

Make Up mult choice for A Modest Proposal (Lincoln humor) Name _____

Read the following passage carefully before you choose your answers.

(The following passage is from a book of essays published in the early 2000s.)

In attempting an analysis of Lincoln’s humor one is immediately confronted with two difficulties. In the first place, many stories attributed to Lincoln were never told by him. A. K. McClure’s *Lincoln Stories* is recognized as the most reliable collection, yet Isaac N. Arnold, an intimate friend of Lincoln’s, wrote on the fly-leaf of his copy of this book that Lincoln probably told no more than half the stories with which McClure credited him.¹ To prove that Lincoln did or did not tell a particular story is often impossible, for in most cases one must rely upon hearsay evidence or reminiscences.

The second difficulty lies in the fact that the effectiveness of a joke depends in large measure upon the manner of its telling. We may not be at all amused by reading some of Lincoln’s jokes or hearing them at secondhand; whereas we might have split our sides had we heard them as he told them. For Lincoln was a master of the story-telling art; and when told by a master, even a dull joke may be irresistible.

“His stories may be literally retold,” wrote Henry C. Whitney, “every word, period and comma, but the real humor perished with Lincoln”; for



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“he provoked as much laughter by the grotesque

25 expression of his homely face as by the abstract

fun of his stories.”²

His manner of recital, declared Judge David Davis,

was “in many respects unique, if not remarkable.”³ His

countenance and all his features seemed to take part in

30 the performance. As he neared the pith or point of the

joke or story every vestige of seriousness disappeared

from his face. His little gray eyes sparkled; a smile seemed

to gather up, curtain-like, the corners of his mouth;

his frame quivered with suppressed

35 excitement; and when the point—or ‘nub’ of the

story, as he called it—came, no one’s laugh was

heartier than his.”⁴

His humor had a general appeal. Not only the

circuit lawyers and the Western villagers and farmers,

40 but even urbane Easterners readily succumbed to it.

In 1842, Ex-President [Martin] Van Buren, making

a tour of the West, stopped one night at the village of

Rochester, a few miles from Springfield. The Democratic

politicians of Springfield went out “en

45 masse” to meet and entertain him, taking Lincoln and

a few other Whigs along. Van Buren related several

amusing incidents of New York politics, while others

told tales of early life on the frontier. But all yielded



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at last to Lincoln, who kept them in an uproar far into
50 the night with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of
yarns, until Van Buren insisted that “his sides were
sore with laughing.”⁵

In many cases the stories Lincoln told were not
original, although he often embellished and improved
55 them. He himself repeatedly disclaimed credit for
authorship and described himself as merely a retail
dealer. His proficiency lay rather in a retentive memory,
an uncanny power of association and
histrionic skill.⁶ “He did not forget the good things
60 that he heard,” wrote Charles Sumner, “and was never
without a familiar story to illustrate his meaning.

When he spoke, the recent West seemed to vie with
the ancient East in apologue and fable. His ideas moved,
as the beasts entered Noah’s ark, in pairs. At
65 times his illustrations had a homely felicity, and with him
they seemed to be not less important than the argument,
which he always enforced with a certain
intensity of manner and voice.”⁷

Much of Lincoln’s success as a storyteller was due
70 to a talent for mimicry. “In the role of storyteller,”
said T. G. Onstot, son of the New Salem cooper, “I
never knew his equal. His power of mimicry was very
great.”⁸



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¹ Alexander K. McClure, *Lincoln's Yarns and Stories* (Chicago: John C. Winston, 1904). Far more trustworthy and scholarly is Paul M. Zall, ed., *Abe Lincoln Laughing: Humorous Anecdotes from Original Sources by and about Abraham Lincoln* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

² Henry C. Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1940), 174.

³ In 1836, Maryland-born David Davis (1815-86) settled in Bloomington, Illinois. A close friend of Lincoln, he served as judge of the Eighth Circuit from 1848 to 1862, when Lincoln named him to the U.S. Supreme Court.

⁴ Paul M. Angle, ed., *Herndon's Life of Lincoln: The History and Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln as Originally Written by William H. Herndon and*

Jesse W. Weik (Cleveland: World, 1942), 250. This reminiscence of Lincoln's story-telling is by Herndon, not Davis.

⁵ Angle, ed., *Herndon's Lincoln*, 208.

⁶ *Thomas's note*: Lincoln's skill as a raconteur may have been to some extent hereditary. "From his father came that knack of story-telling, which has made him so delightful among acquaintances, and so irresistible in his stump and forensic drolleries," wrote William Dean Howells in his campaign biography of Lincoln. And Lincoln, when he corrected a copy of this book for his friend Samuel C. Parks, "let the statement stand." *Editor's note*: W. D. Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield: Abraham Lincoln Association, 1938), 20. Samuel C. Parks of Springfield was a friend of Lincoln's. In 1863 he became an associate justice of the Idaho Supreme Court. His copy of Howells's biography, complete with Lincoln's penciled corrections, is reproduced in facsimile in this edition.

⁷ Charles Sumner, "Eulogy," in *A Memorial of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: City Council, 1865), 134.

⁸ Thompson Gaines Onstot (b. 1829), author of *Pioneers of Menard and Mason Counties* (Forest City, Ill.: Onstot, 1902), was the son of Henry Onstot.

1. In the second paragraph (lines 13-20), the author primarily

- (A) lists the challenges others have experienced in cataloging Lincoln's jokes
 - (B) celebrates the timeless appeal of Lincoln's jokes
 - (C) describes how Lincoln's skill in telling jokes improved over the years
 - (D) distinguishes between the content and the delivery of Lincoln's jokes
 - (E) details the difficulty in verifying when Lincoln's jokes were recounted
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2. The passage is primarily characterized by

- (A) anecdotal descriptions of Lincoln's storytelling
 - (B) brief excerpts from Lincoln's stories
 - (C) sensational accounts of Lincoln's personal life
 - (D) detailed explanations of Lincoln's political motivations
 - (E) perceptive observations about Lincoln's audiences
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3. Which of the following does the fourth paragraph (lines 27-37) describe?

- (A) Lincoln's full immersion in storytelling
 - (B) Audience responses to Lincoln's stories
 - (C) Lincoln's typical mood when he was with people
 - (D) The true significance behind Lincoln's stories
 - (E) Lincoln's compulsive need to entertain people
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4. The final paragraph (lines 69-73) underscores which of the following implied ideas?



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- (A) Lincoln defended the interests of different classes of people.
 - (B) Lincoln was a shrewd observer of people.
 - (C) Lincoln relied on humor to make serious arguments.
 - (D) Lincoln wished he were an actor rather than a politician.
 - (E) Lincoln was unattractive but highly charismatic.
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5. The description in lines 62-68 (“When he spoke . . . voice”) suggests that Lincoln

- (A) described fantastic creatures to amaze and inspire people
 - (B) tailored the delivery of his stories as well as the stories themselves to emphasize the message he was trying to convey
 - (C) used mixed metaphors to support each point he was trying to make
 - (D) dramatized the lives of real people to emphasize the significance of their actions
 - (E) drew examples from current events as well as history to exploit his audience’s anxieties
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6. In context, the author’s primary purpose in the first paragraph (lines 1-12) is to



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- (A) show his familiarity with Lincoln's favorite stories
 - (B) point out different errors that scholars have made
 - (C) introduce a challenge that his topic poses
 - (D) critique the views of Lincoln's friends
 - (E) explain his skepticism regarding the state of the field
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7. In the passage, the author primarily represents Lincoln as a figure who

- (A) was admired as a folk hero
 - (B) possessed a rare and unique talent
 - (C) influenced a generation of politicians
 - (D) believed in the instructional value of art
 - (E) strived to improve his dramatic performances
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8. In the third paragraph (lines 21-26), the author cites Whitney primarily to



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- (A) confirm Lincoln's exceptional storytelling skills
 - (B) argue that Lincoln's jokes were occasionally distasteful
 - (C) stress that people thought Lincoln was unattractive
 - (D) show that Lincoln loved to laugh at himself
 - (E) reveal the moral lessons within Lincoln's stories
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9. The anecdote in the fifth paragraph (lines 38-52) primarily demonstrates

- (A) how Lincoln's storytelling spoke to a broad audience
 - (B) how Lincoln improved his tales by listening to other storytellers
 - (C) when people began envisioning Lincoln as a potential president
 - (D) why Lincoln was relaxed and easygoing in the 1840s
 - (E) why colleagues were uncertain of Lincoln's political loyalties
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