The Gettysburg Address

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The life of Abraham Lincoln epitomizes the classic American story of rising from humble origins through hard work, persevering despite formidable obstacles, and achieving success as well as lasting fame. The future 16th president of the United States was born in a log cabin to an impoverished and itinerant family on the Kentucky frontier. Growing up, Lincoln engaged in typical tasks of a young man in a pioneering community, working on the farm, splitting logs, and building the homestead. While he had practically no formal schooling, Lincoln's love for reading, particularly the Bible, became the foundation of his self-education. Lincoln's political career began in 1834 when, after a failed campaign two years earlier, he was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives and served until 1841. After two years as a representative in the U.S. Congress from 1847-1849, Lincoln ran for the senate in 1858, an election that catapulted him into the national spotlight, thanks to a series of debates (the Lincoln-Douglas debates) showcasing his talent for public speaking. Lincoln lost the senate election but won the White House in 1860. His first year in office, the Civil War began and lasted throughout his presidency; five days after the surrender of the Confederacy, Lincoln was assassinated. His leadership during the Civil War, including the watershed signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the war's successful end, prevented the dissolving of the nation. As such, Lincoln is consistently ranked by scholars as the greatest president in U.S. history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was the most northern point achieved by Confederate forces in the Civil War. A successful invasion into the northern states at Gettysburg could have led to the occupation of Washington, D.C., but after a three-day-long battle from July 1st to July 3rd in 1863, Union forces triumphed. While the Battle of Gettysburg marked the definitive turning point of the Civil War in favor of Union victory, the war was far from over, and Lincoln needed his country's support. At the dedication of a national cemetery on the site of the battle where 51,000 soldiers died in combat––the most costly battle in United States history––Lincoln delivered a short address before an audience of 15,000 people. Without cursing the Confederacy or lapsing into jingoism, Lincoln interpreted the democratic significance of the war in the Gettysburg Address, which he had expounded upon in an earlier war address in 1861: "On the side of the Union, it [the war] is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men––to lift the artificial weights from all shoulders––to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all––to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." Lincoln's Gettysburg Address became a hallmark of American rhetoric and a definitive statement of the country's core values.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Abraham Lincoln is remembered as one of the most eloquent public speakers in American history, yet he gave very few public addresses. After accepting the Illinois Republican Party's nomination to the United States Senate, Lincoln delivered his famous "House Divided" speech in response to the country's deepening divisions over the issue of slavery. Alluding to the words of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Lincoln boldly declared, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." In addition to the "House Divided" speech and address at Gettysburg, Lincoln is equally remembered for his second inaugural address, delivered only a few weeks before the end of the Civil War. The speech echoes his call in the Gettysburg Address for Americans to dedicate themselves to the "unfinished work" of the war. Seeing an end in sight to the Civil War, Lincoln pleads at the end of the address for a spirit of reconciliation: "With malice toward none; with charity for all…let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds." Unlike the long-windedness that characterized the rhetoric of his day, Lincoln sought to relate to his audience, writing and speaking in a concise style that never sacrificed poignancy or richness of content. Other significant speeches in American rhetorical history include Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman?* speech (1851) and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, *I Have a Dream* speech (1963), both of which deal with the practical outworking of founding American principles. Michael Shaara's 1974 novel *The Killer Angels* tells the story of the Battle of Gettysburg from a fictional perspective.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Gettysburg Address
- **When Published:** The speech was delivered on November 19, 1863, at the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.
- **Literary Period:** 19th century
- **Genre:** Speech
- **Setting:** Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

EXTRA CREDIT

The Other Gettysburg Address. At the cemetery dedication ceremony, President Lincoln was not the primary speaker. Edward Everett, one of the most celebrated speakers of the time, delivered a two-hour-long speech which was followed by Lincoln's brief address. Everett later wrote to Lincoln and remarked, "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes."

A Lasting Legacy. The historian Garry Wills offers a unique perspective on the significance of the Gettysburg Address in his book *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*: "The Gettysburg Address has become an authoritative expression of the American spirit––as authoritative as the Declaration [of Independence] itself, and perhaps even more influential, since it determines how we read the Declaration. For most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it."

PLOT SUMMARY

Lincoln begins the Gettysburg Address by reminding the audience of their country's ancestry, specifically the founding fathers who established a nation dedicated to the ideals of liberty and equality, and that the current Civil War threatens the survival of the nation and everything for which it stands. Lincoln spends the middle part of his speech addressing the matter at hand, dedicating the new national cemetery at Gettysburg and commemorating the lives lost in battle. However, Lincoln asserts that, in a sense, commemoration is futile, as the soldiers *themselves* have already dedicated the site by sacrificing their lives. Instead, Lincoln implores the audience to honor the soldiers' sacrifices by committing themselves to supporting the war, the survival of the nation, and the nation's defining democratic values.

CHARACTERS

Abraham Lincoln – Abraham Lincoln was the president of the United States from 1861 until his assassination in 1865. Known for shepherding the Union through the Civil War, Lincoln was a transformative president who preserved the Union and ended slavery. One of his most famous speeches (and one of the most famous speeches of all time) was the Gettysburg Address, given on the battlefield to honor the many soldiers who died there. At the time, Lincoln's young son Tad was suffering from symptoms similar to Typhoid fever, which had killed another of Lincoln's young sons the year before, and Mary Todd, his wife, was recovering from a head injury. Against his wife's advice to stay home with their ailing son, Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg to speak at the cemetery dedication. In Lincoln's day, it was not customary for presidents to address the general public directly in the way presidents do so frequently today. Nevertheless, Lincoln used his mastery of language and persuasion to inspire his country, boost support for the war, and prepare the public for the possibility of more violence. He taught the audience listening to his address (and the many who would read the speech in newspapers the next day) how to make sense of the bloodshed: Lincoln defined the Civil War as a test of democratic American values, a test that would determine whether a country committed to freedom, equality, and liberty could survive.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

REMEMBRANCE, COMMEMORATION, AND FUTURE ACTION

Throughout his address at Gettysburg, Lincoln weaves together the past, present, and future in order to inspire his audience to action. In the first sentence, he calls the audience to remembrance by summoning the past, specifically the founding of the United States as a nation "**conceived** in liberty" and "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." This lays the foundation for Lincoln to contrast the past (the nation's history) with the present (the current Civil War and the survival of the United States along with its founding principles). For the audience, remembering national values rooted in a shared past becomes the lens for understanding the present and what's at stake in this war. Remembrance gives way to commemoration when Lincoln transitions to the immediate present, the task of dedicating the site where brave soldiers fought in the Battle of Gettysburg. However, Lincoln states that dedicating this ground––the ostensible purpose of his speech––isn't necessary, since the soldiers' deaths have hallowed the ground better than words ever could. Instead, Lincoln summons his audience to dedicate *themselves* to an ongoing cause––the cause of freedom for which the soldiers died. However, Lincoln avoids the grim, violent aspects of war by channeling the past in this present moment, interpreting the civil war as a struggle for democracy and beckoning the audience to ensure the nation's future survival.

LIFE, DEATH, AND SACRIFICE

In the first sentence of his address at Gettysburg, Lincoln speaks of the founding of the United States like the **birth** of a child: the United States is a nation "conceived in liberty" and "brought forth" by "our fathers." Personifying the nation as a living person allows Lincoln to draw a parallel for the audience between the mortality of the nation alongside the mortality of the soldiers. If human life is fragile and needs to be protected, the same is true for the nation's life. Instead of treating the life of the nation and the death of the soldiers (which he is tasked to commemorate) as separate topics, Lincoln links the two through the theme of sacrifice. As the speech unfolds, Lincoln contextualizes the casualties at Gettysburg and the tragedy of the Civil War by interpreting the soldiers' deaths as sacrifices offered to ensure the continued life of the United States. At the end of the speech, all three themes converge when he envisions "a new birth of freedom" thanks to the sacrificial deaths of the soldiers at Gettysburg. Thus, Lincoln gives meaning and significance to what his audience might perceive as senseless bloodshed by connecting themes of life and death with sacrifice. This linking of themes advances his purpose of not only honoring the dead but bolstering support for the war and national values.

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, AND FREEDOM

Surprisingly, Lincoln doesn't speak much about liberty, equality, or freedom in the Gettysburg Address. In fact, each term in this patriotic trifecta occurs only once: Lincoln declares in the first sentence that the United States is a nation "**conceived** in liberty" and dedicated to the principle that "all men are created equal," and he concludes by envisioning "a new birth of freedom" in the nation. However, these themes implicitly inform every aspect of the speech and Lincoln's message to his audience, specifically that the Civil War is a test of the values that define the nation known as the United States. Soldiers "gave their lives" not only that the "nation might live," but that the values at the heart of the nation––liberty and equality and freedom––might endure. Moreover, the survival of these values depends not only upon soldiers fighting in combat but upon Lincoln's audience, the representatives of the nation who embody its defining values. For Lincoln, freedom depends upon everyone, especially "the living," to honor the dead by carrying on the work the soldiers "nobly advanced" to preserve these values. Thus, the audience must commit themselves not only to the war but to the ideals of the country in order to ensure its existence, advancing the nation the founding fathers envisioned as a world-wide symbol of democracy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LIFE AND DEATH

Throughout the speech, life and death operate as symbols of national survival. In the opening sentence, Lincoln recalls the beginning of the United States's life as a nation which he personifies as "conceived in liberty" by the founding fathers. He refers to the lives of the soldiers who fought at Gettysburg and addresses the soldiers who continue to fight in the Civil War, as well as the audience listening to the speech, as "the living." References to life are balanced with images of death, specifically the deaths of the Union soldiers who gave their lives at Gettysburg. The "honored dead" have made possible the continued life of the United States and, with the commitment of the living audience, the hope of a "new birth of freedom."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Great Speeches* published in 1991.

The Gettysburg Address Quotes

❝ Fourscore and seven years ago...

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Lincoln begins his 1863 speech by marking the time since the passage of the Declaration of Independence––specifically, 87 years––but he doesn't state this number explicitly. Instead, Lincoln uses a vigesimal numeral system, an archaic method of counting, in which a "score" refers to 20. Thus, four score and seven years is four times twenty (80) plus seven (87). Many of the world's oldest languages employ a vigesimal system, and it features prominently in the Bible, a book that shaped Lincoln's life and education. It is possible that Lincoln took inspiration from the King James Bible's translation of Psalm 90:10, which reads, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon

cut off, and we fly away." This verse echoes the same themes of life and death that Lincoln probes in his speech, and his use of the vigesimal system, which recalls the Biblical way of counting, may be a way to prime his audience, many of whom would be familiar with the Bible and perhaps even this verse, for the important themes in his speech. At the very least, the first five words establish a serious tone, one that reflects the reverence of the occasion to commemorate the new national cemetery. The formal diction, as well as his use of assonance in the vowels of "four" and "score" and the alliteration of "score" and "seven," enable Lincoln to command attention from his audience and foreground his authority as a skilled orator.

> …our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In the speech's opening sentence, Lincoln personifies the founding of the United States as a birth through phrases such as "our fathers brought forth" and "conceived in liberty." This diction reminds the audience of their shared history and sets the stage for the recurring theme of life and death (of both the soldiers and the nation itself) throughout the speech. Lincoln's reference to the "continent" reminds the audience that the land on which they are hearing this speech, the site of the three-day-long horrific Battle of Gettysburg, is part of that "new nation" established by the founding fathers. With "the proposition that all men are created equal," Lincoln alludes to the Declaration of Independence and starts building his argument that the Civil War is being fought in order to preserve and extend the nation's founding principles of liberty, equality, and freedom.

> But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

The coordinating conjunction ("But") that begins this sentence marks a turn in the speech as Lincoln starts to unfold his intended purpose in the Gettysburg Address. In three successive clauses, Lincoln repeats the words "We cannot" to emphasize the futility of the purpose of the ceremony. While all three verbs ("dedicate," "consecrate," "hallow") are synonymous, the intensity of their connotations builds throughout the clauses, which supports Lincoln's emphatic claim concerning the ceremony's purpose. The root word of "consecrate" is "sacred," a word that carries a religious connotation not found in the word "dedicate." However, the word "hallow"––which appears in the King James Bible's translation of the Lord's Prayer––comes from the Old English word for "holy," which intensifies the religious connotations from "consecrate." Some in the audience, Lincoln seems to imply, might view this cemetery dedication as a ceremony with holy or spiritual significance. However, that spiritual purpose—to set apart this ground as holy—is impossible to achieve. As Lincoln will shortly explain, the soldiers' deaths have accomplished that as human words never could.

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

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

This sentence of the Gettysburg Address offers two noteworthy examples of irony. Lincoln was known for his gift of public speaking and rhetorical persuasion, beginning with his famous debates with Stephen Douglas during the Illinois senate campaign in 1858, as well as his "House Divided Speech" when he declared, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." But here, Lincoln emphasizes *actions*––soldiers fighting and dying for democracy––over words, underscoring the significance of

their deaths. Moreover, in a touch of irony that Lincoln could not foresee, the world remembers the Gettysburg Address as one of the greatest speeches ever written. In fact, the entire speech is carved into stone within the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Many writers have turned to the speech for inspiration, including Martin Luther King, Jr., who alludes to the address in his "I Have a Dream" speech, which was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963—one hundred years after Lincoln's words at Gettysburg.

❝ 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 here gave the last full measure of devotion—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.

Related Characters: Abraham Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103-104

Explanation and Analysis

In the speech's longest sentence, Lincoln expands his use of dignified diction from the previous sentence with phrases, such as "great task" and "honored dead" and "increased devotion," that further emphasize the importance of the audience's support for the war and the battle for democracy. In the second half of the sentence, Lincoln's language becomes boldly patriotic, referring to the war as a "cause" and summoning the audience to "resolve" and building to the phrase "a new birth of freedom" as he promotes national ideals to inspire his audience to action.

Furthermore, this sentence features an elaborate succession of relative clauses which begin with "that." The first clause showcases another deft use of Lincoln's wordplay. Like the multiple meanings he employs for the word "dedicated," Lincoln draws out two uses of the word "devotion": the audience must draw *their* devotion from the example of the soldiers who died devoted to the war and the ideals of democracy.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

Eighty-seven years ago, the United States became a nation based upon the principle of liberty and the idea that "all men are created equal."

The Declaration of Independence and its historical significance serves as the foundation for the opening sentence of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Signed in 1776 by representatives of the original thirteen British colonies, this founding document of the United States declared the colonies' separation from Great Britain and established a new country of "free and independent states." Lincoln ends the sentence with a quotation from the Declaration: "all men are created equal." This direct reference alludes to the central cause of the Civil War––the institution of slavery in southern states and its potential expansion in new U.S. territories. Lincoln deliberately refers to the Declaration of Independence as opposed to the Constitution, the U. S. founding document ratified in 1787 that outlines the framework of the federal government and that initially protected the institution of slavery. While Thomas Jefferson may not have envisioned equal rights extending to slaves when writing the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Lincoln appropriates Jefferson's words and implicitly understands them as encompassing the enslaved persons for whom the war is being fought. Thus, Lincoln reinterprets not only the Declaration of Independence but American history by foregrounding the founding principle of the United States as a nation built upon the idea of equality for everyone, including slaves––a principle that superseded the Constitution as it existed in 1863. Moreover, this sentence, with its overtones of the Declaration and Lincoln's expansion of one of its core propositions, introduces one of the speech's major sets of themes: liberty, equality, and freedom.

A civil war has put to the test the survival of not only the United States, a nation founded on the principle of liberty, but other nations founded on liberty as well.

In the opening sentence of the address, Lincoln evokes the past; the second sentence transitions to the present. He appeals to his audience by using inclusive language, specifically the pronoun "we"; the war involves everyone, not just soldiers, generals, politicians, and presidents. In this sentence, Lincoln beckons his audience to understand the stakes behind the country's catastrophic divisions and the horrific casualties of the past two years. For Lincoln, the Civil War is the ultimate test of the survival of the nation and the defining democratic ideals for which the country stands––a matter of life and death for the United States. Moreover, the implications of the war extend beyond the survival of American democracy to the survival of other nations founded upon similar ideas.

President Lincoln is delivering his address to an audience on the site of the Gettysburg battle.

After explaining the significance of the Civil War, Lincoln continues his use of inclusive language, reminding the audience of their physical location at the site of the battle of Gettysburg. This battle, which raged the first three days of July in 1863, is considered to be the deadliest battle in the Civil War and the most costly battle in American history, with 51,000 casualties. Moreover, it is also considered by historians as the turning point of the Civil War in which Union forces began to triumph over the Confederacy. Given the symbolic significance of the war that Lincoln claims in the previous sentence, this sense of place gives rise to the association that Gettysburg is not just a battlefield of the Civil War; it is the battlefield of the fight for democracy.

This site is being dedicated to those who died in battle. These **deaths** have significance, as they have afforded the possibility of continued life for the United States as a nation.

In the previous two sentences, the word "dedicated" is used in the context of the commitment to democracy. In this sentence, Lincoln reuses the word to address the purpose of the ceremony and the task of the audience: dedicating the national cemetery to honor the sacrifice of the dead soldiers. The multiple meanings of "dedicated" in the speech thus far––the dedication of the soldiers and a nation dedicated to democracy––will assist Lincoln later when he calls for the audience's dedication to the ongoing war. Not only does Lincoln mention the purpose of the ceremony; he subtly clarifies the purpose of the war itself and offers a subliminal commentary on the speech's major themes of liberty, freedom, and equality: For Lincoln, freedom comes at a cost, and the continued life of the nation depends upon the sacrifices of the soldiers who died on the land where Lincoln is delivering his address ("...those who here gave their lives, that the nation might live."). Lincoln continues his use of the pronoun "we" which highlights the unity he seeks for the divided country, and he refrains from differentiating between the soldiers of the Union and those of the Confederacy. Rejecting exclusive language that could underscore divisions in the country, Lincoln implicitly recognizes the cemetery as the resting place of American soldiers, both Union and Confederate.

It is appropriate to dedicate this land to those who **died** in battle.

While it might be easy to dismiss this short sentence as insignificant, it carries subtle importance. Lincoln will go on in the following sentences to seek the audience's support for the ongoing war, but to do so outright would be sheer propaganda and disrespectful, suggesting that Lincoln's sole purpose for attending the ceremony is to shift attention away from the dead soldiers to the war and himself. Prior to his address at Gettysburg, Lincoln had been portrayed in print media as unsympathetic towards the casualties of the war, despite the fact that he would write personal letters to the families who lost loved ones in battle. While he does need the audience's support for the war to ensure a Union victory, guaranteeing that the United States and its democratic values can survive, Lincoln does not exploit his invitation to speak for political gain. Instead, he expresses his esteem for the dead and confirms his support for the national cemetery.

In fact, however, it is not possible to dedicate this site, make it sacred, or make it worthy of respect.

Roughly one-third of the way through the speech, Lincoln begins leading the audience to reconsider the purpose of this ceremony. While not unsympathetic to the idea, Lincoln is skeptical that any living person can endow spiritual significance to a concrete reality. How can any ceremony truly give justice to the sacrifices of 51,000 soldiers? Lincoln's emphatic sixth sentence of the Gettysburg Address lays the groundwork for his claim that the audience should commit themselves to the underlying reason why these soldiers sacrificed their lives.

The **living** and dead soldiers who fought bravely in the Battle of Gettysburg have already made the site sacred. President Lincoln and his audience are powerless to do so.

Here, Lincoln continues his treatment of themes related to life and death. Why is it impossible to dedicate the land to the dead soldiers? Just as the nation's survival is made possible by the deaths of the soldiers, Lincoln reveals an additional significance of their deaths. In a reversal that rhetorically undermines the purpose of the ceremony, Lincoln claims that the soldiers, through their sacrifices, have already accomplished this task, and the audience can do nothing else.

In the future, no one will remember the commemorative speeches of dedication, but no one will forget the soldiers' fighting on the site of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Lincoln's reference to the world returns the audience back to the global implications of the Civil War, which he outlines in the second sentence. Throughout the speech, Lincoln repeats the word "here," which continually emphasizes the importance of the land on which the speech is delivered, the land where "brave men" "gave their lives." However, "here" carries a special resonance as Lincoln considers not only the reality of this moment and the soldiers' sacrifices, but its larger significance in world history.

Instead of dedicating this site to the **dead** soldiers, the living audience should dedicate themselves to the war and the principle of liberty for which the soldiers fought and died.

Now that Lincoln has rhetorically overturned the purpose of the ceremony dedicating the National Cemetery, Lincoln continues to shift the focus of the speech away from the dead to the "living" as the subliminal purpose of his speech is revealed––to rouse support for the ongoing Civil War. By 1863, the war had dragged on for two years, with a number of casualties never before seen in American history and mass destruction throughout the south. Moreover, opposition to the Civil War was far-reaching, from politicians to the general populace, including a series of deadly draft riots in New York City that occurred only a week after the Battle of Gettysburg. In his address, Lincoln is careful to avoid any unpleasant associations with a widely unpopular war. For the fourth time, he repeats the word "dedicated" which now extends not only to the country's democratic ideals and the soldiers who died in battle, but to the members of the audience. Instead of "war," he says "unfinished work" and qualifies this work as "nobly advanced" by the soldiers. This diction lends dignity and prestige to Lincoln's cause, indicating to the audience that the Civil War and the task of ensuring the survival of democracy are worthy projects.

Again, the **living** audience should be dedicated to the war and the principle of liberty, and the dead soldiers are the motivation for this dedication. This way, the deaths of these soldiers will not be meaningless, and freedom and democratic government will not only persist but begin anew.

Lincoln opens his address at Gettysburg by evoking the nation's past in his reference to the birth of the United States. The speech's middle section honors the sacrifices of the soldiers and addresses the importance of the present moment (the dedication of the national cemetery) while also highlighting the ceremony's limited significance. In the final sentence, the past and present collide as Lincoln looks beyond the deaths of the soldiers and towards the future: a rebirth of the nation's founding democratic values. This sentence begins in the same way as the previous sentence ("It is for us the living, rather..."), but with a minor variation ("It is rather for us...") that maintains just enough emphasis to underscore Lincoln's message without becoming repetitive. Structurally, the sentence comprises a series of relative clauses that intertwine many of the speech's core themes. In the first relative clause, the "honored dead" become the inspiration for the commitment to the Civil War and the war's significance in the struggle for liberty, equality, and freedom. The second relative clause builds upon the first: While the audience may not have the power to hallow the ground on which the soldiers gave their lives, they do *have the power to ensure that their deaths have meaning, a claim that signals Lincoln's implicit encouragement for the audience to support the war. In the penultimate clause, Lincoln transitions from the present into the future with the image of birth that harkens back to the opening sentence. Here, Lincoln asserts that despite what seems like an impending death, the nation will not only survive but be reborn––unified and committed to the principle that all men, including the enslaved persons whose humanity is being championed in the present war, are created equal. The last clause contains one of the most quoted phrases in American culture––"a government of the people, by the people, for the people"––which serves as a shorthand definition for the meaning of democracy. Lincoln omits the traditional conjunction that appears before the final item in a series, giving the phrase perfect balance, and the repetition of "the people" reminds the audience of their role as the stewards of democracy. The final words of Lincoln's address envision that a successful end to the Civil War will ensure that democracy will live on, not only in the nation of the United States, but the entire world. Thus, Lincoln's final sentence completes the speech's cycles of past, present, and future as well as birth, death, and rebirth.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Knighten, Shelby. "*The Gettysburg Address*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Feb 2022. Web. 16 Feb 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Knighten, Shelby. "*The Gettysburg Address*." LitCharts LLC, February 16, 2022. Retrieved February 16, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-gettysburg-address.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Gettysburg Address* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Lincoln, Abraham. The Gettysburg Address. Dover Thrift Editions. 1991.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lincoln, Abraham. The Gettysburg Address. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions. 1991.