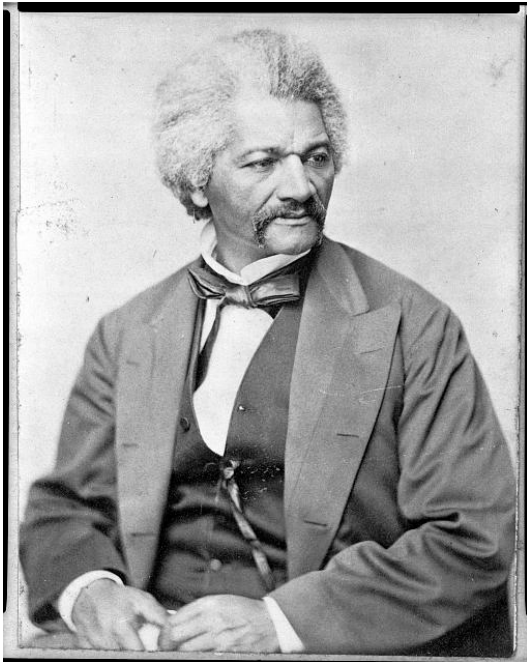


Teaching

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

A Common Core Close Reading Seminar



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2010-11

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GOAL

- To understand what arguments and rhetorical strategies Frederick Douglass uses to persuade a northern, white audience to oppose slavery and favor abolition.

FROM THE FORUM

- What was the composition of Douglass’s audience?
- Did the speech receive wider circulation in print?
- How was the speech received?
- Did a majority of Northerners ever become sympathetic to abolitionism?



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Co-Editor:

Environment: An Interdisciplinary Anthology
(2008)

*The Committed Word: Literature and Public
Values*
(1999)

Forming the Critical Mind
(1989)

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

This represents a classic, speech or composition:

1. paragraphs 1–3: **introduction** (*exordium*)
2. paragraphs 4–29: **narrative or statement of fact** (*narratio*)
3. paragraphs 30–70: **arguments and counter-arguments** (*confirmatio* and *refutatio*)
4. paragraph 71: **conclusion** (*peroratio*)

Sometimes the pivot points are clearly identifiable, at other times, particularly with the counter-argument, they occupy several paragraphs and places. Yet, the basic, five-part structure is secure.

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

The Fourth of July is a traditional occasion for **ceremonial** and commemorative rhetoric, often celebratory. However, Douglass turns it into an occasion for **deliberative** and even **forensic** rhetoric. Forensic rhetoric determines guilt or innocence, good or bad, honor or shame. Deliberative rhetoric embraces debate and judgment where there is no single verdict but rather a complex conclusion, law, or policy.

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable — and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight. That I am here today is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude. You will not, therefore, be surprised, if in what I have to say, I evince no elaborate preparation, nor grace my speech with any high sounding exordium. With little experience and with less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together; and trusting to your patient and generous indulgence, I will proceed to lay them before you.

Discussion Questions

- What relationship does Douglass establish with his audience? By what means? Is his a simple or complex relationship?

From the round top of your ship of state, dark and threatening clouds may be seen. Heavy billows, like mountains in the distance, disclose to the leeward huge forms of flinty rocks! That bolt drawn, that chain broken, and all is lost. Cling to this day — cling to it, and to its principles, with the grasp of a storm-tossed mariner to a spar at midnight.

Discussion Question

- What role does imagery play in the address?

They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression. They showed forbearance; but they knew its limits. They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny [government rule of absolute power]. With them, nothing was “settled” that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were “final;” not slavery and oppression. You may well cherish the memory of such men. They were great in their day and generation. Their solid manhood stands out the more as we contrast it with these degenerate times.

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. When the dogs in your streets, when the fowls of the air, when the cattle on your hills, when the fish of the sea, and the reptiles that crawl, shall be unable to distinguish the slave from a brute, then will I argue with you that the slave is a man!

Discussion Question

- He openly refuses to argue his basic premise or postulate, that slavery is wrong. Why so?

“The pathetic part”: Paragraph 45

Behold the practical operation of this internal slave-trade, the American slave-trade, sustained by American politics and America religion. Here you will see men and women reared like swine for the market. You know what is a swine-drover [herder]? I will show you a man-drover. They inhabit all our Southern States. They perambulate the country, and crowd the highways of the nation, with droves of human stock. You will see one of these human flesh-jobbers [flesh-sellers], armed with pistol, whip and bowie-knife, driving a company of a hundred men, women, and children, from the Potomac to the slave market at New Orleans. These wretched people are to be sold singly, or in lots, to suit purchasers. They are food for the cotton-field, and the deadly sugar-mill. Mark the sad procession, as it moves wearily along, and the inhuman wretch who drives them. Hear his savage yells and his blood-chilling oaths, as he hurries on his affrighted captives! There, see the old man, with locks thinned and gray. Cast one glance, if you please, upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun, her briny tears falling on the brow of the babe in her arms. See, too, that girl of thirteen, weeping, yes! weeping, as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn! The drove moves tardily.

Discussion Question

- What is “the pathetic part” (a nineteenth-century specialty), here seeing in the mind’s eye a heart-rending scene?

“The pathetic part”: Paragraph 45

...

Heat and sorrow have nearly consumed their strength; suddenly you hear a quick snap, like the discharge of a rifle; the fetters clank, and the chain rattles simultaneously; your ears are saluted with a scream, that seems to have torn its way to the center of your soul! The crack you heard, was the sound of the slave-whip; the scream you heard, was from the woman you saw with the babe. Her speed had faltered under the weight of her child and her chains! that gash on her shoulder tells her to move on. Follow the drove to New Orleans. Attend the auction; see men examined like horses; see the forms of women rudely and brutally exposed to the shocking gaze of American slave-buyers. See this drove sold and separated forever; and never forget the deep, sad sobs that arose from that scattered multitude. Tell me citizens, WHERE, under the sun, you can witness a spectacle more fiendish and shocking. Yet this is but a glance at the American slave-trade, as it exists, at this moment, in the ruling part of the United States.

Discussion Questions

- Logos, Ethos, Pathos: what do these vital terms mean? How can we recognize them in this speech? What role does personal witness or testimony play?

But the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters. Many of its most eloquent Divines, who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system. They have taught that man may, properly, be a slave; that the relation of master and slave is ordained of God; that to send back an escaped bondman to his master is clearly the duty of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ; and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off upon the world for Christianity.

Discussion Questions

- Why does Douglass think religion important?
- In terms of its ordained representatives, can his speech be related to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail?"

Fellow-citizens! there is no matter in respect to which, the people of the North have allowed themselves to be so ruinously imposed upon, as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gateway [the preamble]? or is it in the temple [the body of the Constitution]? It is neither. While I do not intend to argue this question on the present occasion, let me ask, if it be not somewhatsingular that, if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slave-holding instrument, why neither slavery, slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it. What would be thought of an instrument [legal agreement, in this case a deed], drawn up, legally drawn up, for the purpose of entitling [giving ownership to] the city of Rochester to a tract [piece] of land, in which no mention of land was made? Now, there are certain rules of interpretation, for the proper understanding of all legal instruments. These rules are well established. They are plain, common-sense rules, such as you and I, and all of us, can understand and apply, without having passed years in the study of law. I scout the idea that the question of the constitutionality or unconstitutionality of slavery is not a question for the people....

Discussion Question

- What specific points, instead, does he argue?

...

I hold that every American citizen has a right to form an opinion of the Constitution, and to propagate that opinion, and to use all honorable means to make his opinion the prevailing one. Without this right, the liberty of an American citizen would be as insecure as that of a Frenchman. Ex-Vice-President Dallas tells us that the Constitution is an object to which no American mind can be too attentive, and no American heart too devoted. He further says, the Constitution, in its words, is plain and intelligible, and is meant for the home-bred, unsophisticated understandings of our fellow-citizens. Senator Berrien tells us that the Constitution is the fundamental law, that which controls all others. The charter of our liberties, which every citizen has a personal interest in understanding thoroughly. The testimony of Senator Breese, Lewis Cass, and many others that might be named, who are everywhere esteemed as sound lawyers, so regard the Constitution. I take it, therefore, that it is not presumption in a private citizen to form an opinion of that instrument.

Discussion Questions

- Why does Douglass insist on the right of citizens to advocate their own interpretations of governmental documents, the Constitution in particular?
- What recent federal law has troubled, even incensed, Douglass and abolitionists?
- Was abolition a mainstream movement, or then considered fringe?

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. “The arm of the Lord is not shortened,” and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world, and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done. Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude walked on in mental darkness. But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind. Walled cities and empires have become unfashionable. The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city.

Discussion Question

- Where is there a vision of globalization?

...

Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated. Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic are distinctly heard on the other. The far-off and almost fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved. The fiat of the Almighty, "Let there be Light," has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light. The iron shoe, and crippled foot of China must be seen, in contrast with nature. Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment. "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand unto God."

Discussion Question

- What is Douglass's vision of globalization?

Final Discussion Questions

- How does the speech reflect a person liberally (i.e. generously and broadly) educated?
- Is this important?



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LESSONS



16th Century 17th Century 18th Century 19th Century 20th Century

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

Lesson prepared by National Humanities Center staff. Advisor: [James Engell](#), Gurney Professor of English and Professor of Comparative Literature, Harvard University, National Humanities Center Fellow.

What arguments and rhetorical strategies did Frederick Douglass use to persuade a northern, white audience to oppose slavery and favor abolition?

Understanding

In the 1850s abolition was not a widely embraced movement in the United States. It was considered radical, extreme, and dangerous. In “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Frederick Douglass sought not only to convince people of the wrongfulness of slavery but also to make abolition more acceptable to Northern whites.

Text
Frederick Douglass, “[What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?](#)” An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852. 

Text Complexity
Grades 11-CCR complexity band.

Text Type



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Final slide.

Thank you.