Douglass' Declaration

The concept of freedom carries a relative and subjective meaning. Every Fourth of July, the people of the United States magically "forget" their previous battles with family members, neighbors, and third-world-countries, as they gather over grilled food and under explosive fireworks. The initial importance of our country's freedom from British control dissipates as quickly as a pack of sparklers. In his Address, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," delivered on July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass glorifies the people's perpetual praise of America's patriotic accomplishments, which Jefferson launched through the Declaration of Independence. Douglass relates to his audience of white abolitionists by using rhetorical devices and stylistic approaches while acknowledging the ambitious accomplishments of the country's Founding Fathers. His powerful use of repetition, metaphor, and juxtaposition, combined with strategic syntax and tonal shifts enhance his argument as he engages his audience and maintains credibility – all of which assist in unraveling his shocking conclusion that American values are more impressive on paper than in practice.

Douglass initially speaks from the same level as that of his audience; by stating that he is nervous to be speaking to a large crowd and by addressing the public as his "fellow-citizens," Douglass temporarily adopts the viewpoint of an American on Independence Day in order to establish credibility for both himself and his argument (Douglass 380). He uses metaphor as he joins his audience in praising the resilience of the Founding Fathers: "As the sheet anchor takes a firm hold, when the ship is tossed by the storm, so did the cause of your fathers grow stronger. . ." (381). The stormy fight for independence triumphed with the Declaration of Independence, the "ring-bolt" in the destiny of the nation. The metaphor of the ring-bolt is designed to give the audience a tangible grasp of the significance of the declaration and leaves them the option of "reaping the fruits" of success.

After acknowledging America's past achievements, Douglass dramatically shifts his tone as he isolates himself from the collective group by saying that he will "see this day and its popular

characteristics from the slave's point of view" and that "this Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*" (386). He claims that July 4th makes a mockery of the realistic situation in America and poses a series of rhetorical questions comparing himself with other citizens: "What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?" (385) Combining the device of anaphora with more rhetorical questions, he emphasizes his accusations of American ignorance through the phrases "you have no right" and "need I tell you" in order to escalate his authority and ethos. Douglass then stresses America's arrogance through antithesis as he juxtaposes people's shallow tolerance with people's actual behavior in their own nation; he condemns the way they are "all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America" (389). Additionally, with Douglass' allusion back to Jefferson and the Declaration, the audience can infer that Douglass implies that although Jefferson symbolized freedom, he owned hundreds of slaves himself, thus further demonstrating the ironic tendencies of human nature and the hypocritical message in his independence speech.

While Douglas dramatically shifts his tone from sharing brotherhood with his audience to speaking in a condescending manner, he equivocates by concluding his speech with a quote by William Lloyd Garrison. By leaving the audience with the inspirational words of "God speed the year of jubilee / the wide world o'er," Douglass reinstates the speech's patriotic undertone (390). He ends on a positive note in order to re-establish any credibility that he might have lost during the speech and to ensure that he motivates his audience; it is up to them to mobilize the Declaration of Independence into action like their Founding Fathers had done in past generations. Douglass demands a new Declaration.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* Public Address. Rochester, NY. 5 July 1852.