

# The Lincolns

## Christ College Reading Groups Spring 2010

Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, is by most accounts the most famous and influential American. It is a commonplace that more books and words have been written about Lincoln than anyone who has ever lived except Jesus Christ. And while Lincoln is most naturally, and justifiably, understood as a political figure, the depth of his unique hold on the imagination of people around the world – not just on Americans – transcends politics and reaches that rare atmosphere where history, psychology, literature, and, yes, religion all intersect.

This syllabus is intended to provide a very brief dip into the vast ocean of “Lincolnia.” It does not claim to be remotely comprehensive or systematic, but rather to touch on several different dimensions of Lincoln’s life and appeal. The first involves what must still be the central consideration in understanding and interpreting Lincoln: his essential leadership in saving the Union and ending slavery.

The second involves Lincoln the orator and writer. The influence of Lincoln’s words has long been known, but in recent years more literary scholars as well as historians have begun to read Lincoln’s words afresh, and to treat him as a major American literary figure. While Lincoln’s writings and speeches cannot of course be divorced from the political circumstances that inspired most of them, they deserve attention on their own as some of the most powerful prose of all time. Of particular importance are Lincoln’s five greatest speeches: the House Divided Speech, the Cooper Union Address, the First Inaugural Address, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural Address. Here, we will attend primarily to the latter two.

The third topic considered here is less commonly treated – Abraham Lincoln’s wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. There has of long been great fascination with Lincoln’s seemingly mysterious personality and character, and in an age of psychology there are innumerable interpretations, from the plausible to the loony, of Lincoln as sober, repressed, depressed, gay, death-obsessed, father-or-lost-mother-fixated, status-hungry, and many more. But almost everyone agrees that Lincoln’s relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln eventually became the most important emotional component of his adult life, even if the precise nature of their relationship is a large question.

Our purpose in focusing on Mary Todd Lincoln is not, however, primarily to see her in relation to her husband, but rather to understand and interpret her as an important personage in her own right. She is, indeed, every bit as fascinating and complex a character as Abraham Lincoln – in this regard it may truly be said that two unique American originals found each other. And Mary Lincoln’s dramatic life story is also significant because it illuminates dimensions of nineteenth-century American women’s culture and experience that has been, until fairly recently, largely invisible to historians and the general public.

Finally, we examine the “image” of both Lincolns as they have been interpreted and debated in subsequent American history and culture. This, too, is a vast and endless subject, especially since each subsequent generation adds its own unique chapter to the vast volume of Lincoln lore. As Albert Schweitzer once observed about the “quest for the historical Jesus,” most of those who claim to have uncovered the “real truth” about such compelling figures are simply staring at their own reflections in the mirror without recognizing that fact. Still, it is important to ask: What have subsequent generations made of Lincoln? What has become of him in our own time? How does our image of him affect our views of the future of American democracy and culture? And what does Mary Lincoln’s life—and alleged “madness”—reveal not only about her, but about the role of women in American culture and imagination, then and now?

## Unit I

*Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith,  
let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.*

(Abraham Lincoln, “Cooper Union Speech,” February 27, 1860)

The first text in this course will be James McPherson’s *Abraham Lincoln*. McPherson is America’s preeminent scholar of the Civil War (his *Battle Cry of Freedom* is by far the best history of that conflict). In this brief biography McPherson compresses much of his vast learning about Lincoln and the Civil War to highlight the most essential dimensions of his life and work. (For a more in-depth look, some groups might also choose to read a chapter or two of one of the complete Lincoln biographies listed in McPherson’s Bibliography; the best complete biography is David Herbert Donald’s *Lincoln*. The best brief biographies are William Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America* and Mark Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America*.)

McPherson sets Lincoln firmly within the context of American history and politics, and focuses on the central questions that everyone who seeks to understand and interpret Lincoln must address: Who was Lincoln, really, and how did he rise from poverty and obscurity to national power? What was Lincoln’s stance on slavery before and after he became President? Why, if at all, did the Civil War have to be fought, and what did it accomplish? Was the War, as Lincoln came to lead and define it, essentially a “conservative” attempt to “preserve the Union” against rebels who wanted to destroy it, or was Lincoln himself a “revolutionary” who utterly transformed the original Constitution and led the way toward a powerful federal government unimagined by the Founders? And what was Lincoln’s—and America’s—understanding of what was said to be their central political and moral value—Liberty? In particular, how did Lincoln, and his fellow Americans then and since, understand liberty in relation to the “peculiar institution” of slavery, and to the African-Americans who originally lived under its yoke?

## Unit II

*The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.*

(Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," November 19, 1863)

*Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."*

(Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," March 4, 1865)

The focus in this unit is on Lincoln's rhetoric, both spoken and written, and especially on his most important speeches – the House Divided Speech, the Cooper Union Address, the First Inaugural Address, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural Address. The recommended text is Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, which contains these speeches as well as other important Lincoln texts, letters, and speeches. The speeches are also available in other Lincoln anthologies, including William Gienapp, ed., *This Fiery Trial*, and the two superb Library of America volumes, *Abraham Lincoln: Writings and Speeches*, edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher. The key speeches may also be readily accessed online.

As is well known, Lincoln grew up in almost unimaginable poverty in Kentucky and Indiana, before emerging as a young-man-on-the-rise in frontier Illinois. Lacking almost all formal schooling, Lincoln was essentially self-educated through his own reading – yet by the time he emerged on the national stage in the 1850s he had acquired an astonishingly eloquent and forceful literary style, based partly on his deep grounding in the classics of Shakespeare and the Bible, and partly in the force of his own passionate moral opposition to the expansion of slavery.

Many Lincoln texts included in the Delbanco collection – including many of his letters-- are worth careful examination, and groups may want to read selections of these. And many historians agree with James McPherson that Lincoln's compelling, lucid language played a significant role in rallying the Union forces behind him and winning the Civil War. But these five speeches stand above all others. The House Divided speech first brought Lincoln to national attention. The Cooper Union Address essentially introduced the raw frontier politician Lincoln to the Republican Party's eastern elite, defined him as the moral but moderate leader of the political antislavery cause, and essentially paved the way for the Republican presidential nomination. The First Inaugural Address defined the issues at stake in preserving the Union, and represented a last appeal to the seceding South (seven states had already seceded when Lincoln took the oath of office) to avoid war. The Gettysburg Address, delivered at the pinnacle of the War's violence, on the very site of its greatest slaughter, defined the nature not only of the War itself, but also redefined the character of the American nation and American identity. The Second

Inaugural Address, delivered as the War roared to a close, and just one month before Lincoln's assassination, summarized the meaning of the War and set it into an extraordinary cosmic context defined by a powerful, mysterious God's infinite justice and compassion.

### Unit III

*No such sorrow was ever visited upon a people or family, as when we were bereaved of my darling husband. Every day causes me to feel more crushed and brokenhearted . . . Time does not soften [my grief] nor can I ever be reconciled to my loss until the grave closes over the remembrance and I am reunited with him.*

(Mary Todd Lincoln, 1865)

In this unit we turn our attention from the “great man,” Abraham Lincoln, to a figure no less fascinating—his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. The text is Jean Baker's compelling biography, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, first published in 1987 and now out in a new edition in 2008. Baker's biography essentially reflected and promoted the late twentieth century revival of interest in understanding and interpreting women of the past not as the dominant (male) historical cultures had often viewed them, as subordinates and accessories, but as significant actors and characters in their own right. And women of strong personality who did not simply conform to the social roles imposed on them are especially compelling, both in the ways they responded to their culture and the ways—overt or covert—in which they rebelled against it. Much historical attention has been given to the overt feminists who openly challenged the social order and promoted women's rights. But equally deserving of attention may be those women who, while sharing many conventional ideas about women's roles in theory, in fact possessed such powerful personalities that they clashed with the dominant culture in different ways than the predominantly political feminists. Mary Todd Lincoln is, in Baker's view, undoubtedly one of those unique women. Her life experience alone marks her as exception: a privileged childhood of wealth and social prominence, marriage “beneath her” to an uneducated and socially awkward attorney, a family life marked by profound tragedy and loss, and a painful self-assertion and adaptation to widowhood. Her strong and unusual personality is evident throughout, and her personal troubles culminated in the charge of mental illness (madness), instigated by her sole surviving son, that led to her confinement in an Illinois asylum for the insane. Was Mary Lincoln really “mad,” or was hers simply a powerful, “extreme” female personality, living in the wrong time in a culture that could not tolerate such a force?

## Unit IV

*Now he belongs to the Ages.*

(Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, at the moment of Lincoln's death, April 15, 1865)

We conclude with several brief essays/articles that address different dimensions of Abraham and Mary Lincoln, and raise questions how about how to understand and interpret them within the context of American history. The first is Barry Schwartz's deliberately provocative—and polemical—essay "**Lincoln at the Millennium,**" which addresses the image of Abraham Lincoln as it has evolved throughout the twentieth century and up to our own twenty-first century. The study of "historical memory"—how historical events and figures are "constructed," remembered, and imaged in public culture—has become a major industry among historians, literary critics, and culture-studies mavens. The attention in such works shifts from an attempt to uncover the true about the "actual" historical figure or event—if indeed, such a thing can be determined, as some postmodernists insist it cannot—and instead to the shifting, conflicting, kaleidoscopic interpretations of the figure, and the ways in which these diverse interpretations are connected to contemporary issues, problems, and cultural beliefs.

Abraham Lincoln, thus, is now often studied through this lens of "public memory." Schwartz's essay is a distillation of his book-length studies of the same subject, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* and *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*. (Reading groups who want to pursue this topic further might look at these two works or—for a more conventional and less provocative scholarly treatment—Merrill D. Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory*.)

The second pair of essays reflect alternative interpretations of Mary Todd Lincoln, especially the issues surrounding her alleged "insanity" and commitment to the asylum in Batavia, Illinois, instigated by her son Robert. In contrast to Jean Baker's strong case for Mary Lincoln's essential "sanity" (despite her many peculiarities and obsessions), the historian Jason Emerson has argued the contrary: that Mary was indeed profoundly mentally ill ("mad" or "insane" in nineteenth century vocabulary). These two pieces,

### **"The Madness of Mary Lincoln"**

[http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/3/2006\\_3\\_56.shtml](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/3/2006_3_56.shtml)  
and

### **"New Mary Lincoln Letter Discovered"**

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jishs/101.3-4/emerson.html>

convey Emerson's essential argument of his book *The Madness of Mary Lincoln*, which depends in part on several "lost" Mary Lincoln letters that Emerson discovered. It should also be noted that Emerson's view that Mary Lincoln was indeed insane (or "bipolar," in a retrospective diagnosis), and Baker's view that she was not—that she was instead a victim of gender stereotyping and misanthropy—reflects the way differing views of Mary Lincoln have, for nearly 150 years, divided largely although not entirely along gender lines. Do men and woman, then and even now, use different lenses to interpret certain behaviors as "rational" or "irrational"?

Finally, as an “Optional Reading,” groups may want to look at Barry Schwartz’s take on a fascinating, semi-mythical subject who has long been connected to interpretations of both Abraham and Mary Lincoln’s personal life – Ann Rutledge. Barry Schwartz’s

**“Ann Rutledge in American Memory: The Erosion of a Romantic Drama”**

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/26.1/schwartz.html>

shows how Rutledge, the alleged love of Lincoln’s youthful life, was once a major fixation of Lincoln analysis and interpretation. Rutledge has also long served as a “foil” for explaining Lincoln’s lifelong melancholy, even depression, and has been particularly important as a “stick” with which to denigrate the allegedly shrewish, histrionic Mary and explain the two Lincolns’ supposedly “loveless” marriage. Probing the Lincolns’ relationship provides great insight into the nature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century marriage and gender relations. But the full truth about the intimate lives of even the best-known historical personages may never be known. The Lincolns’ marriage may in the end reinforce the adage that no one really knows what happens inside anyone else’s marriage – even one’s best friends. Yet the difficulty of the subject has never stemmed the tide of interest in it – then or now.

- Texts:** James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Penguin, 2009). [Other editions of Lincoln speeches are available.]
- Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln* (New York: Norton, new edition, 2008)
- Barry Schwartz, “**Lincoln at the Millennium**”  
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/24.1/schwartz.html>
- Jason Emerson, “**The Madness of Mary Lincoln**”  
[http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/3/2006\\_3\\_56.shtml](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/3/2006_3_56.shtml)
- Jason Emerson, “**New Mary Lincoln Letter Discovered**”  
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jishs/101.3-4/emerson.html>
- Barry Schwartz, “**Ann Rutledge in American Memory: The Erosion of a Romantic Drama**”  
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/26.1/schwartz.html>

## I. Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War

*Reading:*

James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Abraham Lincoln matters because the Civil War matters, and the Civil War matters because it was the defining event of American nationhood and national identity, and especially because it was fought over the essentially American ground of racial slavery. In this brief biography, the leading Civil War historian James McPherson examines Lincoln's historic leadership through the prism of both his personal experience and the public and political forces of his time. What kind of a person was this, who rose from such humble beginnings to the pinnacles of power? What was ordinary in his political outlook, and what was truly remarkable, even "great"? And how do, or should, we view Lincoln, the Civil War, and the unique experience of race and slavery from our present perspective 150 years after Lincoln's death?

1. In Chapter 1, McPherson suggests in a few strokes and hints some of the qualities that defined the boy and young man Abraham Lincoln: his childhood poverty, his hatred of farm labor, his essentially self-constructed education, his initial encounters with wider worlds on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers (and hatred) of the slavery he saw, his apparent distaste for his father, his emerging melancholy and obsession with death, and his political ambition. How are these elements in his experience and makeup related, and which is most important? How does Lincoln seem "common," and how was he unusual, even as a young man?
2. If, as McPherson suggests in Chapter 2, the deaths of Lincoln's early loves Ann Rutledge and Matilda Edwards were somehow related to his deepening melancholy and intermittent bouts of depression, what light does this shed on his public life and character? What does it mean for someone of such a temperament to enter politics and public life?
3. The rough-hewn Lincoln first became engaged to the educated, sophisticated Mary Todd, broke the engagement, and then married her after Matilda Edwards' death. Should one assume, as many have, that this "marriage of opposites" was an unhappy one from the beginning? Or might this marriage really have "worked" for both parties?
4. Until the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (repealing the prohibition on slavery in territories north of the southern boundary of Missouri) in 1854, Lincoln had been a good lawyer but a minor and mostly unsuccessful frontier politician. Why did the potential expansion of slavery "light a fire" in Lincoln? How was his career radically altered by his Senate election debates with Stephen Douglas (even though Lincoln lost the election)?
5. How did Lincoln position himself as the "moderate" antislavery candidate and thus win the Republican party's nomination in 1860? Was his position—that the

Constitution protected slavery where it existed, but that it could not expand and must be placed on “the course of ultimate extinction” a morally defensible one? Or was it essentially a piece of political expediency? Similarly, what do you think of Lincoln’s essential position, before the Civil War, that blacks deserved human rights of “life, liberty, and property,” but not political rights or social integration? (Though McPherson does not mention it, Lincoln also supported efforts to relocate blacks to Africa or the West Indies after they were freed from slavery.)

6. How did Lincoln brilliantly maneuver the South into firing the first shots of the Civil War? Was there any way to prevent the War without compromising on what Lincoln saw as the non-negotiable principle of no expansion of slavery?
7. McPherson shows how Lincoln *began* the war by arguing that he sought only to *preserve* the Union as it was. How did Lincoln change during the course of the Civil War into a “revolutionary” leader who championed such previously radical ideas as complete emancipation, the destruction of the Southern social and economic system, and – most controversially – the use of federal *power* to promote political equality for blacks?
8. McPherson traces the evolution of Lincoln’s commitment to emancipation of the slaves from, essentially, a practical war measure to defeat the Confederacy into a *principled* ideal that demanded a “total war” requiring the “unconditional surrender” of the South?
9. What political issues did Lincoln, and the Civil War, solve? Which did it leave unresolved? Is it right to regard Lincoln as a “martyr”?

## II. Lincoln's Rhetoric and the Meaning of America

Reading:

Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

While groups may want to read a number of Lincoln's letters and speeches, and perhaps dip into the texts of the "House Divided" speech (pp. 100-109) and the First Lincoln-Douglas debate (pp. 130-171), the key texts addressed here are Lincoln's House Divided speech (pp. 100-109), his First Inaugural (pp. 226-234), the Gettysburg Address (pp. 323-324), and the Second Inaugural Address (pp. 348-349). These speeches are available in many other editions, and also online.

1. Delbanco's Introduction (pp. ix-xx) characterizes Lincoln's language as a new one of "familiar dignity," escaping both rhetorical formalism and colloquialism. What are the assumptions and effects of such rhetoric?
2. The context of the House Divided Speech was the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), which incorporated Stephen Douglas's principle that the settlers in each territory should be able to permit or exclude slavery as they chose ("popular sovereignty"), and that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in the territories. How does Lincoln attack Douglas's doctrine, and also the Supreme Court decision in the *Dred Scott* case (1857) that declared that a slave could not be freed even if he had been taken into a "free" territory or state, and blacks had no rights that whites were bound to respect? How does he argue that the *Dred Scott* case, and Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, effectively open the door to the eventual expansion of slavery into the North, and even the re-opening of the African slave trade?
3. What is Lincoln's fundamental purpose in the First Inaugural Address – to reassure the South that he would not interfere with slavery where it existed (seven states had formally seceded at the time of his inauguration), or to insist that the Union was inherently "indivisible" and that secession would be suppressed (an overt or implied threat)?
4. Lincoln says that the only difference between South and North is that "one section of our country believes slavery is *right* and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is *wrong* and ought not be extended." Given this difference, how can he urge the South to refrain from "assailing the government"? Why does Lincoln, in the speech's concluding paragraph, appeal to "the mystic chords of memory"? Does he really believe that Civil War can be avoided, or is this a rhetorical attempt to lay blame for the war's outbreak on the South?
5. Study the Gettysburg Address carefully. How does Lincoln's use of biological metaphors for the nation ("brought forth," "conceived," "new birth") uphold his elevation of the soldiers "who here gave their lives that that nation might live"?

- How does the sacrifice of the dead, who gave “the last full measure of devotion,” increase the devotion of the living?
6. How does the Address relate America’s original “conception” in liberty and dedication to equality to the cause of the Civil War? Even though Lincoln never mentions the words “slavery” or “blacks,” is the Gettysburg Address in effect incorporating African-Americans into the “born again” nation?
  7. The Second Inaugural Address was delivered as the horrible Civil War neared its end. With the imminent abolition of slavery – which Lincoln calls “somehow, the cause of the War” – he declares as he did in the “Meditation” that “the Almighty has his own purposes.” After observing that both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God, why does he consider it “strange” that the South should ask divine aid in defending slavery?
  8. Rather than draw the logical conclusion from this line of thought that the South’s cause was evil, Lincoln instead chooses instead to accept Jesus’ admonition in the Gospel of Matthew 7:1 that “we judge not lest we be judged.” Instead of viewing the North as God’s instrument for righteously punishing the South, Lincoln proposes that God has given *both* the North and South “this terrible war” as a *shared* punishment for their common, centuries-long “offence” of slavery.
  9. The invocation and vindication of God’s evident judgment on the two hundred and fifty years of the slaves’ bloody suffering required the Civil War to continue until “every drop of blood drawn with the lash be paid by another drawn with the sword” is compelling and chilling. Does Lincoln’s claim that the Civil War is God’s judgment on America’s – and not just the South’s – evil history of slavery seem justified, then or now? Lincoln also quotes Psalm 19:9, “As was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said: ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”
  10. The conclusion of the Second Inaugural Address derives, subtly but profoundly, from the theological meaning that Lincoln has attached to the Civil War itself. It is precisely because *all* of America has been implicated in this profound “offence” against God that the appropriate response toward those who have been enemies in the war is to act “with malice toward none; with charity for all.” Why does Lincoln believe that right response to God’s terrible but righteous chastisement of the United States must not be self-righteousness, but rather, mutual charity, mercy, humility? Does it seem appealing, then or now, for a president to evoke such a shared sense of national remorse and sorrow over the fundamental American injustice of slavery?

### III. Mary Todd Lincoln

Reading:

Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln* (New York: Norton, new edition, 2008)

Jean Baker's biography of Mary Todd Lincoln represented the first serious scholarly biography of the sixteenth president's wife, and also the first to reflect the new importance that historians have come to place on the lives of women even in societies that excluded them from large sectors of public life and power. While Baker sticks closely to the narrative form, describing all the major events and relationships of Mary's life from birth to death, she also creates a compelling portrait of a woman who both belonged to her own time and social milieu, but also in some ways transcends it. While some of the interest in Mary Todd Lincoln certainly derives from her unique relationship with her famous husband, she also emerges from these pages as a powerful, though certainly flawed, personality – but above all a humanly interesting one. In her love and grief, her pride and sense of inferiority, her self-display and attention-getting and her maudlin self-pity and eccentricity, Mary Todd Lincoln provides a stimulus to thinking about the lives of women, and all of us, in both past and present.

1. How did Mary Todd's childhood as part of the Kentucky frontier elite Todd and Parker clans shape her worldview and life course? What assumptions and roles were assigned to women in that antebellum environment? How did Mary's mother's early death, and remarriage of her father to a soon-despised stepmother, shape her emotional and practical life? What strengths and weaknesses did she bring into adulthood?
2. In what ways was Mary Todd's relocation to Springfield, Illinois, an act of independence? How would you characterize the complex courtship process – including apparent disappointments and breakups – that she engaged in with the socially "inferior" but ambitious young attorney Abraham Lincoln? What did Mary and Abraham see in one another? How did contemporary attitudes towards politics, economics, and women's place shape marriage and family in early nineteenth century households – including that of the Lincolns?
3. Baker's Chapter 5 ("Domestic Portrait") is a rich examination of the topics that dominated most American women's lives for centuries, but that have traditionally been ignored or trivialized by historians. How did the labors involved with cooking, clothing, childbearing and childrearing, and hospitality shape Mary Lincoln's life and outlook? How did she, as someone raised in a well-off family where much of such work was done by slaves, adapt to this environment? How did she express, or suppress, her apparent love of self-display, sociability, and self-assertion?
4. In Chapter 5, "The Politics of Marriage," Baker examines the Lincoln marriage as closely as the historical evidence will bear. Do you agree with her basic assessment that the Lincolns were personally and sexually very compatible within the conventions of the time? Why was Mary Todd Lincoln so ambitious

- and involved in advancing her husband's career – beyond the level of political engagement expected of women? How successfully did the “balance of power” in the Lincoln marriage work?
5. How did Mary Todd Lincoln help define the role of “First Lady” in the White House? Was her great emphasis on stylishness and entertainment inappropriate during a bloody Civil War, or the natural form that her own need for self-expression took?
  6. As Baker regularly notes, Mary Lincoln was scornful of the women's rights advocates of her day, and in many respects shared the overwhelming view of most men – and women – regarding women's “place.” Yet she herself violated many of the expected norms of female behavior. How, if at all, can these contradictions be explained?
  7. What was the impact on the Lincolns in general and Mary in particular of the early deaths of their two sons, Eddie and Willie? How do you interpret Mary's involvement in the socially dubious spiritualist movement? Why was spiritualism especially appealing to women of the time, and how did it fit with Mary Todd Lincoln's own psychology and religious outlook?
  8. What was the impact of Abraham Lincoln's assassination on his wife? Were her reactions “excessive” from the beginning, or are they understandable given her earlier life and the place and role of women – even the most prominent women – in nineteenth century America?
  9. How do you interpret Mary Lincoln's apparent dual obsession with clothing and money (and with shopping for clothing on credit) from her White House days on? Why and how did the episode of the “Second Hand Clothing Sale” accentuate the public image of Mary Todd as eccentric, greedy, etc.? Were her actions in her early widowed years understandable, or reflective of serious mental disturbance?
  10. How did Tad Lincoln's death, the growing estrangement from son Robert and his wife Mary, further isolate Mary Todd Lincoln and accentuate her seemingly “peculiar” behavior?
  11. Why did Robert Todd Lincoln seek to have his mother committed to an insane asylum? In what ways might this kind of “insanity” have been a gendered condition? Was her commitment an act of injustice? Was it the result of her son's particular animus, or of deeper cultural perspectives of the time?
  12. What is your basic view and interpretation of Mary Lincoln's life? Would she – could she – have been an interesting and significant character, even if she had never married Abraham Lincoln? How should she be understood today?

#### IV. Historical Interpretations and Controversies

*Reading:*

Barry Schwartz, **"Lincoln at the Millennium"**

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/24.1/schwartz.html>

Jason Emerson, **"The Madness of Mary Lincoln"**

[http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/3/2006\\_3\\_56.shtml](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/3/2006_3_56.shtml)

Jason Emerson, **"New Mary Lincoln Letter Discovered"**

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jishs/101.3-4/emerson.html>

Barry Schwartz, **"Ann Rutledge in American Memory: The Erosion of a Romantic Drama"**

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/26.1/schwartz.html>

These four readings are meant to be deliberately provocative, and to generate discussion about the historical "image" of both Abraham and Mary Lincoln. Barry Schwartz makes the controversial argument that Abraham Lincoln's "heroic" image in American culture was largely the product of a particular time and phase of American nationhood and identity that involved belief in a shared public life. He claims that, now, the fragmentation and skepticism of "postmodern" society has inevitably also shattered and diminished the public's views of even the "greatest" of Americans like Lincoln. In an ironic twist, however, Jason Emerson promotes a more "traditional" view of Mary Lincoln as, indeed, a seriously mentally disturbed woman, who probably does not deserve the claim on our attention that historians like Jean Baker and Mary Lincoln's most recent biographer, Catherine Clinton, have given her. Finally, the curious figure of Ann Rutledge—who first emerged in the public mind through William Herndon's claim that she was Abraham Lincoln's one true love—is again interpreted by Schwartz as the expression of a particular stage of American "gender ideology," particularly the cult of romance, that has now largely disappeared. Was Ann Rutledge primarily a foil by which to denigrate Mary Todd Lincoln—someone who did not fit popular romantic stereotypes? Or could it be true that the death of his youthful loves did deeply shape Lincoln's personal character and outlook? What images of all the Lincolns do we hold today?

1. According to Barry Schwartz, what was Abraham Lincoln's "heroic" image in the early twentieth century? What were the fundamental reasons for that image, and the importance that was attached to the Great Emancipator in defining American character and identity? (You may want to reflect on how Lincoln has been portrayed in your experience, from the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to statues and films to observances like the Lincoln Birthday and recent Lincoln Bicentennial.)

2. How did the image of Lincoln change in the immediate post-World War II era? How did the new perspectives reflect the changing character of American politics and culture in the postwar and civil rights eras?
3. How has Lincoln's image been altered in recent decades? Do you agree with Schwartz that portrayals of him in connection with popular culture "diminish Lincoln's dignity"? Are the "acids of postmodernism" inevitably totally corrosive and ultimately cynical, or might they be the vehicles by which new generations appropriate "Lincoln" ideals in accord with their own cultural expressions? (You may want to explore some of the internet portrayals of Lincoln that Schwartz cites, such as that of the Internet series "Hard Drinkin' Lincoln"; URL is in the text of the article.)
4. In what ways does Jason Emerson's portrait of Mary Lincoln contradict Jean Baker's? Does the evidence that Emerson assembles from Mary Lincoln's "lost letters" persuade you that she was indeed mentally ill?
5. According to Schwartz, what explains the immense popularity of the story of Abraham Lincoln's love for the doomed Ann Rutledge? What needs did both the "weak" and "strong" versions of the story serve?
6. Is the Rutledge narrative inherently hostile to Mary Todd Lincoln? What purpose has been served by those, from William Herndon on, who have argued that Abraham never loved his wife, and that his lifelong melancholy derived from lost love? (It was Herndon who first popularized the Rutledge story after Lincoln's death.)
7. How do you assess Schwartz's claim that declining interest in the Ann Rutledge story reflects changing ideas about romance and gender relations? Even if we could know "the truth" about Rutledge and Abraham Lincoln, would that alter our view of Mary Lincoln or the Lincoln marriage?