



Discussion Questions: Reading Frederick Douglass

Good humanities conversations are facilitated by a discussion leader who respects opinions, holds space for all members to share their thoughts, and keeps time. Below are some questions that invite reflection and spark thoughtful dialogue. Allow the group to respond to one another, and provide time for them to return to the text to investigate.

1. Who was Douglass' audience? Did they expect this speech?
2. Why was it essential for Douglass to argue that he was a man?
3. Why read this speech today?
4. Have we moved forward as a country? How?
5. What is citizenship?
6. What parts of the speech do you find particularly powerful, and why?
7. If Douglass were alive today, what might he be working on?
8. What does this speech tell us about today's United States?
9. What other speech or writing would you compare to this?
10. Look at the opening of the speech. How does Douglass characterize himself and his relationship with the audience? Why do you think he describes himself in those terms?
11. Does Douglass stick to that (apologetic) tone, or does he change at some point? How would you explain how and why he changes?
12. If you were a member of the group of abolitionists who had invited Douglass to give the speech, how might you feel about his criticism of the founders and other parts of American history and life? Would you feel personally attacked, or would you agree with his attacks?
13. Why does Douglass attack the church, especially given the fact that many abolitionist groups were affiliated with churches? Was this dangerous, and if so, why did he do it?
14. If most of his listeners were already abolitionists, what do you think he was trying to accomplish with respect to persuading them to take action?
15. If you were a member of the audience listening to this speech, at what points in the speech might your mood change? How and why? How would you feel at the conclusion of the speech, and why?