

**Whitehaven High School
Summer Reading Project 2020
English III and English III Honors**

“The Underground Railroad”

by Colson Whitehead

The Underground Railroad

Colson Whitehead, 2016
Knopf Doubleday
320 pp.
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About the author:

Colson Whitehead is a New York-based novelist and nonfiction works. He was born and raised in New York City, attending Trinity, a private prep school, in Manhattan. He graduated from Harvard University in 1991. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York City, New York.

He has taught at Princeton University, New York University, the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, Wesleyan University, and been a Writer-in-Residence at Vassar College, the University of Richmond, and the University of Wyoming.

In the spring of 2015, he joined *The New York Times Magazine* to write a column on language. He has received numerous awards for his accomplishments.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the depiction of slavery in *The Underground Railroad* compare to other depictions in literature and film?
2. The scenes of Randall’s plantation are horrific—how did the writing affect you as a reader?
3. In North Carolina, institutions like doctor’s offices and museums that were supposed to help "black uplift" were corrupt and unethical. How do Cora’s challenges in North Carolina mirror what America is still struggling with today?
4. Cora constructs elaborate daydreams about her life as a free woman and dedicates herself to reading and expanding her education. What role do you think stories [play](#) for Cora and other [travelers](#) using the underground railroad?

5. "The treasure, of course, was the underground railroad.... Some might call freedom the dearest currency of all." How does this quote shape the narrative for you?
6. How does Ethel's backstory, her relationship with slavery, and Cora's use of her home affect you?
7. What are your impressions of John Valentine's vision for the farm?
8. When speaking of Valentine's Farm, Cora explains "Even if the adults were free of the shackles that held them fast, bondage had stolen too much time. Only the children could take full advantage of their dreaming. If the white men let them." What makes this so impactful both in the novel and today?
9. What do you think about Terrance Randall's fate?
10. How do you feel about Cora's mother's decision to run away? How does your opinion of Cora's mother change once you've learned about her fate?
11. Whitehead creates emotional instability for the reader: if things are going well, you get comfortable before a sudden tragedy. What does this sense of fear do to you as you're reading?
12. Who do you connect with most in the novel and why?
13. How does the state-by-state structure impact your reading process? Does it remind you of any other works of literature?
14. The book emphasizes how slaves were treated as property and reduced to objects. Do you feel that you now have a better understanding of what slavery was like?
15. Why do you think the author chose to portray a literal railroad? How did this aspect of magical realism impact your concept of how the real underground railroad worked?
16. Does *The Underground Railroad* change the way you look at the history of America, especially in the time of slavery and abolitionism?

NOTE: It is the expectation that ALL responses should be typed using full sentences that are free of errors.