Frederick Douglass: What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?: An Analysis

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FREDERICK DOUGLASS – WHAT TO THE AMERICAN SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY? – AN ANALYSIS

Frederick Douglass, born a slave to an African American woman and an unknown white man, learned to read and write, eventually becoming a 19th century celebrity orator. “There was not a more famous or more eloquent African American abolitionist than Frederick Douglass” (Duffy & Besel). His speaking career was launched in 1841 after leading abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison heard him deliver an impressive speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society annual convention in Nantucket – at the time, Douglass was 23 years old (PBS). He would spend the rest of his life championing both the end of slavery and equal rights. The Independence Day speech he delivered on July 5, 1852 is judged overwhelmingly as his finest.

Overall, even sans an audio recording of this speech, Frederick Douglass’s eloquence, confidence, epic themes and imagery-filled phrases all combine to beautifully create, ornament and frame his irrefutable arguments against slavery and for upholding the idea that the United States Constitution confirms liberty for all. Employing multiple variations on motifs as a form of grand anaphora, he capitalizes on analogy, antithesis, metaphor and irony. With a single voice, he conjures deeply resonant biblical choruses in phrases such as “emancipated people of God,” “hallelujahs of a nation’s jubilee,” and in direct quotes from the books of Matthew, Acts, Isaiah, Genesis, Exodus and Psalm. With a single voice, he stirs the waters of the nation’s collective unconscious, one molecule at a time, until he swells with polyphonic passion, waves of fervent respect, revulsion, resolve. With a single voice, he strums emotions, accents morality and holds a fermata on humanity, effectively composing and performing a time-honored verbal symphony.

Douglass opens his speech by claiming to feel nervous and even embarrassed about delivering a Fourth of July address. He humbles himself before the audience as having “little experience with less learning,” when most of the attendees had likely heard him speak his soulful stanzas before, or had at least heard of him. He states also that listeners find such apologies “flat and unmeaning.” These are “commonplaces” used extensively by early sophistic orators and logographers such as Antiphon and continue to be employed in today’s speeches (Sophists).
Very early on in the speech – the third paragraph of more than seventy – Douglass plays with imagery to set the visual stage for his premise and place in the minds of the audience (present listeners and future readers) a distinct cognitive and emotional impression. He expounds, “…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.” He makes it clear that the physical expanse as well as the chronological interval between his presence at both Corinthian Hall and the slave plantation is analogous to the philosophical and moral vastness between freedom and slavery. This concept separates him from his audience, affording him the ability to analyze, criticize, and empathize. (He will revisit spatial and temporal issues from a different perspective near the end of his speech.)

Upon the completion of his exordium, Douglass begins the body of his address by shrewdly distinguishing himself further yet from the audience, using the simple but effective technique of comparing pronouns, “you” and “I.” He speaks specifically to full citizens (as opposed to including any slaves, who were legally counted, during this time period, as three-fifths of a person). He states: “[The 4th of July] is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom” [italics added]. Throughout the remainder of the speech, Douglass continually and insistently refers to “you” citizens and “your” nation, digging, as a diligent yet lone worker shovels a massive pile of earth, one scoop at a time, until the task is completed.

Then Douglass introduces a metaphor of the nation as a youngster, and he finds solace in that abolitionists might regain hope in future understanding, claiming “Were the nation older, the patriot’s heart might be sadder, and the reformer’s brow heavier.” While he doesn’t overtly say as much, he implies that “youth know not what they do or say” but will encounter opportunities to learn and grow, as will the United States. Specifically, he refers to the nation as an “impressible” female who, presented with “high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give direction to her destiny[?]” This is one of the first few bones beginning to form Douglass’s speech construct: the “father” frame.
Douglass segues into a grand nation-as-river metaphor, poetically considering possibilities – both positive or life affirming, and negative or life-destroying – that loom in the republic’s years, decades, centuries to come. He declares: “Great streams are not easily turned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages,” and contrarily, “But, while the river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave nothing behind but the withered branch, and the unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss-sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory.” For him, just as a river lives and transforms as body of water, a nation lives and transforms as a body politic, both in “majesty” and “mysterious properties.” This implies his belief, or at least his spiritually based line of reasoning, that an otherworldly force drives both river and nation. Only Douglass himself could have confessed whether he purposefully argued from probabilities or felt inspired by his comprehension of capital-T truth – or some combination of both positions. But thirteen years later, Abraham Lincoln would exercise this idea of Divine Providence in his second inaugural address: “If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which…He now wills to remove…shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?” If the masses turn to God for psychological guidance and moral reasoning, perhaps an impassioned, intelligent speaker is spiritually obliged to meet them at their level – especially if his or her desired goal is informed by the very ethical, sociopolitical ground on which they stand.

Author William B. Rogers fleshes out a similar idea of “prophetic politics,” based on four tenets. First, a society should be grounded in the “Biblical values of peace, freedom, love, truth, justice and prosperity” for everyone. Second, he affirms as necessary a thorough critique of the status quo. Third, “constitutional action” is requisite in bridging “the gap between prophetic values and existential reality.” Lastly, he calls for continued vigilance in upholding and strengthening the commitment over time. Rogers claims that Douglass “cogently and realistically articulates a theory of constitutional action and…keenly addresses problems of the future.” In this one speech, he achieves all four principles, delivering them with the typical and expected
“firebrand qualities that had made him a sought-after orator” (Duffy & Besel). Douglass, a rebel of the grandest sort, expands traditional speech categories in content, style and delivery.

As is *apropos* in epideictic speeches, Douglass spends some time praising “not America and its institutions among American ancestors…praise is reserved for the sacrifices made and risks taken by the Founders on behalf of liberty” (Duffy & Besel). Douglass elucidates: “[The founding fathers] went so far in their excitement as to pronounce the measures of [the King of England] unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not to be quietly submitted to.” He reminds his rapt audience of the bravery of the founding fathers in advancing the radical idea of revolution, and that they did so “with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom…the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you.” Here, he also refers to his work as an abolitionist; the image/memory is an historical comparison to his own cause.

Then, in a clever exchange, Douglass himself assumes the role of a “re-founding” father figure for the abolitionist era, chastising American citizens for rebuking the founding fathers’ righteous wisdom and bravery in their opposition to oppression: “…why am I called upon to speak here to-day?...Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to [slaves]?” Indeed, who better to exalt true valor than an escaped slave who “risked his own freedom by becoming an outspoken antislavery lecturer, writer, and publisher?” (LOC)

Douglass extols later that “…the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.” This is an example of modern speech content, which, unlike nearly all other speeches of the era (prior to Lincoln’s Gettysburg address), focuses on recalling history not for idly reminiscing about patriotic values and national sentiments, but exposing the exigent need for social change.

Douglass asserts himself further into the role of “father” when he states unequivocally and in paralipsis, “I scarcely need say, fellow citizens, that my opinion of those measures [in the founding documents] fully accords with that of your fathers.” Now his earlier comments about
the young age of America come into focus: he becomes the father, scolding his blameworthy progeny: “You have no right to enjoy a child’s share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be blest by your labors.” He repeats this pay-it-forward admonishment throughout the speech as variations on the main theme: “That people contented themselves under the shadow of Abraham’s great name, while they repudiated the deeds which made his name great. Need I remind you that a similar thing is being done all over this country to-day?” In this case, he employs a scathing form of anamnesis: the audience has conveniently forgotten by whence their freedom had come. Douglass pushes the idea of conscious, concerted progress.

Recently, George Lakoff observed in President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address that “…the speech worked via frame evocation,” essentially creating a “morally-based progressive frame that made sense of what the president said.” Photographed in this light, Douglass crafted his “father” frame to fix the audience in an emotional state of both reverence and shame for the purpose of furthering his progressive agenda.

In addition, Lakoff writes, “When a frame is repeatedly activated, it is strengthened.” Without a doubt, Douglass’s “father” frame is a refrain in his symphony. He lays out verses of praise, each followed by a stabbing repetition of the patriarchal refrain with such gems as, “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?” Mocking one’s father would surely result in swift and harsh punishment – and punish them, Douglass does. The practice of slavery, he snaps, is “murderous traffic,” a “revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy” in which “America reigns without a rival.” (Of course, his audience is not only comprised of those in attendance at the convention, but will extend to soon-to-be reprimanded readers of his speech – of this fact, he is well aware).

Douglass extends his “father” frame to include God the Father, claiming repetitively in yet more variations on his theme that the church and Christian religion are complicit in slavery through their apathy toward the severe plight of slaves and the protection of “slave-hunters.” He vilifies individual ministers and church families as “the champions of oppressors...in utter denial of the authority of Him” [italics are his]. And in quoting from the book of Isaiah, he chastises,
“YOUR HANDS ARE FULL OF BLOOD [his capitalization]; cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgment; relieve the oppressed; judge for the fatherless; plead for the widow.” One could envision Douglass on an adjacent heavenly throne, whispering in God’s ear, “Shall I continue to deliver your words, Father?”

Coming full circle in his praise of the founding fathers, Douglass finds strength first in his belief that the Constitution of the United States did not, as was argued by some, condone slavery. To the contrary, he calls the Constitution “a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT” [his capitalization] by virtue of the fact that “neither slavery, slaveholding nor slave” is mentioned in it, and by finding its “principles and purposes...entirely hostile to the existence of slavery.” Only after peaking with this great pronouncement can Douglass then, just as he started the main theme of his symphony-speech, end “with hope” [his italics]. His confidence lies in decidedly divine “forces in operation,” powering earthly, human progress: ‘The End’ of slavery.

In his prescient denouement, Frederick Douglass returns to the intertwining concepts of physical and temporal distance – wherein he completes his earlier discourse with seemingly due grandiloquence: “Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. Space is comparatively annihilated.” Douglass can see the future of humanity as unified under the divine principles of progress and truth. He adds several sweepingly angelic images into his “father” frame: “The far-off and almost fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved.” He waxes even larger as his spoken symphony comes to its coda: “The fiat of the Almighty, “Let there be Light,” has not yet spent its force.”

Upon ending with William Lloyd Garrison’s decidedly determined, lyrically hopeful poem, “The Triumph of Freedom,” Frederick Douglass has perfectly composed and performed his dramatic abolitionist argument from the depths of his soul. He is spent. The score complete, he turns to suspend his “father” frame upon a sacred wall, where it bathes in the “pervading light” of our to-day.
Works Cited


