

McCarthy Clip 4 Transcript

STUDENT: One effect of the context could be that if Douglass is writing when the abolitionist movement is in full swing, then it doesn't-- it's more important for him to push the definition of freedom that is accepted by that movement. And that translates into a very specific kind of like, policy change, which is no more slavery in the south, as opposed to Grimes-- if he's writing before that-- it could be that he's envisioning a kind of freedom that is something closer to equality. And that would be-- and so therefore, would be not just freedom from bondage but also equality once you escape bondage.

And part of his ending could be a sort of-- could be him addressing those two, freedom in each place. So freedom in the North, freedom in the South, in both places. Right now it's impossible to attain freedom, and sort of leaving it up to the individual slave as to which kind of oppression they want to be in.

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: I'm smiling because I've never thought of the abolition as a policy change. It was such a contemporary way of framing a revolution. But no, it was definitely a major policy change in the 19th century. No, that's good. That's good. What do other people think about--

STUDENT: I think also with regards to context, another interesting layer is socioeconomic context of each of the writer's. So Grimes was beyond broke at the end of his book. Whereas Douglass, he had the privilege of being close to white abolitionists, who aren't necessarily going to let homeboy starve.

[LAUGHTER]

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: I've also never thought of Douglass as a homeboy, but I guess he is.

STUDENT: I guess the privilege that comes with being able-- of the privilege of associating with with like the context with which you are writing. So Grimes was at his last end. At the end of his book, he says he doesn't know where he's going to live or if he's going to die or if he's going to eat. Whereas Douglass had benefactors who could get him out of the country if he need to, had benefactors who could book speaking engagements for him, had benefactors who could help him escape from slavery.

And so the nature of their works is different, their visions of freedom is different, the context with which they're writing is also different. And has really interesting ramifications for the white, in which black political struggle arranges itself, depending on who are the spokespeople, who are the people, and what are their backgrounds? So I think all of that context is really important for understanding the tone of their works, what they privilege and what they don't privilege. And how well their works are accepted.

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: Just to add to that-- because I think it's a great point-- is that Douglass also, was part-- immediately part of a community in the North of middle-class black people, who had always been free or who had been free for a long time. Who also had resources, institutional and civic kind of power, and so he found himself in that place too. He certainly had white abolitionists benefactors, but he also had black abolitionist benefactors, and he was a part of that community. Yeah absolutely.

STUDENT: Yeah. Can I talk about something that kind of struck me in the Grimes narrative?

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: Sure.