

HEAD AND HEART

Lincoln's childhood and youth were touched by the proximity of death. The first, was that of his mother, followed by his sister Sarah and his brother Thomas. But no doubt the hardest one was that of Ann Rutledge, the daughter of a tavern owner, to whom he was engaged. In August of 1835 Ann contracted "brain fever," probably typhoid, and died. Lincoln was devastated and deeply depressed for a time.

Those who knew Lincoln closely, e. g., Mary Todd, his future wife, realized how little of his feelings the young Lincoln would display. In fact, she reported that "when he felt most, he expressed the least."¹ He was awkward around women, up to freezing in their presence. No doubt the early experiences left a trace upon Lincoln, who would swing from complete self-confidence to discouragement and depression. He allied often opposing strains: sternness and tenderness, melancholic moods and playfulness, from effusive to serious and solemn.

Two things did help Lincoln, however. He could be easily distracted by what presented itself to him—a new situation, a social occasion, a friend's visit would move him from gloom to laughter. Witnesses would see him swing from the bottoms to the heights in a very short time. The second was humor, his constant tonic; he knew it had a therapeutic effect on his moodiness. But sometimes it could unleash its own problems.

Another outlet was his writing. In 1844, revisiting an area of Indiana close to where he had spent his youth, Lincoln wrote the poems we mentioned earlier. He felt that he could now complete the process of grieving for his mother. His emotions had been brought to the surface and he had expressed them in verses. He relieved not only his grief but also his fear of madness. At that time he confronted the insanity that had taken hold of his friend Matthew Gentry.

One could say Lincoln was undergoing a test between passion and reason that would occupy him for some years and shape the person he would become. It appeared most clearly in his close relationships, most of all Mary Owens and Mary Todd, his future wife.

Mary Owens

With Mary Owens Lincoln went through a roller-coaster of emotions. His interest had been mixed with doubt about their lifestyle compatibility. He first put some distance from her, then offered a dispirited marriage proposal. When she refused, it was Lincoln who felt most hurt.

While he was under stress for the heartbreak, Lincoln did something uncharacteristic. In the Sangamon County courthouse he had an argument with

¹ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, 98.

attorney Jesse B. Thomas, deriding him and bringing him to tears by imitating very effectively his voice and gestures. However, Lincoln did not fail to apologize.²

Mary Todd

The courtship with Mary Todd brought together so many aspects of the young Lincoln and his personal growth. Mary was the pampered offspring of slave-owner aristocracy. She had received the best of schooling and had become a refined and graceful young woman, though others, like Bill Herndon, would find her haughty and sarcastic. It was her assurance and verve that charmed young Lincoln, as it had Stephen Douglas, with whom she had ostensibly flirted previously.

Mary and Abraham had a lot to share: their Kentucky roots, the Whig affiliation for which Mary was uncharacteristically vocal for women of her time, the love of poetry. Lincoln got as far as engagement before having once more cold feet. Again he feared he would not be able to offer Mary the lifestyle to which she was accustomed.

Assailed by strong emotions and self-doubt, he broke off with Mary, which was devastating to both of them. His depression lasted a whole week, and Lincoln got in touch with his hypochondriac nature. The two could not have found a way to mend, were it not for others in their entourage who understood their plight. And politics and humor were part of the mix as well in unusual ways.

After the 1842 failure of the Bank of Illinois, dear to the Whigs, Lincoln attacked a Democratic state auditor, James Shields, under the disguise of the pen name Rebecca in the *Sangamon Journal*. In her column Rebecca, a simple but resourceful and outspoken countrywoman, poured sarcasm against Shields and the local Democrats. Mary Todd took part in the ploy, with another woman. When an irate Shields pressed the journal to reveal the identity of Rebecca, Lincoln chivalrously decided to take the fall, and Shields challenged him to a duel.

Humor was leading to tragi-comedy, and young Abraham could not find a way to extricate himself. Duels were illegal in Illinois, so it was arranged that the two would fight it off in nearby Alton, Missouri. The mounting farce was resolved thanks to the providential intervention of Dr. R. W. English and John J. Hardin, a Whig and relative of Mary Todd. Both parties were no doubt relieved. Lincoln was experiencing the devastating effects of his emotional instability when allied with a corrosive humor. He saw, as no one else could, the double-edged sword of the word.

² Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America*, 24.

In the last similar episode Lincoln engaged against Van Buren, the Democratic presidential candidate, by helping to create the *Old Soldier*, a publication that carried "Lincoln speeches and Tippecanoe Almanacs" from the *Sangamon Journal*. In one speech Lincoln, without much scruple or evidence, accused Van Buren of discriminating in favor of free blacks at the expense of poor white folks in matter of property rights.³

Here was a young man under the whim of the Mars forces, expressing themselves in word and deed, and allied for better or worse with the Mercury forces of satire and humor. The mix of the two was causing mischief in private and public life. The quest for balance between passion and reason occupied the young Lincoln both in his personal life and in his political career. What lived in this soul tension is also what he tried to address in American society, without failing, no doubt, to see the parallels. The integration of passion and reason formed a central place in Lincoln's politics and in his estimate of the rule of law.

Lincoln between Emotion and Reason

In 1838 in an address given to the Young Men's Lyceum—"The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions"—Lincoln singled out political hyper-emotionalism as a danger to American institutions, and advanced the need to resort to "the solid quarry of sober reason." He was referring to outbreaks of mob violence and lynching of criminals, gamblers, abolitionists, and blacks. He called his fellow citizens to uphold the respect of law and appealed to "reason, cold, calculated, unimpassioned reason." The same emotionalism kept Lincoln at arm's length from the temperance movement. Not without passion he invoked reason thus: "Happy day, when, all appetites controlled, all passions subdued,... mind, all conquering mind, shall live and move the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail fall of Fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!"⁴

We can surmise that this stand for reason and against passion reflected his own stage of growth and his desire to curb his temper, which could on occasion flare up and bring him to dare his opponents to fistfights.

We can measure the progress by comparing these early episodes with the record of the future president. Later in life he showed a great mastery over his emotions and would hardly ever lose his temper.

In Lincoln's individuality we can surmise the re-embodiment of someone of the Middle Ages or culture of Chartres, such is his striving to render concrete the knowledge of the seven liberal arts, no matter how remote a situation this is from the life of an uneducated frontier man.

³ Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America*, 24.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln's Temperance Address of 1842.

The classical seven liberal arts included Grammatica, Dialectica, Rhetorica, forming the *Trivium*; and Arithmetica, Geometria, Astronomia, and Musica, forming the *Quadrivium*. We could say that the first part concerned the humanities, the second one the sciences. These disciplines of knowledge were at the time living experiences conveyed by living goddesses, divine-spiritual beings. In Steiner's words, the teachings that took place in the School of Chartres "contained the teachings from the old seership of the pre-Platonic Mysteries that had been imbued ever since with the contents of Christianity."⁵

Lincoln's connection with the *Trivium* appears in his love for the Word. Through grammar he acquired the grasp of correct speech; dialectic/logic provided him with the framework of right thinking. Rhetoric, in which he excelled, built upon the two previous arts to create such art forms that could be remembered by others.

Lincoln did not achieve the complete *Quadrivium* formation. He still yearned for this scientific integration, as we can see in his efforts to unite science and faith, which continued up to his death. He also showed it in his love for Thales' geometry treatises, for understanding evolution, and, in his spare time, with the invention he patented.

⁵ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3, lecture of July 13, 1924.