***The Underground Railroad* Lesson Plan 1**

Introducing the Historical Fiction Genre

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Overview:

This lesson is designed to introduce students to *The Underground Railroad* and its place within the genres of historical fiction, speculative fiction, and meta-slave-narrative.

The Introduction to Genre Fiction portion of this lesson is adapted from the "Introduction to Genre Fiction" exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason's *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 199-201).

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Define the historical fiction genre
- Identify 3-4 ways *The Underground Railroad* complicates the historical fiction genre and offer interpretations of what the novel achieves in doing so

Class Structure:

20 minutes: Introduction to Historical Fiction

- Start class by asking students to explain what they think historical fiction literature is and what it achieves. Keep a list of student answers on the board or a powerpoint slide, if available. If needed, prompt students with the following questions: What elements does a story need to have to be in this genre? What kinds of character relationships, or events would you expect to encounter? What kinds of beginnings or endings? What kind of setting or time period? Why? Is there a typical consumer of this genre? If so, who? Why do people who enjoy this genre enjoy it?
- Before starting discussion of the first list, build on student associations by asking students to brainstorm examples of the historical fiction genre from literature, film, television, video games, or other media. Record student answers in a second list on the board or powerpoint. Ask students to refrain from commenting on the list until it is complete.
- Open the floor to a discussion of the class-generated lists. Are there any listed genre conventions that students do not agree with? Are there any elements that should be cut from the list? Ask students to defend their answers as they offer their arguments.
- Ask students to help you draft a brief definition of the historical fiction genre based on the list you have created together.
- *The Underground Railroad*'s genre:
    - Whitehead is famous for mixing genres
    - At its most basic level, *The Underground Railroad* is historical fiction, but as students will quickly identify, the novel is profoundly anachronistic, collating

numerous moments from throughout American history into the novel's setting. In some ways, the novel is better described as historical fiction mixed with speculative realism.
        - Provide students with Ramón Saldívar's definition of speculative realism: "a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, meta-fiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper" (13).
    - Provide students with various interpretations of Whitehead's use of genre and its effects.
        - "The setting of *The Underground Railroad* is temporally complex, bending and juxtaposing historical referents from the Fugitive Slave Act of the antebellum period (128) and Klan violence under Jim Crow (81) to the Tuskegee syphilis study and programs of forced sterilization that continued into the mid-1970s (113-17, 121-22). The climax of the novel even alludes to the … phenomenon of contemporary mass shootings" (Manshel 38).
        - "Whitehead builds on "recognizable historical moments and patterns" in a manner similar to the late Toni Morrison. The author conducted extensive research before writing his novel, drawing on oral histories provided by survivors of slavery in the 1930s, runaway ads published in antebellum newspapers, and accounts penned by successful escapees like Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass" (Solly)
        - "Whitehead's satire points to the real conditions of US racism while couching that critique through fantasy acknowledged as such—a move that might explain why the novel's broad reception has not been met with more discomfort and controversy. The novel's insistence that contemporary acts of violence be read through the legacies it remixes and satirizes, that is, had led to it being positioned as a literary achievement rather than, primarily, a polemic tale that positions slavery as a symptom, rather than a cause, of a racism that is foundational to the nation's ongoing colonial economy" (Dischinger 92)
    - Ask students to share how the blending of genres has influenced the way they approach reading *The Underground Railroad* so far.

15 minutes: History and Alternate history in *The Underground Railroad*

- *The Underground Railroad* opens with details that clearly situate the novel in a very specific time period (somewhere between 1850 and 1860) in the state of Georgia. Readers know the approximate year for two reasons:
    - First, the underground railroad is fully in operation at the beginning of the novel. The underground railroad is the name for the network of secret routes and safe

houses used to help enslaved men and women escape to places where slavery was illegal. The network was primarily the work of free and enslaved African Americans and was assisted by white abolitionists. The underground railroad began to organize in the 1780s and ran until the end of the Civil War.

- As a note of local interest: The Underground Railroad was incredibly active here in Indiana. The state's southern border on the Ohio River marked the line between free states and slave states.
    - Indiana's Underground Railroad ran on three main lines with many smaller stops along the way. One of these, the western route, ran from southwest Indiana through Evansville and then up the Wabash toward the Indiana/Michigan border.
    - Indiana's most famous stop on the Underground Railroad, The Coffin House, was known as the "Grand Central Station" of the network and was located along the eastern route (by the Indiana/Ohio border). It is believed that Catherine and Levi Coffin (who were Quaker abolitionists) helped over 1,000 freedom-seekers between 1826 and 1847 (Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites).

- Second, the presence of slave catchers with rights in northern states and the consequences for harboring freedom seekers indicates that the setting is after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and before the Civil War (1860-1864).

- Provide students with a summary of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850)
    - Part of the Compromise of 1850, designed to keep peace between the southern and northern states.
    - It required that all escaped slaves, upon capture, be returned to the enslaver. It also required officials and citizens of free states to cooperate.
    - "Law enforcement officials were required to arrest people suspected of escaping enslavement on as little as a claimant's sworn testimony of ownership. The Commissioner before whom the fugitive from slavery was brought for a hearing was compensated $10 if he found that the individual was proven a fugitive, but only $5 if he determined the proof to be insufficient. In addition, any person aiding a fugitive by providing food or shelter was subject to six months' imprisonment and a $1,000 fine. The Act was broadly condemned in the North and prompted multiple instances of violent resistance. Although the Supreme Court upheld Congress's power to pass such laws in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, Northern states resisted enforcement of the law on their soil." (Edwards and Lash)

20 minutes: Small group discussion

- Place students into groups of 3-5. Ask them to discuss some of the following questions. Each group should be prepared to share their answers to 1-2 of the questions when the class comes back together.
    - What do you know about the historical Underground Railroad? How do you imagine history would change if it had been a literal railroad that was hidden underground?
    - What do you know about your local area's history with the Underground Railroad?
    - What role do you think alternate history might play in telling a story about historical slavery? Why might an author choose to blend alternative history with elements of fantasy or the fantastic, and what might this allow them to explore?
    - What about elements of the horrific? Do the villains in this story feel human and realistic so far? Or larger than life?
        - Ex. p. 82 "Ridgeway was not working the spirit. He was not the smith, rendering order. Not the hammer. Not the anvil. He was the heat."
    - When you think about the antebellum period in general and stories about escaping slavery, what stories come to mind?
    - What do you think these stories do well? Do you see any limitations?
    - Colson Whitehead references a wide range of historical and literary sources, and he's writing about his heritage, in a way. But he is also writing from a 21st-century perspective. What kind of responsibilities do you think a contemporary author writing about this subject has? How does writing about a fugitive enslaved girl in the alternate history fiction genre allow us to access this history? What sort of things could show up in this novel that might undermine the story? Help it?
    - What can we already tell about Cora from her actions during these first two chapters? What do we expect her to act/react throughout the novel? [Can point to doghouse/garden scene on pages 19-21.]
    - What do you think triggers Cora to decide that running away is a risk worth taking?
        - Page 34: Protects Chester from Terrance Randall "This feeling settled in her heart again. It grabbed hold of her and before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her, she was bent over the boy's body as a shield." What do you think Cora was feeling in this moment? How does this motivate Cora? And what does it mean to separate the 'slave' and 'human' parts of Cora?

25 minutes: Class discussion

- Bring the class back together. Ask students to share what their group discussed. Discuss their answers to the previous questions as a class.

If time allows, you can continue the discussion with the following prompts:

- What did you think of Ajarry's story (pp. 1-8)? How does it relate to or differ from other similar stories that you have read? Why do you think we start with the story of Cora's grandmother?
- The novel takes on the voice or perspective of whichever character it is currently discussing. For example, Ajarry, who learns that she is viewed as a thing in America ("If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place" p. 7) keeps careful tabs on her 'value' by tracking her price as she is bought and sold. What different perspectives or voices do we hear in these first two chapters? Which ones do you like or dislike reading? What is the effect of having so many perspectives?
- At this point in the story, what parts of the story feel more true to history? Which parts venture into alternate history?
- What can we already tell about Cora from her actions during these first two chapters? What do we expect her to act/react throughout the novel?
- How does the escape of Mabel (Cora's mother) from the Randall plantation inspire Cora?
    - Page 40: "Things in the swamp whistled and splashed, hunted in living darkness. To walk in there at night, heading north to the Free States. Had to take leave of your senses to do that. But her mother had."
- What is the effect of making the metaphorical underground railroad literal? How did this change your reading experience so far?
    - *Note: Whitehead mentions that the literalization of the railroad stems from his own childhood misunderstanding.
    - Pages 68-71
- Some of the scenes in *The Underground Railroad* are quite violent—how did the writing affect you as a reader?"
    - The differences between the two halves of the Randall plantation are quite stark. Why do you think Whitehead has the two Randall brothers run things so differently?

Sources:

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