



Exploring Junior Cycle Texts

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan is a novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for Junior Cycle English (For the student cohorts commencing Junior Cycle in 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026 and 2027 and presenting for examination in 2026, 2027 and 2028, 2029 and 2030).

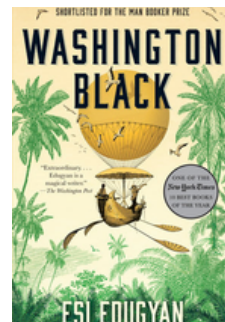


Image courtesy of
Profile Books Ltd

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.
- *Washington Black* covers themes which could be considered sensitive and controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.



Scan the QR code or click here to
access a Getting Started with Guide
for this Text

Before you read... (Teacher Guidance)

1. Context Carousel

In groups, students examine a fact card or image about the historical context and jot key points. They rotate to add to others' posters. Finish by asking: How might this context affect a boy like the narrator?

2. Vocabulary

Students match key words (e.g., estate, overseer, plantation, duppy) to meanings or images, then write a quick prediction about how these words link to themes such as power or freedom.

3. Setting

Show images of the setting and have pairs discuss: What do you notice? What might the narrator experience here? What kind of story might begin in this place?



Images courtesy of National Geographic



Extract

Background: This is extract from the opening of chapter one of *Washington Black*. It is set in the 1830s on a Barbados plantation and features an enslaved boy, called George Washington Black and Big Kit, an older enslaved woman on the plantation.

I might have been ten, eleven years old—I cannot say for certain—when my first master died. No one grieved him; in the fields we hung our heads, keening, grieving for ourselves and the estate sale that must follow. He died very old. I saw him only at a distance: stooped, thin, asleep in a shaded chair on the lawn, a blanket at his lap. I think now he was like a specimen preserved in a bottle. He had outlived a mad king, outlived the slave trade itself, had seen the fall of the French Empire and the rise of the British and the dawn of the industrial age, and his usefulness, surely, had passed. On that last evening I remember crouching on my bare heels in the stony dirt of Faith Plantation and pressing a palm flat against Big Kit's calf, feeling the heat of her skin baking up out of it, the strength and power of her, while the red sunlight settled in the cane all around us. Together, silent, we watched as the overseers shouldered the coffin down from the Great House. They slid it rasping into the straw of the wagon and, dropping the rail into place with a bang, rode rattling away.

That was how it began: me and Big Kit, watching the dead go free.

His nephew arrived one morning eighteen weeks later at the head of a trail of dust-covered carriages driven directly from the harbour at Bridge Town. That the estate had not been sold off was, we thought at the time, a mercy. The carriages creaked their slow way up the soft embankment, shaded by palm trees. On a flatbed wagon at the rear of the caravan sat a strange object, draped in canvas, as large as the whipping boulder in the small field. I could not imagine its purpose. I could see, at the Great House, pretty Émilie, who was my age, and whom I would glimpse some evenings dumping the pans of wash water into the long grass outside the scullery. She descended the first two steps of the verandah and, smoothing out her apron, fell still.

The first man to emerge, carrying his hat in his hands, had black hair and a long, horselike jaw, his eyes darkened by heavy brows... Cradling a hand to his eyes, he turned, and for a frightening moment I felt his gaze on me. He was chewing some soft-textured thing, his jaw working a little. He did not look away.

But it was the second man, the sinister man in white, who seized my attention. This was our new master—we all could see it at once. He was tall, impatient, sickly, his legs bending away from each other like calipers. Under his three-cornered white hat a shock of white hair burst forth. I had a sense of pale eyelashes, an uncooked pallor to his skin. A man who has belonged to another learns very early to observe a master's eyes; what I saw in this man's terrified me. He owned me, as he owned all those I lived among, not only our lives but also our deaths, and that pleased him too much. His name was Erasmus Wilde.

I felt a shudder go through Big Kit. I understood. His slick white face gleamed, the clean white folds of his clothes shone impossibly bright, like a duppy, a ghost. I feared he could vanish and reappear at will; I feared he must feed on blood to keep himself warm; I feared he could be anywhere and not visible to us, and so I went about my work in silence. I had already seen many deaths: I knew the nature of evil. It was white like a duppy, it drifted down out of a carriage one morning and into the heat of a frightened plantation with nothing in its eyes. It was then, I believe now, that Big Kit determined, calmly and with love, to kill herself and me.



Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidelines)

These prompts are designed to support close reading and personal response. They may be used orally or in writing, individually or in groups.

1. Language Analysis

Give students this focus question: How does Esi Edugyan use language to create fear and tension in the description of Erasmus Wilde? Support them with a guided approach:

- Find two or three powerful phrases or images that describe Wilde.
- Annotate or explain what effect each has.
- Connect to overall mood: What do these descriptions tell us about power and danger?

Have students present their work in an analytical paragraph.

2. Theme Discussion

Display the quote, “watching the dead go free”. In small groups, give pupils questions to prompt their discussion: What does the line mean? How do ideas of freedom, ownership, and fear appear in the extract? How might Big Kit’s final decision reflect those ideas?

Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

These activities extend engagement with the extract and invite creative and personal responses. Use individually, in pairs, or in groups.

1. Freedom and Control

Give pupils the prompt: *The extract explores ideas of freedom, ownership, and power.* Guide students to write a reflective piece explaining what freedom means to the characters in this extract and how it might connect to their own ideas of freedom. Encourage them to use quotations from the text to support their ideas.

2. The Story Continued

Invite students to write a creative response using the prompt: *The day everything changed.* Encourage their own story set at a moment of sudden change or new fear, using sensory detail like Edugyan does.

3. Personal Response

Give pupils the prompt below and guide them in writing a personal response. Prompt: *A time I realised how powerful fear can be.*

4. Persuasive Writing

Give pupils the prompt below and guide them in writing a persuasive response. Prompt: *Empathy is humanity’s greatest strength.*

5. Poster Design

Tell pupils they will be designing a poster for the film adaptation of this novel in pairs. They should decide what elements they will focus on: theme, character etc. Then on paper or digitally, students should create a film poster which would encourage an audience to watch the film. Ask pairs to present their work and justify their creative decisions.