

LESSON PLAN

Frederick Douglass' "A Plea for Free Speech in Boston"

INTRODUCTION:

In 1860, during the growing tensions leading to the American Civil War, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass was scheduled to speak in Boston on the then-controversial question: "How Shall Slavery Be Abolished?"

Before the meeting could proceed, however, it was "invaded, insulted, [and] captured" by an angry, unruly, and violent mob, who sought to silence the abolitionists. As Douglass explained, the mayor and local officials "refused to protect" the meeting and the free speech of the abolitionists. Instead, they simply cancelled it. You can read more about this incident in the *New York Times* article included with this lesson ("Silencing the Fanatics," by Adam Goodheart, Dec. 2, 2010.).

Frederick Douglass knew the disorderly mob posed a direct threat to the free speech rights of citizens, so he used his First Amendment right to speak up and he delivered this speech in response to the unfortunate incident.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Listen to the audio recording of the speech and/or read along.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What brought the subject of this speech about?

Why is free speech the dread of tyrants and the first of all rights to be struck down?

Why do you think Frederick Douglass would consider free speech the enemy of slavery?

Why does Douglass think that free speech suppression is a double wrong?

Douglass says that "liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Douglass states that: "No right was deemed by the fathers of the Government more sacred than the right of speech. It was in their eyes, as in the eyes of all thoughtful men, the great moral renovator of society and government." What does the phrase "moral renovator" mean? Why do you think the founding fathers felt that no right was more sacred than the right of speech?



What subjects or people do you think are not allowed to be discussed now? Is that a problem?

Do you agree that denying a person the ability to speak freely is the same as it would to rob a man of his money? Why/ why not?

What does this statement mean to you? "Until the right is accorded to the humblest as freely as to the most exalted citizen, the government of Boston is but an empty name, and its freedom a mockery?"

What did you find as the most powerful lines of the speech? Why?

Would you suggest the reading of this speech to a friend? Why/ why not?

VOCABULARY:

Write down the definitions of the words you already know. Then, look up and write down the definitions of the words you don't know yet.

Expound
Abolitionist/Abolish
Renovator
Apprehend
Assert
Mortify
Notorious
Wily
Tarpaulin
Broadcloth
Tyrant
Denounce
Deprecate
Palliate

Palpable
Flagrant
Indignation
Eminent
Vindication
Overawed
Compelled
Concession
Humblest
Suppress
Mockery
Base
Exalted

