

**AP Literature & Composition
Summer 2017**

***The Underground Railroad*
(2016)
By Colson Whitehead
Published by Doubleday**

The winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead is a dynamic new novel in which Whitehead takes the Underground Railroad--the loosely interlocking network of black and white activists who helped slaves escape to freedom in the decades before the Civil War--and turns it from a metaphor into an actual train that ferries fugitives northward. (Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*)

Welcome to AP Lit!

To get you ready for the challenges of AP Literature & Composition, during the summer we want you to read *The Underground Railroad*. Whitehead's novel is, of course, first and foremost a story—full of rich characters, surprising turns of event, emotion, and history. However, students of literature take that part of reading for granted; even more interesting is the analysis you'll conduct on your reading of the novel.

- First, read the novel closely, noting your own questions and observations. Then, tackle each of the following questions, citing evidence that supports your observations.
- Reviewers have noted “echoes” of other great works of literature and writers: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. If you have read any of these novels, connect one of them to *Underground Railroad* in a meaningful way. If you have not read any of them, look up *New York Times* reviews of them and see if you can connect what the reviewer is saying about the earlier work that relates to your reading of *Underground Railroad*.
- The narratives jumps around in time and space. How did this decision by Whitehead to convey his story in this way enhance the novel overall?
- Reviewers have commented on the elements of the novel that do not adhere directly to history but to Whitehead's imagination. In *The Things They Carried*, author Tim

O'Brien avers that he writes as he does "to make the stomach believe." That is, the events may not have actually happened in the way they are depicted in his work--they may be exaggerated or completely made up--but the point of it all is to make the reader *feel* what the author feels about his/her subject. Select one or two events in the novel that seem likely to be fictionalized. Do a little research to see if your suspicions are correct. Analyze the effect this event has on the reader and why you imagine Whitehead presented it in the way he did.

- Any attempt to tell the story of slavery must include violent images of subjugation. What do you think of the way Whitehead deals with the physical, mental, and emotional cruelty of slavery?

Your responses should be typed in an MLA style document (one-inch margins, double-spaced, cited correctly). If you're not sure about the format check mla.org or owl.purdue.edu or any other reliable, academic source offering information on the MLA format.

Have a happy, healthy, safe summer! See you in September!