

"What To the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

Answer Key

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Directions: The passage below is followed by questions based on its content; answer the questions on the basis of what is stated or implied in the passage.

Douglass, Frederick. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852." The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. (1852)

Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men, too great enough to give frame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men. The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory....

...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?

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. For who is there so cold, that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits? Who so stolid and selfish, that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee, when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man. In a case like that, the dumb might eloquently speak, and the "lame man leap as an hart."

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 glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. 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? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrevocable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."

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 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery the great sin and shame of America! "I will not equivocate; I will not excuse"; I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just.

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. 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. The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia which, if committed by a black man (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or to write. When you can point to any such laws in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave. When the dogs in your streets, when the fowls of the air, when the cattle on your hills, when the fish of the sea, and the reptiles that crawl, shall be unable to distinguish the slave from a brute, then will I argue with you that the slave is a man!

For the present, it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race. Is it not astonishing that, while we are ploughing, planting, and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver and gold; that, while we are reading, writing and ciphering, acting as clerks, merchants and secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators and teachers; that, while we are engaged in all manner of enterprises common to other men, digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hill-side, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives and children, and, above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian's God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave, we are called upon to prove that we are men!

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.

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 employment for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.

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 passed.

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! Had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

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

Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the Old World, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

Questions

1. The crowd to whom Frederick Douglass was speaking would most likely describe his tone as:
 - A. endearing and motivational
 - B. passionately accusatory
 - C. justifiably angry
 - D. concerned and factual
 - E. docile, but inspirational

The correct choice is B. Looking at the title, you have to realize that Frederick Douglass, a freed slave, was speaking to a crowd of mostly white, *free* people in New York in 1852. From the language he used, we know that no one would consider his tone to be docile or endearing, so that rules out Choices E and A. Choice D is also a little bit too calm for the speech Douglass delivered. So, that leaves us Choices B and C. The only reason C is incorrect is the word "justifiably." We have no idea whether or not the crowd would believe his anger justified. During that time frame, you could argue that many, probably, would *not*. You CAN argue, however, that he was passionate and accusatory of the United States in general and even someone from the 1850's with a dissimilar viewpoint would have felt that passion, so Choice B is the best answer.

2. Which statement best summarizes the main idea of Frederick Douglass's speech?
 - A. Throughout the world, America shows the most revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy for its usage of slavery.
 - B. The 4th of July is a day that reveals to the American slave the injustice and cruelty of his or her lack of freedom.
 - C. Gross inequalities exist throughout the United States of America, and Independence Day serves to highlight them.
 - D. Enslaving people robs them of their essential humanity, which is a God-given right.
 - E. The 4th of July should not be celebrated by some Americans if it cannot be celebrated by everyone.

The correct choice is B. Choice A is too narrow; America's barbarism as it relates to the rest of the world is only really described in a couple sentences in the text. Choice C is much too broad. "Gross inequalities" could be describing inequalities between races, sexes, ages, religions, political viewpoints, etc. It needs to be more specific to be correct. Choice D is too narrow, and Choice E is not really alluded to in the passage. That means that Choice B is the correct answer!

3. What does Douglass state he does NOT need to prove to the audience?
 - A. That the popularity of slavery would diminish with their help.
 - B. That slaves can do the same amount of work as free men.
 - C. That slaves are men.
 - D. That slavery is divine.
 - E. That comparing slaves to animals is wrong.

The correct choice is C. This is a tricky question, because Douglass asks a lot of questions, states he doesn't need to answer them, and then answers them anyway. He never mentions Choice A, so that's out. He also never states Choice B, although he lists various jobs that slaves all do. He argues the opposite of Choice D, and although he mentions that animals are different from slaves, he never says that he doesn't need to prove that the comparison is incorrect. He does, however say that he doesn't need to prove that slaves are men because laws have already proven it. Therefore, Choice C is the best answer.

4. Based on the passage, all of the following were reasons Douglass said he would not argue against slavery EXCEPT:
- A. the time for such arguments has passed
 - B. it would make him appear ridiculous
 - C. it would insult the audience's understanding
 - D. he has better employment for his time and strength
 - E. he has too much pride to offer such things

The correct choice is E. Sometimes, you'll need to answer questions directly from the passage like this. Here, it's a simple matter of finding the information. The only answer choice not stated in the passage directly is Choice E. Everything else is mentioned verbatim.

5. Douglass mentions that there are seventy-two crimes in Virginia that will subjugate a black man to death while there are only two that will do the same for a white man in order to:
- A. Prove that by the state's own laws, slaves should be considered people.
 - B. Display the gross inequities between free men and slaves.
 - C. Relay facts to the audience that they may not already know.
 - D. A and B only.
 - E. A, B and C.

The correct choice is E. Douglass' usage of this fact serves multiple purposes. Yes, the main point of the paragraph in which the fact was expressed was that because of the law, a slave is proven as a person, but Douglass threw that statistic in for other reasons, too. He also enlightens the audience to a horrendous tidbit of Virginian law that they may not know: a slave can be *killed* for 72 different offenses, whereas a white man could for only two. This not only displays the gross inequities between the free men and slaves, but it also offered support for the main point of his essay: the 4th of July is not Independence Day for everyone.