

Analysis of the  
argumentative  
persuasive  
effectiveness of  
frederick douglass'  
spe...



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## **Analysis of the argumentative/persuasive effectiveness of Frederick Douglass' speech What to the Slave Is the 4th of July**

In his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July”, abolitionist and freed slave Frederick Douglass articulates and reveals to a white audience some of the deep, underlying contradictions at work in the American political philosophy. Independence Day, which has been celebrated by Americans ever since the Revolution ended, marks a day in which citizens commemorate not only the brave sacrifices of those who fought to attain it, but also the principles for which they fought and died. These principles, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, express the Enlightenment values of equality, democracy, natural rights, and rational thinking—all of which are brutally challenged by the prevalent enslavement of human beings in many parts of the United States. So, while to a free American, working in a system of unfettered capitalism to achieve those things he needs to live, a slave is producing them, not for himself but for others. He is given food and shelter such that he can survive and be worked by parasites through a system of injustice and immorality. The Fourth of July, as Douglass explains, demonstrates to the slave how unjust and cruel this country really is, even while the free men in the State celebrate the same principles that Douglass, other abolitionists, and slaves all mourn over: freedom, liberty, and autonomy.

Douglass goes this far to denounce the United States, saying “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”. This goes to show that not

only are America's celebrations on this day a sham and a "hollow mockery" of reality, but that they are painfully and tragically ironic. Douglass invites the American to travel through all parts of the world, looking at nations of savages and civilized people alike, of monarchies and democracies alike, and to try and find one nation which practices such "revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy" as America does at this time. Douglass' argument for the utter repulsiveness of Americans holding slaves on the Fourth of July hinges upon the rarely-held belief that slaves are actually human, and not sub-human animals born into the servitude that they live under their entire lives. But Douglass wisely refuses, without ado, the thought that it should be necessary for him "to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race".

The most striking rhetorical aspect of Douglass' speech is, of course, the religious imagery that he uses to get across his point. Almost the entire opening portion of the speech is tasked with providing the context of this injustice. He finds historical precedence for the situation in the Bible's recounting of the story of the Jews' loss of Zion, and a paradise lost. In this manner, Douglass fleshes out what he sees as a catastrophic inconsistency for free Americans: claiming at once to be a devout Christian, devoted to the teachings of God and Christ, and yet committing the same wrongful acts that were condemned as evil and unjust. In this manner, Douglass calls the Constitution and the Bible "disregarded and trampled upon", rhetorically contrasting the images of a victorious America, celebrating her independence from what Patrick Henry called "slavery", and an America continuing the practice of slaveholding, and thereby stomping on her Enlightenment foundations.

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All of these points boil down to one recurring theme throughout the speech: paradox. This paradox deals with the incompatibility of freedom and subjugation that had become blurred in America's culture. The misperception of the "Negro race" as something less than human, and therefore not entitled to what Jefferson promised in America's statement of its intolerance of conquest and slavery. Douglass', from the rhetorical devices used in this address such as the use of exclamation, the use of vivid examples, and the use of contrasting imagery, makes it clear that his duty is not to inform his audience of why it is paradoxical to refer to the Fourth of July as "Independence Day" when many of America's residents are not free human beings. According to him, his duty to his audience is to answer the question: what to the slave is the Fourth of July?