



The Underground Railroad

by Colson Whitehead

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Note to Teachers

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead introduces Cora, a young African American woman who journeys to freedom from the antebellum South on a fantastically imagined physical—rather than metaphorical—railroad. Told in episodes, the places and people Cora encounters provide her and the reader with profound revelations of the impact of enslavement. Given the enduring struggle of this country to grapple with the treatment of Africans in America, *The Underground Railroad* is a critical text for opening up conversations about the lasting legacies of slavery. Through Cora, the reader is reminded of the necessity of hope, of rebellion, and of freedom, making *The Underground Railroad* an indispensable addition to any classroom.

To begin, teachers will benefit from preparing themselves, and their students, to have difficult conversations about race, racism, and white supremacy. An understanding of the slave trade, slavery, and how it functioned in the United States is essential to be able to make sense of the number of Africans who were enslaved and the historical legacy of enslavement through Reconstruction, the civil rights movement, up to today. Additionally, background knowledge of how lynching and other forms of racial terror were used as enforcement and of slave narratives and the rich literary history of African Americans deepens the reading experiences.

Most important, incorporating *The Underground Railroad* allows readers to bear witness to a counter-narrative of slavery that is often not discussed. As Cora charts her own path *The Underground Railroad* reminds us that her story can be a basis for broader discussions of race, gender, and many other important themes.

Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading literature for high school curriculums, *The Underground Railroad* is an appropriate selection for grades eleven and twelve in language arts or U.S. history classes. At the college level, the book is appropriate for composition and literature classes, race studies, gender

studies, and is also ideal for first-year/common reading programs.

In the following “Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards” section of this guide, the prompts provide for a critical analysis of *The Underground Railroad* using the CCSS for **Reading Literature and History/Social Studies** for grades eleven and twelve and are organized according to the standard they primarily support. In addition, at the end of each standard and the corresponding prompts, a classroom activity is provided that will strengthen analysis of the text.

For a complete listing of the Standards, go to: www.corestandards.org/the-standards

Trigger warnings: The text contains numerous scenes of violence (sexual and physical). Teachers might choose to provide advance notice for readers as appropriate. Teachers should not, however, avoid exposing students to these moments; rather, helping students navigate them through discussion and critical analysis will deepen their knowledge of the impact of enslavement as experienced by so many. The pre-reading activities offer some ideas about how to create a community that encourages critical conversations.

Pre-Reading Activities

Discussions of African American enslavement in the United States are a necessary and difficult part of understanding history, as well as current events. Teachers might usefully spend time before reading the novel establishing guidelines about discussions about race that encourage full, respectful conversations. This will create a foundation that allows for full participation, leading to a richer and more powerful reading and discussion of the novel.

Realizing that these conversations may be difficult, teachers might choose to preface any discussion by defining language choices (i.e., enslavement vs. slavery; white privilege, white supremacy, paternalism, patriarchy) with students and the historical reasons that accompany them. Also, teachers might decide to help students understand how racism functions as a structural system (see Resources), to help place the events in the novel within broader historical, political, and social contexts.

Children’s literature and film can provide effective ways for introducing the topics of slavery and enslavement (see Resources). Reading texts aloud and analyzing illustrations help students build background knowledge and enable readers to make connections and inferences that lead to deeper understanding.

Teachers might use a particularly moving moment as a catalyst to get students to think and write about their reactions. Incorporating regular opportunities for students to write in response to passages and ideas from the text is an effective, on-going strategy that encourages critical thinking and processing.

There are many characters and settings in *The Underground Railroad*. Students should be encouraged to make a list of key characters, identifying details, and setting shifts as they read.

See the Resources section of this guide for additional pre-reading guidance.

Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards

Key Ideas and Details CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

There are two moments in Georgia that push Cora to decide to run away with Caesar. The first is when she intervenes to take Chester's punishment when Terrance Randall beats him (33). The second is when Randall, after assuming ownership of his brother's part of the plantation, unambiguously sizes her up for sexual assault (47–48). Evaluate the significance of these two moments. What does Cora lose if she stays and what does she stand to gain—despite the dangers—if she leaves? What do those decisions suggest about her own agency and resistance?

Terrance and James Randall control two different parts of the plantation. Each one has different methods of running his respective plantation. Compare how each man enacts violence and terror to rule his respective enslaved populations. Then consider Caesar's life with Mrs. Garner and Ridgeway's treatment of Homer. What are the similarities these characters share? How is each person (the Randalls, Mrs. Garner, Ridgeway) complicit in the perpetuation of enslavement? Additionally, examine and evaluate the impact of how other characters (e.g., Sam and Lumbly) interact with African Americans.

How do the women of Hob form a community? What is the significance of how they support and sustain each other? Discuss Cora's place within Hob and how these friendships create and maintain a family.

Stevens, a Boston medical student and grave robber, asserts: "Yet when his classmates put their blades to a colored cadaver, they did more for the cause of colored advancement than the most high-minded abolitionist. In death the negro became a human being. Only then was he the white man's equal" (139). Evaluate what is troubling about Stevens's words. Consider what it means that doctors flock to South Carolina for medical experiments and that black cadavers are dug up for medical use in Boston, yet they do not benefit from any of the medical advances. What is troubling about how white characters justify their decisions?

Classroom Activity

List all the ways that Cora resists the dehumanization of enslavement. Consider her ownership of the plot of land, her friendships with the Hob women, her insistence on confronting danger, her pursuit of literacy, and other examples. Then conduct a Socratic seminar to evaluate in which ways she is an "insurrection of one" (172) and decide why her resistance makes her such a threat to the system of white supremacy.

Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

In South Carolina, celebrations among the slaves are still engineered by whites, but free people are able to gather and spend time together at will. Compare these free gatherings to those on the Randall plantation for Jockey's birthday, and later at the Valentine farm. What do these gatherings suggest about community, kinship, and joy? What is significant about these gatherings at the Valentine farm?

How is South Carolina another form of enslavement? What similarities does South Carolina share with Randall? In what ways is South Carolina worse than Randall?

Cora spends her time in North Carolina reading in the attic. Her reading material includes a Bible and almanacs, which "Cora adored . . . for containing the entire world" (183). How does the act of reading, and of literacy, help Cora be free? What might the significance of what she reads suggest about her growing understanding of

the world? Think, too, about how the Bible and religion are used by Ethel and Ridgeway to justify slavery: “If God had not meant for Africans to be enslaved, they wouldn’t be in chains” (195), and about Cora’s observation: “Slavery is a sin when whites were put to the yoke, but not the African” (182).

Ridgeway explains his position as follows: “I’m a notion of order. The slave that disappears—it’s a notion, too. Of hope. Undoing what I do so that a slave the next plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too. If we allow that, we accept the flaw in the imperative. And I refuse” (223). What is the “flaw in the imperative,” and why is it important for Ridgeway and the broader institution of enslavement that relies on Black bodies, that the flaw is exterminated? Why is the hope of freedom so dangerous?

Compare Mingo to Lander. What does each man believe and how do those beliefs impact the future of Valentine farm? How are these two men similar to Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois?

Cora muses about the Underground Railroad, “Who are you after you finish something this magnificent—in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side” (303–304). Critique the significance of how each person who worked on the Railroad—from station agents to conductors—were affected by their work. How is each person a reflection of what awaits Cora in the next part of their journey? In what ways, also, do these people understand resistance, agency, and responsibility?

Classroom Activity

The concept of “freedom for literacy and literacy freedom” extends throughout African American history. The ability to read and to be literate allowed one to have a powerful tool of understanding the world and for freeing others. Discuss the culmination of Cora’s literacy journey at the Valentine library. Consider the significance of the Valentine library, “the biggest collection of negro literature this side of Chicago” (273). What is important about the contents of the library and Cora’s experience there? How does Cora’s experience articulate freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom?

Craft and Structure

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Our first introduction to Cora is through her grandmother, Ajarry, a woman who never left the plantation on which she was enslaved, seeing escape as impossible. How does Ajarry help to create an example for Mabel and for Cora, in particular? Explain why the narrative begins here.

Colson Whitehead has compared the episodic structure of *The Underground Railroad* to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Each place Cora lands is a different experience and according to Whitehead, “the book is rebooting every time the person goes to a different state.” How does this structure help to develop the narrative and its themes?

Lumbly, a station agent, says to Cora: “If you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (69). How does Lumbly’s assessment frame the next part of Cora’s journey after leaving Georgia? How does it help the reader understand the novel’s structure?

Cora makes most of her journey alone. While she has companionship at points along her travels, she ultimately is by herself: “She was a stray after all. . . . Somewhere, years

ago, she had stepped off the path of life and could no longer find her way back to the family of people” (145). Why must she travel alone? Also, how do her travels help her think about the omnipresent danger of sexual violence for Black women and a broader lack of safety for enslaved women?

North Carolina is a place constructed from fear. Evaluate the *Friday Festivals and the night riders*. What purpose does each serve? How do these events articulate fears of black rebellion?

Caesar was betrayed by his owner who promised to free him upon her death. Instead, he and his family were sold and separated. Upon arrival at the Randall plantation, he hides a book and reads it at night. The book is *Gulliver’s Travels*. Analyze the importance of literacy for Caesar, particularly in relation to the line “But if he didn’t read, he was a slave” (235), and “Now a page here and there, in the golden afternoon light, sustained him.” What similarities do Cora and Caesar share? How does Caesar’s thirst for literacy sustain the broader theme of literacy for freedom?

Oxford Bibliographies defines Maroons as “people who escaped slavery to create independent groups and communities on the outskirts of slave societies.” Consider the creation of the Valentine farm as a Maroon society. Who founded it? Who lived there? Why was this both a “community laboring for something lovely and rare” and a threat to others (i.e., the people in the neighboring town, slave catchers, etc.)?

Even after losing his livelihood, Sam continued his Underground Railroad work. What is the message about risk and reward? What does Sam’s work suggest about his belief in the mission and about the responsibility of those who were agents and conductors for the Railroad? Out of all the agents who Cora encountered, why is Sam the one who returns? Evaluate his significance, particularly as related to the time and the location of his return

Analyze Lander’s response to Mingo on p. 285. Lander counters: “Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth.” He then lists and explains examples of delusions: “that we can escape slavery,” “Valentine farm,” or “America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all.” What does Lander mean? How does delusion function throughout the novel, and why is this moment pivotal for the actions that follow?

Though the inheritance of property was forbidden for the enslaved, Cora’s “mother had left that in her inheritance, at least, a tidy plot to watch over. You’re supposed to pass on something useful to your children” (293). What have Mabel and Ajarry passed on to Cora? What is their legacy realized in Cora?

Listen to Whitehead’s interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* (link in the Resources section) where he discusses his decisions to make the Underground Railroad a literal one and takes creative license with historical events. Explore the significance of making the Underground Railroad an actual railroad.

Classroom Activity

Whitehead included primary sources of actual runaway reward advertisements throughout the novel, including one for Cora as the last announcement on page 298. Using a framing text (i.e., “New Databases Offer Insight into the Lives of Escaped Slaves” from *The New York Times*), create stations for students to analyze and discuss each advertisement. In what ways do these advertisements demonstrate resourcefulness and resistance? What similarities and differences exist between the actual announcements and Cora’s? Students may write a short response and use it as part of small group discussions.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7**

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

In *The New Yorker* article, “The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad,” Kathryn Schultz writes: “That story, like so many that we tell about our nation’s past, has a tricky relationship to the truth: not quite wrong, but simplified; not quite a myth, but mythologized.” Discussions of the historical underground railroad often centralize the role of white abolitionists. Why is it important to foreground African Americans’ role in abolition, as, notably, “All the railroad men, from Lumbly to Royal, countered with a variation of ‘Who do you think made it? Who makes everything?’” (257).

The 2003 Slave Memorial Act “authorizes the National Foundation for African American Heritage to establish in the District of Columbia a memorial to slavery to: (1) acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the thirteen American colonies; and (2) honor the nameless and forgotten men, women, and children who have gone unrecognized for their undeniable and weighty U.S. contribution.” There are currently no national monuments that mark the enslavement of Africans in America. Ta-Nehesi Coates has argued for reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans as restitution. What is the most appropriate way to honor and remember enslavement?

Classroom Activity

Cora is part of a long line of African American females resistant to white supremacy. Create an artistic representation that places Cora within that lineage, drawing on examples from the text to support your thinking, extending the timeline to the present day.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7**

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

The Underground Railroad draws on actual historical events to create a compelling narrative. Select one of the episodes and use it as a point of departure for conducting a critical analysis and presenting research about one of the following topics and how it connects to understanding themes in the novel. Consult the Resources section for additional information.

- Forced sterilization
- Settler colonialism
- Lynching
- African Americans and abolitionism
- African American slave rebellions
- Sexual violence and African American women
- Reparations
- Literacy practices during and beyond enslavement

- The role of white women in slavery
- Maroons and Marronage
- Racial health disparities

Resources

The following resources could complement a reading of *The Underground Railroad*:

Abolition Seminar. (<http://www.abolitionseminar.org/african-americans-and-abolitionism/>)

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

"Equal Justice Institute Report on Lynching in America." (<http://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>)

"Eugenics: Compulsory Sterilization in 50 American States" (<https://www.uvm.edu/~l-kaelber/eugenics/>)

Everyday Feminism, "Here's What a White Savior Is (And Why It's the Opposite of Helpful)." <http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/06/white-savior-problem/>

Global Social Theory, "Introduction to Settler Colonialism from Global Social Theory." (<https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/settler-colonialism/>)

Kahn, E. "New Databases Offer Insight Into the Lives of Escaped Slaves," *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/arts/design/new-databases-offer-insights-into-the-lives-of-escaped-slaves.html?_r=0

"Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' Is a Literal Train to Freedom," *Fresh Air*, NPR. <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/08/489168232/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literal-train-to-freedom>

Oxford Bibliographies, "Maroons and Marronage." <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0229.xml>

Schulz, Kathryn, "The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad," *The New Yorker*. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/the-perilous-lure-of-the-underground-railroad>

Other Works of Interest

Historically Black Podcast. (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/historically-black/id1155053105?mt=2>), APM Reports & *The Washington Post*

Kindred, Octavia Butler

Freedom Over Me, Ashley Bryan (children's literature)

The Language You Cry In (film), California Newsreel

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates

13th (film), Ava DuVernay

The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross (film). Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Strange Fruit: Uncelebrated Narratives from Black History, Joel C. Gill

Roots (film), Alex Haley

The People Could Fly, Virginia Hamilton (children's literature)

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston

Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison

Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students, Theresa Perry

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot

Smithsonian American Art Museum. Literacy as Freedom, <http://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Literacy-as-Freedom.pdf>

The Great Debaters (film), Denzel Washington

Freedom in Congo Square, Carol Boston Weatherford & Gregory Christie. (children's literature)

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration, Isabel Wilkerson

Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery, Heather Andrea Williams

Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom, Heather Andrea Williams

Lynching Project website, Monroe Work. <http://www.monroeworktoday.org/>

About this Guide's Writer

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James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* and *Nobody Knows My Name*
Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*
Dan Brown, *Inferno*
Peter Carey, *His Illegal Self*
Lorene Cary, *Black Ice*
Da Chen, *Colors of the Mountain*
Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*
Sandra Cisneros, *La casa en Mango Street* (Spanish edition)
Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain*
Karin Cook, *What Girls Learn*
Keith Donohue, *The Stolen Child*
Mark Dunn, *Ella Minnow Pea*
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
William Faulkner, *Collected Stories*
Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*
Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*
Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster*
David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*
Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing*
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*
Latoya Hunter, *The Diary of Latoya Hunter*
Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *In My Place*
Franz Kafka, *The Trial: A New Translation*
Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*
Rachel Kleinfeld, *A Savage Order*
Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*
Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir*
William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*
Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*
Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*
Josh Neufeld, *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*
Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
Alexander McCall Smith, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*
Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*
Piri Thomas, *Por estas calles bravas* (Spanish edition)
Opal Whiteley, *Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart*
Tobias Wolff, *Old School*