

**What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July
Primary Source Analysis Activity**

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject: Civics, U.S. History

Time Required: One to two 50-minute class periods

Historical Thinking Skill: Primary Source Analysis, Contextualization

Objective: Students will analyze Frederick Douglass' speech to understand how he used the Fourth of July to challenge slavery and highlight the gap between American ideals and reality in 1852.

Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Bell Ringer (5-10 minutes)

Write-Pair-Share: *What does the Fourth of July mean to you or your community? Is it a day of celebration for everyone in America? Why or why not?*

Part 2: Setting the Stage (15 minutes)

- Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in 1818
- In 1838, Douglass escaped from slavery and began giving abolitionist speeches by age 23
 - Became an impactful orator and writer

Part 3: Primary Source Analysis Activity (45 minutes)

- What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July Analysis Activity (Attached)

Part 4: Assessment

Use the After Reading Reflection Questions included in the student handout as a formative assessment.



Name _____

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Objective: Analyze Frederick Douglass' speech to understand how he used the Fourth of July to challenge slavery and highlight the gap between American ideals and reality in 1852.

Write-Pair-Share:

What does the Fourth of July mean to you or your community? Is it a day of celebration for everyone in America? Why or why not?

Setting the Stage:

- His escape from slavery
- Becoming a leading abolitionist, orator, and writer
- Advocacy for the end of slavery and equal rights for all Americans



Primary Source Analysis: Read the excerpt until you come across the 🟡. Then, reflect on what you've read and answer any text analysis questions (if applicable). As you're reading, underline and highlight where you find the answers to the text analysis questions.

What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July? Excerpts, 1852

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day. This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76 years old. I am glad, fellow-citizens, that your nation is so young. Seventy-six years, though a good old age for a man, is but a mere speck in the life of a nation. Three score years and ten is the allotted time for individual men; but nations number their years by thousands. According to this fact, you are, even now, only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood. I repeat, I am glad this is so. There is hope in the thought, and hope is much needed, under the dark clouds which lower above the horizon. The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times; but his heart may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young, and that she is still in the impressible stage of her existence. May he not hope that high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give direction to her destiny? [...] 🟡

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

How circumspect, exact and proportionate were all their movements! How unlike the politicians of an hour! Their statesmanship looked beyond the passing moment, and stretched away in strength into the distant future. They seized upon eternal principles, and set a glorious example in their defense. Mark them! 🟡

Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? 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?

I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of 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 July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. 🍅

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, 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 proclaimed and denounced.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour. 🍅

[...] Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. "The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world, and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. 🍅



Text Analysis Questions:

- 1) How does Douglass use the founding generation to support his argument, even as he criticizes the current generation? What message is he trying to convey by doing this?
- 2) Why does Douglass say he still has hope for America, even though there is so much injustice?
- 3) Douglass uses strong language—like "hypocrisy," "fraud," and "sham." Why do you think he uses such words?



After Reading Reflection Questions:

- 1) Imagine being in the audience in 1852—how might different groups (abolitionists, enslavers, formerly enslaved people, politicians) react to different parts of this speech? Why?
- 2) Are there moments today when national celebrations might feel different or even painful to some Americans? Why? How should a country respond to those perspectives?
- 3) How does Douglass both criticize and appeal to American ideals?
- 4) How do his words challenge or deepen your understanding of American freedom?

