

## McCarthy Clip 5 Transcript

STUDENT: So I read Douglass' narrative recently in another class and one thing we talked about is how he kind of glosses over females-- he just treats female characters very strangely. And I think part of that is that he doesn't know how to write the sort of like sexual elements of-- the sexual violence involved in slavery because he's not a female slave.

And I think that Grimes has a line also that says, you know I've heard mothers say, oh I have 12 children and I don't know any of them. I think he sort of quotes a woman, but he doesn't really go into what that is. Because he can't write what that is because he isn't a mother. And-- so the fact that Douglass is imagining his grandmother dying in the woods is a moment of fiction-- it just seems like when his-- when their descriptions of the female experience of slavery goes beyond just observing some kind of scene of violence, it could only really go into a realm of fiction. Because there's this huge distinction between the male and female experience of this institution. And they're completely-- seemed to me in reading their works, they're completely acknowledging that, in sort of managing the female characters the way they are,

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: Can I-- that raises a-- something just clicked for me when you said that. I'm so glad you brought that up. One thing that I'll just put on the table is that the vast majority of slave narratives that were published before the Civil War, through the Civil War, were written or spoken by men. That the slave narratives, as an archive, for us to understand-- or try to understand or approximate-- what it was like to experience these things, is a masculine narrative. It's a male dominated and authored narrative. And yet at the same time these texts-- and we get to, Sojourner Truth, obviously tells her story, Harriet Jacobs, we'll read in two weeks, is the first black

woman to-- former slave to write her own narrative, in 1861-- so the antebellum period is dominated, in terms of the genre of the slavery, by men telling these stories.

And yet at the same time, these narratives are credited and people like John Stauffer and Tim McCarthy are doing that one of the things these narratives are doing is raising the possibility for an empathic understanding and therefore political commitment to-- empathic understanding of what it means to be enslaved and what it means to run away and risk everything for freedom-- and what it might mean to make a political commitment to the abolition of that institution, and to a kind of project of racial equality in the absence of slavery.

And so there is this idea of empathy, and yet what you're saying, and what you raised, too, Matt, is this idea that Douglass's own empathic capacities, with respect to imagining what it was like for black women who are enslaved, are profoundly limited to the point where he must imagine, in a kind of fictional way, the death of his grandmother, he's never actually witnessed. And then also the moment with bearing witness to Aunt Hester's violence-- the violence against Aunt Hester, is a moment of almost empathic disconnection, or the failure of empathy. And so what does it say if the narrator, himself has limited empathic capacities, how does that influence the way that readers, themselves, are limited in their sense of empathy with respect to the stories?

STUDENT: Yeah, no-- I mean, that's like a lot of think about--

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: It's like a meta-empathy question, right?

STUDENT: I don't know if I'm really going to talk about that but I think two things on this, one, I wonder how much of that-- for Douglass writing-- is like a meta-reflection of himself, thinking of himself as a product of sexual violence. And like if that complicates like-- a lot the same with Grimes, right?

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: Yeah.

STUDENT: And thinking about like that adding another layer as the narrator, talking about these types of relationships. And the other thing I think, is related-- is the way that as both are telling their stories and they get to the point where they're free, all of a sudden a wife shows up. And I remember reading them and being like, wait, when was the love story?

STUDENT: Yeah.

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: Well Douglass' wife helps purchase his freedom, ultimately.

STUDENT: Exactly, there's all-- it made me think like, this sort of idea of emotional disconnect, like what is a luxury of telling this whole dramatic love story when like, they're fighting for these basic things. You know? And I think that-- that was a reflection I had on that part, which I think also goes back to sort of, what is the luxury of having this affectionate bond with your mother. Like, you know, slavery takes this away, but also it's like-- the ability to even reflect on this or imagine that type of an affectionate relationship and be able to expound on that, is taken away by the whole system.

TIMOTHY PATRICK MCCARTHY: Yeah.