

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

ANALYSIS OF COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEW HISTORICISM

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Article info

Article Received:05/8/2023

Article Accepted:23/09/2023

Published online:27/09/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.3.215](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.3.215)

Abstract

As an African American writer, Colson Whitehead focuses on the life and emotion of modern and contemporary American people, while expressing his condemnation of social problems, especially the racial discrimination. In *The Underground Railroad*, he rewrites the slave history of the United States based on the historical events and the social realities at present. On the basis of new historicism, this paper explores the texts and the history of slavery in the United States from "the textuality of history" and "the historicity of texts". Through showing the real living environment of the black people under slavery, plight of these blacks and the precious efforts they made to gain freedom, it calls for the continuing attention to the racial discrimination in the mainstream ideology.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, New Historicism, Textuality of History, Historicity of Texts

1. Introduction

As an outstanding African American writer, Colson Whitehead (1969-) always focuses on the issue of racism. Winning the National Book Award in 2016 and the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), one of his most representative works, profoundly presents the miserable situation of the blacks in the United States in the 19th century. Through the method of historical superposition, several major historical events in the nearly two hundred years of racial history in the United States are applied to the same era in the novel.

Set before the American Civil War, the novel revolves around the escape experience of Cora, a black slave girl, from the southern plantation to the

North. Cora's grandmother Ajarry, mother Mabel and herself were all slaves of the Randall Plantation in Georgia. Mabel ran away when Cora was ten years old or so. When Cora was sixteen or seventeen, Caesar, a slave as well, invited her to flee the plantation. Via ugr (the underground railroad), they ran to South Carolina where people of different colors lived peacefully with the white people. However, the slave catcher still searched for them, and Caesar was captured later before Cora escaped to North Carolina. Anti-slavery activity is particularly fierce there, so the ugr has been shut down and the station agent could only hide Cora in his house. Unfortunately, after being reported by the maid Fiona, Cora was captured by Ridgeway, a slave catcher. When being transported back to Georgia, Royal and his companions rescued Cora and sent her

to Valentine's farm in Indiana where she continued to study and fell in love with Royal. However, Valentine's farm is so famous for helping many black people that the white organized to attack it. After Royal was killed, Cora was caught by Ridgeway, who ordered her to take him to ugr. When going down the stairs, they wrestled and Ridgeway dropped to death. In the end, Cora jumped into the handcar in the tunnel and went out of it.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Since its publication, *The Underground Railroad* has aroused heated discussion among many scholars and readers both at home and abroad. From the perspective of new historicism, this paper takes its core concepts, "the textuality of history" and "the historicity of texts" as a basis to explore the slavery history in the United States, calling on people to pay attention to the living conditions of the African Americans throughout the history.

New historicism is a response to several Western literary transformations in the 20th century that have cut off the relationship between literature and culture. It focuses on the historical context of the literary texts, advocates combining literature with history, text and context, breaks down the opposite rampart between literature and history and explores their intertextuality. A literary text is considered to be "thoroughly embedded in its context, and in a constant interaction and interchange with other components inside the network of institutions, beliefs, and cultural power relationships, practices, and products that, in their ensemble, constitute what we call history" (Abrams and Harpham 220). In addition, from the perspective of old historicism, history determines the existence and the content of literature. New historicism, however, considers that both history and literature are textual in the same symbolic system. That means, history has been textualized and the boundary between history and literature becomes blurred.

Therefore, new historicism believes that there is the intertextual relationship between the history and the text. Louis A. Montrose, conveys the relationship in a concise and symmetrical way in his

"Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture": "the historicity of texts" and "the textuality of history". The textuality of history includes two aspects. On the one hand, although "we can have no access to a full and authentic past" -- history is inevitably influenced by political, economic, ideological and other factors (Montrose 20). It is only by means of the preserved texts that it is possible to understand the past. On the other hand, these texts would become "subjects to subsequent textual mediations" for the interpretation of other texts or the basis for later generations to compile history (ibid). As for the historicity of texts, the formation of a text is affected by history, economy, culture and ideology. It means that the interpreter should "investigate both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (Greenblatt 5). Besides, as an important part of history, the text itself is a historical event, participating in the shaping of history.

3. The Textuality of History

People learn about history through the texts and it is the reconstructed history of the slavery that *The Underground Railroad* has reflected. Despite the need for conflicts in the novel, the different periods of historical events are put in the same story, whereas the readers could still find the real marks of the history. Next, the blacks' struggles for liberation and the immoral movements of the whites against the blacks will be analyzed in this section.

3.1 The Blacks' Struggles for Liberation

On the one hand, the story revolves around the ugr (the underground railroad). Without ugr, Cora's escape, the help of the station agents, and the participation of other slaves who managed to escape would not have been possible. In the real history, it is believed that its first use appeared in a report in a Washington newspaper in 1839, in which a slave said he hoped to escape from plantation on a railroad that "went underground all the way to Boston" (Foner 6). Nevertheless, there is not exactly a railway, and the ugr actually refers to a network of secret routes founded by some white abolitionists and free blacks, aiming to help those slaves who

mainly come from the southern plantations to flee to the free states in the north of America or Canada.

In addition, there is neither a unified organization nor a leader. Most people participating in it are merely ordinary people. For example, in the novel, Lumbly, the station agent in Georgia is a farmer who “led a quiet life on his farm” (Whitehead 62); the agent in South Carolina, Sam, “worked at one of the saloons, the Drift” (84); Martin Wells in North Carolina need to “tend to his store” (134). Moreover, to ensure security and secrecy of the uugr, the codes related to some words in railway are used. In *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (2006) Blight concludes that people who help slaves find the railroad are called “agents”; the guides mean “conductors”; the hiding places are nicknamed as “stations”; the escaped slaves referred to as “passengers” or “cargo”; the slaves would obtain a “ticket” (98). More importantly, each participant only knows his or her own area with no idea of the whole network. “It goes everywhere, to places we know and those we don’t. We got this tunnel right here, running beneath us, and no one knows where it leads” (Whitehead 225).

On the other hand, in the novel, Valentine Farm, composed of freeborn and fugitive African Americans living and working together as one community, is reminiscent of such attempts in real history -- the maroon communities tested for “the idea of freedom” from the 16th century onward, the black towns and “utopian experiments” run by white philanthropists in the mid-19th century, and some kinds of settlements also founded by black leaders during and after Reconstruction (Nihad 95). As what Lowell explains in his *Iowa’s Underground Railroad*, “Despite slave patrols, pro-slavery associations, and black codes restricting the migration of African Americans into free states”, “the rising free-state sentiment fostered anxiety among slaveholders”, while also making the enslaved workers “fearful of being sold south” believe that “running to freedom might be possible” (3).

Among them, the most similar example to Valentine Farm is “wartime black self-management” in the Mississippi Delta (Nihad 96). The first try

guided by Joseph soon failed. General Grant then initiated the second, allowing freedmen and freedwomen to lease parts of the land. In this way, the black tenants and landowners eventually “set up their own municipal government, produced their own cotton and profits, and produced leaders of several types who would achieve prominence during and after Reconstruction” (ibid). By the end, such settlements composed of the migrants as Valentine Farm in the novel, could be found throughout the South and into the west, forming dense webs of black community life. After inheriting his white father’s estate, Valentine enlisted a few freedmen to farm potatoes on his new and sparsely populated land in Virginia. As Indiana grew around Valentine Farm, and more “towns erupted into being, quickened by the relentless American thirst, the black farm was there as a natural feature of the landscape... Half the white stores depended on its patronage, as “Valentine residents filled the squares and Sunday markets to sell their crafts”, which forms a typical black community (Whitehead 224).

3.2 The Whites’ Immoral Movements

One of the immoral movements shown in *The Underground Railroad* is the eugenics movement. In “Human Testing, the Eugenics Movement, and IRBs” (2008), Norrgard analyzes that, based on good intentions to breed children, the movement emerged in Britain in the late 19th century and was introduced to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, with its focus gradually changing from the original “eugenics” to the prevention of “inferiority”. In other words, some eugenicists advocated the elimination of negative traits in fertility. Meanwhile, under the long-term prejudice such as racism, the colored people have been considered as inferior. Thus, the eugenicists asserted that the marriage between white native Americans and other ethnic groups should be prevented, as well as urged the sterilizations of colored people. As a result, “30 states adopted eugenic sterilization laws, which together accounted for the forced sterilization of approximately 60,000 Americans” (170).

In the novel, the government mandated that colored people go to the hospital regularly in South

Carolina. When the occasion were ripe, they tried to sterilize black women. "This is just a chance for you to take control over your own destiny", "offering its gift to the colored population" (Whitehead 100). However, the truth is as what Cora has heard in Red's pub, "America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered" and "with strategic sterilization -- first the women but both sexes in time -- we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep" (107). What's worse, black women of poor mental health were forcibly sterilized. "The woman wasn't lamenting an old plantation injustice but a crime perpetrated here in South Carolina. The doctors were stealing her babies from her, not her former masters" (108). Even Miss Lucy, who had been teaching Cora to learn, urged her to agree. Lucy firstly encouraged her to "take on the mantle of leadership with the other girls" and "be a true credit to your race". After being rejected, Lucy threatened her, "The Fugitive Slave Law says we have to hand over runaways and not impede their capture... We don't harbor murderers" (112).

The other unethical behavior of the same kind is Tuskegee syphilis experiments. In "Light on the Shadow of the Syphilis Study at Tuskegee" published in *Health Promotion Practice* (2000), Thomas reviews the experiment from the beginning to the end. Tuskegee syphilis experiments, were organized and conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service, whose official name is the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male. The purpose of the project in the organization is to observe the natural progression of untreated syphilis in the human body. Although the free meals, the medical care and the funeral insurance were provided, workers did not tell these black participants the true purpose of the study and just said that they were accepting some treatment for bad blood. As a result, many of those participators died of syphilis: "about forty male's wives were infected with syphilis, and nineteen children were born with congenital syphilis; the last survivor of the experiment died in 2004" (234).

In *The Underground Railroad*, Dr. Bertram said frankly in Red's pub, "His patients believed they were being treated for blood ailments. The tonics

the hospital administered, however, were merely sugar water. In fact, the niggers were participants in a study of the latent and tertiary stages of syphilis" (Whitehead 106). Sam, as a white station agent who helped black people escape persecution, was ashamed to hear that. He asked the doctor if these blacks thought they were being helped. Nevertheless, Bertram just informed that "it's important", and can "discover how a disease spreads, the trajectory of infection, and we approach a cure" (107). Hence, it is clear that black people do not even have the basic rights to live or to procreate under slavery.

4. The Historicity of Texts

All texts have the cultural and social characteristic. That is the reason why both "the social presence to the world of the literary texts" -- the real world, and "the social presence of the world in the literary text" -- the story's background should be discussed. Besides, the text itself is also shaping the history. Therefore, this section is divided into three parts. Firstly, Whitehead's personal growth experience and the social background in the United States at the time has influenced his work; secondly, the history of the slavery has been rewritten in the novel; thirdly, the novel also has been shaping the history since its publication.

4.1 About Colson Whitehead

To begin with, Whitehead was born in the Upper East Side of New York in a wealth family and was well educated. However, he still experienced racism. When he was sixteen, he was handcuffed by the police after buying beer at the grocery store because a white lady was robbed in a neighborhood there, and he was the first black to be found nearby. The police did not let Whitehead go until the white woman testified that he was not the robber. Such experiences are reflected in the novel:

The patroller required no reason to stop a person apart from color. Slaves caught off the plantation need passes, unless they wanted a licking and a visit to the county jail. Free blacks carried proof of manumission or risked being conveyed into the clutches of slavery; sometimes they were smuggled to the

auction block anyway. Rogue blacks who did not surrender could be shot. They searched slave villages at will and took liberties as they ransacked the homes of freemen, stealing hard-earned linens or making licentious advances. (Whitehead 140)

In addition, the problem of racial discrimination in the United States has not been getting better up to the present. In 2016, *The Underground Railroad* has been published, while on August 9, 2014, an unarmed 18-year-old black teenager was shot to death by a white police officer in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. In the end, the state jury ruled against prosecuting the officer, which has led to many clashes among the blacks, the news media and the police all around the United States. From this case of violence and unfair treatment, it shows undoubtedly that racial discrimination and white supremacy have been rooted deeply in the United States.

4.2 About the Slavery History Rewritten

Besides, the slavery trade is represented clearly as the background of this novel, which was an important part in the triangle trade since the 17th century. European slave traders loaded primary industrial products such as cloth, wine and small handicrafts to Africa to exchange for slaves, and then went to America to exchange for plantation products such as sugar, tobacco, food crops and some industrial materials to bring back to Europe. Because of the massacre of the native Indians by North American invaders and the needs of the plantation economy, the demands for black slaves remained large for centuries.

In the novel, Cora's grandmother Ajarry was the "goods" of the slavery trade. There are usually two sources of slaves: the first is that the tribe sells the captured people or for some reason their own tribe's; the second is that the slave traders themselves catch the blacks. Ajarry belongs to the first one -- "Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first, then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children" (9). Then, the conditions in which slaves were transported were extremely bad as well -- "the noxious air of the hold, the gloom of confinement, and the screams of those shackled"

(ibid). Besides, the physical exploitation, especially the violence and the sexual abuse, by sailors or merchants was common -- "But eventually some of the more seasoned mates dragged her from the hold six weeks into the passage" (ibid). Meanwhile, all the resistance of the slaves resulted in their being "chained head to toe, head to toe, in exponential misery" (10). Ajarry was sold for a few times in exchange for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder along with the other eighty-seven people at first, and then to various types of plantations due to the bankruptcy of the owners. Finally, in Georgia, "she was home" like all the slaves (12).

In addition, the plantation life and its operation were also the environment where the characters in the novel make a living. To begin with, long hours of uninterrupted work which they had to endure every day destroyed their health severely -- "Her joints were swollen and stiff, making her crooked, and it anguished her to walk" (55). Next, they were being violently treated by the white or black overseers. In other words, it provides an environment where all the weak were bullied by the strong, regardless of race. Then, the sexual exploitation of slave women was very typical. Cora was raped by a male slave who was in conflict with her, and a white man who had power, "violated the bonds of affection, sometimes visiting slaves on their wedding night to show the husband the proper way to discharge his marital duty" (31-32). Moreover, unless they succeeded in running away, the slaves were stuck on the plantation for the whole life.

Furthermore, the plantation itself is the absolute protagonist of the novel. Before the Civil War, the economic benefits of the plantations mainly came from various cash crops. Later, the emergence of the industrial machines represented by cotton textile technology, prompted planters to frantically squeeze the slaves to grow cotton to satisfy "the world's insatiable demand for cotton goods" (46). At the time, the slaves became commodities for the cotton production and the price of them was determined by the supply and the demand of cotton in Europe, which is the reason why there is a great conflict between the South and the North. The North had moved into the industrial

and commercial capitalism, requiring a lot of wage labors, leading to the current situation of many abolitionist and free blacks there. Nevertheless, the South was still in the plantation economy, which directly occupied the labor. In the final analysis, it is a battle of these two economic forms.

4.3 About the Publication of *The Underground Railroad*

The Underground Railroad has attracted much attention and discussion in American society since its creation and publication. In the novel, breaking the traditional model of black literature in the past, Whitehead sets a female character as the protagonist. That is because the suffering under slavery for black women is more painful and complex than that for black men because they are subject to a combination of "race" and "gender". Racism in the United States is both a historical problem and a contemporary issue. In other words, many of today's behaviors of racial discrimination can be found the corresponding in the history, and in the novel as well. For example, the abusive language used by the police to stop black people is just the same as that used by slave hunters to stop the slaves. As what the Pulitzer Prize winning awards said, "For a smart melding of realism and allegory that combines the violence of slavery and the drama of escape in a myth that speaks to contemporary America" (Jamieson 22).

New historicism holds the views that literary texts are formed in the social and historical context, and owing to this, *The Underground Railroad* also participates in the shaping of history as a literary text. Whitehead tells about the meaning of the underground railroad, realistic reproduction of the slave trade and the living environment of plantations under the slavery in the south of the United States, endowing this novel with highly valuable historical materials. Therefore, in the process of continuously describing and reshaping history, literary works remind people to correctly understand and reflect on history as well.

5. Conclusion

Based on the subject of the American slavery history, *The Underground Railroad* tells the story of

a black slave girl, Cora, escaping the plantation, presenting a large number of historical events in a textual form and picturing the social visage of the slavery in the 19th century in the United States.

About the textuality of history, through exploring and rewriting the surviving text of the underground railroad, the construction of the black community, and the deprivation of the blacks' rights through the unethical behaviors, people at present could approach and understand the slavery history. Meanwhile, Whitehead's narration of these events would become the interpretation of other texts or the basis for later generations to compile history. About the historicity of texts, the texts in the novel are reflections of Whitehead's African-American identity, the long-standing racial discrimination in American society and the slavery trade history of embryonic period of capitalism. Furthermore, from the perspective of black women who are aphasia in the mainstream society, whitehead conveys a series of contemporary problems in America at the present, which participates in the shaping of history.

To conclude, through showing the real living environment of the black people under slavery, plight of these blacks and the precious efforts that they made to gain freedom, it calls for the continuing attention on the racial discrimination in the mainstream ideology.

6. Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by the NCEPU "Double First-Class" Graduate Talent Cultivation Program (XM2312716).

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