [the north and south] read the same Bible and pray to the same God.” He also tries to inspire Americans, saying that despite this, “The Almighty has His own purposes.” Combined with biblical quotes, these references are employed to evoke the feeling of the nation being guided by a higher power. Lincoln tells his people that the horrors of the past years were simply part of God’s plan, and that “the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” These religious

references serve to reunite the country under a common bond and to inspire the people by appealing to a higher power.

The question states that Americans expected a “lengthy speech on politics, slavery, and states’ rights.” But Lincoln surprised them, and strengthened his purpose by appealing to his audience – the common man. Lincoln acknowledges “the prayers of both” sides and is openly sympathetic to the travails faced by his country. Throughout the speech, he uses “we” and “us” to invoke a sense of unity, and to give the impression that he feels for the common man. Lincoln ends the speech with a challenge for his nation – referred to as “us” of course. He implores the nation to care “for for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.” This final appeal reaches directly out to the people. Throughout the speech, Lincoln is consistently conscious of his audience and uses appeals to further his purpose.

Though Lincoln’s life was cut short, he did not leave his countrymen lost and blind. His second inaugural address was a masterwork, in which Lincoln inspired hope in his people, and evoked ideas of new beginnings. The overall structure, religious references, and awareness of his audience demonstrated by Lincoln in this speech serve to enhance and reinforce his moving message.