

ICONIZATION AND THE THREATS TO TRUTH; A STUDY OF ICONIZATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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ABSTRACT: *In the excitement to glorify people or objects they hold dear, extollers explore various tricks to achieve their aims. They persistently draw attention to what they assume to be the salient features of the items or persons whose images they tend to polish. They may be influenced by certain prevailing circumstances at the time of the undertakings. What occurs here is iconization. It is what this paper investigates, analyzing two poems in the essay. The poems mourn the death of a former American president Abraham Lincoln. In this wise, an attempt is made to find out the sort of strategies employed in iconization and the strengths and weaknesses of the concept. The author avers that a feature of this literary form is the distortion of history when a subject's biography is unintentionally altered or construed to serve the fancies of the makers. The author therefore warns that in an attempt to lay a foundation for someone's immortalization and worship, justice and truth must not suffer. The genre has failed to rid itself of this practice. Had the trend been discontinued or balanced, there would have been some hope of objective presentations of personalities in odes or similar literary expressions. In this essay, we want to observe how poetry is used as a platform to achieve the foregoing. The writer suggests ways in which a healthy, biographical work can retain some of the beauty and experiences as desired, and still contribute to building a healthy society. The bulk of the data for this study was collected through documentary films on the subject and through literatures on Abraham Lincoln.*

Key words: death, immortalization, iconization, assassin, angel

INTRODUCTION

In the excitement and attempt to glorify people or objects they hold dear, extollers explore various tricks to achieve their aims. They persistently draw attention to what they assume to be the salient features of the items or persons whose images they tend to polish. The author discovered that they may be influenced by certain prevailing circumstances at the time of the undertakings. This is what the paper investigates. We have chosen, therefore, two poems, both of which mourn the death of a particular individual, Abraham Lincoln. The author avers that history may be distorted if Lincoln's biography is unintentionally altered or construed to serve the fancies of the makers. The author therefore warns that in an attempt to lay a foundation for the man's immortalization, justice and truth must not suffer. The author declares that this technique has failed. Had this trend been discontinued or balanced, there would have been some hope of an objective presentation of Lincoln. In this essay, we will not only observe how poetry is used as a platform to achieve the foregoing, an attempt will be made to find out the sort of strategies employed, and the strengths and weaknesses of the poems. The writer suggests ways how a healthy biographical work can be produced. He also suggests ways to make iconization desirable as a form of life writing, to have a healthier society.

What is an Icon?

According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, an icon is a form that is held sacred and a revered representation of Christ, the Virgin Mary, a saint or some other religious subject found in homes of Eastern Christianity. It is Byzantine art imprinted on a small, wooden panel. It has usually metal cover. What the picture put on tells us is that the personality therein is a religious entity. Thus, this person is held in reverence. The personality eventually replaces the metal as the icon. The evolution does not stop there, for it is not restricted in the religious sense any longer. Various meanings of the word icon have developed from different directions and perspectives. It could now be cultural, geographical, political and social. Interestingly, the metal has been discarded, and hardly considered when people discuss what it originally stood for (Gove 1961-1121).

What is iconized?

The thing or individual being iconized could have different identities. Such identities may be concepts, beliefs, types of behaviors and lifestyles. This may arise out of philosophical considerations or as a result of pseudo-religious influences. To qualify as an icon, the thing being iconized must possess an enduring, positive image. This does not mean that there do not exist temporary icons or deconstructed icons. In America, an icon must be something or an individual that can be identified as being originally American, and which or who must have triumphed over adversary and different odds, the identifiable being rising to prominence from humble beginnings or from rags to riches. America boasts a good field of national icons, since the word icon made its way into the nation's vocabulary. The Niagara Falls, Elvis Presley, George Washington and the American Flag all fall into the category of icons. But, none has been celebrated like Abraham Lincoln (Boritt 60).

Who Was Abraham Lincoln?

Abraham Lincoln was born February 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. His father was a Kentucky frontiersman. He lost his mother when he was ten years old, and had to struggle for a living and to educate himself. He worked really hard, splitting wood for fences, and working as a store keeper at New Salem in Illinois. He served as a captain on the Black Hawk War, and he married Mary Todd. Between them they had four boys. Only one of the children grew to adult age. Lincoln spent eight years in the Illinois legislature, ran for Senate, and lost to one Stephen Douglas. In 1858, while at the Illinois House of Representatives, Abraham Lincoln tried to explain the magnitude of the threat slavery posed to the nation. He made efforts to make his people understand the implications of their actions or inactions. He and Stephen A. Douglas made many public appearances trying, each, to drive home his point, as they differed. Lincoln argued that one could not build a country on the tenets of the American Declaration of Independence, in which African slavery was tolerated. His good performance against Douglas helped him to become president shortly. He was elected president on 6 November, 1860. Lincoln did a great job as president, reorganizing the Republican Party. He declared the slaves in the Confederate free on 1 January 1863, through the Emancipation Declaration, otherwise known as the Gettysburg Speech. There was a civil war which he courageously conducted. He was assassinated on April 14, 1865 (Boritt 150, Stefan 20).

Stephen Oates describes these events further, when he says,

This same man went on to the presidency, charged with the awesome task of saving the Union – and its experiment in popular government – in the holocaust of civil war. In the end, after enduring four unendurable years, he himself became a casualty of that conflict,

gunned down by John Wilkes Booth just when the war was won and popular government preserved for humankind the world over. (3)

Oates discusses how Walt Whitman did foresee Lincoln's emergence. Oates quotes Whitman thus, I would be much pleased to see some heroic, shrewd, fully-informed, healthy bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith come down from the West across the Alleghenies, and walk into the Presidency, dressed in a clean suit of working attire, and with the tan all over his face, breast and arms (8).

This added a peculiar idea to the Lincoln story. It appeared an instance foretold. Five years later, in 1861, Whitman saw Abraham Lincoln, describing him thus, "his dark-brown complexion, seem'd and wrinkled yet canny-looking face, his black, bushy head of hair, disproportionately long neck [...]" (Oates 4-8)." Oates remarks,

But in the days that followed his assassination, the man became obscured in an outpouring of flowery orations and tear-filled eulogies. As the seasons passed, Lincoln went on to legend and martyrdom, inflated by the myth makers into Godly Emancipator who personified America's ideal Everyman (3).

Oates continues, quoting one X. J. Kennedy as opining that "[m]yths tell us of the exploits of the gods – their battles, the ways in which they live, love, and perhaps suffer – all on a scale of magnificence larger than our life. We envy their freedom and power; they enact our wishes and dreams" (Oates 4). Oates recalls comments by various religious leaders on the personality of Abraham Lincoln:

"The first began on "Black Easter," April 16, 1865, when ministers across the North portrayed the slain President as an American Christ who died to expiate the sins of his guilty land. For them, it was no coincidence that he had fallen on Good Friday. Did not the times of his shooting and death – just after ten in the evening and just after seven-twenty the next morning – make on the clock an outline of the crucifix?" 'Oh, friends,' cried the Reverend C. B. Crane from the pulpit of Broadway Tabernacle, 'it was meet that the martyrdom should occur on Good Friday. It is no blasphemy against the Son of God and the Saviour of men that we declare the fitness of the slaying of the second Father of our Republic on the anniversary of the on which He was slain. Jesus Christ died for the world, Abraham Lincoln died for his country' (4).

Why is He Being Iconized?

Credit should go to Abraham Lincoln for preventing America from continuing in the aristocratic path in which the country was headed in his time. He encouraged the country to embrace a people-oriented society, grounded on universal suffrage. A great orator, Lincoln possessed a unique charm and effect. He was said to be kind and forgiving, and had a special way with words, all attributes combined, unequalled by any American president ever. This is in addition to his transparency, honesty, his love for peace, the warmth he extended to the defeated South, and his pious, religious leaning. Most of all, he is remembered as a man who was always there for his family, in spite of his busy political schedules. For these qualities, Americans want to express how he has affected them and still affects them, and how grateful they are to him for all he has given them. These expressions come in the form of art works, books, statutes, etc (Boritt 326).

The Death of Lincoln - William Cullen Bryant

The poet begins the first stanza with an emotion-laden voice. He begins with the exclamation 'Oh,' which betrays a tearful tone. This is helped further with a lyrical style. It is alliterative, with the application of words beginning with the letter 's' and the preposition *to* in *slow to smite and swift to spare*. He achieves his aim of moving the reader to pity, when the later gets introduced to the poem. Therefore, the reader's inclination is influenced. Expectedly, the reader is informed about the type of qualities Lincoln possesses. Lincoln is portrayed to be *Gentle and merciful and just*. Being gentle conveys or purports being feeble. But as we encounter the next word, we realize the contrary is the case. We find out that Lincoln is merely shown to be hesitant in employing his authority or power unnecessarily. He is *merciful*. He is *just*, which means that he guided by rational thinking, rather than by arbitrary action. It also shows him to be fair in his relationship with his fellow men. Knowing what people in his position do with so much power, an observer sees how Lincoln fairly dispenses with the authority available to him. He, Lincoln, recognizes that it is power placed in his custody by a whole nation and people. It is the combined armory and military of the country broken down into individual soldiers and machines and pulled together again as a common force. All these form the *sword* which he carries with him. The effect, degree or magnitude of this force, should it choose to strike anyone physically, can only be imagined. After exploring and presenting to us what type of might Lincoln has, and how safe the subjects are with so much power invested in one man, the poet takes us to where Lincoln's influence is derived from. This is the moral aspect. We are informed that he wisely does everything *in the fear of God* (William 358).

Next, the reader in what is a cultural contract, is put in a position to compare the enormity of Lincoln's power against some small creatures, who could turn sport before Lincoln; but with an uncanny criminal capacity (Petterssen 3), Lincoln's disinclination to harm people against the recklessness of his assassins. We see what the country is being deprived of. The ground is then being prepared to win sympathy for Lincoln, a very vital ingredient of iconization (William 358).

The poet skillfully holds unto the success recorded so far. Intimacy is brought to bear in the second stanza thus, "In sorry we stand." Lincoln is close to the heart of the nation. The reader is brought close to this esteemed personality to draw out the reader's emotions and make him yield to the designs of the poet. This encounter with him also serves the purpose of filling our hearts with sympathy for the man. There is nearness now, as opposed to distance. This nearness strikes some kind of awe over the poet speaker with whose eyes we are seeing Lincoln. This is "Amid the awe that hushes all/And speak the anguish of a land/That shook with horror at thy fall." The nation is seized with awe over what has just happened. The event makes everybody speechless. This 'awe' and what it brings with it manifests how overwhelming the impact of the loss is. By inflating Lincoln into a giant, the poet stages a tremendous and sensational action. He lays hold of our consciousness so we can understand the effect of the event on the country (William 358).

In the third stanza, the poet speaker strengthens the reputation he helps Lincoln attain in our minds. He holds up Lincoln's achievement for us to see. An act quickly recognizable and something that combines more than any other thing, and reinforces whatever claim the man may have on qualifying to be iconized, and for which he was killed, is the freedom which he granted slaves. This is an impressive credential which resonates each time his name is mentioned. To this, the poet speaker says, "Thy task is done; the bond are free [...]. The broken fetters of the slave." Referring to a man who is credited with such feat, the poet speaker says, "We bear thee to an honored grave." The message is that Lincoln, as a man of honor, deserves no less a burial as an honored grave. The poet,

therefore, opens our understanding to the fact that the grave that is about to claim Lincoln can be distinguished from the ones onto which other men are lowered. The separation and split attempted here is unique. It is a consolation to the bereaved. It also paints a beautiful picture of what Lincoln's new home signifies. Had it been possible, the poet would still have substituted the word 'grave' with a very pleasant word. With "Whose proudest monument shall be," he ties Lincoln's name to the daily activities of every ex-slave. With this comment, he means that anytime an ex-slave exercises his freedom, Lincoln himself is being manifested. He also intentionally, lays on sculptors' and painters' court, the duty of construction statues and monuments in Lincoln's name (William 358).

The last stanza could rightly be construed a summary of the preceding stanzas. It begins with a biographical information. "Pure was thy life; its bloody close/Hath placed thee with the sons of light/Among the noble host of those/Who perished in the cause of Right." We learn, though, what we had not been told before. We are being told now that Abraham Lincoln lived an untainted life. The suggestion is that if he is subjected to scrutiny, very satisfactory results will be obtained, which will free him from reproach. This seems like a fulfillment of the last requirement for his iconization. Now free of any restraining feature, he joins those who, like him, thread the path of human salvation. In the second stanza, his resting place changes to a heavenly home. He becomes immortalized by the poet (William 358).

"For the Services in Memory of Abraham Lincoln" - Wendell Homes

The second poem takes up this same tone, with the first word, "Oh." The poem runs forth: "Thou of soul and sense and breath." The line refers to God. It says that the things mentioned belong to God. God is called the "ever present-Giver." This is to show that he lets man acquire these gifts from him. But, though 'Death,' God's 'Angel,' mankind can let go this wonderful gift, which is Abraham Lincoln. Although this separation is painful, death is a consensual one, and assumes a new form. It is converted to share the same place with birth or the coming to life. Apart from reducing the pain of death, the poet reverses whatever gains those who might revel in Lincoln's death may enjoy, and compels Lincoln's assassins to see how they now give the latter a rare chance to be taken away by God (Memory n.p.).

The second stanza illustrates the type of bond that exists between Abraham Lincoln and his admirers. "Our hearts be buried in the dust/With him so true and tender," meaning that spiritually, Lincoln is not without company in his earthly resting place, even though he is covered with 'dust.' The words 'so true and tender,' are rightly chosen to represent Lincoln's heart, since the poet mentions their own heart. It is a description of the kind of person they have been dispossessed of (Memory n.p.).

The poet continues to assemble relevant religious, biological, social and political concepts to reinforce what he is putting up, even in areas where such things have already been established. In the third stanza, he pleads, "Dear Lord, with pitying eye behold/This martyrs generation." He hints on Lincoln's achievements and role in saving America, while not forgetting the former's colleagues who also fell on the battlefield. It is glorification of their selfless act of giving their lives, so that others may live. As if God's assumed many eyes discriminate and see differently, he implores God to use the kind one to judge Lincoln and his generation. This religious component is still not dispensed with. "Oh let the blood by

murder spilt/Wash out the stricken children's guilt/And sanctify our land." Lincoln's image has now been so fabricated that it has the capability to wash away crimes and inquiries like the blood of Jesus cleanses people of afflictions, crimes and wrongdoings. He pleads that the blood of Lincoln should be used to purify America. Lincoln is, therefore, being made to play a Godly role in America. He takes also the place of both Stephen and Jesus Christ in the Bible. Stephen is martyred for his beliefs and kind heartedness. Quite unusual, not even in the face of their adversaries swinging at them with their hate and stones, do they shift in their kindness, praying to God to hold his anger from those people, when they know any request from them, penal or amnesty or compassion, will be carried out accordingly. It follows that Lincoln, in his dying hours, must have sought forgiveness for his killers (Memory, Scriptures 1371-1375).

The third stanza is hinged completely on religion. It runs thus:

Be thou thy orphaned Israel's friend. Forsake thy people never.

In One our broken Many blend. That none again may sever!

Hear us, O Father, while we raise With trembling lips our song of praise

And bless thy name forever (Memory n.p.).

Lincoln's role, we can see, shifts to that of a father in this stanza. He becomes a father, and America, which bears the likeness of Israel, is orphaned. This is taken in the Puritan sense of the founding of America, as a result of the Puritan's journey from Europe and across the sea. It should be recalled that the children of Israel had earlier journeyed from Egypt to Jerusalem. Moses had been removed from the scene, making the children of Israel to wonder aimlessly in the desert for forty years, especially for want of good leadership. Now, America is in this same situation, the poet requests God's participation in leading America out of the deep waters in which she had just found herself, following Lincoln's death. In the third line of the stanza, he prays God to unite the warring forces, the different races and also to nurse the hitherto fractured country back to health. He feeds into his plea some inducements, in the fifth line. They are mourning. Their infirm lips crave God's attention with song to his glory. If the poet has to sell Lincoln to the Americans, here is the great chance, which he manages very well. He knows he has to set Lincoln on a religious cart back-grounded on ethical wheels and put it on the rail tracks of American consciousness. This is all well-captured and illustrated. Everything now comes together, and Lincoln is emerging as an icon (Boyer 57-67).

Commonly Identifiable Features in the Poems

A feature commonly identifiable in the two poems is the use of lamentation and exclamation marks as devices to make the reader apprehensive of the movements in the poems, how the lines rise and fall. It is obvious from the two poems that the curtain has fallen on the life of a great American, Abraham Lincoln. Without doubt, the poems cover a lot of ground in describing Lincoln, but deliberately overlook the man's faults. The first poem, *The Death of Lincoln*, informs us that "Pure was thy life," in describing Lincoln, and the second poem, *For the Service in Memory of Lincoln*, says, 'Oh, let the blood by murder spilt/Wash out thy stricken children's guilt/And sanctify our nation.' They look to the Bible for linguistic as well as spiritual guide. The poems make use of the subjective, possessive cases, 'thou,' and 'thy.' This is as far as the similarities go. They are dissimilar than they are similar. The first poem, unlike the second poem, already extends to Lincoln the exalted form of 'thou,' 'thee,' and 'thy.' It is not certain if the poet speaker here breaks any literary or linguistic rule. The first poem is a sonnet while the second is not. The first poem brings us closer to Lincoln, and the atmosphere is suggestive of a people deeply hurt and offended by

a disagreeable event, for the poem says, "In sorrow by thy bier we stand/Amid the awe that hushes all" (William 358, Memory n.p.).

CONCLUSION

As if the recourse to heavenly and religious entities as used in the first poem is not enough, the second poem resumes with the same line. Had this trend been discontinued in the second poem, there would have been some hope of an objective presentation of Lincoln. Besides, Lincoln could not have been so faultless that his blood can literarily wash off the sins and guilt of his murderers and the American nation. The man has been removed from the human sphere and made an extraordinary being. From hence, not only the poetic genre, but various genres will be turned into new platforms for the projection of his image. Inevitably, politicians and business people, looking at these poems, will find Lincoln a veritable material they can exploit. But it all shows what iconization is all about. It plays on fantasy.

This is the role hyperbole plays in literature. We have explained in this research how hyperbole is used to promote a personality's image. In *Examples of Dictionary*, it is observed that "using hyperbole can intensify a discussion by increasing message processing [...] or the emotional attitude attached to a subject. We have noted how hyperboles are used to magnify the truth. Therefore, justice and truth suffer in the poems. The poems under study contain worrisome declarations that may threaten reality. In pragmatism, the poet speakers will be disobeying the quality maxim. The reason is because the forms discussed in this essay are not statements of fact. While we may agree with this assertion, it should be consistent with the truth. We therefore find remarkable, the following comment by Oates: "The man who died that dark and dismal day had flaws as well as strengths, made mistakes and suffered reversals just as surely as he enjoyed his remarkable achievements."(3). In this wise, it is advised in *Examples of Dictionary* that we should "be careful not to overdo the overstatement!" In *Examples of Dictionary* some of these forms are described as "extravagant and even ridiculous overstatements," adding that "In these common, everyday examples of hyperbole, you'll see the sentiment isn't realistic" (*Examples*). It is indeed heartwarming to read the following lines from Oates: "I do not mean a story that is uncontaminated by life. Myth, as I am using the term, is a grandiose projection of a people's experience" (3).

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