What to The Slave is The Fourth of July?

by Frederick Douglass

Things To Know/ Things To Think About

Although Douglass claims that the ideas he conveys in this speech are thrown “imperfectly together” with no “elaborate preparation,” this makes the clarity of their vision that much more impressive. Despite the bleak subject matter, Douglass’ prose shines. The result is one of the most dazzingly eloquent condemnations of slavery in U.S. history. Significantly, the speech was delivered on July 5th, 1852 to an audience comprised mainly of women from the Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society, in commemoration of July 4th. The first half of the speech, in line with the festive occasion, underscores the significance July 4th holds for the American people. As Douglass notes, July 4th, to the American people, is both a symbolic marker of their “great deliverance” from Great Britain, and a day to celebrate another happy year of “national life.”

With the benefit of hindsight, however, Douglass makes some penetrating comments on American attitudes towards liberty and independence. At the present time, Douglas concludes, few people, if any, would contest the rightness of the American crusade for independence from the British. But for Douglass, what makes the American revolution so wondrous is that the rightness of the American cause was not an indisputable fact at the time. Moreover, to champion this cause was an act of rebellion, making those who did social pariahs in the eyes of the British and Americans loyal to the crown. Douglass implicitly draws a parallel between these American crusaders, and modern day abolitionists, neither of whom were satisfied with the status quo. The latter half of the speech, however, shifts dramatically in focus from celebrating July 4th, to exposing its bitter irony. Douglass thunders that above the cries of “national tumultuous joy” can be heard the “mournful wail of millions.” The millions in question are none other than the diasporic community of African slaves distributed throughout the United States. Brilliantly, Douglass refrains from citing all the societal ills that can be attributed to slavery, but lets the very existence of slavery serve as a living testament to the unbridled hypocrisy of American values. Fortunately, Douglass concludes his speech, not on a bitter note, but on an optimistic one. Placing his hopes in the youthfulness of America, and the increasingly secular globalized world, Douglass believes that change is not only possible, but inevitable. This piece is perfect as part of a lesson on Frederick Douglass, and the history of the abolitionist movement.

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Additionally, it can also serve as part of a lesson on factors that contributed to the rise of the American Civil War. Finally, it can also be used as part of a lesson on rhetoric, and speech writing.

Before Reading

1. Douglass’ speech addresses what July 4th represents to Americans--and slaves--in the year 1852. Do you think the symbolic value of July 4th has changed in the 21st century? Why or why not? What does July 4th mean to Americans, today?

During Reading

1. What kind of metaphor does Douglass use to describe a nation? What are the tenor, and vehicle of this metaphor? Additionally, how does Douglass use this metaphor to describe the fate of nations?

2. What vice does Douglass choose to personify as a “venomous serpent?” Do you think this comparison is an apt one? If you could choose, how else would you personify this vice, and why?

After Reading

1. According to the text, why is Douglass glad that America is still a youthful nation?

2. While citing examples from the text, explain how Douglass uses the existence of slavery to undermine July 4th, and the credibility of the United States. Furthermore, what evils does Douglass associate with slavery?

Connections In Text

1. Compare the rhetorical devices used by Douglass with the rhetorical devices used by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her speech, “Are Women Persons?” Are the devices they used similar, or different? In your opinion, who is more effective in conveying their argument? Write your answer in one to two paragraphs.
Further Readings


This link provides access to a PDF that contains an elaborate teacher guide for teaching about Frederick Douglass, and works authored by him.


This link provides students with a short, albeit informative and concise biography of the life of Frederick Douglass

Domain-specific vocabulary:
plantation, colonies, Passover (Jewish holiday)

G11 Challenging Vocab List:
evience (10), equivocate (9), impunity (9), inconsistency (9), inundate (9), orator (9), oratory (9)

G9 Challenging Vocab List:
equivocate (9), impunity (9), inconsistency (9), inundate (9), orator (9), oratory (9), penetrate (9), agitator (8), allot (8), avarice (8), incisive (writer’s suggestion, 8), indulgence (8), infinite (8), insolence (8), jubilee (8), reprimand (8), agent (7), agitator (7), agitation (7), ascend (7), bondman (7), celestial (7), depot (7), drive (7), eloquence (7), jurisdiction (7), merit (7), platform (7), signify (7)

G7 Challenging Vocab List:
agent (7) agitator (7) agitation (7) ascend (7) bondman (7) celestial (7) depot (7), eloquence (7) jurisdiction (7) merit (7) brief (6) period (6) dwell (6) deed (6) conduct (6) contrast (6) depot (6) despair (6) forlorn (6) elaborate (5) nation (5) number (5) caution (5) cripple (5) custom (5) lack (5) narrate (5) sufficient (5) vice (5)


G3 Challenging Vocab List: abuse (3), anniversary (3), channel (3), continent (3), howl (3), moral (3), opinion (3), sorrow (3), wonder (3), collect (2), glory (2), harsh (2), ignore (2), pride (2), speech (2), stage (2), suffer (2), support (2), wise (2), change (1), collect (1), dozen (1), earth (1), moment (1), rise (1), smart (1), understand (1), wave (1)

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