

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

"...but at this moment--from whence came the spirit I don't know--I resolved to fight...My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact." Frederick Douglass.

Overview

Students will read excerpts from Frederick Douglass's groundbreaking autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, which provides vivid first-hand accounts of the lives of slaves and the cruel actions of slave owners. Students will demonstrate their understanding of Douglass's narrative and the institution of slavery by writing and presenting an antislavery speech or editorial based upon the excerpt they read.

Grade

8

North Carolina Essential Standards for 8th Grade Social Studies

- 8.H.1.3 - Use primary and secondary sources to interpret various historical perspectives.
- 8.H.1.4 - Use historical inquiry to evaluate the validity of sources used to construct historical narratives (e.g. formulate historical questions, gather data from a variety of sources, evaluate and interpret data and support interpretations with historical evidence).
- 8.H.3.1 - Explain how migration and immigration contributed to the development of North Carolina and the United States from colonization to contemporary times (e.g. westward movement, African slavery, Trail of Tears, the Great Migration and Ellis and Angel Island).
- 8.C&G.1.4 -Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).
- 8.C.1.3 -Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States (e.g. women, religious groups, and ethnic minorities such as American Indians, African Americans, and European immigrants).

Essential Questions

- What can we learn about slavery from the writing of Frederick Douglass? In what ways does his use of language paint a realistic portrait of slavery?
- According to Douglass, what were some common misconceptions about slaves and their situation?
- According to Douglass, what were some of the effects of slavery upon the enslaved? Upon the slaveholder?
- What behaviors and actions did slaveholders use Christianity to justify and how does Douglass effectively point out their hypocrisy?

Materials

- Warm-Up: Simulating the Inability to Read, attached
- Optional: "Frederick Douglas Mini Bio" Video; laptop with Internet access, speakers, and a projector will be needed for sharing with students
 - Available for free viewing at www.biography.com (search "Frederick Douglas" and videos will populate in a box on the right)

- Create an Anti-Slavery Speech or Editorial based on the Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, assignment sheet attached
- Excerpts from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave
 - 21 excerpts are attached
 - Full text and additional information available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/menu.html>
- Notes for Presentations of Speeches and Editorials, handout attached
- Optional: Excerpt from “What to the Slave is the 4th of July,” attached
- Teacher Reference: “What to the Slave is the 4th of July”, Time Magazine article attached

Duration

- 45-60 minutes for introductory lesson and assignment description
- 60 minutes for sharing and discussing editorials and speeches

Teacher Preparation

While the procedure description for this lesson is only 4 pages long, the entire document is lengthy due to the inclusion of 21 excerpts from the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (see attached.) It is recommended that teachers review the attached excerpts before printing this entire document.

Procedure

Day 1

Warm Up: The Ability to Read and Write

1. As a warm-up, project the attached warm-up assignment, which is purposefully written in random letters in order to simulate the experience of being unable to read. Without telling students the purpose of the activity, simply instruct them to get started on the assignment found projected at the front of the room. It won't take long for students to exhibit verbal confusion and frustration. The teacher's firm responses to student comments, questions, and opposition are imperative to furthering the irritation felt by the class. Teachers should assume the role of a “grumpy” educator and offer curt responses such as:
 - “I don't understand what the issue is. You all should know how to do this assignment and I am not taking any further questions about it. Get started immediately.”
 - “You all are just being lazy and impatient. Take a minute to try and figure this assignment out for yourselves! If you don't complete this assignment in the next 5 minutes, you will receive a zero.”
 - “If any one of you can't do this assignment, there is something wrong with you. There is no reason why you can't complete this simple activity!”
2. Once you feel you have manipulated students to an appropriate level of frustration, pretend to “give in” and help the class with their warm-up. For example, the teacher might say:
 - “Alright, that's it. This is ridiculous. I have no idea why you all can't do something as simple as this. Let's go through it together. Who can volunteer to read the assignment for us and we'll take it step by step, since you guys have evidentially reverted to 6th graders!”
 - “What do you mean you ‘can't read it?’ Those are letters put together aren't they? I can read it just fine. It says:
‘Welcome! Please examine the photograph below. Do you recognize this person? If so, write his name on a piece of notebook paper and share what you already know about him.’ It says it right there, right on the board. You guys are just being difficult today.”
3. Students will likely continue to protest. At this point throw your hands up in frustration and say something such as:
 - “You know, just stop with all of your excuses...just forget it. I don't know why you aren't following directions today. Who can at least raise their hand and answer the first part of the question for me, telling us who is pictured here?”

4. Hopefully, a student will recognize Frederick Douglass. If not, tell them that it is he who is pictured. Once he has been identified, instruct the students to take 2-3 minutes and list everything they already know (or think they know) on a piece of notebook paper about Frederick Douglass. As students write, walk around the room and portray a confused expression, picking up various papers and making comments like:
 - “What is this that you’ve put down here? These letters look like gibberish to me. Are you all playing some kind of joke?”
 - I can’t read a thing on this page. What is wrong with you? If you can’t write something down that makes sense, you are getting a zero on this assignment!”

5. Finally, stop the activity, let students know that your grumpiness was an act, and explain to students that you’ve set them up and that of course, they aren’t going to be held responsible for understanding the gibberish on the board. However, tell them that the emotions and frustration they just felt by being expected to figure out that which they could not, and being spoken to in a negative way because they couldn’t figure it out, slightly represents how a person who is unable to read might feel. Discuss:
 - How did you feel when you saw the warm-up? How did you feel when I expected you to be able to know what to do and told you that you would receive a zero if you couldn’t answer the question?
 - How might your experience slightly connect to the experience of a person who is unable to read or write?
 - Think about all the things that you do each day that require you to be able to read. What are some of these things? How would your daily life be negatively impacted if you didn’t know how to read? How do you think other people would treat you if you couldn’t read?
 - How did you learn to read? Do you remember anything about the process?
 - Consider also the ability to write. What types of things in daily life require the ability to write? How would not knowing how to write impact your life?
 - Imagine that there was a law passed when you were young that said it was illegal to teach people like you to read or write. How would you feel about that?

6. Discuss with students that since we live in a time when the right to a free, public education is a given, we often end up taking this for granted. In actuality, we most likely can’t accurately imagine how it would feel to not be allowed to learn how to read or write, because we’ve all been given this right our whole lives. Whereas many students today complain about school and dread doing any type of reading or writing associated with their courses, these were rights that those enslaved were restricted from. It was illegal to teach a slave to read or to write, and thus many were forced to remain illiterate. Others risked their lives to educate themselves and become literate. One such person was Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, or as more commonly known, Frederick Douglass. Discuss:
 - Why do you think it was illegal to teach a slave how to read or write, or educate them in any way?
 - Why do you think some people, such as Frederick Douglass, risked their lives to learn to read and write?

Introduction to Frederick Douglass

7. Tell students that they will be learning more about Frederick Douglass in today’s lesson and about slavery in general by reading the words of Frederick Douglass himself, through his autobiography Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Give students some introductory information regarding Frederick Douglass, such as:
 - Frederick Douglas was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, in Talbot County, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore around 1808. (Since he was born into enslavement, he has no certainty regarding his birth date or birth year.) He was born the son of an enslaved woman, and in all likelihood, her white master. Douglass remained a slave until he escaped at age 20; it was at this point Douglass adopted a new surname from the hero of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*. Douglass then shared his

experiences as a slave in the first of three autobiographies, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, published in 1845. (Source: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/bio.html>)

Discuss:

- Think for a moment about what you would consider to be some of the most important moments of your life. Do you keep any record of your life, such as a journal, a blog, poems or songs, etc.? Why or why not? If not, what might make you start keeping a record one day, or why might you want to start keeping a record of your life?
 - Why do you think Frederick Douglass chose to write about his experiences as an enslaved person? (Discuss with students how slave narratives were often written as antislavery propaganda, as well as for personal exploration and revelation.) What might have been difficult regarding writing about such hard experiences? What might have been positive about this experience of writing this account of his life as a slave?
 - Why is it important to read such first-hand accounts of slavery, even though it was written over 160 years ago?
8. Optional: As an alternate or additional introduction to the life of Frederick Douglass, play the short 3 minute overview video available at <http://www.biography.com>. After showing the video, discuss:
- What did you learn about Frederick Douglass in that clip?
 - What difficulties were noted that Frederick Douglass faced?
 - The video notes that Douglass became an abolitionist. What is an abolitionist? What do you already know about the abolitionist movement?
 - How was Frederick Douglass characterized by other slaves? By masters? What does this characterization tell you about him?
 - What risks did Frederick Douglass take by becoming an abolitionist and advocating for emancipation of all people?
 - What other causes did Frederick Douglass advocate for in addition to the end of slavery?

Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

9. Tell students that they are each going to be reading an excerpt from Frederick Douglass' most popular autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. There are 21 excerpts attached; teachers can assign one excerpt to each individual student. (If there are more than 21 students in a class, a few excerpts can be repeated, students can be paired up and assigned an excerpt together, or additional excerpts can be pulled from the book, which is available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/menu.html>.)
10. Also, provide each student with a copy of the attached assignment sheet, "Create an Anti-Slavery Speech or Editorial based on the Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," Go over the requirements of the assignment providing additional details and clarification as needed. Teachers should make sure students understand that a primary purpose of their speech or editorial is to share the experiences of Frederick Douglass as detailed in their excerpt with their classmates, since everyone will be reading different excerpts. Ensure students understand that Douglass' first-hand accounts from their excerpt should be rephrased in their own words, unless directly quoting a line or two. Likewise, encourage students to include additional information that they have learned or that they gather through independent research. Remind students that the year of their speech or editorial is 1860, thus they need to pay attention to being historically accurate in their language*. Also remind students that they should be creative and persuasive, as another purpose of their speech is to convince people living with them in 1860 that slavery is wrong.

- **Teacher Note:** While it is up to a teacher’s discretion, it is recommended that students be told to refrain from using racial slurs in their work, even though such language would have been employed in the 1860s.
11. Allow students to begin working on their excerpt in class and let them know when their final product will be due in class. (Teachers should use their discretion for the amount of class time and homework time provided for completion of the editorials and speeches.) Remind students that on the due date, they will be presenting their final product to their classmates.

Day 2

Presenting Speeches and Editorials

12. On the following day (or whatever day determined that the editorial and speeches are due) go over respectful audience expectations with students and tell the class that after each presentation, they should clap loudly to show support and then participate in discussion regarding what they learned from the editorial or speech. Teachers should have students present in numerical order based on the numbered excerpt they received. Ask clarifying questions after each presentation and point out any information the class should know from the excerpt that was perhaps not included in the student’s editorial or speech. Give students the attached chart and instruct them to fill it out as they listen to and observe their classmates’ presentations.
- **Teacher Note:** While having students present to the entire class allows all students to be exposed to the information from each of the excerpts, teachers with limited time can place students into groups of 5 and have them present to these smaller groups rather than the class at large. While this format will not expose students to all of the excerpts, they will still be able to gain a sense of the narrative.
13. After all the presentations, culminate with a discussion:
- What can we learn about slavery from the writing of Frederick Douglass? In what ways does his skilled use of language paint a realistic portrait of slavery?
 - According to Douglass, what were some common misconceptions about slaves and their situation?
 - According to Douglass, what were some of the effects of slavery upon the enslaved? Upon the slaveholder?
 - What behaviors and actions did slaveholders use Christianity to justify and how does Douglass effectively point out their hypocrisy?
 - Based on everything you’ve learned about Frederick Douglass, what would you say was the hardest situation he dealt with and why? (Answers may range from being separated from his mother, to being beaten, to being a slave in general.)
 - Based on what Douglass was able to accomplish, especially given his birth into enslavement, how would you characterize him?
 - Why is the fact that Douglass wrote this autobiography an amazing accomplishment? (Writing a book isn’t easy for anyone, and Douglass was at one point an illiterate slave.)
 - Why is it important to learn about slavery and read the experiences of former slaves such as Frederick Douglass?

Additional Activities

- Have students read an excerpt from Frederick Douglass’s speech, “What to the Slave is the 4th of July” (attached). Alternatively, teachers may ask someone (a local theatrical actor, a fellow educator, or perhaps even a dramatic student) to dress as Douglass and dramatically perform the speech for the class as a culminating presentation on Douglass. For additional information on this speech to share with students, teachers should consult the attached TIME article.

Warm-Up: Simulating the Inability to Read

Teachers should project the following “warm-up” for students to “complete” at the beginning of class. Do not include any recognizable words on the assignment.

Kamistu 4, 2010

Erevpr! Plrsdr yslrile upi drsyderaoj smfpw. Ot vpl okryryjrg poeo mhestp? Ef ki, ytper mis maeu ti e pwmxe ie utwqmlld pejrt kin heaty uemi pwc ikedzju plqa byeij mza:



Name: _____

**Assignment: Create an Anti-Slavery Speech or Editorial based on the
Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave**

1. You have been given an excerpt to read and analyze from the Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Carefully read the excerpt provided to you. As you carefully read, please mark the text:

- Circle any words that are unfamiliar to you.
- Underline any parts of the excerpt that you think are most important or that stick out to you.
- If you are confused by any part of the excerpt, write a question mark by that line or section. You can also write out questions in the margins of the text.
- If anything surprises you or evokes a strong emotional response from you, you can write an exclamation mark by the line or section.
- If a particular thought pops in your head that connects to the reading, write it in the margins.

2. Please answer the following on notebook paper:

- Summarize what occurred in this excerpt.
- Based on what you learned and can infer from this excerpt, how would you describe the institution and effects of slavery?
- What evidence from this excerpt can be used to prove that slavery is unjust, cruel, and/or wrong?
- What is the most important thing that Frederick Douglass teaches you in this excerpt?
- Based upon this excerpt, what do you most admire about Frederick Douglass?
- If you were to give this excerpt a title, what would you call it and why?

3. Your classmates are reading different excerpts than yours, so it is your responsibility to effectively teach them about the information Douglass shared in your assigned excerpt. You will do this by creating an antislavery speech that you present to the class, or through writing an antislavery editorial which you will read to the class.

Keep in mind that in his life, Douglass achieved international fame as an orator and as a writer of persuasive power. In thousands of speeches and editorials, Douglass passionately and convincingly spoke out against slavery and racism. He provided a needed voice of hope for his people, promoted antislavery politics, and advocated for social justice and equality. Considering the passions and ambitions of Frederick Douglass, and using what you have learned in class and from your excerpt, choose one of the following to complete:

OPTION 1: Write and Present an Antislavery Speech

Frederick Douglass regularly attended abolitionist meetings. At such a meeting in 1841, Douglass was unexpectedly asked to speak about his slavery experiences. His words were so well delivered and inspiring, he was encouraged to become an anti-slavery lecturer. Several days later, Douglass delivered his first speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's annual convention in Nantucket. Then 23 years old, Douglass said later that his legs were shaking the entire time. However, he conquered his nervousness and gave an eloquent speech about his rough life as a slave. Douglass continued giving speeches around the country. He participated in the American Anti-Slavery Society's Hundred Conventions project, a six-month tour of meeting halls throughout the United States. He also participated in the Seneca Falls Convention, the birthplace of the American feminist movement.

In the spirit of Douglass' talent and passion for delivering speeches, **write a one page antislavery speech** that would have been delivered in 1860. Your speech must include the information from your excerpt (in your own words) as an example of the cruelty of slavery and as proof as to why slavery should be ended.

Your speech must:

- Have a catchy introduction, persuasive and supporting arguments for why slavery is wrong and should be ended, and a moving, memorable conclusion
- Should be one page written and approximately 2-3 minutes long when delivered
- Must be written/spoken in the voice of a person in 1860
- Must include accurate information regarding the institution of slavery as experienced by Frederick Douglass in your assigned excerpt:
 - You can assume the role of Frederick Douglass and speak in first-person, or assume the character of an abolitionist and speak about the experience of Frederick Douglass
 - You should also include additional information, thoughts, and commentary on slavery not found in your excerpt
- Be persuasive, realistic, and creative.
- You will be required to perform your speech. While your speech does not need to be memorized, ensure you practice your delivery. An effective speaker:
 - Varies vocal tone and volume
 - Makes occasional eye contact
 - Uses effective pauses, changes in tone and volume, and inclusion of emotion in various moments
 - Refrains from pacing or speaking in a monotone

OPTION 2: Write an Editorial for the North Star

Frederick Douglass was a skilled writer and editor. He lived the bulk of his career in Rochester, N.Y., where for 16 years he edited the most influential black newspaper of the mid-19th century, originally called *The North Star* (1847-51), and later called the *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (1851-58) and *The Douglass Monthly* (1859-63). In the spirit of Douglass' talent and passion for writing, **write a one page editorial** (a piece of writing intended to promote an opinion or perspective) from the year 1860. Your editorial must include the information from your excerpt (in your own words) as an example of the cruelty of slavery and as proof as to why slavery should be ended.

Your editorial must:

- Have an introductory paragraph, at least three supporting paragraphs for why slavery is wrong and should be ended, and a conclusion
- Must be written in the voice of an abolitionist in 1860
- Must include accurate information regarding the institution of slavery as experienced by Frederick Douglass in your assigned excerpt:
 - You can assume the voice of Frederick Douglass himself in your editorial, or assume the voice of an abolitionist and speak about the experience of Frederick Douglass in your editorial
 - You can also include additional information not found in your excerpt
- Should be persuasive, realistic, and creative
- Should be properly proofread, containing no grammatical or structural errors
- Your editorial should also be decorated to appear as if it is a newspaper from 1860 and should include a picture drawn by you that illustrates some aspect of the editorial
- You will be required to read your editorial in front of the class

What questions do you have regarding this assignment?

Excerpts from Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave



Excerpt 1:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

From Chapter 1, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 2:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant--before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary--a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew anything about it.

From Chapter 1, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 3:

I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony--a title which, I presume, he acquired by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay. He was not considered a rich slave-holder. He owned two or three farms, and about thirty slaves. His farms and slaves were under the care of an overseer. The overseer's name was Plummer. Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.

From Chapter 1, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

**Excerpt 4:**

The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars. The allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.

There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these. This, however, is not considered a very great privation. They find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day's work in the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side, on one common bed,--the cold, damp floor,-- each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn. At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field. There must be no halting; every one must be at his or her post; and woe betides them who hear not this morning summons to the field; for if they are not awakened by the sense of hearing, they are by the sense of feeling: no age nor sex finds any favor. Mr. Severe, the overseer, used to stand by the door of the quarter, armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin, ready to whip any one who was so unfortunate as not to hear, or, from any other cause, was prevented from being ready to start for the field at the sound of the horn.

Chapter 2, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 5:

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,--and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their Contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

Chapter 2, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 6:

The colonel also kept a splendid riding equipage. His stable and carriage-house presented the appearance of some of our large city livery establishments. His horses were of the finest form and noblest blood. His carriage-house contained three splendid coaches, three or four gigs, besides dearborns and barouches of the most fashionable style.

This establishment was under the care of two slaves--old Barney and young Barney--father and son. To attend to this establishment was their sole work. But it was by no means an easy employment; for in nothing was Colonel Lloyd more particular than in the management of his horses. The slightest inattention to these was unpardonable, and was visited upon those, under whose care they were placed, with the severest punishment; no excuse could shield them, if the colonel only suspected any want of attention to his horses--a supposition which he frequently indulged, and one which, of course, made the office of old and young Barney a very trying one. They never knew when they were safe from punishment. They were frequently whipped when least deserving, and escaped whipping when most deserving it. Every thing depended upon the looks of the horses, and the state of Colonel Lloyd's own mind when his horses were brought to him for use. If a horse did not move fast enough, or hold his head high enough, it was owing to some fault of his keepers. It was painful to stand near the stable-door, and hear the various complaints against the keepers when a horse was taken out for use. "This horse has not had proper attention. He has not been sufficiently rubbed and curried, or he has not been properly fed; his food was too wet or too dry; he got it too soon or too late; he was too hot or too cold; he had too much hay, and not enough of grain; or he had too much grain, and not enough of hay; instead of old Barney's attending to the horse, he had very improperly left it to his son." To all these complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word. Colonel Lloyd could not brook any contradiction from a slave. When he spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble; and such was literally the case. I have seen Colonel Lloyd make old Barney, a man between fifty and sixty years of age, uncover his bald head, kneel down upon the cold, damp ground, and receive upon his naked and toil-worn shoulders more than thirty lashes at the time. Colonel Lloyd had three sons--Edward, Murray, and Daniel,--and three sons-in-law, Mr. Winder, Mr. Nicholson, and Mr. Lowndes. All of these lived at the Great House Farm, and enjoyed the luxury of whipping the servants when they pleased, from old Barney down to William Wilkes, the coach-driver. I have seen Winder make one of the house-servants stand off from him a suitable distance to be touched with the end of his whip, and at every stroke raise great ridges upon his back.

Chapter 3, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 7:

To describe the wealth of Colonel Lloyd would be almost equal to describing the riches of Job. He kept from ten to fifteen house-servants. He was said to own a thousand slaves, and I think this estimate quite within the truth. Colonel Lloyd owned so many that he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out-farms know him. It is reported of him, that, while riding along the road one day, he met a colored man, and addressed him in the usual manner of speaking to colored people on the public highways of the south: "Well, boy, whom do you belong to?" "To Colonel Lloyd," replied the slave. "Well, does the colonel treat you well?" "No, sir," was the ready reply. "What, does he work you too hard?" "Yes, sir." "Well, don't he give you enough to eat?" "Yes, sir, he gives me enough, such as it is."

The colonel, after ascertaining where the slave belonged, rode on; the man also went on about his business, not dreaming that he had been conversing with his master. He thought, said, and heard nothing more of the matter, until two or three weeks afterwards. The poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader. He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment's warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions.

It is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind. The slave-holders have been known to send in spies among their slaves, to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition. The frequency of this has had the effect to establish among the slaves the maxim, that a still tongue makes a wise head. They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves a part of the human family. If they have any thing to say of their masters, it is generally in their masters' favor, especially when speaking to an untried man. I have been frequently asked, when a slave, if I had a kind master, and do not remember ever to have given a negative answer; nor did I, in pursuing this course, consider myself as uttering what was absolutely false; for I always measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up among slaveholders around us.

Chapter 3, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 8:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

Chapter 6, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 9:

I had resided but a short time in Baltimore before I observed a marked difference, in the treatment of slaves, from that which I had witnessed in the country. A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation. There is a vestige of decency, a sense of shame, that does much to curb and check those outbreaks of atrocious cruelty so commonly enacted upon the plantation. He is a desperate slaveholder, who will shock the humanity of his nonslaveholding neighbors with the cries of his lacerated slave. Few are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master; and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat. Every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat. There are, however, some painful exceptions to this rule.

Directly opposite to us, on Philpot Street, lived Mr. Thomas Hamilton. He owned two slaves. Their names were Henrietta and Mary. Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these two were the most so. His heart must be harder than stone, that could look upon these unmoved. The head, neck, and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress. I do not know that her master ever whipped her, but I have been an eye-witness to the cruelty of Mrs. Hamilton. I used to be in Mr. Hamilton's house nearly every day. Mrs. Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room, with a heavy cowskin always by her side, and Scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed her without her saying, "Move faster, you *black gip!*" at the same time giving them a blow with the cow skin over the head or shoulders, often drawing the blood. She would then say, "Take that, you *black gip!*"--continuing, "If you don't move faster, I'll move you!" Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-starved. They seldom knew what it was to eat a full meal. I have seen Mary contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street. So much was Mary kicked and cut to pieces, that she was oftener called "*pecked*" than by her name.

Chapter 6, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 10:

I Lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceded to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by anyone else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute. My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach.

Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practice her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow, upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;--not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. Chapter 7, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 11:

I was now about twelve yearn old, and the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master--things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no gutting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every, calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

Chapter 7, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 12:

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did anything very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of *abolition*. Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was "the act of abolishing;" but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask anyone about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about. Aider a patient waiting, I got one of our city papers, containing an account of the number of petitions from the north, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and of the slave trade between the States. From this time I understood the words *abolition* and *abolitionist*, and always drew near when that word was spoken, expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves. The light broke in upon me by degrees. I went one day down on the wharf of Mr. Waters; and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, "Are ye a slave for life?" I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters. I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away. I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

Chapter 7, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 13:

...I resolved to run away. I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus--"L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus--"S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked thus--"L. F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus--"S. F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus--"L. A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus--"S. A." I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be. "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write. I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meetinghouse every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.

Chapter 7, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 14:

...We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder.

After the valuation, then came the division. I have no language to express the high excitement and deep anxiety which were felt among us poor slaves during this time. Our fate for life was now to be decided. We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among whom we were ranked. A single word from the white men was enough--against all our wishes, prayers, and entreaties--to sunder forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings. In addition to the pain of separation, there was the horrid dread of falling into the hands of Master Andrew. He was known to us all as being a most cruel wretch,--a common drunkard, who had, by his reckless mismanagement and profligate dissipation, already wasted a large portion of his father's property. We all felt that we might as well be sold at once to the Georgia traders, as to pass into his hands; for we knew that that would be our inevitable condition,--a condition held by us all in the utmost horror and dread.

I suffered more anxiety than most of my fellow-slaves. I had known what it was to be kindly treated; they had known nothing of the kind. They had seen little or nothing of the world. They were in very deed men and women of sorrow, and acquainted with grief. Their backs had been made familiar with the bloody lash, so that they had become callous; mine was yet tender; for while at Baltimore I got few whippings, and few slaves could boast of a kinder master and mistress than myself; and the thought of passing out of their hands into those of Master Andrew--a man who, but a few days before, to give me a sample of his bloody disposition, took my little brother by the throat, threw him on the ground, and with the heel of his boot stamped upon his head till the blood gushed from his nose and ears--was well calculated to make me anxious as to my fate. After he had committed this savage outrage upon my brother, he turned to me, and said that was the way he meant to serve me one of these days,--meaning, I suppose, when I came into his possession.

Thanks to a kind Providence, I fell to the portion of Mrs. Lucretia, and was sent immediately back to Baltimore, to live again in the family of Master Hugh. Their joy at my return equaled their sorrow at my departure. It was a glad day to me. I had escaped a worse than lion's jaws. I was absent from Baltimore, for the purpose of valuation and division, just about one month, and it seemed to have been six.

Chapter 8, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 15:

Very soon after my return to Baltimore, my mistress, Lucretia, died, leaving her husband and one child, Amanda; and in a very short time after her death, Master Andrew died. Now all the property of my old master, slaves included, was in the hands of strangers,--strangers who had had nothing to do with accumulating it. Not a slave was left free. All remained slaves, from the youngest to the oldest. If any one thing in my experience, more than another, served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders, it was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother. She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever. She was nevertheless left a slave--a slave for life--a slave in the hands of strangers; and in their hands she saw her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren, divided, like so many sheep, without being gratified with the small privilege of a single word, as to their or her own destiny. And, to cap the climax of their base ingratitude and fiendish barbarity, my grandmother, who was now very old, having outlived my old master and all his children, having seen the beginning and end of all of them, and her present owners finding she was of but little value, her frame already racked with the pains of old age, and complete helplessness fast stealing over her once active limbs, they took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die! If my poor old grandmother now lives, she lives to suffer in utter loneliness; she lives to remember and mourn over the loss of children, the loss of grandchildren, and the loss of great-grandchildren...

The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone. She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl. All is gloom. The grave is at the door. And now, when weighed down by the pains and aches of old age, when the head inclines to the feet, when the beginning and ending of human existence meet, and helpless infancy and painful old age combine together--at this time, this most needful time, the time for the exercise of that tenderness and affection which children only can exercise towards a declining parent--my poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. She stands--she sits--she staggers--she falls--she groans--she dies--and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. Will not a righteous God visit for these things?

Chapter 8, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*



Excerpt 16:

In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. They used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them...

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture -- "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes."

Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master's cruelty toward "Henny" is found in the fact of her being almost helpless. When quite a child, she fell into the fire, and burned herself horribly. Her hands were so burnt that she never got the use of them. She could do very little but bear heavy burdens. She was to master a bill of expense; and as he was a mean man, she was a constant offence to him. He seemed desirous of getting the poor girl out of existence. He gave her away once to his sister; but, being a poor gift, she was not disposed to keep her. Finally, my benevolent master, to use his own words, "set her adrift to take care of herself" Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die!

Chapter 9, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 17:

I lived with Mr. Covey one year. During the first six months, of that year, scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back. My awkwardness was almost always his excuse for whipping me. We were worked fully up to the point of endurance. Long before day we were up, our horses fed, and by the first approach of day we were off to the field with our hoes and ploughing teams. Mr. Covey gave us enough to eat, but scarce time to eat it. We were often less than five minutes taking our meals. We were often in the field from the first approach of day till its last lingering ray had left us; and at saving-fodder time, midnight often caught us in the field binding blades.

Covey would be out with us. The way he used to stand it, was this. He would spend the most of his afternoons in bed. He would then come out fresh in the evening, ready to urge us on with his words, example, and frequently with the whip. Mr. Covey was one of the few slaveholders who could and did work with his hands. He was a hard-working man. He knew by himself just what a man or a boy could do. There was no deceiving him. His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. This he did by surprising us. He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, "the snake." When we were at work in the cornfield, he would sometimes crawl on his hands and knees to avoid detection, and all at once he would rise nearly in our midst, and scream out, "Ha, ha! Come, come! Dash on, dash on!" This being his mode of attack, it was never safe to stop a single minute. His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation. He would sometimes mount his horse, as if bound to St. Michael's, a distance of seven miles, and in half an hour afterwards you would see him coiled up in the corner of the wood-fence, watching every motion of the slaves. He would, for this purpose, leave his horse tied up in the woods. Again, he would sometimes walk up to us, and give us orders as though he was upon the point of starting on a long journey, turn his back upon us, and make as though he was going to the house to get ready; and, before he would get half way thither, he would turn short and crawl into a fence-corner, or behind some tree, and there watch us till the going down of the sun.

If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!

Chapter 10, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 18:

The days between Christmas and New Year's day are allowed as holidays; and, accordingly, we were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and take care of the stock. This time we regarded as our own, by the grace of our masters; and we therefore used or abused it nearly as we pleased. Those of us who had families at a distance, were generally allowed to spend the whole six days in their society. This time, however, was spent in various ways. The staid, sober, thinking and industrious ones of our number would employ themselves in making corn-brooms, mats, horse-collars, and baskets; and another class of us would spend the time in hunting opossums, hares, and coons. But by far the larger part engaged in such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whisky; and this latter mode of spending the time was by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters. A slave who would work during the holidays was considered by our masters as scarcely deserving them. He was regarded as one who rejected the favor of his master. It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas; and he was regarded as lazy indeed, who had not provided himself with the necessary means, during the year, to get whisky enough to last him through Christmas.

From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity. But for these, the slave would be forced up to the wildest desperation; and woe betide the slaveholder, the day he ventures to remove or hinder the operation of those conductors! I warn him that, in such an event, a spirit will go forth in their midst, more to be dreaded than the most appalling earthquake.

The holidays are part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery. They are professedly a custom established by the benevolence of the slaveholders; but I undertake to say, it is the result of selfishness, and one of the grossest frauds committed upon the down-trodden slave. They do not give the slaves this time because they would not like to have their work during its continuance, but because they know it would be unsafe to deprive them of it.

Chapter 10, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 19:

Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists. Very near Mr. Freeland lived the Rev. Daniel Weeden, and in the same neighborhood lived the Rev. Rigby Hopkins. These were members and ministers in the Reformed Methodist Church. Mr. Weeden owned, among others, a woman slave, whose name I have forgotten. This woman's back, for weeks, was kept literally raw, made so by the lash of this merciless, *religious* wretch. He used to hire hands. His maxim was, Behave well or behave ill, it is the duty of a master occasionally to whip a slave, to remind him of his master's authority. Such was his theory, and such his practice.

Mr. Hopkins was even worse than Mr. Weeden. His chief boast was his ability to manage slaves. The peculiar feature of his government was that of whipping slaves in advance of deserving it. He always managed to have one or more of his slaves to whip every Monday morning. He did this to alarm their fears, and strike terror into those who escaped. His plan was to whip for the smallest offences, to prevent the commission of large ones. Mr. Hopkins could always find some excuse for whipping a slave. It would astonish one, unaccustomed to a slaveholding life, to see with what wonderful case a slaveholder can find things, of which to make occasion to whip a slave.

A mere look, word, or motion,--a mistake, accident, or want of power,--are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied? It is said, he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out. Does he speak loudly when spoken to by his master? Then he is getting high-minded, and should be taken down a button-hole lower. Does he forget to pull off his hat at the approach of a white person? Then he is wanting in reverence, and should be whipped for it. Does he ever venture to vindicate his conduct, when censured for it? Then he is guilty of impudence,--one of the greatest crimes of which a slave can be guilty. Does he ever venture to suggest a different mode of doing things from that pointed out by his master? He is indeed presumptuous, and getting above himself; and nothing less than a flogging will do for him. Does he, while ploughing, break a plough,--or, while hoeing, break a hoe? It is owing to his carelessness, and for it a slave must always be whipped. Mr. Hopkins could always find something of this sort to justify the use of the lash, and he seldom failed to embrace such opportunities. There was not a man in the whole county, with whom the slaves who had the getting their own home, would not prefer to live, rather than with this Rev. Mr. Hopkins. And yet there was not a man any where round, who made higher professions of religion, or was more active in revivals,--more attentive to the class, love-feast, prayer and preaching meetings, or more devotional in his family,--that prayed earlier, later, louder, and longer,--than this same reverend slave-driver, Rigby Hopkins.

Chapter 10, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 20:

Mr. Freeland was himself the owner of but two slaves. Their names were Henry Harris and John Harris. The rest of his hands he hired. These consisted of myself, Sandy Jenkins, and Handy Caldwell. Henry and John were quite intelligent, and in a very little while after I went there, I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read. This desire soon sprang up in the others also. They very soon mustered up some old spelling-books, and nothing would do but that I must keep a Sabbath school. I agreed to do so, and accordingly devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read. Neither of them knew his letters when I went there. Some of the slaves of the neighboring farms found what was going on, and also availed themselves of this little opportunity to learn to read. It was understood, among all who came, that there must be as little display about it as possible. It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael's unacquainted with the fact, that, instead of spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God; for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings. My blood boils as I think of the bloody manner in which Messrs. Wright Fairbanks and Garrison West, both class-leaders, in connection with many others, rushed in upon us with sticks and stones, and broke up our virtuous little Sabbath school, at St. Michael's--all calling themselves Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ! But I am again digressing.

I held my Sabbath school at the house of a free colored man, whose name I deem it imprudent to mention; for should it be known, it might embarrass him greatly, though the crime of holding the school was committed ten years ago. I had at one time over forty scholars, and those of the right sort, ardently desiring to learn. They were of all ages, though mostly men and women. I look back to those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other, and to leave them at the close of the Sabbath was a severe cross indeed. When I think that these precious souls are to-day shut up in the prison-house of slavery, my feelings overcome me, and I am almost ready to ask, "Does a righteous God govern the universe? and for what does he hold the thunders in his right hand, if not to smite the oppressor, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the spoiler?" These dear souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in a mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. I kept up my school nearly the whole year I lived with Mr. Freeland; and, beside my Sabbath school, I devoted three evenings in the week, during the winter, to teaching the slaves at home, And I have the happiness to know, that several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency.

Chapter 10, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Excerpt 21: At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to live *upon free land* as well as *with Freeland*; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder. I began, with the commencement of the year, to prepare myself for a final struggle, which should decide my fate one way or the other. My tendency was upward. I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me--I must do something. I therefore resolved that 1835 should not pass without witnessing an attempt, on my part, to secure my liberty.

But I was not willing to cherish this determination alone. My fellow-slaves were dear to me. I was anxious to have them participate with me in this, my life-giving determination. I therefore, though with great prudence, commenced early to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition, and to imbue their minds with thoughts of freedom. I bent myself to devising ways and means for our escape, and meanwhile strove, on all fitting occasions, to impress them with the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery. I went first to Henry, next to John, then to the others. I found, in them all, warm hearts and noble spirits. They were ready to hear, and ready to act when a feasible plan should be proposed. This was what I wanted. I talked to them of our want of manhood, if we submitted to our enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free. We met often, and consulted frequently, and told our hopes and fears, recounted the difficulties, real and imagined, which we should be called on to meet. At times we were almost disposed to give up, and try to content ourselves with our wretched lot; at others, we were firm and unbending in our determination to go. Whenever we suggested any plan, there was shrinking--the odds were fearful. Our path was beset with the greatest obstacles; and if we succeeded in gaining the end of it, our right to be free was yet questionable--we were yet liable to be returned to bondage. We could see no spot this side of the ocean, where we could be free. We knew nothing about Canada. Our knowledge of the north did not extend farther than New York; and to go there, and be forever harassed with the frightful liability of being returned to slavery--with the certainty of being treated tenfold worse than before--the thought was truly a horrible one, and one which it was not easy to overcome. The case sometimes stood thus: At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman--at every ferry a guard--on every bridge a sentinel--and in every wood a patrol. We were hemmed in upon every side. Here were the difficulties, real or imagined--the good to be sought, and the evil to be shunned. On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us,--its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh. On the other hand, away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom--half frozen--beckoning us to come and share its hospitality. This in itself was sometimes enough to stagger us; but when we permitted ourselves to survey the road, we were frequently appalled. Upon either side we saw grim death, assuming the most horrid shapes. Now it was starvation, causing us to eat our own flesh;--now we were contending with the waves, and were drowned;--now we were overtaken, and torn to pieces by the fangs of the terrible bloodhound. We were stung by scorpions, chased by wild beasts, bitten by snakes, and finally, after having nearly reached the desired spot,--after swimming rivers, encountering wild beasts, sleeping in the woods, suffering hunger and nakedness,--we were overtaken by our pursuers, and, in our resistance, we were shot dead upon the spot! I say, this picture sometimes appalled us, and made us "rather bear those ills we had, Than fly to others, that we knew not of."

In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed. For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage.

Name: _____

Notes for Presented Speeches and Editorials

Topic of Excerpt Assigned	What did you learn about Douglass' experiences in slavery?	What did you learn about slavery in general?
1: Name		
2: Separated from Mother		
3: Cruelty of Master		
4: Poor Conditions		
5: Singing		
6: Cruelty of Colonel Lloyd		
7: Tricked by the Colonel		
8: Learning to Read		
9: City Slave v. Plantation Slave		
10: A Nice Woman Becomes a Mean Mistress		
11: Influence of <i>Columbian Orator</i>		
12: Abolitionists		
13: Running Away/Learning to Write		

Topic of Excerpt Assigned	What did you learn about Douglass' experiences in slavery?	What did you learn about slavery in general?
14: Valuation		
15: Grandmother		
16: Religion/Cruelty		
17: Living with Mr. Covey		
18: Holidays		
19: Religious Masters		
20: Teaching Others to Read		
21: Determination to be Free		

Additional Notes on Frederick Douglass:

Excerpt from "What to the Slave is the 4th of July"
Speech by Frederick Douglass
Delivered on July 5, 1852, at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, N.Y.

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. In a case like that the dumb might eloquently speak and the "lame man leap as an hart."

But such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. 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 light 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. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me by asking me to speak today? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn that it is dangerous to copy the example of nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrevocable ruin! I can today take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people.

Fellow citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! Whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, today, 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 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 Fourth 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, shall not confess to be right and just....

Sunday, Jun. 26, 2005

"What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

By David W. Blight

In March 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in Boston. By June, 14 steam presses ran day and night to produce enough copies to meet the unprecedented demand for the antislavery novel that changed the imaginative landscape of America's struggle over slavery. It is in this context of the astonishing popularity of Stowe's great novel that Frederick Douglass, the 34-year-old black reformer and the country's most conspicuous former slave, delivered his speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" If *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the fictional masterpiece of American abolitionism, a book Abraham Lincoln would later acknowledge as powerful enough to "cause this big war," then Douglass's Fourth of July address is abolition's rhetorical masterpiece. In style and substance, no 19th century American ever offered a more poignant critique of America's racial condition than Douglass did on July 5, 1852, at Corinthian Hall in his adopted hometown, Rochester, N.Y.

The summer of 1852 was a time of great tension in the nation and in Douglass's own life. For nearly two years, free blacks had defied the hated Fugitive Slave Act, passed as part of the Compromise of 1850. Massive protest meetings condemned a law that denied the right of habeas corpus and trial by jury to alleged fugitive slaves, as well as threatened the kidnapping of free people of color into slavery. Now, under the American flag, said Douglass, blacks could feel "no protection," only "danger, trials, bitter mockery." So deep was the fear in northern black communities that hundreds fled to Canada, causing what Douglass described as "a dark train going out of the land, as if fleeing from death."

By 1852, Douglass had converted from the moral suasionist strategies of abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, to political abolitionism and the possible uses of violence to overthrow slavery. Douglass was struggling financially; his newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, survived only on philanthropy, and he could hardly support his growing family on meager lecturers' fees. At the time, the place of a radical black abolitionist in America's future was altogether uncertain.

In these circumstances Douglass crafted a speech in response to the invitation of the Rochester Ladies Antislavery Society. As was the tradition in black communities of New York state, Douglass insisted on speaking on the 5th and not the 4th of July. Before nearly 600 people who paid the 121/2c admission, Douglass rose as orator of the day after a reading of the Declaration of Independence by a local minister.

The speech has three major rhetorical moves. First, Douglass sets his audience at ease by offering accolades to the genius of the founding fathers. He calls the Fourth of July an American "Passover" and places hope in the youthful nation, "still impressible" and open to change. He calls the Declaration of Independence the "ringbolt" of the nation's destiny and urges his listeners to "cling to this day... and to its principles, with the grasp of a storm-tossed mariner to a spar at midnight."

But his use of pronouns is a warning of what is soon to follow. The nation is "your nation", the fathers "your fathers." The nation's story is taught in "your common schools, narrated at your firesides, unfolded from your pulpits." As Douglass reminds his white audience of their national and personal deterioration, the speech finds its theme—the hypocrisy of slavery and racism in a growing republic. He harkens to the biblical story of the children of Jacob boasting of Abraham's paternity but losing Abraham's faith.

Then, as though slamming a hammer down on the lectern, Douglass says, "Pardon me... what have I... to do with your national independence?" What then flows is his famous attack on America's deepest contradiction, and Douglass does not pull any punches. He was speaking in the house of his friends, but he must have made the good abolitionists squirm with discomfort. As the painful analysis unfolds, he issues a litany of accusative pronouns: "This fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn." To invite him as Independence Day speaker, says Douglass is mere "mockery and sacrilegious irony." So for his Bible-reading audience, Douglass employs one of the deftest uses of irony in American rhetoric. "Let me warn you," he says

as he floats unannounced into the 137th Psalm: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Douglass's answer to the summons? He would not sing a praise song on the nation's birthday, because "above your national, tumultuous joy," he said, "I hear the mournful wail of millions!" He sang no anthems, no spirituals, only a requiem for his people and for the nation.

After this classic use of the rhetorical device of reversal, Douglass launched the second section of the speech, dragging his audience into the "sights and scenes" of slavery itself—the slave trade, brutal punishments, sales at auction, denials of African American humanity. He implicates the church and the state, and his subject is the evil done by Americans to other Americans. After pages of unsparing condemnations of all manner of blasphemy against every American creed, Douglass ends this unforgettable tirade with an apocalyptic warning that his well-churched audience would have understood: "Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away...."

For 20 minutes, the crowd must have felt strapped in their seats, bearing up to a hailstorm of humiliation. Then, in the third stage of the speech, Douglass lets them up, wipes their brows, and ends on cautious hope. The principles of the Declaration of Independence still exist; the founders' best wisdom can still be tapped. It is not yet too late. In an ending that evokes America's geographical boundlessness, draws on Psalm 68 to declare that blacks will rise on the world's historical stage, and then recites the abolitionist poem, "God Speed the Year of Jubilee," Douglass transcended his audience, Corinthian Hall, and almost history itself, into the realm of universal political art. He had used language to move people and mountains; he had explained a nation's condition, and through the pain of his indictment, illuminated a path to a better day. In thought and feeling, Douglass the ironist had never been in better form. No abolitionist had ever brought the two great intellectual traditions of antislavery—the Enlightenment and the Bible—together with such power. The meaning of slavery and freedom in America had never found such a voice at once so terrible and so truthful. As Douglass took his seat, 600 white Northerners roared, wrote a journalist, with "a universal burst of applause."

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