Classical Rhetoric as a Lens for Reading the Key Speeches of Lincoln’s Political Rise, 1852–1856

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After Abraham Lincoln’s first political career ended with the expiration of his only term in Congress in 1849, he concentrated on building his law practice, pursuing only limited political activity until his celebrated return to politics in the second half of 1854.1 Biographers and historians have long recognized the 1854–56 period of Lincoln’s life as significant for his work in helping to found the Illinois Republican Party.2 During the first phase of his return to politics, Lincoln applied his uncanny ability to analyze his audiences in constructing historical, legal, and moral arguments against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the spread of slavery. In this period Lincoln created what scholars have often called his first great speech. Delivered in Springfield and Peoria in October 1854, this speech has become known as the Springfield-Peoria speech or just the Peoria speech, and it forms the foundation of Lincoln’s second political career.3

Despite the extensive treatment of the Peoria speech in Lincoln studies, no work has focused on comparing the rhetoric of the Peoria speech with his political rhetoric just before and after it.4 From 1852 through

1. For an account of Lincoln’s frustrated ambition just before his 1854 return to politics, see David Herbert Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 162–67.
3. For an account of how ideas in Lincoln’s Peoria speech reappear in his other speeches and writings throughout his second political career, including his presidency, see Lewis E. Lehrman, Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2008), 153–255.
4. In different places in Lincoln at Peoria, Lehrman briefly cites ideas in the Clay eulogy that appear in the Peoria speech, but Lehrman does not discuss other rhetorical qualities of the Clay eulogy and does not reference the Scott Club speech. Lehrman does not compare and contrast the rhetorical qualities of Lincoln’s 1852–56 political speeches.
Figure 1. *Lincoln Draws the Line*, by John McClarey, near the site of his Peoria speech. Photo by the author.
1856, as Lincoln became increasingly active in politics, his rhetorical challenges became more diverse. His experiences in politics, writing, and speaking were so closely interrelated that they were probably of mutual benefit. A study of Lincoln’s adaptation of political messages to his audiences in key speeches of this period reveals a growing rhetorical versatility and increases our understanding of his communicative ability. This thesis is developed by considering selected, notable speeches by Lincoln of this period: the 1852 eulogy on Henry Clay, the 1852 Scott Club speech, the 1854 Peoria speech, four 1856 campaign stump speeches, and the 1856 banquet speech in Chicago. In composing these speeches, Lincoln adapted the major components of classical rhetoric to suit his message: content (invention), structure/organization (arrangement), and style (language techniques).

Classical rhetoric—the work of Greek and Roman rhetoricians—mainly concerns the art of persuasion in three forms of discourse: political (deliberative), forensic (legalistic), and ceremonial (epideictic). Classical rhetoric established the primary field of communication study that has been continually expanded and refined for centuries down to the present. This field of study continues to provide concepts, including fundamentals derived from classical rhetoric, for generating, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and teaching spoken and written discourse in almost every academic field and profession. One of the elements of classical rhetoric in Lincoln’s political speeches of particular concern in this essay is structure, because how he organized those speeches reveals a great deal about his communicative knowledge and skill.

Neither do other books that treat Lincoln’s rhetoric of the 1850s, such as John Channing Briggs, Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).


6. Classical rhetoric is also a primary source of information for appealing to an audience based on reason (logos), emotion (pathos), and the credibility of the speaker/writer (ethos). Corbett and Connors, Classical Rhetoric, 18.

7. In classical rhetoric the structure of discourse concerns types of sections and their sequence. The anonymous Roman author of the widely influential Rhetorica ad Herennium described an organizational pattern consisting of six sections: the introduction (exordium), a statement of the facts of an issue in question (narration), the outline of the main points in the speaker’s case (division), the proof (confirmation), a refutation of the opposition (confutation), and the conclusion (peroration). This sequence is not meant to be a rigid formula, and the adaptation of these concepts allows for flexible
Lincoln would have encountered strategies of classical rhetoric in his efforts to improve his communicative ability from childhood through adulthood. The tradition of classical rhetoric was a major influence on the work of nineteenth-century Anglo-American rhetoricians, and some of the textbooks and anthologies that Lincoln is known to have read (or may have read) afforded him the opportunity to learn about classical rhetoric in his formative years.\(^8\) One of these books was Lindley Murray’s *English Reader* (1799). William H. Herndon wrote of it, “Mr. Lincoln told me in later years that Murray’s English Reader was the best school-book ever put into the hands of an American youth.”\(^9\) Many scholars have accepted this testimony as evidence that the young Lincoln read Murray’s text. The *English Reader* includes didactic material from Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783).\(^10\) Murray’s book promoted the study of models of composition, arrangement, especially in the body of a work depending on a particular communicative purpose and audience. Corbett and Connors, *Classical Rhetoric*, 20; 256–92.


10. Blair advocated principled discourse, and he was a proponent of plain language, which characterizes Lincoln’s style, rather than a bombastic style, which is associated with the rhetoric of Stephen A. Douglas. For a discussion of Lindley Murray’s use of Blair’s *Lectures*, see Robert Bray, *Reading with Lincoln* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2010), 5–6. Bray discusses other textbooks Lincoln may have read. For a discussion of the rhetorical theory of Hugh Blair, including the influence of classical rhetoric on it, see Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran, eds., “Editors’ Introduction,” in Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), xv-liv. Nineteenth-century Anglo-American education continued the classical tradition of emphasizing the study of grammar, rhetoric, and logic; and Lincoln may have known about the close relationship between grammar and rhetoric through his study of Kirkham’s *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* at New Salem because that source includes Kirkham’s view of that relationship, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14070/14070–h/14070–h.htm#RHETORIC. It follows that a Lincoln motivated to study grammar would also have been interested in rhetoric. Whether Lincoln read Blair’s *Lectures* at New Salem is uncertain. Bray concludes it is very unlikely that Lincoln read Blair’s *Lectures* as a separate work. For Bray’s explanation, see *Reading with Lincoln*, 46. Douglas L. Wilson notes, “Except for the passages on rhetoric in the textbooks he read as a young man, it is doubtful that Lincoln ever studied the art of persuasion as a formal discipline or read Aristotle’s *Rhetoric.*” *Lincoln’s Sword* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 147. Ronald C. White Jr. maintains, “Lincoln’s rhetoric embodies the principles of the ancient Greek philosopher [Aristotle].” *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln through His Words* (New York: Random House, 2005), xxi.
including selections from classical antiquity. Throughout its history, the pedagogy of classical rhetoric included copying and imitating from models. Biographers have cited Lincoln’s stepmother’s testimony that during his childhood he copied material from books, and he may have learned about language from that experience. Similarly, Lincoln the aspiring politician in the 1850s could have learned about strategy in classical rhetoric through his perusal of the oratory of Daniel Webster, who was formally educated in that subject.

It is difficult to determine to what extent Lincoln’s rhetorical skill reflected conscious application of learned information rather than intuitive assimilation of information. Douglas L. Wilson has cited various sources that testify Lincoln carefully, thoughtfully planned, composed, and revised. David Zarefsky comments on Lincoln’s self-directed learning process, observing that Lincoln “studied models. . . . Lincoln probably thought about rhetoric. . . . Lincoln’s implicit theory [as suggested by the 1842 Washington Temperance Society speech] reaches back to the classical understanding of rhetoric as the discovery of available means of persuasion. His concern was not with artistry in itself but with making his message acceptable to his audience.” Biographers have cited Lincoln’s self-consciousness about his lack of formal education, and his lifelong desire for self-improvement led him to locate and study the speeches of political friends and foes. Whether Lincoln understood that his rhetorical skill encompassed elements of classical rhetoric is unknown, and there will always be the question as to what extent his thinking-composing process used rhetorical terminology. A sentence in Lincoln’s eulogy on Henry Clay suggests he was familiar with some of it: “Mr. Clay’s eloquence did not consist, as many fine specimens of eloquence does [do], of types and figures [of speech]—of antithesis.”

The most significant political speeches Lincoln delivered just before his 1854 return to politics were given in the summer of 1852: the eulogy on Henry Clay (July 6) in the statehouse at Springfield and

11. Corbett and Connors, *Classical Rhetoric*, 411–13. This source explains that the teaching-learning methods of classical rhetoric also included reading aloud. Many biographers have noted that the adult Lincoln often asked people to listen to him read his own writing to solicit their feedback.
the speech for the Scott Club of Springfield a little more than a month later. The statehouse audience most likely consisted of leading state politicians and local leading citizens. Many of them would have been formally educated, and Lincoln gave them an informative account of Clay’s distinction as a national leader and eloquent orator. In fact, the eulogy can be seen as a history lecture to a captive audience. Clay was Lincoln’s ideal statesman, and in the Clay eulogy Lincoln reveals his own values by praising the ones he most admired in Clay. Early in the eulogy Lincoln describes Clay’s devotion to the Union for its promise of freedom as a natural right and the resulting economic benefit: “He loved his country . . . mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of human liberty, human right and human nature. He desired the prosperity of his countrymen . . . chiefly to show the world that freemen could be prosperous.” In future speeches Lincoln would use these arguments in his opposition to slavery’s extension.

After giving a biographical sketch of Clay, Lincoln devotes much of the speech to an explanation of Clay’s work to accomplish the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850: vital measures for controlling slavery agitation and avoiding disunion. The importance of preserving the Union is a theme that would appear in many of Lincoln’s future speeches, and, of course, as president he said it was his central mission. Another primary concept seen in Clay that Lincoln would express in future speeches was opposition to “both extremes” on slavery. Extremists included those who rejected the Constitutional protection of slavery where it existed at the founding (abolitionists) and those “increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery [Southern fire-eaters], are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white-man’s charter of freedom—the declaration that ‘all men are created free and equal.’”

The Scott Club speech has a more explicit political purpose than the Clay eulogy. Lincoln gave the Scott Club speech in support of the Whig presidential candidate, General Winfield Scott. Lincoln had requested to speak, prompted by a desire to respond to a speech Stephen A. Douglas had given on behalf of the Democratic presidential candidate, Franklin Pierce, in Richmond, Virginia, on July 9, 1852. The Scott Club speech was given to a sympathetic, partisan audience. This circumstance led the eager Lincoln to make the most of an opportunity to entertain, inform, and persuade his audience at the expense of common political foes, and the speech required two dates (August 14 and 26). Many Lincoln
biographers and historians have ignored the Scott Club speech, and the scholars who do mention it are typically derisive, for example, calling it “a very poor effort,” an “inelegant harangue,” “a strained performance,” and “Lincoln at his feeblest.”¹⁵ Michael Burlingame says this speech “reflected the immaturity of the pre-1854 Lincoln.”¹⁶ Biographer Fred Kaplan offers a more positive assessment: “With an election at stake, Lincoln hammered away at Douglas and Pierce with his usual combination of satiric wit, literary allusion, practical politics, and issues of principle, the speech a rallying of the faithful.”¹⁷

Lincoln begins the Scott Club speech by identifying nearly a dozen topics from Douglas’s Richmond speech. Identifying topics in advance is called forecasting, a technique derived from classical rhetoric.¹⁸ Lincoln reminds the audience he used to “try [italics in original] to answer many of his [Douglas’s] speeches,” and the one at Richmond “though marked with the same species of ‘shirks and quirks’ as the old ones, was not marked with any greater ability.”¹⁹ Lincoln’s contempt for the Richmond speech, combined with Douglas’s outstanding political success and Lincoln’s frustrated ambition for political distinction, apparently motivated him to give the Scott Club speech. Lincoln’s introduction also describes Douglas’s central theme: “In addition to these specific points, a constant repetition of something more than insinuations and yet something less than direct charges, that Gen. Scott is wholly under the control of Seward of New York; and that abolitionism is controlling the whole whig party, forms a sort of keynote to the whole speech.”


¹⁸. Forecasting is an adaptation of “division,” a section of structure in classical rhetoric as described supra in note 7. The signaling function of forecasting is useful in any part of a composition. Forecasting, which names forthcoming content, differs from foreshadowing, which only hints at it.

¹⁹. Speech to the Springfield Scott Club, August 14, 26, 1852, Basler, Collected Works, 2:136. The printed versions of Douglas’s speech at Richmond and Lincoln’s rebuttal of it in the Scott Club speech have paragraphs ranging from one sentence to a dozen or more. Lincoln’s speech is several paragraphs longer than its target. Other quotations from the Scott Club speech are from Collected Works, 2:137–57.
The body of the Scott Club speech is a belabored cross-examination of Douglas’s speech based on its topic-by-topic sequence. Lincoln explains and exploits various factual errors and distortions in Douglas’s speech with a blend of satirical and informative passages intended to entertain and persuade. In the first section of the body of the speech, after caviling at length over Douglas’s imprecise language, Lincoln attacks Douglas’s accusation that a new naturalization law proposed by Scott “to admit to the rights of citizenship, such foreigners as may serve one year in time of war, in the land or naval service of the United States” would be unconstitutional. Lincoln cites existing Federal laws that contained different naturalization provisions for “adult aliens,” their minor children, and foreigners who had been “proscribed by any State.” Lincoln then asks whether Douglas has read the naturalization laws and comments sarcastically: “Even those adopted citizens, whose votes have given Judge Douglas all his consequence, came in under these very laws. Would not the Judge have considered the holding of those laws unconstitutional, and those particular votes illegal, as more deplorable, than even an army and navy, a million strong?” By pointing out Douglas’s faulty logic, Lincoln undermines his opponent’s credibility (ethos).

In the opening of the second half of the speech, Lincoln says that he and another critic of Douglas who had spoken to the Scott Club were not trying to make personal attacks on Douglas, but “only trying to meet his mode of conducting the assault which the whole party are making upon Gen. Scott.” In light-hearted but tedious detail, Lincoln covers the remaining topics in the second half of his speech, finally reaching “the key-notes of the Richmond speech—Seward—Abolition—free soil, &c. &c.” According to Lincoln, the Democrats’ “hatred to Seward” derived from their need to gain the Free-Soilers’ votes in New York that would ensure Pierce’s election. Lincoln explains the Democrats chose Pierce because of the appeal he would have to Free-Soilers owing to his alleged opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law. Lincoln also implies duplicity in the Democrats by citing a letter from Pierce that Lincoln speculates “will deal in generalities, and will be framed with a view of having it to pass at the South for a denial [of opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law].”

Lincoln’s Scott Club speech is more an exercise in refutation than a rousing campaign speech. It primarily attacks Douglas’s rhetorical weaknesses but does not make much of a case for Scott’s qualifications to be president. Lincoln says Scott’s military leadership well qualifies him for civilian leadership. Buried in the Scott Club speech is a noteworthy reference to the importance of the Union, for Lincoln
says Scott would represent the “union view of the slavery question.” Lincoln apparently does not feel a need to issue a direct call for his audience to vote for Scott, as he would do in 1856 for Frémont. The Scott Club speech proves that Lincoln wanted to take advantage of opportunities to challenge Douglas and that Lincoln’s political analysis and articulation were formidable. In the Scott Club speech he demonstrates intellectual, ethical, and rhetorical strength, if not eloquence, by exposing Douglas’s errors in fact and reasoning.

The Clay eulogy and the Scott Club speech show that three years after he left Congress Lincoln still wanted to be engaged in public life. Yet in 1852 Lincoln saw no issue substantial enough to draw him more deeply into politics. Two years later Douglas would present him with just such an issue—the threat of slavery extension and more slavery agitation. The rhetoric of Lincoln’s response to those problems would be far more significant and sophisticated than the rhetoric of the Scott Club speech.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act, which Douglas shepherded through Congress in January 1854 and President Pierce signed in May, in effect repealed the Missouri Compromise and replaced it with the principle of “popular sovereignty” (allowing voters in the newly-created Kansas and Nebraska territories to determine the legality of slavery within their borders). Lincoln was among the many who were outraged at the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act because it opened the possibility for the extension of slavery into areas where it previously had been forbidden. The backlash caught Douglas by surprise.20 Being “thunderstruck and stunned,” Lincoln did not write or say anything formally in response to the act’s passage until several months later, after he had carefully formulated his views. Besides conducting research in the state library, Lincoln had his ear to the ground, witnessing at least one speech denouncing slavery.21 He also had opportunities to discover Douglas’s central arguments by studying newspaper reports of his current speeches given in various Illinois communities and hearing him speak in Bloomington on September 26.

In early September Lincoln’s renewed interest in politics led him to become a candidate for the Illinois state legislature. While keeping

20. Douglas felt the combination of the Compromise of 1850 and popular sovereignty in the unorganized territory would end slavery agitation for the most part so that the country could get on with the business of developing the West and was shocked at the intensity and duration of the backlash. Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (1973; reprt., Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 439–56.

up with his law practice, he began speaking and writing letters and at
least one unsigned editorial attacking the Nebraska bill. Lincoln gave
a rebuttal speech in response to Democrat John Calhoun in Spring-
published an editorial attributed to Lincoln that “continued his debate
with John Calhoun.”

On October 3 Douglas spoke in Springfield at the Illinois State Fair, and the next day Lincoln responded with a
speech at the statehouse. In like fashion, Douglas spoke at the Peoria
Courthouse in the afternoon of October 16, and Lincoln followed that
evening. Similarities and differences between Lincoln’s speeches at
Springfield and Peoria afford insight into his rhetoric, including his
writing and revision process, but comparing these speeches is chal-
lenging. First, no complete text of the speech at Springfield has been
found. Second, the extant text of the Peoria speech is one Lincoln wrote
specifically for newspaper publication, so he may have edited his
text for the reading audience. The formal structure of the speeches at
Springfield and Peoria suggest that Lincoln may have had newspaper
publication in mind early on. The most obvious difference between
the speeches given at Springfield and Peoria is that the one at Peoria
ends with a refutation of Douglas’s response to Lincoln’s Springfield
speech of October 4.

On October 6 the Springfield Daily Register noted that Lincoln opened
his speech there with “a number of jokes and witticisms,” but they do
not appear in the introduction of the speech at Peoria. Lincoln may have
excluded such material at Peoria because he felt a need to get quickly to
his subject and purpose—perhaps a conscious effort to accommodate
an interested but somewhat tired audience. Lincoln, however, did use
a touch of humor when he appeared after Douglas’s speech in Peoria

During this period Lincoln may have written other anti-Nebraska editorials, but the
Calhoun editorial is the only unsigned editorial from this period attributed to him. If
Lincoln did not write other editorials published in the Illinois Journal at this time, he
surely read them there and elsewhere. A significant example is “Political Power in
Negroes,” published in the Illinois Journal of September 23, 1854. This six-paragraph,
unattributed editorial emphasizes the political advantage Southern states had because
of the constitutional provision counting three-fifths of the slave population in the total
population, thus giving those states additional votes in the House of Representat-
ives and the Electoral College. Lincoln cited the three-fifths provision as an advantage for
the South in two places in his Peoria speech.

23. For contemporary and reminiscent accounts of the culture of Peoria in 1854,
Douglas’s and Lincoln’s speeches there, and photostatic copies of pertinent cor-
respondence, including Lincoln’s, see B. C. Bryner, Abraham Lincoln in Peoria, Illinois (1926;
to invite the audience to have dinner and then return in the early evening to hear him. In characteristic, self-deprecating humor, Lincoln tells the audience he had agreed to give “one of his [Douglas’s] high reputation and known ability” the final word, “for I suspected if it were understood, that the Judge was entirely done, you democrats would leave, and not hear me; but by giving him the close, I felt confident you would stay for the fun of hearing him skin me.”

Reexamining seldom-used contemporary newspaper reports, Graham A. Peck notes that Lincoln’s speeches at Springfield and Peoria “are organized almost identically” but that the Peoria speech omits some short passages and relocates others: “At Peoria Lincoln dropped mention of the Know Nothings and the Nicholson letter [Lewis Cass’s 1847 proposal of popular sovereignty], relocated two passages [to the conclusion] relating to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and deemphasized distinctions between himself and other opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. All in all, these were very modest changes for a speech of such length and complexity.” Lincoln retained his original structure: no new major section was added to the body of the speech, and no major section was deleted or repositioned. Peck suggests that Lincoln may have made some changes specifically for publication. If so, here is an example that Lincoln was astute in realizing that writers need to adapt their messages according to communicative context and audience—fundamentals of classical rhetoric.

Many Lincoln scholars have praised the Peoria speech for its fact-based, logical use of various kinds of arguments and unembellished style. Yet Mark E. Neely Jr. says the Peoria speech could be


26. Enos, s.v. “Contextuality.”

interpreted as expressing a sectional view and is vague about when and how to end slavery. The widely recognized significance of this speech has led to critical commentary on its every aspect, including its structure, but the assessment of the Peoria speech’s structure has lacked depth. The *Illinois Journal* said the speech was “interlocking in all its parts.” Noah Brooks, a contemporary reporter, noted that witnesses of the speech called it “perfect in its construction, a marvel of logical force.” Historian John S. Wright extols, “It was well prepared and beautifully organized.” Among the qualities of the Peoria speech Lewis E. Lehrman admires is its structure: “The clarity and originality of the prose, the organization and the substance of the speech—rather more than its delivery—contributed to Peoria’s intellectual and emotional power.”

All of the preceding descriptions offer general praise but no explanation of the Peoria speech’s structure. With access to Douglas’s speeches in newspapers, Lincoln could have created the Peoria speech with a structure based on a sequence of topics in those speeches. In a published speech Douglas gave November 9, 1854, in Chicago after the fall elections, he said it followed an outline for many of his earlier speeches that year. Yet Lincoln decided not to base the Peoria speech on Douglas’s topic-by-topic pattern, as he had done in the Scott Club speech. Fred Kaplan offers a limited analysis of the structure of the Peoria speech: “The audience heard a loosely structured presentation divided into four sections: (1) a statement of theme and purpose; (2) a history of slavery in relation to the territories; (3) an analysis of the ramifications of the Missouri Compromise and its revocation; and (4) a discussion of the relationship between slavery, self-government, and what it is to be human.” Kaplan does not identify the classical roots of these sections, and the speech is more tightly, carefully structured than he realizes.

In fact, the sections of the Peoria speech present a textbook example of the structure of political oratory in classical rhetoric. The first sec-

31. Wright quoted in ibid., 281.
32. Ibid.
34. Kaplan, 252.
tion is the introduction, or exordium (paragraphs 1–5 of 118 total paragraphs, or 4 percent of the speech). Beginning the body of the speech, the second section (paragraphs 6–19, 12 percent) is called a statement of fact. It provides a history of Federal measures designed to end slavery agitation that culminated in the Compromise of 1850, and this section includes historical information and some of the anti-Nebraska Act arguments he gave in speeches at Bloomington, Illinois, on September 12 and 26. The third section (paragraphs 20–74, 47 percent), attacking the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and popular sovereignty, is refutation. A fourth section (paragraphs 75–91, 14 percent), arguing for the restoration of the Missouri Compromise, is called confirmation; and a fifth, two-paragraph section (paragraphs 92 and 93, 2 percent) is the conclusion, or peroration, of the speech given at Springfield. For clarity and force of argument, Lincoln logically places a refutation section before the confirmation section. As previously noted, the sixth section (paragraphs 94–118, 21 percent) cogently closes Lincoln’s case with a refutation of Douglas’s response to Lincoln’s Springfield speech of October 4. The two refutation sections, exemplifying Lincoln’s analytic, legalistic prowess, constitute 68 percent of the speech.

Lincoln’s previous speeches do not show such an explicit application of structure derived from classical rhetoric. Developing such a complex structure required knowledge. The use of classical structure suggests Lincoln was aspiring to create a major political document in a formal, elevated manner to be appreciated by the well-educated, influential members of a listening and reading audience.

An interesting and important question arises as to a derivative source of classical rhetoric that may have influenced the organization of the Peoria speech. Scholars have disagreed over whether Lincoln had read Blair’s *Lectures* as an individual work apart from material quoted in Murray’s *English Reader*. *Lectures* contains two chapters on organizational strategy based on classical rhetoric, but that information does not well correspond to the organization of the Peoria speech, and Blair has nothing whatsoever to say about refutation.35 A more likely source is the rhetoric of Senator Daniel Webster. During his two years in Congress, Lincoln met Webster, socialized at Webster’s Saturday breakfasts, and became familiar with his oratory. According to Burlingame, Lincoln “greatly admired Webster’s speeches, which he predicted ‘will be read for ever.’”36 Unlike Henry Clay, whose rhetoric

36. Burlingame, 1:141.
Lincoln also admired, Webster received advanced formal education, which included work in classical rhetoric. Clearly, Lincoln’s rhetoric was influenced by Webster’s. For example, Burlingame observes that in Lincoln’s 1856 “lost speech” at Bloomington, he quoted from Webster’s famous 1830 Second Reply to Hayne speech: “Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable.” Burlingame further notes that the beginning of Lincoln’s 1858 House Divided speech paraphrases the first sentence of that same Webster speech.

In the research Lincoln conducted as preparation for his 1854 Peoria speech, he most likely perused Webster’s 1850 speech supporting Clay’s compromise proposals to end slavery agitation. Often called the Seventh of March Address, it was published in the National Intelligencer and the Congressional Globe, and Lincoln said he read them. Certain qualities of rhetoric seen in Webster’s speech, including some elements in the classical tradition, have parallels in Lincoln’s Peoria speech and thus may have influenced it: for example, using a well-focused introduction, forecasting, providing a statement-of-fact section, offering conciliatory passages toward the South, using discrete passages of refutation and confirmation, appealing to reason by carefully sequencing paragraphs or sentences to build toward a main point, and calling for national unity.

38. Burlingame, 1:418.
39. Ibid., 1:458. The 1830 passage in Webster that Lincoln paraphrases in his 1858 House Divided speech is ornate in contrast to Lincoln’s plain style. Webster had developed a somewhat plainer style by the time he wrote his 1850 speeches in support of Clay’s compromise proposals. Both the ornate, or grand, style and the plain style have roots in classical rhetoric. Corbett and Connors, 461–63.
41. For the text of Webster’s 1850 Seventh of March Address, see Smith, Defender of the Union, 167–74. Analysis of this eighteen-paragraph speech reveals Webster’s attempt to provide an even-handed account of the history and implications of slavery agitation and to call for peaceful, legal measures in dealing with this problem: a two-paragraph introduction that acknowledges sectional “agitations” and states the speaker’s purpose of pleading for national “harmony”; a five-paragraph statement of fact to review slavery history, including the alleged shift in the Southern viewpoint from slavery as evil to slavery as a “blessing”; a two-paragraph assertion of the speaker’s opposition to slavery in California, New Mexico, and other new territories; three paragraphs that include forecasting the topics in the remaining body of the speech and concurring with Southern objections to agitation caused by Northern abolitionist activity; a one-
The introduction of Lincoln’s Peoria speech states his subject and purpose in a series of five one-sentence paragraphs. The first sentence is direct, succinct: “The repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the propriety of its restoration, constitute the subject of what I am about to say.” The introduction asserts a recurring theme, the importance of the Union, in this speech: “I also wish to be no less than National in all the positions I may take; and whenever I take ground which others have thought, or may think, narrow, sectional, and dangerous to the Union, I hope to give a reason . . . why I think differently.” This introduction clarifies the scope of the speech, a technique in classical rhetoric, including what the speaker/writer will not do. Lincoln implies he will not base his presentation on a point-by-point response to a Douglas speech, preferring instead “to present my own connected view of this subject . . . ; yet, as I proceed, the main points he has presented will arise, and will receive such respectful attention as I may be able to give them.”

In the tradition of classical rhetoric, Lincoln forecasts development from one section to another. Forecasting strengthens clarity of organization and coherence, especially important qualities in such a long composition as the Peoria speech. Lincoln starts section two with a statement of its subject and purpose: “In order to [get?] a clear understanding of what the Missouri Compromise is, a short history of paragraph description of the North’s complaint of being at a political disadvantage if slavery is extended; one paragraph criticzing the North’s press for highlighting provocative Southern rhetoric; one paragraph criticizing Southerners for imprisoning Northern free blacks working on ships arriving in Southern ports; one paragraph calling for legal solutions to Southern and Northern grievances wherever possible; one paragraph refuting the notion that secession can be accomplished without war; and a single concluding paragraph affirming the founding principles and Constitution and extolling the need for national unity. During Senate proceedings in the summer of 1850, Webster gave other but shorter speeches in support of Clay’s compromise proposals, culminating in the important Seventeenth of July Address just before Webster left the Senate to become secretary of state. This farewell address opens with a tribute to the late President Taylor, and its arguments supporting Clay’s proposals took the form of pragmatic, topic-by-topic legislative steps to accomplish a balance between Northern and Southern interests for the purpose of sustaining the Union. Smith, 76–86. The organization of this speech does not suggest it significantly influenced the organization of Lincoln’s Peoria speech.

42. Corbett and Connors explain forecasting as a technique to gain coherence: “We want the parts of our discourse to ‘hang together,’ and while we would like the sutures to be as unobtrusive as possible, we nevertheless want our readers to be aware that they are passing over into another division of the discourse. Aristotle himself, that great master of exposition, is not at all hesitant about marking his transitions explicitly” (Classical Rhetoric, 269).
the preceding kindred subjects will perhaps be proper.” He similarly begins the third section: “I think, and shall try to show, that it is wrong; wrong in its direct effect, letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska—and wrong in its prospective principle, allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it.” The Kansas-Nebraska Act thus threatens the Union, Lincoln maintains. Section four opens with a direct statement of its topic and a central idea of the entire speech: “The Missouri Compromise ought to be restored. For the sake of the Union, it ought to be restored.” Lincoln begins section five, the peroration of the speech at Springfield, by directly addressing his audience: “Fellow countrymen—Americans south, as well as north, shall we make no effort to arrest this [‘spirit of Nebraska’]? . . . Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south—let all Americans—let all lovers of liberty everywhere—join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.”

In the Peoria speech Lincoln was careful to forecast organization and development not only from one section to another but also within sections. For example, in section three he identifies the arguments he will strive to refute: “First, that the Nebraska country needed a territorial government. Second, that in various ways, the public had repudiated it [Missouri Compromise], and demanded the repeal; and therefore should not complain of it. And lastly, that the repeal establishes a principle, which is intrinsically right. I will attempt an answer to each of them in its turn.” In this third section he employs the principle in classical rhetoric of building toward the most significant point. He often begins a paragraph with directional phrasing: for example, “But to return to history”; “Before proceeding, let me say”; “But it is next said”; “I now come to consider”; and “Let me here drop the main argument, to notice what I consider rather an inferior matter.” Further, Lincoln throughout uses rhetorical questions, conjunctions, and such transitional adverbs as again, thus, and further.

During the dozen days between Lincoln’s statehouse speech of October 4 and the version of it given at Peoria, he was busy with legal business in court in Pekin, but he found time to analyze Douglas’s response to his statehouse speech and compose a rebuttal, which

43. Ibid., 277.
became the sixth and final section of the Peoria speech. Peck notes this final section “suggests the degree to which he chose to protect the cohesion” of his speech first given at Springfield.44 Lincoln opens this section with a forecasting thesis: “At Springfield, twelve days ago, where I had spoken substantially as I have here, Judge Douglas replied to me—and as he is to reply to me here, I shall attempt to anticipate him, by noticing some of the points he made there.” Lincoln rejects Douglas’s denial that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was conceived as an instrument of slavery extension.45 Much of this final section of Lincoln’s Peoria speech corrects Douglas’s errors and distortions of historical fact.46

In this final section Lincoln rejects Douglas’s arguments that the Kansas-Nebraska Act has precedence in the Compromise of 1850, in the Washington territorial law of 1853, or in the work of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. Lincoln also denies that the question of slavery in new territories should be decided before they submit their constitutions to Congress in applying for statehood. Lincoln thus emphasizes that Congress has authority over this question. Lincoln says he agrees with Douglas that “this government was made for the white people and not for the negroes,” but Lincoln reiterates his objection to the Nebraska bill that it fails to recognize that African Americans are humans and should not be treated as property. Lincoln avers that “the great mass of mankind . . . consider slavery a great moral wrong;

44. Peck, “New Records,” 37. Given Lincoln’s pressing court schedule at Pekin the week before his speech at Peoria, he was shrewd in using his time to compose the rebuttal to Douglas’s response to his speech at Springfield and closing the Peoria speech with it for a strategic effect on his opponent rather than trying to incorporate those rebuttal points through an extensive revision of his speech at Springfield.

45. In rejecting Douglas’s denial that the Nebraska Bill was conceived as an instrument to extend slavery, Lincoln employs a Shakespearian allusion, and this device suggests he had the well-educated members of his audience in mind: “Like the ‘bloody hand’ you may wash it, and wash it, the red witness of guilt still sticks, and stares horribly at you.” This simile compares the Kansas-Nebraska Act to a bloody hand, which symbolizes the undeniable facts that Macbeth is haunted by a guilty conscience for murdering the good King Duncan and that the Kansas-Nebraska Act will allow slavery to enter those new territories. In an 1863 letter Lincoln wrote, “I think nothing equals Macbeth. It is wonderful.” Abraham Lincoln to James H. Hackett, August 17, 1863, Basler, Collected Works, 6:392.

46. Throughout the Peoria speech, Lincoln draws heavily on his own research and knowledge of history; and at the end of his statement-of-fact section, he offers a disqualifier to offset any quibbling over his own use of facts: “The foregoing history [of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise] may not be precisely accurate in every particular; but I am sure it is sufficiently so, for all the uses I shall attempt to make of it.” Peoria Speech, Basler, Collected Works, 2:254.
and their feelings against it, is not evanescent, but eternal. It lies at the very foundation of their sense of justice.” The repetition of this moral criticism of slavery endows Lincoln’s lengthy text with a vital unity.

In closing, Lincoln expresses frustration with a rhetoric that disregards the accurate use of historical facts and the principles of the Declaration of Independence: “If a man will stand up and assert, and repeat, and re-assert, that two and two do not make four, I know nothing in the power of argument that can stop him. I think I can answer the Judge so long as he sticks to the premises; but when he flies from them, I can not work an argument into the consistency of a maternal gag, and actually close his mouth with it.” Lincoln says at the outset of the speech that he will refrain from personal criticism, but in the end Lincoln could not resist jabbing Douglas for his sophistry. This final section is somewhat redundant of material presented in the preceding body of the speech, but undoubtedly Lincoln felt his closing rebuttal served the purpose of trying to gain a verbal chokehold on his feisty opponent. If Lincoln were writing an editorial rather than trying to capture his speech, a shorter composition would have been appropriate.

In addition to structure, the style of Lincoln’s Peoria speech accommodates his distinct message and diverse audience, which ranged from the illiterate in the listening audience to the minimally educated and the well educated in both his listening and reading audiences. Plain language characterizes Lincoln’s style, and this quality is evident in the preceding quotations that demonstrate forecasting. Yet some of Lincoln’s language is witty and refined. He sharpens refutation with irony, a tactic traced to classical rhetoric. In several instances he sarcastically refers to the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a “sacred right” of self-government. With hyperbole and prosopopoeia, he mocks: “Nebraska brings it [the “sacred right”] forth, places it on the high road to extension and perpetuity; and, with a pat on the back, says to it, ‘Go, and God speed you.’” He finds chicanery in the argument that the Kansas-Nebraska Act does not necessarily mean slavery extension: “It is argued that slavery will not go to Kansas and Nebraska, in any event. This is palliation—a lullaby.” The style of the Peoria speech includes other literary techniques seen in classical rhetoric: for example, sentences with structural parallelism and contrasting ideas (antithesis). Many of the sentences of the last paragraph of section five (again, the peroration of the speech at Springfield) gain impact through

47. Corbett and Connors, Classical Rhetoric, 280–82.
the repetition of initial phrasing (anaphora). Lincolnian writers have generated extensive and ongoing publications about his style.\textsuperscript{49}

The Peoria debate marked the last of the closely successive appearances of Lincoln and Douglas at the same place in the 1854 campaign, and they spoke separately at other places until Election Day in November.\textsuperscript{50} In a speech at Chicago on October 27, Lincoln’s confidence in his rhetoric led him to quip that, as reported in the \textit{Chicago Daily Journal}, “he could not help feeling foolish in answering arguments which were no arguments at all.”\textsuperscript{51} After the November election through January 1855, Lincoln pursued his ambition for the US Senate. During the state legislature’s deliberations in the first week of February, when he realized he could not get enough votes to win, he gave his support to the anti-Nebraska Democrat Lyman Trumbull.

Lincoln’s tenacious political ambition moved him beyond the 1855 setback as he cautiously joined other anti-Nebraska advocates to form the Illinois Republican Party, and his communicative ability helped the party address its critics, attract members, and promote its first presidential candidate. In his speeches of 1856, Lincoln would carefully assess his audiences and show resourceful adaptability in structuring and developing his arguments, although there is no evidence that he provided manuscripts for publication.

At the first Illinois Republican convention (Bloomington, May 1856), Lincoln delivered his famous “lost speech.” As with the Scott Club speech, Lincoln relished addressing a sympathetic, partisan audience; and scholars have speculated that ingratiating, provocative statements


\textsuperscript{50} According to \textit{The Lincoln Log}, after his speech at Peoria of October 16, 1854, Lincoln delivered speeches at Urbana (October 24), Chicago (October 27), Quincy (November 1), possibly at Naples (November 2), and possibly at Carlinville (November 4), http://www.thelincolnlog.org/view/1854.

in the Bloomington speech led party associates to prevent its publication.\textsuperscript{52} From summer until the November election, Lincoln took the lead in the Illinois Republican Party’s promotional communication. He wrote personal letters, at least one form letter to solicit party support, and at least one editorial.\textsuperscript{53} Additionally, he delivered campaign speeches throughout Illinois and in Kalamazoo, Michigan.\textsuperscript{54} His political goal was to get old-line Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, and Know-Nothings to “fuse” in support of John C. Frémont, the Republican presidential candidate. Lincoln’s rhetorical goal was to convince these disparate groups that the Republican Party best represented the political and economic principles of the founding fathers and the Constitution. Specifically, Lincoln sought to persuade the supporters of the Know-Nothing presidential candidate, Millard Fillmore, that they could not carry Illinois and that if they wished to defeat the Democratic Party candidate, James Buchanan, they could do so by casting their vote for Frémont. Democrats charged that Republicans were forming an abolitionist, sectional party that would bring about disunion.\textsuperscript{55}

In 1856 Lincoln gave various stump speeches to campaign for Frémont, to answer the critics of the Republican Party, and to build its base—the most complex political and rhetorical challenge in the first phase of his return to politics. More text has survived from the speech he gave at Kalamazoo, Michigan, on August 27 than from any other he gave in that campaign.\textsuperscript{56} The speech was given at a Republican rally open to the public. The message, structure, and development of the Kalamazoo speech are especially important to consider because, unlike the Scott Club and Peoria speeches, Lincoln does not use speeches by Douglas as targets. Nor does Lincoln use as much of a formulaic and forecasted structure as he did in the more formal and apparently lengthier Peoria address. At Kalamazoo Lincoln assumed his audience included not only Republicans but also members of the Know-Nothing and Democratic parties, and he courted them all. To establish his focus

\textsuperscript{52} Burlingame, \textit{Abraham Lincoln}, 1:418–20.


\textsuperscript{54} According to \textit{The Lincoln Log}, after his lost speech at Bloomington of May 29, 1856, Lincoln frequently spoke from June through November 1. Lincoln’s July speeches were in northern Illinois, where there were more abolitionists than in central, western, and southern Illinois; but he eventually and often spoke in those sections, too, http://www.thelincolnlog.org/view/1856.

\textsuperscript{55} Burlingame, \textit{Abraham Lincoln}, 1:430–33.

and get attention, Lincoln incisively proclaimed in the introduction that “slavery, at the present day, should be not only the greatest question, but very nearly the sole question.” The thirteen-paragraph text—the fullest account of one of Lincoln’s stump speeches to date—exhibits Lincoln’s rhetorical ingenuity in arguing for the Republican cause.

The first body section of the speech blends explanation of principle (confirmation) and rejection of popular sovereignty (refutation). The speaker’s guiding principle is that slavery is a national problem that should concern all Americans and should be handled by the Federal government. Lincoln rejects popular sovereignty and Douglas’s argument that the Supreme Court should determine when and how such a policy would be implemented in Kansas. Further, Lincoln cautions that even the few slaveholders moving to Kansas could lead others eventually “to look upon slavery with complacency.” Lincoln then says Fillmore and Buchanan do not favor limiting slavery’s extension, and he urges their antislavery supporters to turn to Frémont. In this speech Lincoln four times directly asks antislavery Fillmore or Buchanan supporters to vote for Frémont, whereas in the Scott Club and Peoria speeches Lincoln does not explicitly ask the audience to vote for a named candidate. Lincoln also argues against the complacent attitude that slavery extension is “none of our business” by citing the three-fifths clause advantage of the South. Extending slavery, he says, would increase that undesirable advantage.

Additionally, Lincoln maintains that the slavery question is a national problem because free labor, not slave labor, represents the founding principles that have made the United States great. Free labor deserves “an outlet, through which it may pass out to enrich our country.” Lincoln attacks the Southern shibboleth that “slaves are far better off than Northern freemen” by describing how freedom enables individuals to advance economically: “The man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him. . . . When these reasons can be introduced, tell me not that we [all citizens] have no interest in keeping the Territories free for the settlement of free laborers.”

Lincoln then shifts into refutation of the accusations that “our party is a sectional party” and that electing a Republican administration will dissolve the Union. First, Lincoln points out that the country has had administrations with both the president and vice president being from the North and both being from the South without the Union being dissolved. Then, Lincoln addresses criticisms that Frémont is an abolitionist and disunionist by stating that the accusers admit they have no proof. Somewhat abruptly, Lincoln predicts the nation will see either slavery’s
proponents or opponents eventually “triumph” (anticipating the thesis of the 1858 “House Divided” speech) and that voting for Buchanan endorses slavery while voting for Frémont opposes it.

Lincoln argues by using rhetorical questions: “They [critics of Republicans] tell us that the Union is in danger. Who will divide it? Is it those who make the charge? Are they themselves the persons who wish to see this result?” Lincoln next argues with the rhetorical question he would use in the 1861 secession crisis: “a majority will never dissolve the Union” and asks “can a minority do it?” Lincoln closes by saying the Democratic Party has always been “the friend of individual, universal freedom,” and again urges Democrats to unite with the Republican cause “and not to Democrats alone do I make this appeal, but to all who love these great and true principles [of liberty and union].” Lincoln ends with a flourish: “Come, and keep coming! Strike, and strike again! So sure as God lives, the victory shall be yours.” This speech thus concludes with a strong emotional appeal of patriotism based on preserving the Union.

Newspaper reports of Lincoln’s other 1856 campaign speeches are brief but shed additional light on strategies in his oratory tracing to classical rhetoric. Lincoln continued to use arguments from the Kalamazoo speech and strengthened them with the classical technique of citing or quoting testimony from authority. In this case, Lincoln referenced first Clay and Webster, then Washington and Jefferson. Lincoln engaged in humorous interaction with detractors in the audience, and he displayed rhetorical skill in customizing his message to his particular audience. For example, in his speech at Vandalia on September 23, Lincoln faced an audience in which many had Southern roots and were resistant to Frémont, and Lincoln denies that Republicans were disunionists and quotes “from the disunion speeches of [Southern politicians] Toombs, Slidell, Wise and Brooks.” On October 18 at Belleville, Lincoln spoke to an audience that included many Germans who had come to America to escape oppression and played to their love of liberty by affirming the value of “free labor, ‘that national capital,’ in the language of Col. FREMONT, ‘which constitutes the real wealth of this great country, and creates that intelligent power in the masses alone to be relied on as the bulwark of free institutions.’”

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Buchanan won the 1856 presidential election because the anti-Nebraska supporters split between Fillmore and Frémont. Republican William Henry Bissell was elected governor of Illinois. On December 10 at a postelection Republican banquet in Chicago, Lincoln delivered an inspirational speech to members of the base he had helped to create, and an examination of the speech shows he ultimately had more than a celebratory purpose and more than just Republicans in mind. The speech reflects the increasing diversity of Lincoln’s political rhetoric: it emphasizes the themes of liberty and union, the immorality of slavery, folksy humor for satiric effect, problem analysis, numeric analysis of voting, refutation, solution development based on his political-social philosophy, and exhortation. The speech includes the stylistic techniques characteristic of Lincoln’s well-crafted writing, including antithesis, metaphor, and anaphora. In this speech, Lincoln famously observes that public opinion shapes American government and that “whoever can change public opinion, can change the government.” He quotes Buchanan’s accusation that Republicans are trying “to change the domestic institutions of existing states” and “doing every thing in our power to deprive the Constitution and the laws of moral authority.” Lincoln, rather, says the Democrats are the ones who are trying to shift from the American principle of “the practical equality of all men” to “the opposite idea that slavery is right.” Lincoln denies that the majority of Americans believe slavery is right.

The conclusion is an exhortation to meet the challenge and was the only part published in Springfield’s Illinois Journal, appearing a week after the speech was given, and provided “in manuscript” by Lincoln to the editors. The peroration is polished and poignant, and its conciliatory tone foreshadows his inaugural addresses: “In the late contest we were divided between Frémont and Fillmore. Can we not come together, for the future. Let every one who really believes, and is resolved, that free society is not, and shall not be, a failure, and who can conscientiously declare that in the past contest he has done only what he thought best—let every such one have charity to believe that every other one can say as much. Thus let bygones be bygones. Let past differences, as nothing be; and with steady eye on the real issue, let us reinaugurate the good old ‘central ideas’ of the Republic. We can do it. The human heart is with us—God is with us. We shall again be able not to declare, that ‘all States as States, are equal,’ nor yet that ‘all citizens as citizens are equal,’ but to renew the broader,
better declaration, including both these and much more, that ‘all men are created equal.’”

Lincoln’s immediate, primary audience at the banquet consisted of Republicans, but the conclusion also specifically appeals to supporters of Fillmore. In this celebratory speech Lincoln might have limited himself to entertaining his audience by using his well-known talent for telling stories and jokes. Instead, he spoke to inspire political unification. Burlingame writes that the Chicago banquet speech was “eloquent” and “helped clinch Lincoln’s reputation as the leader of Illinois’s Republicans.”

The Chicago banquet speech capped the first phase of Lincoln’s return to politics, and during the span of just over two years, he had found a compelling political purpose and was pursuing it through multiple roles and responsibilities. Throughout this period Lincoln demonstrated a shrewd ability to adapt his communicative purpose to contexts and audiences of various kinds of speeches—each with a distinctive political message, but most of them, to one extent or another, include the theme of the importance of preserving the Union: a eulogy (Clay); an entertaining, legalistic rebuttal (Scott Club); a formal address intended for publication (Peoria); stump speeches (e.g., Kalamazoo); and a celebratory speech (Chicago). The 1852–56 speeches are the first substantial evidence of Lincoln’s rhetorical growth and versatility. Reporter Horace White, in commenting on Lincoln’s stump speeches during the Lincoln-Douglas debates, wrote, “I was struck with admiration and wonder that Lincoln hardly ever repeated himself. Each speech, no matter how small the audience, seemed to be a new one, although the pabulum was the same and some particular phrases were in frequent use.”

From 1852 through 1856, while maintaining a prominent law practice, Lincoln was more involved in public life than in any previous period. As a leading strategist for the Illinois Republican Party, he was writing policy that would become essential to the success of his

61. Ibid.
63. Horace White, The Lincoln and Douglas Debates: An Address before the Chicago Historical Society, February 17, 1914 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1914), 28. White also noted that Douglas’s speeches tended toward much similarity, and White paraphrases what Lincoln told him about his opponent’s stump speeches: “Douglas was not lacking in versatility, but that he [Douglas] had formed a theory that the speech which he was delivering at his small meetings was the one best adapted to secure votes and since the voters at one meeting would not be likely to hear him at any other, they would never know that he was repeating himself, or, if they did know, they would probably think that it was the proper thing to do” (33).
party at the state and later the national levels. Lincoln was functioning as the director of communications for the new state party, writing editorials and engaging in correspondence necessary for that party’s development. He was writing his own speeches, addressing diverse audiences, and excelling as one of that party’s chief spokesmen. His aspiring political work during this time exemplifies the principle that skill in rhetoric is essential for success in a profession and that such skill benefits from the study of models informed by classical rhetoric.

Lincoln was succeeding remarkably well for a self-educated person. Historian James T. Hickey said that Lincoln always demonstrated the capacity to learn from experience and that by the time he became president, he had educated himself to the level of a college graduate of his day. In 1857 Lincoln would criticize the Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision, and during the 1858 Senate race he would again raise his penetrating voice in all sections of Illinois—and then it would reverberate across the nation and throughout history. An examination of the relationship of context and audience, communicative purpose, content, structure, and style in Lincoln’s speeches of 1852–56 reveals a great deal about his evolving rhetorical ability that enabled him to grow from a political party operative into a party leader, then into a statesman whose writing would contribute immeasurably to the classical heritage of American and world literature.