



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

Lesson prepared by National Humanities Center staff.

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### Framing Question

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”](#)

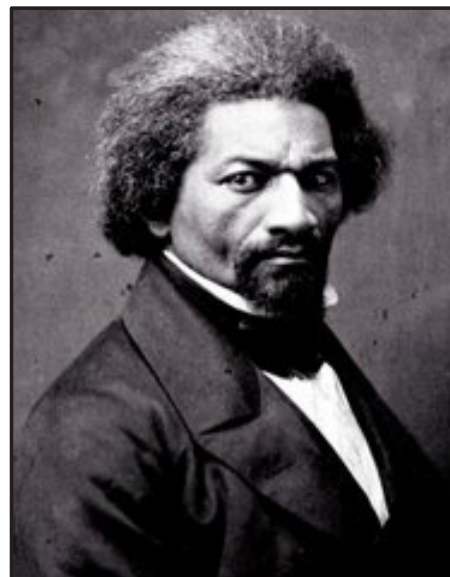


#### Text Complexity

Grades 11-CCR complexity band.

#### Text Type

Speech, historical, informational.



*Portrait of Frederick Douglass, circa 1860.  
Courtesy of The New York Historical Society.*

### Background

At the invitation of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, Frederick Douglass delivered this speech on July 5, 1852, at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. It was reported and reprinted in Northern newspapers and was published and sold as a forty-page pamphlet within weeks of its delivery. The 500 to 600 people who heard Douglass speak were generally sympathetic to his remarks. A newspaper noted that when he sat down, “there was a universal burst of applause.” Nonetheless, many who read his speech would not have been so enthusiastic. Even Northerners who were anti-slavery were not necessarily pro-abolition. Many were content to let Southerners continue to hold slaves, a right they believed was upheld by the Constitution. They simply did not want to slavery to spread to areas where it did not exist. In this Independence Day oration, Douglass sought to persuade those people to embrace what was then considered the extreme position of abolition.


He also sought to change minds about the abilities and intelligence of African Americans. In 1852 many, if not most, white Americans believed that African Americans were inferior, indeed, less than fully human. Douglass tries to dispel these notions through an impressive display of liberal learning. His speech gives ample evidence of knowledge of rhetoric, history, literature, religion, economics, poetry, music, law, even advances in technology.




## Teaching the Text

In addition to making historical points about nineteenth-century attitudes toward slavery, race, and abolition, you can use this speech to teach formal rhetoric. We have divided the address into four sections according to the function of each one. This division follows the classic structure of argumentative writing:

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*)

We have included notes that explain the function of each section as well as questions that invite discussion of the ways in which Douglass deploys rhetoric to make his case.

This lesson features five interactive activities, which can be accessed by clicking on this icon: . The first explores the subtle way in which Douglass compares the patriots of 1776 with the abolitionists of 1852. The second challenges students to determine how Douglass supports his thesis. The third focuses on his use of syllogistic reasoning, while the fourth examines how he makes his case through emotion and the fifth through analogy.

We recommend assigning the [entire text](#) . For close reading we have analyzed eighteen of the speech's seventy-one paragraphs through fine-grained questions, most of them text-dependent, that will enable students to explore rhetorical strategies and significant themes. The version below, designed for teachers, provides responses to those questions in the "Text Analysis" section. The [classroom version](#) , a printable worksheet for use with students, omits those responses and this "Teaching the Text" note. Terms that appear in blue are defined on hover and in a printable glossary on the last page of the classroom version. The student worksheet also includes links to the activities, indicated by this icon: .

This is a long lesson. We recommend dividing students into groups and assigning each group a set of paragraphs to analyze.

## Text Analysis

### Introduction (*Exordium*): Paragraphs 1–3

1. Mr. President, Friends and Fellow Citizens: He who could address this audience without a quailing sensation, has stronger nerves than I have. I do not remember ever to have appeared as a speaker before any assembly more shrinkingly, nor with greater distrust of my ability, than I do this day. A feeling has crept over me, quite unfavorable to the exercise of my limited powers of speech. The task before me is one which requires much previous thought and study for its proper performance. I know that apologies of this sort are generally considered flat and unmeaning. I trust, however, that mine will not be so considered. Should I seem at ease, my appearance would much misrepresent me. The little experience I have had in addressing public meetings, in country schoolhouses, avails me nothing on the present occasion.
2. The papers and placards say, that I am to deliver a 4th [of] July oration. This certainly sounds large, and out of the common way, for it is true that I have often had the privilege to speak in this beautiful Hall, and to address many who now honor me with their presence. But neither their familiar faces, nor the perfect gauge I think I have of Corinthian Hall, seems to free me from embarrassment.
3. 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 to-day 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 evinced 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.

### Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

## Close Reading Questions, Paragraphs 1–3

### What are introductions supposed to do?

They seek to engage the interest of listeners and make them receptive to the speaker's message. Introductions can inform listeners of the subject or the purpose of a speech, attempt to convince them that a topic is important and worthy of their attention, or ingratiate a speaker with the audience.

### What does Douglass try to do in this introduction? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Because his audience is familiar with the subject matter of Fourth of July speeches and because it recognizes the importance of the occasion, in his introduction Douglass does not have to sketch out his topic or argue for its significance. Instead, he sets out to ingratiate himself with his listeners. He praises their importance and claims to be humbled by their stature. He “quails” and “shrinks” before them. He distrusts his “limited powers of speech.” His ease is apparent, not real.

### Why does he say that “apologies of this sort are generally considered flat and unmeaning”?

He calls attention to the rhetorical conventions of introductions to signal to his audience that in this case they do not apply. He seeks to win their trust by assuring them he is sincere.

### The word “flat” often means level or smooth. In this context how is Douglass defining the word “flat”?

Here the word “flat” is used to mean dull or superficial. Using the context we can see that Douglass intends the connotation of the word “flat” not to be level but instead to mean something that lacks depth or emotion behind it.

### Why would it be “out of the common way” for him to deliver a Fourth of July oration?

As he reminds his audience in the final paragraph of the introduction, he is an escaped slave. By calling attention to the fact that a slave has been invited to speak on freedom, he employs irony, a strategy he will use throughout the speech to emphasize certain themes.

### There are contradictions in Douglass's self-presentation. What are they? Cite specific instances of them in the text.

#### How can you account for them?

In the first paragraph not only does Douglass describe his “powers of speech” as “limited,” but he also maintains that he has “limited experience” in exercising them, which he claims to have done chiefly in “country school houses.” Yet in the next paragraph he says that he has spoken in Corinthian Hall many times to many of the same people sitting before him now. The last sentence of the second paragraph (“But neither...”) suggests what he is doing. He is walking a tightrope. He seeks at once to ingratiate himself with a display of humility while at the same time establishing his authority as a speaker and justifying his presence on the platform. He continues this balancing act in the next paragraph when he asserts that he has “little...learning.” Yet he deploys the term “exordium,” which contradicts the little-learning claim by revealing a study-acquired vocabulary and a knowledge of formal rhetoric.

### What expectations do you think a white audience would have for a black speaker in 1852? How does Douglass address these expectations in his introduction?

In this introduction Douglass is doing more than simply presenting himself to his audience. When he raises the topic of slavery in the third paragraph, he brings into his text a topic which the color of his skin has already brought into Corinthian Hall, racism. Even among some abolitionists there existed the strong prejudice that African Americans were inferior, indeed, something less than fully human. Douglass's entire speech is designed to do dispel that belief. In his introduction he begins to do so with that subtle flash of learning revealed in his use of “exordium.” Thus with an ironic wink he signals to his listeners that they are in for a serious display of learning and rhetorical skill, a feat quite beyond the capacities of an inferior being.

## Narrative or Statement of Fact (*Narratio*): Paragraphs 4–29

4. 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. This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76 years old. I am glad, fellow-citizens, that your nation is so young. Seventy-six years, though a good old age for a man, is but a mere speck in the life of a nation. Three score years and ten is the allotted time for individual men; but nations number their years by thousands. According to this fact, you are, even now, only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood. I repeat, I am glad this is so. There is hope in the thought, and hope is much needed, under the dark clouds which lower above the horizon. The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times; but his heart may well beat lighter at

the thought that America is young, and that she [America] is still in the impressible stage of her existence. May he not hope that high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give direction to her destiny? Were the nation older, the patriot's heart might be sadder, and the reformer's brow heavier. Its future might be shrouded in gloom, and the hope of its prophets go out in sorrow. There is consolation in the thought that America is young. Great streams are not easily turned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages. They may sometimes rise in quiet and stately majesty, and inundate the land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth with their mysterious properties. They may also rise in wrath and fury, and bear away, on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of toil and hardship. They, however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever. But, while the river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave nothing behind but the withered branch, and the unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss-sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers so with nations.

#### Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 4

**Note:** Students are likely to be familiar with the function of an introduction in a speech but less so with the function of the narrative section. You might explain that in an address commemorating an event, speakers often invoke the event by offering a narration of it. This reminds the audience why they are gathered together, and it offers speakers the opportunity to draw inspiration for the future from the event. Douglass's narration clearly performs the first function and, as we shall see, the second as well. But it also performs two other important functions. Looking back on America's revolutionary past, the narration, through implied comparison, condemns America's slave-holding present. Moreover, it enshrines radical resistance to government policy and revolution in the face of bondage as venerated parts of the mainstream American political tradition. In other words, it equates the abolitionists of 1852 with the patriots of 1776, each group denounced in its day as "plotters of mischief, agitators...rebels, dangerous men."

**What is the effect of Douglass's repetition of the words "your" and "you" in this paragraph and throughout the speech?**

The repetition of the words "your" and "you" startlingly emphasizes the distance between Douglass and his audience and signals to his listeners that he does not share their perspective or their attitudes toward the Fourth of July.

**Why does Douglass feel hopeful about America's future? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.**

He takes hope from the fact that the country is young, only seventy-six years old. Its destiny and character are not fixed. Thus it may yet change and abandon slavery.

**What is he suggesting in the "great streams" metaphor?**

If America permits slavery to become a deep and permanent part of its life, the nation might benefit from it, or it might be destroyed by it, or it could be morally drained by it. In the end the metaphor is a warning about what might happen if change does not happen soon.

**In the sentence "Were the nation older, the patriot's heart might be sadder, and the reformer's brow heavier," why does Douglass equate the patriot and the reformer? Why would both groups be sadder if the nation were older?**

In this part of his speech Douglass takes pains to equate the founding patriots with contemporary anti-slavery reformers. He begins to make that equation here. The nation, Douglass tells his audience, is still young, not set in its way, and thus more susceptible to change. By inference, were it older, it would be more set in its ways, and the reformer who would want to change those ways, would be sad. But why would a patriot be sad? From Douglass's perspective, he would be sad for the same reason. In Douglass's view the patriots established a just nation, one that would not tolerate bondage. Were the nation to mature with the injustice of slavery deeply entrenched in it, America would betray the ideals of the Revolution, and thus the patriot would be sad.

...

6. But, your fathers, who had not adopted the fashionable idea of this day, of the infallibility of government, and the absolute character of its acts, presumed to differ from the home government in respect to the wisdom and the justice of some of those burdens and restraints [things the British government required and prevented]. They went so far in their excitement as to pronounce the measures of government unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not to be quietly submitted to. I scarcely need say, fellow-citizens, that my opinion of those measures fully accords with that of your fathers. Such a declaration of agreement on my part would not be worth much to anybody. It would, certainly, prove nothing, as to what part I might have taken, had I lived during the great controversy of 1776. To say now that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy. Everybody can say it; the dastard, not less than the noble brave, can flippantly descant on the tyranny of England towards the American Colonies. It is fashionable to do so; but there was a time when to pronounce against England, and in favor of the cause of the colonies, tried men's souls. They who did so were accounted in their day, plotters of mischief, agitators



and rebels, dangerous men. To side with the right, against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! here lies the merit, and the one which, of all others, seems unfashionable in our day. The cause of liberty may be stabbed by the men who glory in the deeds of your fathers. But, to proceed.

## Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 6

### Activity: The “Fathers” and the Abolitionists

This online activity illuminates the context of Douglass’s speech and provides background for the comparison he is making.



**According to Douglass, what did the “fathers” do? Cite specific language from the text. Does Douglass equate the patriot and the reformer? Why would both groups be sadder if the nation were older?**

They rejected “the infallibility of government,” “pronounced the measures of government unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive,” and sided with “the right against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor.”

**Why does Douglass assert his agreement with the actions of the “fathers”?**

Douglass asserts his agreement with the actions of founders and embraces the principles of the Revolution to create a bond with his audience and to reassure them that, to some degree at least, he participates in the American political tradition.

...

23. 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 that 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.

## Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 23

**How would you characterize the structure of the first four sentences of this paragraph?**

The structure balances ideas through antithesis, a rhetorical device that poses contrary qualities against each other: They were *peace* men, but they preferred *revolution*....”.

**How does the structure of those sentences reinforce the main idea of the paragraph?**

The carefully balanced structure reinforces the idea that the founders were themselves balanced, reasonable men.

**What inference does Douglass want his audience to draw from his portrayal of the founders?**

Since he established an identification between the founders and the abolitionists in paragraphs 4 and 6, the temperate qualities he ascribes here to the former apply to the latter as well, and this ascription is important because it addresses the charge that abolitionists were fanatics and monomaniacs.

**Often speakers and writers make their points as much by leaving things out as by putting things in. This strategy is known as the strategic silence. What has Douglass omitted in his portrayal of the fathers? Why would he choose to do so?**

Douglass never mentions the fact that many of the fathers were slave owners. This silence allows Douglass to create his own version of the fathers, untainted by facts that would challenge his portrayal. Similarly, they deflect the minds of his listeners from points that might lead them to resist his argument.

**Do you think Douglass’s omission weakens his argument?**

Here you might encourage a debate among your students. Some will say the omission weakens Douglass’s argument because it straightforwardly refutes his case. How can he say that the “fathers” sided “with the oppressed against the oppressor” when many of them were themselves oppressors? Other students may argue that this omission does not weaken his case. Despite being slaveholders, men like Washington and Jefferson did, in fact, establish a nation built on the ideals of justice and freedom. That many of the founders did not live up to those ideals does not make them any less compelling. As Douglass says in paragraphs sixteen and seventeen (paragraphs we do not analyze in this lesson), the “fathers” enshrined those “saving principles” in the Declaration of Independence, and it is to those principles that the nation must cling. Thus in this part of the speech Douglass argues that just because the “fathers” did not fully embrace justice and freedom in 1776 does not mean that his listeners should not in 1852.

## Arguments and Counter-Arguments (*Confirmatio* and *Refutatio*): Paragraphs 35–40

35. Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, “may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!” To forget them, to pass lightly 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. 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.

### Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 35

**Note:** Arguments and counter-arguments lie at the heart of persuasive discourse. Review with your students what speakers and writers try to do when making a case. They put forth their arguments and refute those of their opponents. To win over an audience, they may appeal to their listeners’ reason by laying out a logical case, or they may seek to win their trust by impressing them with sound sense or high moral character, or they may appeal to their emotions. We offer passages that illustrate all of these strategies.

#### Activity: Thesis Sentence and Supporting Evidence

In paragraph 35 Douglass states the thesis of his address. This online activity explores his thesis and the evidence he uses to support it.



#### What point of view does Douglass announce in this paragraph?

In paragraph 3 Douglass alluded to the fact that he had been a slave. In this paragraph his listeners discover the full import of the fact for his speech. Identifying himself with the enslaved, he announces that he will consider the Fourth of July from their perspective.

36. 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!

## Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 36

### Activity: Douglass's Use of Syllogistic Reasoning

In paragraph 36 Douglass uses logic to show that slaves are human beings. Specifically, he uses a syllogism. This activity explores syllogistic reasoning and the way Douglass employs it.



37. For the present, it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race. Is it not astonishing that, while we are ploughing, planting and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver and gold; that, while we are reading, writing and cyphering, acting as clerks, merchants and secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators and teachers; that, while we are engaged in all manner of enterprises common to other men, digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hill-side, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives and children, and, above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian's God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave, we are called upon to prove that we are men!

## Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 37

### How does paragraph 37 relate to paragraph 36?

Douglass continues to argue that slaves are men.

### How does Douglass develop this paragraph?

He does so by listing examples of some of things slaves do that are done by others also: ploughing, planting, building, writing, raising children, etc.

...

39. What, am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters? Must I argue that a system thus marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is wrong? No! I will not. I have better employments for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.

## Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 39

### How does Douglass maintain the order and coherence of the first sentence of this paragraph?

He employs parallelism, a type of organization in which a writer places similar ideas in a similar structure. Here Douglass parallels the indignities slaves suffer in a series of infinitive phrases: "...to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty," etc.

### What is the effect of the repetition of the infinitive phrases ("to make," "to rob," "to work", etc.) in the first sentence?

They establish a rhythm that emphasizes each indignity and heighten the emotional impact of the argument.

40. What, then, remains to be argued? Is it that slavery is not divine; that God did not establish it; that our doctors of divinity [preachers, ministers] are mistaken? There is blasphemy in the thought. That which is inhuman, cannot be divine! Who can reason on such a proposition? They that can, may; I cannot. The time for such argument is past.

...

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. 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.

### Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 45

#### Activity: The Emotional Appeal

In paragraph 45 Douglass argues from emotion. This online activity explores the emotional appeal and how Douglass employs it.



46. I was born amid such sights and scenes. To me the American slave-trade is a terrible reality. When a child, my soul was often pierced with a sense of its horrors. I lived on Philpot Street, Fell's Point, Baltimore, and have watched from the wharves, the slave ships in the Basin, anchored from the shore, with their cargoes of human flesh, waiting for favorable winds to waft them down the Chesapeake. There was, at that time, a grand slave mart kept at the head of Pratt Street, by Austin Woldfolk. His agents were sent into every town and county in Maryland, announcing their arrival, through the papers, and on flaming "hand-bills," headed CASH FOR NEGROES. These men were generally well dressed men, and very captivating in their manners. Ever ready to drink, to treat, and to gamble. The fate of many a slave has depended upon the turn of a single card; and many a child has been snatched from the arms of its mother by bargains arranged in a state of brutal drunkenness.
47. The flesh-mongers gather up their victims by dozens, and drive them, chained, to the general depot at Baltimore. When a sufficient number have been collected here, a ship is chartered, for the purpose of conveying the forlorn crew to Mobile, or to New Orleans. From the slave prison to the ship, they are usually driven in the darkness of night; for since the antislavery agitation, a certain caution is observed.
48. In the deep still darkness of midnight, I have been often aroused by the dead heavy footsteps, and the piteous cries of the chained gangs that passed our door. The anguish of my boyish heart was intense; and I was often consoled, when speaking to my mistress in the morning, to hear her say that the custom was very wicked; that she hated to hear the rattle of the chains, and the heart-rending cries. I was glad to find one who sympathized with me in my horror.

### Close Reading Questions, Paragraphs 46–48

#### What strategy of argument does Douglass employ in this section of his speech?

Here Douglass established his own moral authority to speak on the issue of slavery by citing his own experience, by establishing himself as reliable witness with first-hand information.

...

63. Americans! your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent. You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation (as embodied in the two great political parties), is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen. You hurl your anathemas at the crowned headed tyrants of Russia and Austria, and pride yourselves on your Democratic institutions, while you yourselves consent to be the mere tools and



bodyguards of the tyrants of Virginia and Carolina. You invite to your shores fugitives of oppression 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, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill. You glory in your refinement and your universal education yet you maintain a system as barbarous and dreadful as ever stained the character of a nation — a system begun in avarice, supported in pride, and perpetuated in cruelty. You shed tears over fallen Hungary, and make the sad story of her wrongs the theme of your poets, statesmen and orators, till your gallant sons are ready to fly to arms to vindicate her [Hungary's] cause against her oppressors; but, in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the strictest silence, and would hail him as an enemy of the nation who dares to make those wrongs the subject of public discourse! You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America. You discourse eloquently on the dignity of labor; yet, you sustain a system which, in its very essence, casts a stigma upon labor. You can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a threepenny tax on tea; and yet wring the last hard-earned farthing [a coin formerly used in Great Britain] from the grasp of the black laborers of your country. You profess to believe “that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth,” and hath commanded all men, everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate, (and glory in your hatred), all men whose skins are not colored like your own. You declare, before the world, and are understood by the world to declare, that you “hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;” and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to your own Thomas Jefferson, “is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose,” a seventh part of the inhabitants of your country.

### Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 63

#### How does this paragraph relate to the overall thesis of the speech?

Here Douglass offers the strongest illustration of the ways in which America is false to the ideals it has set for itself.

#### What is the thesis of this paragraph?

The ways in which Americans practice their politics and religion are inconsistent with the values and ideals they claim to be following.

#### How does Douglass's sentence structure reflect the thesis of the paragraph?

Of the eleven sentences in this paragraph, ten exhibit a parallel compound structure in which the first clause identifies an ideal and the following clause refutes America's claim to it. Each sentence begins with a slightly accusatory “you” and then pivots at a conjunction or a word functioning as one — “while,” “but,” “yet” — that suggests contradiction.

...

68. 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 somewhat singular 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. 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.

### Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 68

**Note:** This paragraph is an important part of Douglass's *refutatio* and as such deserves careful attention. Not only does he address a powerful justification for the continuation of slavery — the belief that it is protected by the Constitution — but he also asserts a controversial theory about Constitutional interpretation.

#### Activity: Argument by Analogy

In paragraph 68, Douglass introduces another tool of persuasion, argument by analogy, which is explored in this online activity.



### Conclusion (*Peroratio*), Paragraph 71

...

71. 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. 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." In the fervent aspirations of William Lloyd Garrison, I say, and let every heart join in saying it:

God speed the year of jubilee

The wide world o'er!

When from their galling chains set free,

Th' oppressed shall vilely bend the knee,

And wear the yoke of tyranny

Like brutes, no more:—

That year will come, and Freedom's reign,

To man his plundered rights again

Restore.

God speed the day when human blood

Shall cease to flow!

In every clime be understood,

The claims of human brotherhood,  
And each return for evil, good—  
    Not blow for blow:—  
That day will come, all feuds to end,  
And change into a faithful friend  
    Each foe.  
God speed the hour, the glorious hour,  
    When none on earth  
Shall exercise a lordly power,  
Nor in a tyrant's presence cower;  
But all to Manhood's stature tower,  
    By equal birth!—  
That hour will come, to each, to all,  
And from his prison-house the thrall  
    Go forth.  
Until that year, day, hour arrive,  
With head and heart and hand I'll strive,  
To break the rod, and rend the gyve,—  
The spoiler of his prey deprive,—  
    So witness Heaven!  
And never from my chosen post,  
Whate'er the peril or the cost,  
    Be driven.

### **Close Reading Questions, Paragraph 71**

**Note:** Conclusions are important. Ask your students how they function and what they should do. The final words an audience hears, they often linger and shape the impression of an entire speech. Traditionally, speakers use them to do four things: leave the audience with a favorable opinion, emphasize key points, stimulate an appropriate emotional response, or summarize the argument. Douglass does not emphasize key points or restate his arguments. Rather, he seeks to cast his case for abolition in a favorable light and instill hope in his listeners.

#### **What are conclusions supposed to do?**

Traditionally, four things: leave the audience with a favorable opinion, emphasize key points, stimulate an appropriate emotional response, or summarize the argument.

#### **Why is it important for Douglass to tell his listeners that he does “not despair of this country”?**

Even though he has just delivered a dark and stinging denunciation of the country, he does not want his listeners to leave the hall feeling depressed and hopeless.

#### **On what does Douglass base the hope he expresses in this paragraph?**

He looks to the past and the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. For Douglass those ideals, if the nation can live up to them, make the United States, despite its flaws, a place of promise and hope for the enslaved. He also looks to the future in which he believes commercial and technological progress — ships using steam to make a “pathway” over the sea and telegraph cables using “lightning” (electricity) to do the same under it — will spread intelligence, enlightenment, and moral progress throughout the world.

## Glossary

absolute: definite, certain quality

abyss-sweeping: blowing through valleys

accords with: matches, is the same as

accounted: considered

affirm: establish, declare

agitators: people who stir up feeling about political issues

anathemas: outrage

anguish: sorrowful pain

avails: aids, assists

avarice: greed

blasphemy: insult to holiness

bondman: slave

borne: carried

captivating: charming

conceded: agreed upon

consolation: comfort

conveying: transporting

dastard: coward

degenerate: corrupt, unethical

deliverance: freedom from oppression

denounce: publicly reject or criticize

discharge: firing

drove: herd

emancipated: free, liberated

equivocate: be vague, avoid commitment

evinced: reveal, show

exceedingly: very

exordium: introduction

faltered: slowed

fashionable: widely accepted

fiendish: evil, cruel

flippantly descant: easily, carelessly speak

forbearance: patience, restraint

forlorn: sad, lonely

forms: bodies

gallant: brave, heroic

gauge: understanding

grievous: serious

hastily: quickly, swiftly

heart-rending: heart-breaking

hideous: ugly

impunity: freedom from punishment

infallibility: perfection, flawlessness

inundate: overload, overtake

large: important

license: permission

lingering: remaining, staying

locks: hair

lots: groups

mischief: trouble

mournful: sad

oration: speech

perambulate: walk about

perpetuate: continue

piteous: sad

placards: advertising posters

portending: warning, indicating

prevailing: most widely held

propagate: spread

proposition: proposal

quailing: shy, trembling

reared: raised

rebuke: criticize

reformer: one who wants change

rendered: made

reproach: expression of disapproval

sanction: legal standing

scandalous: offensive

scout: have encountered

serenely: calmly, peacefully

severest: strongest

shrouded: covered

singular: odd, unusual

submit: argue

sunder: separate, divide

sustained: allowed to continue

toil: work, labor

treason: a crime

tumultuous: noisy, expressive

unsightly: ugly

waft: blow

warrant: justification

wharves: docks

withered: dried