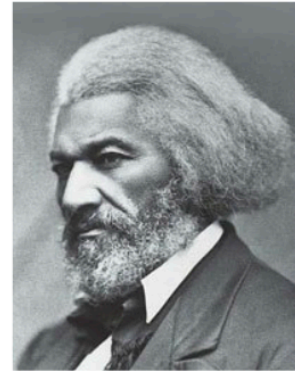




FROM

# What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?



Frederick Douglass (1818–1895).  
Photograph © Bettmann/CORBIS.

by Frederick Douglass  
JULY 5, 1852

- 1 **M**r. President, Friends and Fellow Citizens:
- 2 The papers and placards say that I am to deliver a Fourth [of] July oration. . . .
- 3 The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable—and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from **the latter to the former**, are by no means slight. . . .
- 4 So, 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?
- 5 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. . . .

## In Other Words

**the latter to the former** the slave plantation  
to the platform  
**devout** sincere

## Historical Background

**Frederick Douglass** was one of the most important human rights leaders of the 1800s. A former slave, Douglass wrote and spoke powerfully for the liberation of enslaved people, for women's rights, and for equal rights for all people.



6 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 life 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 to-day? . . .

7 Fellow-citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the **mournful wail** of millions! Whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the **jubilee** shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, “may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!” To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be **treason** most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a **reproach** before God and the world. My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is American slavery. I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave’s point of view. Standing there identified with the American **bondman**, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July! . . .

8 But I **fancy** I hear some one of my audience say, “It is just in this circumstance that you and **your brother abolitionists** fail to make a favorable impression on the public mind. Would you argue more, and denounce less; would you persuade more, and rebuke less; your cause would be much more likely to succeed.” But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued. . . .

#### In Other Words

**pale** light  
**bequeathed** given  
**fetters** chains  
**were inhuman mockery** is cruel teasing  
**mournful wail** sad cry  
**jubilee** joyful

**treason** disloyalty  
**reproach** disgrace  
**bondman** slave  
**fancy** think  
**your brother abolitionists** others who wish to free enslaved people



9 Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for Republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter **beset with** great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to be understood? How should I look to-day, in the presence of Americans, dividing and subdividing **a discourse**, to show that men have a natural right to freedom? Speaking of it relatively, and positively, negatively, and affirmatively. To do so, would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding. There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong *for him*.

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

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

12 At a time like this, **scorching irony**,  
not convincing argument, is needed. . . .

13 What, to the American slave, is your Fourth 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

#### In Other Words

**beset with** of  
**a discourse** an argument  
**brutes** animals  
**ignorant** unaware  
**sunder** separate  
**blasphemy** wickedness

**divine** godlike  
**scorching irony** angry words  
**sham** fake  
**vanity** pride

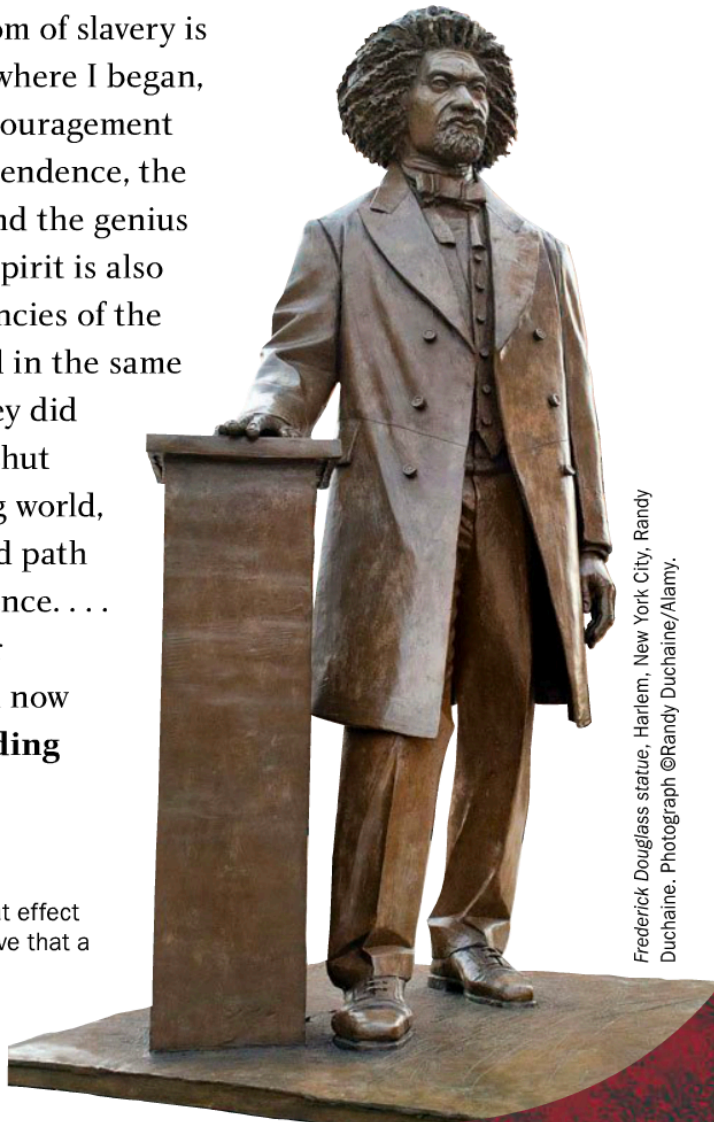


**denunciations** of tyrants, **brass fronted impudence**; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover 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 these United States, at this very hour. . . .

14

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. . . . No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport, or **avarice**, can now hide itself from the **all-pervading light**. . . . ❖

► **Critical Viewing: Effect** What effect does a life-size sculpture have that a painting does not?



Frederick Douglass statue, Harlem, New York City, Randy Duchaine. Photograph ©Randy Duchaine/Alamy.

#### In Other Words

**denunciations** criticisms  
**brass fronted impudence** showy confidence  
**despair of** lose hope in  
**avarice** greed  
**all-pervading light** light that is everywhere