

The Legacy of Frederick Douglass's Words

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More than a century after his death, Frederick Douglass remains an iconic figure widely referenced by politicians, educators, editorialists, community activists, poets, hip hop artists, comedians, and more, both domestically and abroad as a legitimizing and representative historical figure. This fact raises a number of questions— why have Douglass's rhetorical contributions remained significant to so many persons in the 21st century? What types of individuals and organizations continue to find the legacy of Douglass's words relevant and what is the underlying significance therein? How well have Douglass's 19th century words and ideas been adapted to more modern forms of media and audience expectations that have arisen in the subsequent centuries since his 1895 death?—that this exploration into Douglass's enduring legacy helps to identify. In order to address these issues, we employed techniques from two disciplines, History and Communication Studies, to identify and analyze the impact of the large body of speeches, editorials, and autobiographical writings left by the runaway Maryland slave who rose to become the most influential African American of the nineteenth century. This research was conducted through careful examination of both print and online sources from the 19th through the 20th centuries as we located and then verified the accuracy of quotations purporting to be from Douglass's works. Finally we assessed the usage of Douglass's words by modern commentators through the employment of current scholarly lenses such as rhetorical criticism, cultural studies, and Critical Race Theory in order to judge whether this usage was consistent with the values of Douglass's long public career as a reformer in areas of social justice and politics. This study further demonstrates the need for continued analysis and dissemination of his thinking considering the modern-day relevancy that is still found in Douglass's commentary and opinions.

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