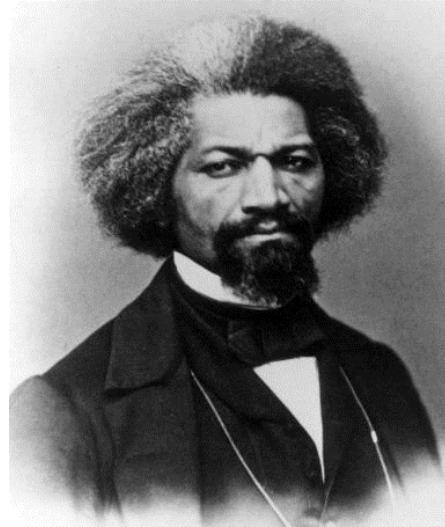


Frederick Douglass

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

Born in February around the year 1818, in Chesapeake, Maryland, Frederick Douglass was one of the best speakers and writers of his day. Whatever he wrote, people wanted to read. When he spoke, people listened. His words were respected not only by African Americans but by many white Americans too. So you might be surprised to learn that Frederick Douglass was also born a slave.



Douglass was born at a time when most black Americans were treated horribly, denied their rights, thought of as animals, and were *by law* considered property. During his lifetime, many anti-slavery groups were formed and worked hard to make life fairer for Black Americans. However, justice and change were slow to take effect. In 1852, life was nowhere even *close* to fair for most Black Americans.

Because there were laws which said black people were not allowed to learn to read or write, Douglass had to learn in secret, sometimes even tricking people into teaching him. By reading any book he could get his hands on, he learned quickly, and before long, he realized how unnatural it was to be a slave. Douglass made a dangerous escape to New York, a state where slavery had already been abolished. Here, he dazzled many in anti-slavery circles. He quickly became vocal in speaking out against slavery and the treatment of Black Americans.

Many people looked at Douglass' life and all that he accomplished and thought of it as a sort of “feel-good” story, complete with a happy ending. Many people did not see that despite his personal success, Douglass was still in pain over the treatment of other Black Americans. So when he was invited by the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester to give a speech at an Independence Day celebration, the speech he gave was not what people expected.

Far from joining in the celebration, Douglass rebuked the audience for their celebratory attitude. He criticized their insensitivity and what he saw as over-complicated ideas about Liberty. He said, “The blessings in which you this day rejoice are not enjoyed in common. This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, I must mourn.” He asked them, “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?”

We celebrate Black History Month to fill in stories that were left out of our history textbooks. In his Fourth of July speech, Frederick Douglass accomplished this very thing. He talked openly and critically about the stories that were not being told.

Turn the page to read a small excerpt of this famous speech.

Frederick Douglass

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

“At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh! Had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced.”

-Frederick Douglass, July 5th, 1852

Food For Thought

Answer the following questions, on a separate sheet of paper, or in discussion.

1. An easy definition of irony could be, “When the opposite of what you expect to happen, happens.” Irony is walking into a coffee shop and finding out they’re out of coffee beans, or that a salad shop is out of lettuce. What is ironic about having a man who was enslaved give a speech at your Independence Day celebration? (*Hint: Think about the ideas we are celebrating on the 4th of July.*)
2. This passage is a call to action. Why is it important to call attention to unfairness? What happens when unfair things go unchecked and unmentioned?
3. When Douglass says that the “nation must be startled,” he is basically saying that the United States needs to be surprised. Did you ever learn something that surprised you, and if so, what effect did it have on you?
4. Have you ever been angry about someone’s treatment toward you? Circle all the words that describe that feeling.

Helpless Worthless Small Angry Inspired Powerful

Powerless Infuriated Motivated Sympathetic toward others

5. Look at the words you circled. Do any of them surprise you? Why or why not?

**Academic Standard: CC.1.2.9-10.I*

Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance, including how they address related themes and concepts.