

The Many Faces of Frederick Douglass- Portrait Analysis Lesson Plan

Frederick Douglass sat for dozens of portraits over his lifetime, more than perhaps any other abolitionist. The portraits of Douglass included in the Images section range from the late 1830s to the 1890s, from the time of his escape from slavery to the last years of his distinguished life. This lesson plan takes students through the development of Douglass's portraiture, encouraging them to think about the significance of portraiture to the abolitionist movement, to an individual's understanding of him/herself, and to the study of history more generally.

First, students will read Douglass's position on photography (<http://www.huarchivesnet.howard.edu/0002huarnet/freddoug.htm>).

Next, split students into eight groups, each receiving one portrait located on the Images section of the Abolition Seminar site to analyze using the Image Analysis Worksheet (see <http://www.abolitionseminar.org/images/>).

After analyzing the image, students must find a speech or printed text written by or about Douglass around the time of the portrait's painting. This particular task teaches students the task of research using the internet, letting them choose a document that reflects Douglass at the particular point of his life pictured by the portrait.

Lastly, each group will function as the "experts" on their particular portrait as the entire class analyzes the development of Douglass's image as an abolitionist using the following questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences in expression?
2. How does his clothing change or stay the same?
3. What three adjectives would you use to describe this portrait?
4. What might be the different uses of these portraits?
5. How does each portrait make you feel as a viewer?
6. What do you think Douglass was trying to convey with these portraits?
7. Why might Douglass have thought portraiture was such an important method of communication?
8. Is portraiture still an important visual communicator today, and why? (i.e. hint to students that their "selfies" are a form of portraiture)