

Today, the chains that once bound Africans Americans to the fields and their master cease to exist. For the first time in American history, we have elected a person of color to the presidency. What does this mean for the nation, our history, and the future? One might argue that Barack Obama's election into the presidency somehow severs our relationship with the Nation's racist past. Is it possible that Obama's political success has freed the American people of their guilt? I argue that there is no forgiving, much less forgetting, the oppression forced on African Americans during the nineteenth century. If President Obama's election had, indeed, counteracted our history of injustice, why, then, does the president continue to preach of prejudice and inequality?

Although the physical chains have been removed, the symbolic shackling of Black Americans still survives. On March 18, 2008, Obama reminded us in his speech, "A More Perfect Union," that racism still exists today. In his speech, "Obama nests the traumas of slavery and racism with those suffered by American workers lacking a living wage and affordable health care, the bigotry faced by gays and Arab Americans, and an America in the wake of 9/11" (Frank and McPhail 9). He claims that it is shockingly prevalent in the form of "legalized discrimination." Legalized discrimination occurs in the education system when the nation's worst schools just so happen to be made up of primarily Black students. It occurs in the lack of public services in Black urban neighborhoods. And, it occurs on every paycheck, when the average Black worker makes a significant percent less than the average white worker. These are only some of the current issues that serve as a constant reminder of the Nation's haunting past.

President Obama stressed: "Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote: 'The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.' We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But

we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow” (Obama).

President Obama’s brilliant speech on racial injustice mirrors much of the oratory of the nineteenth century. His stylistic devices and rhetorical strategies in his race speech are nothing new. His speech belongs in the genre of abolition rhetoric, which emerged during the movement for emancipation in the 1800’s. “This speech [‘A More Perfect Union’], I believe, illustrates the intertwining of psychology and rhetoric; the continuing legacy of rhetoric, particularly when cast to persuade the composite audience, in affecting material, legal, and cultural change for African Americans” (Frank and McPhail 11). Similarly, individuals like Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and William Lloyd Garrison utilized abolition rhetoric when delivering speeches on the nature of slavery. Although, Barack Obama was not advocating for the legal emancipation of the slaves, he recognized the figurative enslavement of Black Americans that still prevails today. In doing this, he revisits the old oratory used to combat slavery over two hundred years ago. With the perseverance of racial discrimination, comes the persistence of abolition rhetoric. The fact that such rhetoric has endured, is reason in itself to re-examine it.

Barack Obama faced various hindrances on his quest for the presidency: The most obvious being his race. “Given the history of race in the United States, this background might have presented an insurmountable obstacle for leaders less skilled than Obama” (Leanne 44). Because Obama was a Black American, he had to go above and beyond to prove himself as an eloquent speaker. Like President Obama, many nineteenth century African American orators were restricted by the color of their skin. The most renowned of the nineteenth century abolition orators was the former-slave, Frederick Douglass. Douglass confronted tremendous limitations

with regards to structuring his rhetoric: yet, he succeeded with eloquence and grace. His most famous address, “What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July,” was quite possibly the most influential speech in the movement for emancipation. Douglass’ Fourth of July oration encompassed all of the attributes of the typical abolitionist speech; however, he managed to rise above both his Black and white counterparts. Like Obama today, Frederick epitomized the idyllic nineteenth century Black orator.

In this paper, I am going to pinpoint the crucial elements that frame the genre of abolition rhetoric, and which particular attributes make them successful. In order to better grasp the genre, I will, first, offer a brief historical description of how abolition rhetoric was involved, and ultimately responsible for the emancipation reform movement. Then, I am going to describe the genre and its key components. After a brief biographical history of Frederick Douglass, I will conduct a rhetorical analysis of his speech “What to the American Slave is the Fourth Of July,” to examine how closely Douglass’ speech fits in the genre of abolition rhetoric. I will offer Douglass’ address as a model for the ideal abolitionist speech. Frederick Douglass served as one of the most articulate and entertaining orators of his day, so it is worth shedding light on his history and how it cultivated him into such a gifted rhetorician.

### **Historical Significance**

Historically, periods of great peril have given birth to exceptionally impressive oratory. The most brilliant orators tend to emerge in response to crisis, emergency, and exigency. These individuals take a stand in the face of desperation, in the hope of pacifying a despondent audience. Like clockwork, notable speakers surface in times of political unrest or during tumultuous social movements. One such movement arose in the quest for abolition, during the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century America was plagued with flagrant inequality and callous

racism. African American citizens were denied basic human rights that had supposedly been guaranteed to them in the both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. They were denied control over their own bodies, voting privileges, child rearing, and freedom itself. Slavery transformed the nation from a once unified democratic front, into a broken collection of fragmented states, on the brink of civil war. A wave of conflict emerged between the north and south, and among those pro and anti-slavery. Social movements arose out of the desperation of Black Americans and the fighters against racial injustice. In the quest for abolition, a new type of rhetoric emerged which instilled in the American people a haunting image of the reality of slavery. For the first time, Americans were confronted with a war, both in themselves and on the home front. Harsh irony and contradiction was all around them. The Declaration of Independence was stripped of its core values, and left as a reminder of the Nation's unfulfilled promises to ensure equal rights for all. Abolition rhetoric struck hard, and revealed the impending doom that awaited the American people if the injustices of slavery were not confronted and destroyed. The abolitionist, Theodore Weld, warned the Nation of its imminent ruin if they did not make a change, fast: "Here is to be the battle field of the world. Here Satan's seat is. A mighty effort must be made to dislodge him *soon*, or the West is undone" (Weld).

Hundreds of abolitionists like Theodore Weld emerged during the nineteenth century in an attempt to protest slavery and to urge the American people to stop supporting it. Never before had there been such a diverse collaboration of individuals fighting for the same cause. It is safe to say "abolitionism was born with the American republic" (Newman 16). In the book, *Forerunners of Black Power*, Ernest S. Bormann argues, "Few reforms have been supported by so many inspired, dedicated, involved, and admirable people and few by as many crackpots, radicals, neurotics, and fanatics as the antislavery movement"(1). Between the years of 1830 to

1860, people from all walks of life gathered together to discuss the politics, unjust laws, and moral hypocrisy surrounding slavery. Their collective reform efforts included delivering speeches, campaigning, composing essays, and writing tracts, encouraging the immediate emancipation of the slaves. Abolitionists were fueled with such passion and intensity; their speeches often served as a spectacle of dramatic entertainment and excitement. Whether their audiences were composed of pro or anti-slavery supporters, people from all over the nation traveled hundreds of miles just to hear this new genre of oratory entitled abolition rhetoric. Those who did not have the opportunity to witness abolitionist oratory first hand undoubtedly read their speeches in print. There was no escaping this rhetoric in nineteenth century America. The words of abolitionists spread throughout the nation, affecting all who came into contact with it.

Abolition rhetoric grew out of nineteenth century antislavery reform efforts. Although Americans had written and spoken out against slavery prior to 1830, “the antislavery movement of the 1830’s was different enough in activity, clarity of purpose, and in rhetoric to justify setting it aside as a unique rhetorical movement” (Bormann 2). The chief difference between the two time periods was that the later movement demanded immediate emancipation, while the earlier abolitionists took a more gradual approach in their efforts. The later abolitionists were characterized by their overwhelming dedication and radical approach toward immediate emancipation. Abolitionists dedicated their lives in the pursuit to free the slaves. Public advocates, fueled by the same passion, strategized how to shine more light on the issue of slavery. With the aim of recruiting volunteers and various human rights organizations, public advocates formed various antislavery societies in order to further the movement’s efforts. The emergence of antislavery societies placed more control in the hands of reformists pushing for emancipation. “Once public advocates had established a large number of local antislavery

societies and nurtured them, the movement turned more and more to substantial written tracts of detailed arguments filled with factual materials and to the columns of reform newspapers to propagandize their efforts” (Bormann 3).

The recruitment of local volunteers attracted an increased number of citizens wanting to voice their concerns. “By October, 1835, there were in the North three hundred anti-slavery societies with one hundred thousand members” (Turner 48). In the attempt to evoke a more radical antislavery sentiment, abolitionists began speaking out at public events. They did this in the hope of forming new societies, gaining converts, and raising money. Over time, abolitionists discovered that the paid professional lecturer was one of the most effective means of satisfying these needs. Many of the speakers in the beginning of the movement were self-taught in the art of antislavery rhetoric. They had learned by previous reform speakers that had composed tracts or whose speeches had been transcribed in newspapers. Once the movement really began to gain support, it caught the eye of more public figures and rhetoricians. Politicians like President John Quincy Adams and Congressman Joshua Giddings spoke out in support of emancipating the slaves. Political speakers quickly transformed slavery from a racial and moral issue into a political issue stirring controversial legislative debates.

The oratory during this tumultuous period prevailed as the driving force behind the movement, and abolition rhetoric soon transpired as its own genre. Without the public voice and transcribed speeches from abolitionists, little progress would have been made to ensure equal rights for African Americans. Abolitionists served as the face of injustice, at a time when African American slaves did not have the opportunity or the right to speak for themselves. This new type of oratory took many forms, and transformed itself to fit the needs of the movement.

Abolitionists did not give up as they ‘worked consistently to destroy slavery and racial

injustice in these years [1776–1864], their strategy and tactics constantly evolved.’ The antislavery advocates made use of a host of discursive acts and appeals, including nonviolent resistance, petitions, legal briefs, and rational and emotional arguments, and drew upon the religious and Enlightenment principles that many of their audience members found persuasive. (Frank 16)

While the rhetoric differed in its emphasis and presentation, the overall message remained the same. As abolition rhetoric became a more popular means of publicly addressing the nation and more diverse volunteers joined the cause, the oratory diverged into two distinct categories: the rhetoric of agitation and the rhetoric of conversion. Although both groups of abolitionists were still fighting for emancipation, they differed in their method, style, and delivery. “The strategy of the agitator was to sting, goad, and disturb the audience, while the aim of the antislavery evangelist was to convert the listener to the gospel of immediate abolition and to recruit people for active work in the antislavery cause”(Bormann 6). Those who practiced the rhetoric of agitation spoke in order to provoke an emotional response from their audiences, often accusing them of hypocrisy and directly challenging their faith. Agitators during this time included William Lloyd Garrison, his followers which included Frederick Douglass, and members of the Boston antislavery forces. These individuals were often classified as radicals, because they spoke with such zeal and performed so passionately, that many government leaders feared they would provoke a revolution. In the book, *The Rhetoric of Our Times*, J. Jeffery Auer describes the goal of the agitator:

With extreme action their goal, they have found they succeed only when using language that is also extreme-extreme in the sense that pejorative poetry is extreme. Concrete diction heavy with unpleasant connotation appears; tropes and schemes with high sensory

appeal carry the *invention*; unexpected vocabulary upsets the listener's expectations of the speaker and the occasion. It is the speaker's choice of the abrasive word instead of the bland one, his deliberate selection of the derogatory metaphor rather than the complimentary, his use of jabbing, pounding simple sentences in place of complex syntax that marks his rhetoric as agitative rather than informative or gently persuasive. (8)

The agitators were bold in their delivery and thus ignored their inherent limitations as speakers arguing on a nationally controversial topic. Their goal was to create an unforgettable and moving experience for the audience, and they took countless risks during their rhetorical performances. On more than one occasion, William Lloyd Garrison, the leader of the agitators, burned a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Constitution during his Fourth of July speech in 1854. It was probable spectacles like Garrison's upset and disturbed the audience, but at a time when so many African American lives were at risk, orators took drastic measures to draw attention to their cause.

On the other hand, those practicing the rhetoric of conversion took a more persuasive approach to oratory, with an emphasis on the religious conversion from sinful behavior to salvation. "Traditionally, 'conversion' has served a socializing function, signifying that one has come into alignment with certain linguistic, behavioral, and cultural expectations. By publicly testifying to a conversion experience, believers became empowered members, not only of God's elect community but also of a local population" (Dorsey 86). Instead of lashing out at the audience, they "quoted testimony, historical and legal precedent, specific examples, and statistical examples in support of their case" (Bormann 22). Conversion abolitionists took a more passive approach in their rhetorical style, and were associated with the benevolent empire and the headquarters of the American Antislavery Society in New York Society. I argue that



conversion rhetoric was not as effective as agitation rhetoric because it did not leave a lasting impression on the audience. Consequently, those who witnessed the speeches of conversion were not moved to change their beliefs and attitudes. Their speeches were dull and failed to excite the audience and the members of the anti-slavery forces. In the article, “Patterns of Persuasion in the Civil Rights Struggle,” Herbert W. Simons argues, “The more moderate and peaceful the leader’s appeals, the more likely he is to find himself without a following” (48).

For the purpose of this paper, I am going to focus on agitation rhetoric as it pertains to Frederick Douglass’ style of speech. Also, I contend that agitation rhetoric was far more successful in persuading the public to take a second look at the institution of slavery.

### **The Genre: Abolition Rhetoric**

Abolition rhetoric emerged in response to the rhetorical landscape of the nineteenth century and due to a desperate need by the American people. The reform movement required that the abolitionist speak in order to keep their efforts alive. This dire need for oratory was the inherent exigency that marked all abolition rhetoric. Consequently, exigence satisfies the first criterion of the abolition rhetoric genre. Lloyd Bitzer defines exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer 3). In this instance, the “defect” lies in both the moral integrity and the political infrastructure of the nation. As a result of the inequality reinforced by policy makers and the religious institutions during the nineteenth century, the nation’s character was vilely flawed. The sole fact that African Americans were not guaranteed equal rights and were enslaved by the white man demanded that the abolitionist orator speak. Exigency, in general, is an imperfection or problem which must be addressed or confronted. But *rhetorical* exigency exists when the particular problem is capable of being resolved or changed for the better. “An

exigence which cannot be modified is not rhetorical; thus, whatever comes about of necessity and cannot be changed--death, winter, and some natural disasters, for instance--are exigences to be sure, but they are nonrhetorical. . . . An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification *requires* discourse or can be *assisted* by discourse” (Bitzer 6). Therefore, all abolition rhetoric contained a rhetorical exigence because slavery was not an innate characteristic of the nation. Thus, America was repairable through immediate emancipation. The emancipation movement required abolitionist discourse because their speeches, essays, and petitions were the driving force behind all of the anti-slavery efforts. Without them, the movement would have crumbled.

With an undeniable rhetorical exigence, came an overwhelming sense of urgency which was also characteristic of all abolition rhetoric. In his 1838 Fourth of July Address, William Lloyd Garrison proclaimed, “I demand the immediate emancipation of all who are pining in slavery on the American soil, whether they are fattening for the shambles in Maryland and Virginia, or are wasting, as with a pestilent disease, on the cotton and sugar plantations of Alabama and Louisiana; whether they are males or females, young or old, vigorous or infirm” (Garrison). Abolitionists like Garrison, insisted on the immediate emancipation of all slaves everywhere, with no exception. This sense of urgency occurred for two chief reasons. One, the state of the Union was severely unstable. The divide between the north and south created a national uproar among the supporters and detractors of slavery. Unless the country agreed upon a united consensus on how to deal with slavery immediately, America would have surely split into two separate entities. Second, the abolitionists modeled many of their speeches after the early Puritan preaching heritage, which “put great pressure on their audience to seek salvation *immediately*” (Bormann 6).

The Puritan belief system of the eighteenth century was based on the belief that humans were intrinsically cruel and callous beings. Puritan ministers cautioned their audiences to do good and to appreciate the now, or else they would risk their one and only chance into heaven. Constant warnings regarding an ominous apocalypse often fueled many of the Puritan sermons which further emphasized the need to seek immediate salvation, or risk a life entrapped in the depths of a fiery hell. This apocalyptic metaphor also served as a means of mobilizing conversion to the Puritan faith, and rallying support for controversial public transformation. “Traditionally, the rhetoric of the apocalypse was a religious idiom for advocating radical social change, a vehicle of protest for the most disaffected of the powerless and the poor” (Kibbey 122). Similarly to the Puritans during the eighteenth century, the abolitionists employed a milder version of the apocalyptic metaphor. They cautioned the nation against what the abolitionist, Theodore Weld, referred to as “the battle field of the world” (Bormann 29). This “battle field” was a consequence of both the inherent sin of slavery and the turmoil of the Union.

The emphasis on the intrinsic sin of slavery was another criterion that characterized the genre of abolition rhetoric. Ernest G. Bormann discusses the function of sin:

The key in the myth of supernatural sanction was *sin*. In the early instructions accompanying the commission to be an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society, the speakers were instructed as follows: ‘Insists principally on the SIN of SLAVERY, because our main hope is in the conscience of men, and it requires little logic to prove that it is always safe to do right. To question this, is to impeach the superintending Providence of God.’ Since slavery was a sin and the abolitionists were battling on the side of God, they had more than merely human reasons for committing themselves to the movement. They were God’s chosen people and his instrumentality, which meant that

they were inevitable and must win. (32)

Abolitionists constantly reminded their audiences of the fact that the Bible, which they supposedly adhered to, declared slavery a sin in Scripture and in the Ten Commandments. Because most of the population was fluent in biblical history, orators were free to make Scriptural references without having to worry if their audience did not understand. This shared knowledge made it easier for rhetors to recall historical and religious narratives. The famous abolitionist, Theodore Dwight Weld, reconstructed the Biblical narrative of the Ten Commandments in his speech, “The Bible Against Slavery,” to reiterate the blatantly obvious sinfulness of the institution. “Just after the Israelites were emancipated from their bondage in Egypt, while they stood before Sinai to receive the law, as the trumpet waxed louder, and the mount quaked and blazed, God spake the ten commandments from the midst of clouds and thunderings. *Two* of those commandments deal death to slavery. ‘Thou shalt not steal,’ or, ‘though shalt not take from another what belongs to him’ ” (2). Weld then continued with several arguments from definition:

All man’s powers are God’s gift to *him*. That they are *his own*, is proved from the fact that God has given them to *him alone*, -that each of them is a part of himself, and all of them together constitute himself. All else that belongs to man is acquired by the *use* of these powers. The interest belongs to him, because the principal does; the product is his, because he is the producer. Ownership of anything, is ownership of its *use*. The right to use according to will, is *itself* ownership. The eighth commandment presupposes and assumes the right of every man to his powers, and their product. Slavery robs of both. A man’s right to himself, is the only right absolutely original and intrinsic-his right to whatever else that belongs to him is merely *relative* to this... (2)

Arguments like Weld's were prevalent in every abolition speech. Abolitionists often laughed at the task of having to defend the sinfulness of slavery when it was such a blatant obstruction of justice. Ironically enough, Southern slavery supporters began justifying slavery on Biblical grounds. This only served to further humor the abolitionists who recognized the hypocrisy of supporting a practice that went against everything Christian. "The advocates of slavery find themselves at their wits end in pressing the Bible into their service. Every movement shows them hard-pushed. Their every-varying shifts, their forced constructions, and blind guesswork, proclaim both their *cause* desperate and themselves" (Weld 3). An element of scorching irony infiltrated all abolition rhetoric because the American people, whether they wanted to admit it or not, knew very well that slavery was condemned by God, thus innately wrong. In his "Address to the Slaves of the United States of America," the former slave and black abolitionist, Henry Highland Garnet, proclaimed: "Slavery had stretched its dark wings of death over the land, the Church stood silently by-the priests prophesied falsely, and the people loved to have it so" (Garnet 4). Abolitionists spoke of the dangers of maintaining such an institution that invoked so much suffering. They warned of the strain it would put on one's soul, and the wrath God would summon as a result of hypocritical faith: "He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death" (Garrison 7).

All abolition rhetoric contained an element of scorching irony. The anti-slavery speakers pointed out the hypocrisy of the American people's faith, and their blind adherence to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Notably, abolitionists accused the *current* population of manipulating the words of Scripture and policy to suit their needs, not their forefathers. In fact, the abolitionists paid a great deal of reverence towards the founders of the nation in their oratory. They recognized that the originators of the Declaration of Independence

had fought the same battle for freedom that the abolitionists were fighting for in the nineteenth century. Hence, in this lies the irony of slavery. Many abolition speeches of the nineteenth century incorporated elements of the Jeremiad. They called for a return to the old ways and belief systems that constituted the time period of their forefather. The abolitionist and renowned Clergyman, Theodore Parker, professed this irony perfectly in his speech “A Sermon of Slavery”:

We all know that our fathers fought through the War of Independence with these maxims in their mouths and blazoned on their banners: that all men are born free and equal, and that the God of eternal justice will avenge the cause of the oppressed, however strong the oppressor might be; yet it is just as well known that the sons of those very fathers now trade in human flesh, separating parent and child, and husband and wife, for the sake of a little gain; that the sons of those fathers eat bread not in the sweat of their own brow, but in that of the slave’s face; that they are sustained, educated, rendered rich, and haughty, and luxurious by the labour they export from men who they have stolen, or purchased from the stealer, or inherited from the purchaser. (Bormann 23)

Criticisms like these were not uncommon in abolition rhetoric. Orators argued that slavery denied African Americans their natural rights to self-government. In the nineteenth century, the promise of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” did not anticipate the inclusion of African slaves or former slaves. Pro-slavery advocates argued the inferiority of black Americans, going as far to say that they were incapable of reason and that they were, by nature, an atypical type of being. Many of these beliefs took hold during the Enlightenment when philosophers contemplated issues like race, gender and class. “Some of the great philosophers of the time, among them David Hume and Immanuel Kant, argued that Blacks were slaves because it was

impossible for them to reason. Though the discourse of ‘natural rights’ dominated such philosophical inquiry, one of the main questions of the day was whether these rights extended to all people equally, without regard to hierarchies (Blacks, women, the poor and unpropertied, etc.)” (McBride 106). Philosophies based on the Black ability to reason led to heated discussions as to whether or not slavery was “good” for the Black man. Since many believed Blacks lacked the capacity to reason and take care of themselves, many abolitionists found themselves arguing for the basic intelligence and humanity of African Americans. The Black abolitionist, Frances Maria W. Stewart, delivered an address at the African Masonic Hall on this matter. She, like many other abolitionists, claimed that African American intelligence was hindered by slavery. Blacks were not unintelligent by nature; they were prohibited by the government and punishment of death to receive education and to read and write. “Give the man of color an equal opportunity with the white, from the cradle to manhood, and from manhood to the grave, and you would discover the dignified statesman, the man of science, and the philosopher. But there is no such opportunity for the sons of Africa, and I fear that our powerful ones are fully determined that there never shall be” (Stewart 3).

In, *Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony*, Dwight A. McBride maintains:

One of the main arguments of the pro-slavery advocates for the justification of slavery was that Africans were not of the same variety of humanity as [white] Europeans and were, therefore, fit for slavery. This is why abolitionists were constantly responding to this claim in their writings by showing examples of the humanity of the African.

Nonetheless, in this over determined political and philosophical debate, the equating of humanity with whiteness persists. (McBride 59)

Although abolitionists often acknowledged the ridiculousness of arguing that African Americans

were indeed “men,” their oratory was plagued with arguments by definition rationalizing why blacks were fully equal with the white man. They confirmed the equality of Blacks by referencing of the Bible and commenting on the nature of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. In 1822, Ralph Waldo Emerson commented on the nature of slavery philosophically. He called slavery “an assault upon reason and common sense, and said that if man was himself free-and it offended the attributes of God to have him otherwise-it was manifestly a bold stroke of impiety to wrest the same liberty from his fellow” ( Turner 34).

According to the abolitionists, slavery was inherently wrong and sinful no matter which angle one looked at it. Abolitionists made it their effort to destabilize the belief that there was an inherent black-white racial dichotomy. The incorporation of religious and political arguments served as astute persuasive techniques to convince their audiences to take a step back from their ethnocentrism. It allowed them an opportunity to experience a revelation on the true hypocritical nature of slavery. Apocalyptic rhetoric forced both the immediate and extended audience to reflect on the “bigger picture” and overall ramifications of their duplicitous behavior. This leads me to my next point: all abolition orators spoke both to an immediate and an extended audience.

All abolitionists spoke with the intention of reaching more than one audience. They addressed their immediate audience, of course, but they also had an intended audience outside of their initial speech. Because most speeches were recorded or transcribed by newspapers, the rhetoric of abolition was dispersed throughout the nation. “The printed version often reached as wide, if not a wider, audience than the speech itself and thus was a more persuasive message than the original” (Bormann 93). For this reason, nineteenth century rhetoricians often began their speeches by addressing the audience as “fellow citizens,” as opposed to tailoring their introduction to a specific group of people like the “Boston Anti-slavery Society.” This aspect of



abolition rhetoric is important to note because all emancipation speeches were customized for not only the audience that witnessed the speech first hand, but also the thousands of people that would read it in the newspapers.

Another crucial element of abolition rhetoric was the employment of slave narratives and eye witness reports on the brutal treatment of African Americans. “An important feature of the rhetoric of the movement was the graphic, detailed, and revolting description of the evils of slavery. One of the ways in which credibility of the descriptions was enhanced was by presenting the testimony of a man or woman who had experienced slavery first hand” (Bormann13). Rhetorical descriptions of the reality of slavery served as an authentic artifact establishing both the speaker’s credibility, and evidence to base their arguments. The American people, whether they were pro or anti-slavery, had an undying interest in the institution itself. We see this in the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was the bestselling novel of the nineteenth century (Smith 89). Stowe’s fictional accounts of slave abuse attracted even the most radical proponent of slavery. Abolitionists recognized authentic slave narratives as a powerful persuasive appeal to gaining converts. “Since the experience of slavery itself is inaccessible to nonslaves, the rhetoric of authenticity, which pervades the slavery debates, requires witnesses and testimony that approximate the value of that irretrievable experience” (McBride 94). White abolitionists made it a priority to include some graphic mention of a black slave being mercilessly beaten or taken away from his family. They used theatrical language to set the stage of the African American slave, often making references to “furious threatenings, bloody whips, and murderous halters” (Bormann 85).

Rhetorical images which graphically described the exploitation of the Black slave emphasized the white man’s obsession with power and the slave’s lack of control over his own

body. “The image of the slave evoked not simply the loss of “liberty” but the loss of all claims to self possession” (Eppler 30). Thus, the body of the slave served as a metaphorical prison. The descriptive mistreatment of his body acted as a physical representation of both the harsh realities of slavery and the intangible depiction of his tortured soul. Karen Sánchez-Eppler studied the similarities between the rhetorical representations in abolition and feminist discourse. In her article “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetoric of Feminism and Abolition,” she argues: The problem of having, representing or interpreting a body structure both feminist and abolitionist discourses, since the rhetorics of the two reforms meet upon the recognition that for both women and blacks it is their physical difference from the cultural norms of white masculinity that obstructs their claim to personhood. Thus the social and political goals of both feminisms and abolition depend upon an act of representation, the inscription of black and female bodies into the discourse of personhood. (29)

Abolitionists in the nineteenth century recognized that the only thing that disconnected the Black slave from the white man was the color of his skin. Therefore, the skilled abolitionist deconstructed this racial barrier by presenting unsettling images of the slave being exploited. Instead of reinforcing the inferiority of African Americans, this image stripped the slave of his blackness and exposed the striking similarities between the two races. The image of the tortured slave represented an individual plagued with emotion, passion, and sentiment, which were unmistakable signs of both whiteness and traits of humanity.

Abolitionists employed a myriad amount of persuasive techniques to achieve their goal of immediate emancipation. The genre itself was defined by the rhetorical landscape of the nineteenth century. Based on the traditional Puritan Sermon, abolitionists utilized the apocalyptic metaphor to motivate their audiences to join the emancipation movement. They accused the

American people of hypocrisy for supporting an institution that was intrinsically sinful, and blatantly went against all Christian values. References to the Bible and the Declaration of Independence served as a technique to exposing the scorching irony of American behavior. Abolitionist also argued for the basic humanity of African Americans, proclaiming that the only difference between the free man and the slave was the color of his skin. Graphic images of the slave's exploitation were used to evoke sympathy from the audience and to expose the cruel realities of the unjust institution. All of these characteristics distinguish the genre of abolition rhetoric. After examining countless speeches from this genre, I have come to the conclusion that one speech, in particular, stands out. This speech contains all of the elements of the abolition genre, but it has a few additional components that make it the ideal abolition speech. To this day, Frederick Douglass' speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," remains one of the most influential and poignant speeches of the nineteenth century. In the subsequent section I am going to present a brief biography of Frederick Douglass, followed by a genre criticisms of his Fourth of July oration in order to prove that Douglass was, in fact, the most distinguished of all the abolition orators.

### **The Life of Frederick Douglass**

In order to grasp the significance of Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July oration, one must delve into his history as a slave. Douglass' life prior to his success as an orator helped build his credibility and ethos as a speaker. His experiences as a slave established his authority on the subject matter. "What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?" was a self-referential speech that based much of its criticisms on Douglass' personal encounters.

Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Talbot County, Maryland, in 1818. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was a slave, and his father was an unknown

white man, rumored to be his slave owner at the time. To these rumors, Douglass would later write in his autobiography, “that my master was my father, may or may not be true...is of but little consequence...The slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father” (Chesebrough 246).

Early on, Frederick recognized the injustices of slavery. Many of his experiences as a young man were later reflected in his rhetoric. One of which was the separation of mother and son in the first few months of his life. Not long after Douglass’ birth, he was removed from his mother, Harriet Bailey, and sent to live twelve miles away with his grandparents, Isaac and Betsey. From then on, Douglass recalled seeing his mother only a few times before her death when he was only seven years old. He later reflected, “For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result” (Pitts 288). During the nineteenth century, slaveholders often removed children from the care of their parents to destabilize their family structures. This was done in order to keep slaves feeling isolated and to ensure slave parents remained focused on their work. Later on in his life, Douglass acknowledged the cruel separation of mother and child as a way for slaveholders to foster familial detachment and racial injustice.

Frederick spent the next twenty one years of his life as a slave. His experiences during these years shaped much of the oratory and rhetorical style he employed later on in his career. His speeches were all the more powerful because he had first-hand anecdotes reflecting the brutal nature of slavery. Douglass developed his ethos as a speaker by simply living the life of a slave. Throughout his life, Frederick moved to numerous plantations and was forced to work under the lash of many masters. Each plantation was characterized by new and repulsive horrors.

Douglass witnessed “the screams for mercy, the shrieks of agony, the sound of the lash upon bare flesh, and the gory sight of flowing blood” (Chesebrough 7). Scenes of slave mothers ripped from their children, and Black folk being beaten until they could not stand fueled the bitterness Douglass felt and later referenced in his speeches. Not until Douglass moved to Baltimore to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld, did he feel any ounce of gratitude toward his masters. In Baltimore, Sophia Auld treated Douglass with compassion, and taught him to read and write.

Much to the dismay of her husband, Sophia introduced Douglass to the Bible, the dictionary, and the American novel. Teaching a slave to read or write was against the law in the nineteenth century, and was punishable by imprisonment, fines, and a whipping. Sophia’s kindness towards Douglass ultimately paved the way for the rest of his life. “As a child Douglass learned from his environment that the literate enjoyed certain benefits. He understood that his own illiteracy kept him at a disadvantage, thus, he decided to create his own program for self-improvement” (Burke 10). After his initial taste of literacy, Douglass became conscious that his race was not what declared him inferior to whites, but the suppressive institution of slavery that produced his illiteracy and ignorance. With this knowledge, Douglass knew that achieving literacy was what could set him apart from the stereotypical slave. He took advantage of every opportunity to read books, magazines, advertisements, newspapers, and the Bible. He was obsessed with *Webster’s Spelling Book* and was inspired by famous speeches from Caleb Bingham’s volume, *The Columbian Orator* (Burke 11). Douglass was especially drawn to slave narratives and speeches given by early abolitionists. Douglass’ introduction to the Bible also sparked an interest in religion. He recognized the irony of the white man’s devotion to religion, yet his contradictory adherence to slavery. “He observed the use of religion to justify slavery, to support the doctrine of racial superiority and inferiority, and condone the use of the whip and

other forms of brutality to keep the people of color in their ‘God-ordained places’ (Chesebrough 8).

Annoyed with Frederick’s dedication to literacy and his peculiar tendency to defy authority, Thomas Auld sent him to live with Edward Covey, a heartless old man known for ruthless slave breaking. Covey succeeded in breaking Frederick by crushing his spirits and diminishing any desire he had to read. The tables were turned one morning when Frederick refused to be whipped. This incident led to a two hour fight between Frederick and Covey, which ultimately brought Covey’s beatings to an end. Douglass claimed that this moment was “the turning point in my career as a slave. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (Chesebrough 10). Following this fight and Douglass’ enlightenment, he was sent to live with a surprisingly tolerable master, William Friedland. While serving Friedland, Douglass found solace conducting a secret Sunday school for other slaves, but he still yearned for freedom. Douglass made plans to escape, failed, and was once again sent to Baltimore under the control of Hugh Auld. In Baltimore, Douglass was taught to work in a Shipyard as a caulker, earning a mere dollar and a half a day (Chesebrough 10). On Monday, September 3, 1838, Frederick finally carried out a successful escape. He met a woman named Anna Murray, married her, and moved to Bedford, Massachusetts to begin their new life.

Once in Bedford, Douglass continued to struggle with the realities of prejudice and racial injustice. He was quickly introduced to William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist paper entitled *Liberator*, which centered on bold criticisms of slavery. Douglass closely identified with the words of Garrison and not long after began attending abolitionist meetings. Frederick became a

prominent member at anti-slavery meetings, speaking on the injustices of slavery and quickly making a name for himself. He was asked to speak by The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and by his idol, William Lloyd Garrison (Chesebrough 18). Douglass spoke about equality, the abolition of slavery, the disjointed union, and religious irony. He rapidly earned recognition among abolitionists, and harsh criticisms from pro-slavery supporters.

In 1844, Douglass worked on his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in response to accusations that he was “too eloquent, too learned, too polished, too sophisticated, to have ever been an uneducated slave” (Chesebrough 25). The detailed information released in Douglass’ narrative, including the names of former masters, threatened both his life and the potential to be re-enslaved; so, he planned a lecture tour in the British Isles. His nineteenth month tour of the British Isles came to a close in 1847. These months served as a growth period for Frederick. “He began the exile, still legally a slave, still owned by another; he concluded the exile a legally free man. When he left the United States he was a subordinate to Garrison in the American antislavery movement; he returned a leader in his own right, subordinate to no one” (Chesebrough 35). When Douglass returned to the United States, he had established himself as a leader and a speaker. His new-found independence was irrefutable.

Douglass' popularity opened up new outlets for him to speak to larger and more influential audiences. He proved himself as both a public speaker and a journalist. Douglass addressed diverse audiences, including the members of the historic women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, the American Colonization Society in Boston, individuals at Faneuil Hall in Boston, the American Anti-Slavery Society at the Broadway Tabernacle, and the antislavery

convention in Syracuse, New York (Chesebrough 46). These were only a few of the many people exposed to the unprecedented rhetoric of Frederick Douglass.

On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered his most compelling anti-slavery speech to an audience of six hundred, mostly white abolitionist Americans. Douglass' speech entitled "What to the American slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?" was an eloquent performance meant to both praise America's Founders and to condemn his audience for not continuing their vision of a free and equal nation. I argue that Douglass' Fourth of July address was the most successful abolition speech of the nineteenth century; and it serves as a model for all anti-slavery orators.

### **Genre Criticism of Frederick Douglass': "What to the American Slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?"**

Frederick Douglass' "What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?" encompassed all of the crucial elements of the genre of abolition rhetoric. But, his utilization of additional rhetorical techniques set him apart from all other nineteenth century abolitionists. Specifically, Frederick took advantage of his rhetorical situation by employing the unique characteristics of the subgenre of Fourth of July Orations. In addition, irony and alleged hypocrisy permeated every line of his famous address. His overall message can be summarized in the following lines of Frederick's illustrious speech:

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 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.

“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” exposed slavery as a National atrocity and positioned the white population at the forefront of blame. Douglass’ austere criticisms were initially veiled by his praise of the Nation’s forefathers, but were eventually unleashed as full-fledged accusations. In his Fourth of July oration, Frederick refutes the religious and political arguments in support of slavery, and calls for immediate emancipation. His carefully formulated discourse was the epitome of what an abolition speech should be , and, to this day, is “ranked as one of the most important abolition speeches of the nineteenth century and Douglass’ most celebrated oratorical achievement” (Duffy and Besel 2). Similar to all speeches in the genre of abolition rhetoric, Douglass’ address was brought forth as a result of a rhetorical exigency. His discourse arose out of the rhetorical situation: the Fourth of July. He was invited to speak at the 1852 Independence Day Celebration, by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society.

Traditionally, nineteenth century Fourth of July festivities were devoted to praising the Nation’s forefathers, and reflecting on America’s progress since the reign of the English throne. Guests of these particular celebrations spent the day listening to lengthy Fourth of July orations given by renowned political figures, philosophers, and speakers notorious for their public addresses. Skilled rhetoricians were sought to “perform a skillfully crafted reaffirmation of the principles for which Americans had risked their lives” (Duffy and Besel 1). The national tradition of including Fourth of July orations in Independence celebrations ultimately established a sub-genre of situational abolition rhetoric. Douglass’ Fourth of July oration fits in this sub-genre because the rhetorical situation helped shape the formation of his oratory. The nature of the

day presented an opportunity for speakers to voice their concerns publically. “Abolition orators used the July Fourth oration to plead their cause” (Duffy and Besel 2). Frederick Douglass used his oration to plead the cause of thousands of enslaved Black Americans. He addressed those attending the ceremony in order to shed light on slavery and to expose the irony of being asked to speak on such an occasion, when he, himself, was not long ago a slave.

One of the hallmarks of Douglass’ oratory was its universal application to his listeners. Like all speeches in the abolition rhetoric genre, “What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?” was composed with the intention that it would be heard by more than those individuals who witnessed it firsthand. Because, Fourth of July orations were often transcribed and distributed as pamphlets Douglass had to tailor his rhetorical style to both his immediate audience at the Independence Day celebration, and to those who later read it in print. “The fact that most important speeches were destined for print helps to explain the atavistic grandiloquent style of nineteenth century oral discourse, particularly of ceremonial speeches” (Duffy and Besel 2). Douglass’ immediate audience was composed of 600 primarily white male abolitionists, who would have likely welcomed his oratory. His extended audience was a mixture between white and Black, old and young, and those in favor and those opposed to slavery. Douglass’ discourse was customized for the latter group of individuals, since his immediate listeners were already in support for his cause. They would not have embraced his oratory or him as a credible and fluent rhetorician.

Among the many factors Douglass had to consider when delivering his speech, his race significantly inhibited him. Not only was he protesting the controversial topic of racial injustice, but he was doing it as a minority, someone ridiculed and persecuted for the color of their skin.

"As a protest speaker, the African American is met with the limitations placed upon all protest speakers, but because he or she is Black, a further constraint, based upon socio-historical factors, exists" (Conyers 114). In order to overcome the limitations placed on Douglass due to his race, he had to be careful regarding the rhetorical strategies he chose to employ. To avoid offending the audience, Douglass took precaution with the language, style, and delivery of his speech "There can be no reckless abandon in language or behavior that will allow for misinterpretations or misunderstandings" (Conyers 114).

Douglass exercised a couple of techniques to verify his credibility as an orator and to establish a common ground between himself and his audience. His speech began by using the rhetorical strategy, *diminutio*. He employed this strategy by belittling himself, his achievements, and his experiences as an orator. "Should I seem at ease, my appearance would much misrepresent me. The little experience I have had in addressing public meetings, in country school houses, avails me nothing on the present occasion." Because Douglass was a powerful Black man, his extended audience might have viewed him as a threat. *Diminutio* was a method of eliminating this threat, and rendering a subsequent glimpse of Douglass' vulnerability. Abolition orators who utilized *diminutio* were far more successful than those who paraded their accomplishments and successes as rhetoricians. Douglass' compatriot, William Lloyd Garrison, was often hindered by his pretentious ego and flamboyant personality. Garrison never eased his audience into his condemnations, which was one of many reasons for his failure as an orator.

Instead of boasting about his rhetorical expertise, Douglass led the audience to believe that he was an inexperienced speaker, when in fact, he had spoke on many occasions to even larger groups of people. He also expressed his gratitude for being given the chance to speak at

such a gathering. He claimed: "That I am here today is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude." Douglass' use of praise was another means of establishing common ground and alleviating the tension between him and his more critical audience. He hoped to captivate his listeners through this rhetorical strategy so they would be more inclined to hear his message. Douglass directed his praise towards the Nation's Founding Fathers and their contributions to the Declaration of Independence. He referred to them as "men of honesty and men of spirit" in their pursuit seeking independence from England. He utilized the traditional Jeremiad form of oratory by encouraging his audience to revisit the mindset of their forefathers, and to follow the principles of the Declaration of Independence. "In Douglass' famous Fourth of July oration, he employed the rhetorical jeremiad to excoriate his auditors for their contradictory behavior regarding this national holiday. The content of the speech criticized Americans for not adhering to the tenets presented in historical documents" (Burke 82). Douglass' brief tribute to the Nation's historical plight for freedom eased the transition from "subdued and circumspect" oratory to the "mordant criticism of the Nation and, apparently, of his audience" that followed (Duffy 3).

In the same way that all abolition orators recognized the correlation between the anti-slavery fight for freedom and the forefather's battle for Independence, Douglass commented on the irony "that Americans in the present were guilty of the sin of hypocrisy for accepting the institution of slavery in their midst" (Duffy and Besel 7). Douglass identified with the forefather's struggles fighting an unjust government, which so closely paralleled the African American struggle for freedom. He also utilized the rhetorical strategy, anamnesis, to remind his audience of what they were celebrating and how it resembled the present pursuit for

emancipation. Bernard K. Duffy and Richard D. Besel describe anamnesis as the “‘recollection’ or attempt to remind people of what they have forgotten” (5). By reminding his audience of their colonial past under the rule of English tyrants, Douglass unveils the irony of enslaving Black Americans. “Feeling themselves harshly and unjustly treated by the home government, your fathers, like men of honesty, and men of spirit, earnestly sought redress. They petitioned and remonstrated; they did so in a decorous, respectful, and loyal manner. Their conduct was wholly unexceptionable” (Douglass).

After Douglass reminisced about the history of the Nation and applauded their noble Forefather’s fight for Independence, he steered his speech back to the present. “My business, if I have any here to-day, is with the present. The accepted time with God and his cause is the ever-living now” (Douglass). Similarly to all abolition rhetoric, Douglass emphasized the need for *current* and *immediate* social transformation. He called his audience to take immediate action so that the “scorching irony” plaguing the Nation could cease. Action had to be instantaneous and dramatic. Douglass used a clever metaphor involving the elements when he claimed: “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.” This sense of urgency pervaded all abolition rhetoric in the nineteenth century, so it was quite appropriate that Douglass demanded immediate emancipation at whatever cost to the Nation. Like an earthquake that strikes an unsuspecting town of people, the consequences would be far-reaching and drastic.

Frederick cleverly crafted his arguments by calling attention to the Nation’s hypocrisy. He deliberately separated himself from his white audience throughout the speech by referring to the Fourth of July celebration as “*your* National Independence of *your* political freedom.” He

was careful never to include himself among those celebrating the Nation's independence. In doing this, he emphasized the irony of being asked to speak at an event, on a national holiday, that he could not honor. Douglass stated: "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us." In this quote, Douglass urged his audience to acknowledge the irony of a national holiday that so few could celebrate. He wanted them to realize that although America was a nation that advertised their great democracy, not all of its inhabitants were given an equal chance to vote and participate. Although, America was so proud of its supposed uncompromising freedom, a huge portion of the population was being denied their basic human rights.

Characteristic of all abolition rhetoric, Douglass pointed out the religious hypocrisy of the nineteenth century. This was something he had observed while growing up in the households of different slave masters. While Frederick served under the command of devout religious masters, he witnessed their heartless treatment of both himself and his fellow slaves. He recognized the intrinsic sinfulness of slavery, and utilized the Puritan rhetorical strategy of warning the Nation of the apocalyptic consequences of upholding such an institution. "Freedom, according to Douglass, was a God-given, fundamental right, and a nation that denies such a right to any of its citizens, does so at its peril" (Chesebrough 47). Douglass employed a metaphor to express his apocalyptic warnings to the Nation: "Oh! Be warned! A horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever."

Frederick expressed his bewilderment regarding how the American people, who preached

kindness to all of God's creatures, still could not see the moral defects and sinfulness of the institution of slavery. He conveyed this contradiction through an argument by definition exposing the irony of the social state of the Nation:

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.

Douglass noted that because all the arguments against slavery had already been altercated, it made no sense to continue returning to the issue. Douglass was well aware that his audience was made up of devout religious individuals, which explained why he continually mentioned God, the divine, and the persecution of the Jews. He noted that there was no excuse to uphold slavery as an institution, because it violated every man's God-given right to freedom.

Characteristic of all abolition speeches, Douglass mentioned the humanity of the Black slave in order to further sanction their natural, God-given, right to freedom. He did not spend much time on the claim that African Americans were not, in fact, "men" because he recognized the ridiculousness of such an irrational argument. His use of the rhetorical strategy, *paralepsis*, revealed the irony of the claim that African Americans were not human. The device, *paralepsis*, allowed Douglass to mention the humanity of the slave, while denying that it was a topic worth mentioning: "What point in the anti-slavery creed would you have me argue? On what branch of the subject do the people of this country need light? Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it" (Douglass). Douglass contended that the white population confirmed the Black man's humanity with the enactment of American laws

that prohibited slaves to read and write, and punished them for disobedience. This fact alone confirmed the African American's ability to think and reason. "What is this but the acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded" (Douglass). Frederick argued that because the humanity of the man is already established, it is pure hypocrisy to deny him control over his own body and his natural right to freedom.

After Douglass presented the moral and spiritual arguments for immediate emancipation, he used a particularly effective technique to evoke a sympathetic emotional response from his audience. Characteristic of all abolition rhetoric, Douglass' closing paragraphs graphically painted the picture of the inhumane treatment of slaves. He condemned the population, referring to them as "man-drovers" and "flesh-mongers," continually comparing slave treatment to that of animals. Douglass used this rhetorical technique, also known as a tableau, to present the visual image of slavery with clarity for his audience. His graphic tableau put a face on the cruel nature of slavery, and exposed the ruthless behavior of slave masters:

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 know out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters?

The explicit portrayal of the exploitation of slaves appealed to the audience's pathos. Douglass captured their sympathy with slave narratives that he experienced growing up in the households of his masters. His encounters as a former slaver made him especially credible on this subject.



Frederick Douglass, himself, was the physical representation of the abused slave, which just so happened to be one of his most powerful attributes.

Douglass' depiction revealing the evilness of slavery sent chills through all that heard them, and to those who read about them later on. His rhetorical techniques, throughout his speech, left his audience feeling anxious and unsettled. They had been struck with the unsympathetic wrath of agitation rhetoric, by the cleverest abolitionist of their day. To relieve the Nation's broken spirit, Douglass concluded his speech with a glimpse of hope. "Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day represented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work...I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope." These words were followed by a Puritanical sermon poem written by William Lloyd Garrison entitled "The Triumph of Freedom," which reemphasized the coming of a time "When none on earth/ Shall exercise a lordly power." Douglass foresaw the eventual collapse of the institution that had been poisoning the Nation for so long. He envisioned the day when slavery would cease to exist, and the Black man could walk freely wherever he pleased.

Fortunately, Frederick Douglass lived to see the day of National emancipation. He celebrated the freedom of the slaves, knowing that he played a vital role in the abolition movement. Of his many public addresses criticizing slavery, "What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?" was, by far, his greatest rhetorical achievement. Following his speech, he received a universal burst of applause, and many compliments thereafter (Burke 88). His Fourth of July oration improved his credibility as a Black speaker and heightened his popularity as an orator. He employed all of the necessary characteristics included in the genre of abolition rhetoric, while infusing his speech with elements of the sub-genre of Fourth of July orations.

What really set Douglass' speech apart from all other abolitionists, was his awe-inspiring use of scorching irony. Frederick utilized rhetorical irony to expose the Nation's duplicity as hypocritical followers of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. "What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?" continues to inspire all those who encounter it. It served as the model for all abolition rhetoric during Frederick Douglass' lifetime, and remains an archetypal representation of emancipation discourse today.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

My analysis of the genre of abolition rhetoric began with a brief history on how discourse was involved in the movement for emancipation. The historical landscape of the nineteenth century was a critical component in the formation of abolitionist oratory. The time period served as the rhetorical exigency that brought forth the discourse. The rhetoric that developed during this period was split into two groups: the rhetoric of conversion and the rhetoric of agitation. The most successful abolitionist orators were those who partook in agitation rhetoric, because it utilized emotional appeals to move the audience to act. Following the historical significance portion of the paper, I described abolition rhetoric as a genre. Nineteenth century abolitionist oratory was characterized by the following: a sense of urgency, apocalyptic metaphors deriving from the traditional Puritan Sermon, an emphasis on the intrinsic sinfulness of slavery, irony, arguments for the humanity of the slave and his right to self government, the incorporation of slave narratives, and the intention of reaching more than one audience.

After the description of the genre, I offered a brief biography of Frederick Douglass. His historical background was particularly important to this paper because it enriched his credibility and success as an orator. Thus, his unfair treatment and horrible experiences as a slave fueled his passion as a speaker. After discussing Douglass' life, I conducted a genre criticism of his speech,

“What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?” I analyzed Douglass’ speech according to all the elements included in the genre of abolition rhetoric. Then, I evaluated the additional components of his speech that set it apart as an example of ideal abolitionist discourse. These extra rhetorical techniques included Douglass’ clever use of scorching irony throughout his speech, and his employment of specific elements from the sub-genre of Fourth of July Orations. All of the rhetorical devices Douglass utilized in his speech had an emotional impact on his audiences. He exposed their hypocrisy through subtle rhetorical devices like paralipsis, so that he did not blatantly offend any of his listeners. All of these techniques contributed to the success of Douglass’ speech,” “What to the American Slave is the Fourth of July?” It was a model of abolitionist perfection in the nineteenth century, and remains a symbol of civil rights discourse today.

In the present day, leaders fighting for equality continue to revisit abolition rhetoric in their speeches and public broadcasts. Only a few decades ago, the feminist and the Civil Rights Movement reverted to the traditional style of the nineteenth century abolitionists. More recently, President Barack Obama utilized the essential rhetorical devices included within this genre to encourage fairer treatment of Black Americans in his “State of the Union” address. We also see elements of abolition discourse in the addresses at rallies for gay marriage. In general, whenever civil rights issues come into play, abolition discourse is usually involved as a method of rhetorical persuasion.

The abolition genre was established as a means of pursuing peaceful resistance against a national catastrophe. During the nineteenth century, this tragedy was slavery. Today, leaders encounter comparable tribulations and instances of inequality. Abolitionist discourse can be utilized to expose the irony of upholding various institutions and policies that threaten groups or

individuals. Emancipation oratory is particularly helpful in targeting hypocritical behavior by people who insincerely follow a supposedly righteous code of ethics. This type of discourse exposes the irony of preserving an element of inequality, especially when one claims to follow a doctrine or law that rules against discrimination.

Abolitionist discourse is an incredibly useful approach to promoting change. Nineteenth century audiences were evidently moved by the agitative style of abolitionists, because slavery was later eradicated. Today, speakers should take a second look at abolitionist speeches in their efforts to promote change. The elements of abolition discourse constitute a powerful tool today, and have the potential to move audiences to eliminate inequality all together.

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