

Frederick Douglass

“What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

July 5, 1852

The following excerpt, from a speech Douglass made at the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society provides examples of persuasion, logic, and rhetoric in a speech. In this speech, Douglass takes on the country, its belief in liberty and freedom, and its moral and religious foundations.

Use the definitions you find in *Elements* to identify what Douglass is doing in this speech.

NOTES

Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions! Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. For who is there so cold, that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits? Who so stolid and selfish, that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee, when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man ...

... I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn...

... My subject, then fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see, this day, and its popular characteristics, from the slave's point of view. Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America! “I will not equivocate; I will not excuse;” I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just.

But I fancy I hear some one of my audience say, it is just in this circumstance that you and your brother abolitionists fail to make a favorable impression on the public mind. Would you argue more, and denounce less, would you persuade more, and rebuke less, your cause would be much more likely to succeed. But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued. What point in the anti-slavery creed would you have me argue? On what branch of the subject do the people of this country need light?

Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man, (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or to write. When you can point to any such laws, in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave.

...At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy - a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

When the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, N.Y., invited Douglass to give a July 4 speech in 1852, Douglass opted to speak on July 5 instead. What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. On July 5, 1875, as Reconstruction brought its own fears, like violence from the Ku Klux Klan, Douglass shifted his speech for the day, asking, "If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?" The day was July 5th, 1852, and Frederick Douglass was poised to deliver what would soon become his most famous speech, "What to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?" Commissioned to be a cheerful hurrah, it. Read More. Rhetorical Analysis Of What To The Slave Is The Fourth Of July. 1184 Words | 5 Pages. With his oratorical appeals, in 1852, Douglass delivered a speech that changed the views of millions over the Fourth of July. By using the experience Douglas has encountered as a slave, the historical context to support his argument and certain rhetorical devices, Douglass remarks a speech in order for the citizens of Rochester to be aware of the hypocrisy. Read More. The Life Of Frederick Douglass ' Context. 1480 Words | 6 Pages. On July 5, 1852, Douglass delivered his unprecedentedly powerful speech to the women of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society in Rochester, New York, concluding, "I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim." He said, "What to the American slave is your 4th of July? I answer: A day that reveals to him more than all other days in the year the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is a constant victim. We're still in slavery, we just don't like using that because we say, "Oh we had a black president, we've got a black mayor of St. Paul, there's a black person over here."

What is now known as the "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" speech was delivered on July 5, 1852 as an address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Rochester, New York. Before you read the speech you can follow these links to learn more about Douglass's life and the evolution of his thought in this period. This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day. In 1852, the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York, invited Frederick Douglass to give a July Fourth speech. Douglass opted to speak on July 5 instead, and, addressing an audience of about 600, he delivered one of his most iconic speeches that would become known by the name "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" This episode explores Douglass's oration on racial injustice and the broken promises of equality and liberty laid out in the Declaration of Independence. This week's episode is about Frederick Douglass' speech "What to the Slave is the 4th of July". Before we get to the episode, here's a recording of actor, Ozzie Davis, reading an excerpt from the speech courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. In a Fourth of July holiday special, we hear the words of Frederick Douglass. Born into slavery around 1818, Douglass became a key leader of the abolitionist movement. On July 5, 1852, in Rochester, New York, he gave one of his most famous speeches, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro." He was addressing the Rochester Ladies Antislavery Society. On July 5th, 1852, in Rochester, New York, he gave one of his most famous speeches, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" He was addressing the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. This is the actor James Earl Jones reading the historic address during a performance of Howard Zinn's *Voices of a People's History of the United States*. This is the late great people's historian Howard Zinn.