

Analyzing Texts: Fredrick Douglass

Fredrick Douglass was born into slavery in the United States. He learned to read and write, escaped to the North, and dedicated the rest of his life to the advancement of Abolition and then rights for African Americans in the United States through a prolific writing and speaking career. He was invited to give an address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society for the Fourth of July celebrations in 1852, when slavery and the Fugitive Slave Laws were still legal in the United States. The follow is a very short excerpt from his very long address.

Pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called to speak here today? What have I...to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom embodied in that Declaration of Independence extended to us? Am I called upon to bring our humble offering to the national alter, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us? But, such is not the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included in 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. This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn.

...Above your national joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! To forget them, to pass over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. 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 day! 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.

Identify the American values that Douglass appeals to in the first paragraph. What is the effect of contrasting those who can live these values (citizens) with those who cannot (enslaved people)?

What is Douglass' tone in the second paragraph? Identify particular word or phrasing choices that support that tone. What is the effect of this tone on his audience?

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, our 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, shameful; 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 bragging, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

...you boast of your love of liberty, superior civilization, and pure Christianity, while the whole nation is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen...You hurl your threats at tyrants in Russia and Austria and pride yourselves on your Democratic institutions, while you consent to be the more *tools* and *bodyguards* of the tyrants of Virgin and Carolina. You invite fugitives of absolutism from abroad, honor them with banquets, greet them with ovations, cheer them, toast them, salute them, protect them, and pour out your money to them like water; but the fugitives from your own land you advertise, bunt, arrest, shoot and kill. You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France; but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America. Fellow-citizens! I will not discuss further your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your democracy a sham...and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home.

...In conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. I, therefore, leave off where I began...with hope.

Identify places in this paragraph where Douglass uses contrast to build his argument. What is the effect of choices of words in this paragraph on the audience?

What evidence does Douglass provide in this paragraph to support his main claim in this speech?

Consider the context and exigence for this speech. How would delivering this message have been received on the Fourth of July?