



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead is a novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2026, 2027 and 2028. It may be used as the Single Text at Ordinary Level or as part of the Comparative at Ordinary Level or Higher Level.

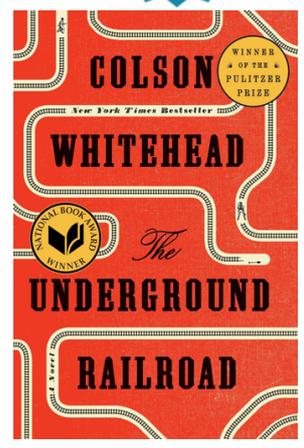


Image courtesy of Knopf Doubleday Publishing



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Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- Please note that *The Underground Railroad* covers themes which could be considered sensitive or controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.

Before you read... (Teacher Guidance)

These activities encourage students to reflect on personal and collective concepts of freedom, explore the cultural context of the 19th century American South. Adapt as appropriate for your class.

1. Discuss and reflect on Personal Freedom

Facilitate a class discussion on student's own ideas of freedom and the various versions of freedom that should exist in society. Use a collaborative tool (e.g. Wooclap or Mentimeter) or a Spiderweb discussion to capture individual contributions. Guide students in identifying recurring themes and prompt reflection on shared concepts.

[Click to listen to a Maya Angelou poem "Caged Bird" on Youtube.](#) 

2. Listen, Reflect and Connect

Play a recording of *Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou that explores themes of freedom, escape, or oppression. Lead a discussion or debate on the motion 'Does society have a responsibility for ensuring freedom exists for all people'. Invite students to respond creatively by composing a short poem, audio visual or spoken-word piece that represents their views

3. Considering Cultural Context

Support students in creating an interactive digital journey through the American South in the 19th century, exploring issues such as American slavery and the Underground Railroad. Recommended tools include Padlet or Miro. or any other existing shared class space. Use this activity to establish historical and social context for the play.



Extract

The Underground Railroad

Background to the novel:

Background: This extract is taken from the opening chapter of *The Underground Railroad*. *The Underground Railroad* is a historical novel set in the antebellum United States (1830s–1850s). It follows Cora, a young enslaved woman on a Georgia plantation, who decides to escape in search of freedom. As Cora travels, she encounters different states, each showing how race, freedom, and oppression vary across the country.

Cora's grandmother (Ajarry) was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads. It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah as she was part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles, making an individual accounting difficult.

The Nanny was out of Liverpool and had made two previous stops along the Gold Coast. The captain staggered his purchases, rather than find himself with cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue. This was the ship's final port of call before they crossed the Atlantic. Two yellow-haired sailors rowed Ajarry out to the ship, humming. White skin like bone.

The noxious air of the hold, the gloom of confinement, and the screams of those shackled to her contrived to drive Ajarry to madness. Because of her tender age, her captors did not immediately force their urges upon her, but eventually some of the more seasoned mates dragged her from the hold six weeks into the passage. She twice tried to kill herself on the voyage to America, once by denying herself food and then again by drowning. The sailors stymied her both times, versed in the schemes and inclinations of chattel. Ajarry didn't even make it to the gunwale when she tried to jump overboard. Her simpering posture and piteous aspect, recognizable from thousands of slaves before her, betrayed her intentions. Chained head to toe, head to toe, in exponential misery.

(Colson Whitehead, 2016, The Underground Railroad. Doubleday, p. 3.)

Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel. Students may like to complete the activities individually or collaboratively.

1. Exploring Characterisation

Guide students in examining how Whitehead presents Ajarry in the extract. You may wish to prompt attention to language, tone, and the depiction of suffering in shaping readers' understanding of her character.

Encourage consideration of what the passage reveals about the experiences of enslaved women and children.

2. Exploring Themes

Facilitate discussion identifying key themes emerging from the extract. Support students in selecting relevant textual evidence to explore how the passage conveys the brutality and dehumanising nature of the slave trade.



3. Personal Writing

Invite students to adopt Ajarry's perspective during her journey to the Americas through a diary entry or letter. Encourage engagement with emotional response, drawing on details from the extract and reflecting on themes such as suffering, survival, and resilience.

You may wish to guide students in attending to structure, tone, and expressive language in shaping their response.

Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel. Students may like to complete the activities individually or collaboratively.

1. Language, Style and Structure

Guide students in analysing Whitehead's use of language, imagery, and narrative structure. You may wish to prompt attention to how specific words, sensory imagery, and key episodes, such as the Atlantic crossing or Cora's journey through different states, shape emotional impact and reader understanding.

Students may respond through a short personal or analytical reflection.

2. Opinion and Debate

Invite students to develop a persuasive response exploring the importance of remembering history, using the novel as a stimulus. Encourage students to support viewpoints with relevant examples from the text and to structure their response with clear argument and conclusion.

3. Symbolism and Motifs

Support students in identifying recurring symbols or motifs within the novel. You may wish to use a visual mapping activity linking symbol, scene, thematic meaning, and emotional effect on the reader.

4. Reimagining the Narrative

Encourage students to revisit a selected scene and rewrite it from an alternative perspective or with a different outcome. Discussion may focus on how character choices, language, and tone influence thematic development and alter the reader's understanding.