



SEIZING LIBERTY IN THE NOVEL *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* (2016) BY COLSON WHITEHEAD

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Abstract

The purpose of this analysis is to expose the issue about seizing liberty which is done by a slave in America and to know the contribution of the plot, setting, and character in revealing the issue of seizing liberty. This analysis is related to the psychoanalysis theory developed by Sigmund Freud and the concept of self-awareness by Crisp and Turner that are supported by the text and context based interpretation. The result of this analysis shows the efforts of a young slave woman to get free from slavery that can be seen from taking opportunities smartly and enhancing curiosity.

Keywords: Seizing, Liberty, Slave

A. INTRODUCTION

All human beings have the desire to be free in determining the choice of their life. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude. People must not be owned, bought, or sold. No one has the right to enslave anyone else. Everyone has the right to live, get liberty and security of person. People supposed to respect other's right such as right to get education, have social security and religion, and free from discrimination. These rights call on everybody to stand up for themselves. Unfortunately, not all people think that human beings are equal. Some people think that they were superior than others. These feelings of superiority have prevented the accomplishment of the long sought goal to live peacefully. Most of this event occurred in agriculture era in America which was known for slavery.

¹The oppression of being enslaved make people struggle and strive for their life. The slave's refusal to accept their condition manifested in their effort to seize their liberty. Seizing liberty is a highly ambitious effort which is done by the slaves in order to get free from slavery. They took liberty in their own efforts to free themselves. They strived for their right forcibly by escaping from their master and

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start new life by making new identity. Those efforts not only done by the old but also young generation.

Unlike the old generation who escaped in rough way, the young generation slaves did an interesting way to escape from slavery. They escape silently and secretly through a railway which was called the Underground Railroad. This Underground Railroad was known as a network of secret routes and safe houses and it described in the novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead. This novel shows the struggle of slaves to seize their liberty. Through the main character, the novel makes people realize that slaves had to put their hardest effort and took risks to get their rights as a human being. They show their knowledge and desire by taking opportunities smartly and enhancing curiosity.

Colson Whitehead was born in New York City on November 6, 1969, and grew up in Manhattan. He has produced seven book-length works, six novels and a meditation on life in Manhattan in the style of E.B. The novels are *The Intuitionist*(1999), *John Henry Days* (2001), *The Colossus of New York*(2003), *Apex Hides the Hurt*(2006), *Sag Harbor*(2009), *Zone One*(2011), a *New York Times* Bestseller; and *The Underground Railroad* (2016)which earned a National Book Award for Fiction.

His novel *The Underground Railroad*, was a selection of Oprah's Book Club 2.0, and was also chosen by President Barack Obama as one of five books on his summer vacation reading list. In January 2017 it was awarded the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction at the American Library Association Mid-Winter conference in Atlanta, GA. He was also honored with the 2017 Hurston/Wright Award for fiction presented by the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation. His non-fiction, essays and reviews have appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, and *Harper's*.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis of this play script is done through text-based and context-based interpretation. The fictional devices such as character, plot (conflict) and setting are needed during the process of analyzing. These devices are related each other. Characters and conflicts are used to show the way to seize liberty by analysing character's reactions toward the conflict. Then, the setting deals with the circumstances and atmosphere in order to reveal the protagonist's efforts to get free from slavery. This analysis is dealing with the psychological theory by Sigmund Freud and supported by the concept of self-awareness by Crisp and Turner.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses the fictional devices such as character, plot (conflict), and setting to reveal the issue of seizing liberty. Seizing liberty in this analysis refers to the efforts of the protagonist, Cora, a sixteen years old slave to get free from slavery. Seizing liberty in this section can be seen through two ways; taking opportunities smartly and enhancing curiosity.

1. Taking Opportunities Smartly

The protagonist takes some opportunities to seize her liberty. She utilizes the opportunities that can help her to reach her goals. She takes opportunity to run away from her master's plantation and change her identity. She prepares strategies to run away, one of them is by escaping with friends. In her journey to run away, she uses the opportunities to get education and provide her own finance. She starts her new life as a new person. She changes her identity by changing her name, performance, and behavior.

To succeed their plan to run away, the protagonist and her friend choose the perfect time to escape. It can be seen from the following quotation:

“They meet at the schoolhouse, by the milk house after the work there was done, wherever they could. Now that she had cast her lot with him and his scheme, she bristled with ideas. Cora suggested they wait for the full moon. Caesar countered that after Big Anthony's escape the overseers and bosses had increased their scrutiny and would be extra vigilant on the full moon, the white beacon that so often agitated the slave with a mind to run. No, he said. He wanted to go as soon as possible. The following night. The waxing moon would have to suffice. Agents of the underground railroad will be waiting.” (p. 31)

She and her friend have made a plan before they took action. They prepare strategies to succeed their plan. She is an open-minded girl and will accept other's opinion wisely. The utterance *Now that she had cast her lot with him and his scheme*, points out that she dares to take the risks of running away. Before escaping she makes sure that she has trustworthy friends. The utterance *The waxing moon would have to suffice* shows that they choose the right time to escape when everyone carelessly, since it will increase the possibility of success. The word *suffice* shows that people never expect that the waxing moon will be chosen by slave to escape, because of the situation is quite dark and it will make it difficult to down the road, but the protagonist did it. The setting here refers to serious and uptight situation so that they have to be careful to make decisions. Her firmness to runaway can be seen through her feeling, it proves that she understands what she should do and she knows that she is the decision maker of her life. She escapes secretly in unusual way. She chooses the underground railroad because it is a secret path that hidden from the crowd and it is not discovered yet by White people at that time.

The second opportunity that taken by the protagonist is getting education. She gets education by joining class that provided by government for Black people. It shows in the following quotation:

“A gust sent the shutters wheezing in their hinges. Miss Handler put down her chalk. “In North Carolina,” she said, “what we are doing is crime. I would be fined a hundred dollars and you would receive thirty-nine lashes. That’s from the law. Your master would likely more severe punishment.” The woman met Cora’s eyes. The teacher was only a few years later than her but she made Cora feel like an ignorant pickaninny. “It’s hard to start from nothing. A few week ago, some of you were where Howard is now. It takes time. And patience.””(p. 58)

The protagonist believes that she has nothing about being freeman, therefore she has to learn everything harder. She knows that she cannot get something instantly. The utterance *The teacher was only a few years later than her but she made Cora feel like an ignorant pickaninny* reflects that she realizes that she lack of knowledge and has to learn harder. The conflict here is internal conflict. The word *ignorant* means that she feels worthless if she lacks of knowledge so that she push herself to study hard.

The next opportunity she had taken is changing her identity. She made new identity by changing her name, performance, and behavior. During her running, she learns a lot to be a freedman. She tries her best to blend in the community. She makes new identity by changing her name, which can be seen in the following quotation:

“If Cora’s own mask was occasionally askew, she proved adept at maintaining the disguise of Bessie Carpenter, late of North Carolina. She had prepared herself for Miss Lucy’s question about her mother surname and for other tracks the conversation might have taken. The interview at the Placement Office that first day had concluded after a few brief questions. The newcomers had toiled either in the house or in the field. In either case, the majority of the openings were domestic work. The families were told to exercise forbearance with inexperienced help.” (p. 60)

The quotation above shows that she is able to adapt and be familiar with everybody in the community. The utterance *If Cora’s own mask was occasionally askew, she proved adept at maintaining the disguise of Bessie Carpenter* reflects that the protagonist tends to prepare everything to maintain her new life. She learns what she needed to survive in the new place. She changes her name and gets new family name. The setting here is calm but tense because she has to face

someone who will expose her real identity. To release that tense, she prepares herself to answer all of the questions and try to be calm. The conflict here is internal conflict because she has to hide her real identity. The utterance *The interview at the Placement Office that first day had concluded after a few brief questions* means that it is hard get a job to afford her own finance. She has to do a set of interview and with her hard work she is able to go through it and get a job. She realizes that she has to strive for her freedom and maintain it by herself.

The protagonist makes new identity by changing her performance and behavior. It can be seen from the following quotation:

“When Cora finished her Saturday washing and had supper, it was almost time for the social. She put on her new blue dress. It was the prettiest one at the colored emporium. She shopped there as little as possible on account of the markup. From shopping for Mrs. Anderson, she was horrified that things in their local establishment cost two or three times as much as those in the white stores. As for the dress, it had cost a week’s wages and she was forced to use scrip. She had been careful about her spending for the most part. Money was new and unpredictable and liked to go where it pleased.” (page 62)

She is a hard worker and has desire to improve her life. In term of performance, she changes appearance. She takes care of her appearance and cleanliness. Since she has her own income, she can buy new dress that she likes. The phrase *new blue dress* reflects that she gives new colors to her life by throwing out her white clothes and pick new blue dress. She realizes that the white color from the plantation is one of the method used by White to control slaves. They give slaves uniform to determine their status. Whites supply them with bad quality and uncomfortable fabrics that chosen for the low cost. Since the protagonist realizes that she is not slaves anymore, she choose her own color and starts her new life. She chooses blue as the representation of her confidence, faith, and wisdom. The color also represents her changes from a forced slave into an employee who works as her own wishes.

In term of behavior, the protagonist learns how to use her money. From the utterance *She had been careful about her spending for the most part* can be revealed that she saves and spends her money wisely. She realizes that she had to use money appropriately because there were many things she had to prepare for her future. She uses her money only for the most important thing. The utterance *Money was new and unpredictable and liked to go where it pleased* reflects that she has to be smart in spending her money because there are lots of temptations that will occur.

Briefly, from all the quotations above, it can be seen that the protagonist has taken all the opportunities to seize her liberty. Most of the setting in this

analysis refers to tense situation and dangerous situation that she has to face. To release the tenses, she tends to be careful in everything she does. To face the dangerous situation, she prepares a plan before takes action. The conflict mostly comes from the internal of herself when she has to face her own desire to running away and afraid of being caught. Those conflicts make her use her knowledge and her strong determination to reach her goals and seize her liberty. It makes her develop her life instincts to deal with the problems she faced. It shows that she has intelligence and uses her awareness.

2. Enhancing Curiosity

In seizing her liberty, the protagonist tends to curious about everything she met. Having high curiosity makes her asks lots of questions and tries to figure out the answer. It also makes her listen carefully about every information that she gets. She unleashes her curiosity and getting education by joining class and learning by herself. She grows into an open-minded girl and not judge or blame everything directly. She does not afraid to try new experience and take risks. It makes her cautious so that she tends to prepare everything before taking actions. She knows that she has better future if she struggles so that she does not let her past time affects her effort to get liberty.

Her high curiosity can be seen from the way protagonist takes the risk. It shows in the following quotation:

“This time tomorrow she would be loose in the night. Is this what her mother felt when she decided? Cora’s image of her was remote. What she remembered most was her sadness. Her mother was a Hob woman before there was a Hob. With the same reluctance to mix, the burden that bent her all the times and set her apart. Cora couldn’t put her together in her mind. Who was she? Where was she now? Why had she left her? Without a special kiss to say, when you remember this moment later you will understand that I was saying goodbye even if you did not know it.” (p. 32)

The protagonist was being motivated to escape by her mother. At first, she thought that her mother abandoned her and runaway to get free without thinking about her. Then she starts to think about all the probability that her mother took. She takes the risk to runaway to get all the answer of her questions. The phrase *Who was she? Where was she now? Why had she left her?* It indicates that she wonder about what things are hidden by her mom. She realizes that there were reasons for everything. She starts not to judge or blame something without finding out the reasons. She dares to take the risks of running away because she thinks if her mother can succeed escape the she will able to succeed too. The setting here refers to tense situation. She has to consider all the probability that can happens in her journey to get liberty. The conflict is internal conflict for her because she does not want to fail and captured by the slave catcher because she knows that brutal

punishments have been prepared for her. She risks herself to take a big decision in her life.

Another quotation that supports the idea that the protagonist is a curious person can be seen in the following quotation:

“... The car was empty apart from hay bales, dead mice, and bent nails. She later discovered a charred patch where someone had started fire. Caesar was numb from the series from the series of curios events and he curled up on the floor. Following Lumbly’s final instructions, Cora looked through the slats. There was only darkness, mile after mile.

When they next stepped into the sunlight, they were in South Carolina. She looked up at the skyscraper and reeled, wondering how far she had travelled.” (p. 42)

The protagonist tends to show interest with her surroundings. She tends to pay her attention even for the small things around her. It makes her listen to other suggestions and acts carefully. The word *mile after mile* indicates that she comes to an endless journey without certainty. She is curious about what is waiting for her in the future. To fulfil her curiosity she keeps her eyes open and be ready with all possibility. The phrase *wondering how far she had travelled* reflects that the protagonist has move to a new place. She has been through a long destination and be ready to start new life. The setting here refers to calm but dangerous situation. They travel on the darkness and have to be aware of the dangers that can appear. To face the dangerous situation, they have to be careful and depend to each other so that they can succeed in their journey. The word *skyscraper* means that there are many industries in South Carolina. It is a symbol for material wealth and brighter future. It makes the protagonist puts her hopes in the new place.

Her journey to get liberty has sharpened her into a critical thinking person. She grows physically and mentally mature. She tends to face problems from various perspectives. It makes her full of consideration about everything. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“Cora had become too accustomed to escaping unscathed from encounters with white authority. The directness of his questions and his subsequent elaborations threw her. To compare what had happened the night of the smokehouse with what passed between a man and his wife who were in love. Dr. Stevens’s speech made them the same. Her stomach twisted at the idea. Then there was the matter of mandatory, which sounded as if the

women, these Hob women with difference faces, had no say. Like there were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased. Mrs. Anderson suffered black moods. Did they make her unfit? Was her doctor offering her the same proposal? No.” (p. 69)

The protagonist is critical thinking person. She realizes that human she is not a research's object. The utterance *Like there were property* shows that she knows that she is precious women. She knows that all people are equal but the treatment that she get is very different. It makes her aware of her future life and realizes that she is the decision maker of her life. She will not let other trick and control her. The utterance *Dr. Stevens's speech made them the same. Her stomach twisted at the idea* reflects that she is more intelligent than the doctor because she can separate things properly. The setting here is tense and anger because the protagonist despiteful of the argument of the doctor who wants to control her future. To release that tense and anger, she refuses the treatment firmly and tries to focus on continuing her life.

Another quotation that supported the idea she is a critical person can be seen in this following quotation:

“With the surgery that Dr. Stevens described, Cora thought the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies-steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better.” (p. 71)”

The quotation above shows that she realizes that the surgery Dr. Stevens had is not for her goodness but only for controlling and destroying her future. She realizes that some of White people would not let Black and White equal. Whites will try everything to abolish Blacks by destroying them in every aspects of their live. Even the medical also become a weapon to demolish Blacks. The word *hope* means that White people knows that Black people have the same future as they are but they want to make it disappear because they think that Black people are not deserve such things. The setting here is refers to serious situation. In which the protagonist has faces the external and internal conflicts. She faces external conflict when she come to visit the doctor and realize that the treatment is a manipulation. To get out of the situation, she dares to reject the treatment.

Another way that done by the protagonist to fulfil her curiosity is learning by herself. Since she felt the education that she got from the formal class is not enough, she starts to learn by herself. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“...Cora was not a natural believer, and her education had been terminated sooner than

she wished. In the attic she had struggled with the words, pressed on, doubled back to difficult verses. The contradiction vexed her, even half-understood ones.” (p. 112)

The quotation above reflects that the protagonist has to strive to learn. She cannot finish her class because she has to move and run from the slave catcher but she never give up on studying. She wants to learn as much as possible. She faces it patiently. The utterance *In the attic she had struggled with the words* indicates that the protagonist still has spirit to gain knowledge even in the hidden place.

She wants to learn and improve her skills. She seeks help from other who has more intelligence. She also does not hesitate to involve in discussion. That can be seen in the following quotation:

“It means what it says,” Ethel said. “it means that a Hebrew may not enslave a Hebrew. But the sons of Ham are not of that tribe. They were cursed, with black skin and tails. Where the Scripture condemns slavery, it is not speaking of negro slavery at all.”

I have black skin, but I don’t have a tail. As far as I know—I never thought to look,” Cora said. “Slavery is a curse, though, that much is true.” Slavery is a sin when whites were put to the yoke, but not the African. All men created equal, unless we decided you are not man.” (p. 112)

The protagonist is a smart and critical thinking person. She understands that all human being are equal. The utterance *Slavery is a curse* shows that she realizes that slavery created by people who feel more powerful than others. She also reads and learns the bible. She realizes the irony of Whites who said they were believe in the Bible but they actions are not suitable with what they say. She breaks the argument of Whites with knowledge. The phrase *They were cursed, with black skin and tails* shows that Whites differentiate people from their appearance. They think that the skin represents the quality of people. The word *cursed* reflects that Whites believe that Black is the representation of bad things and evil. They even equalize Blacks with animal and treat them badly. Ironically, it proves that the real evil is Whites. The utterance *All men created equal, unless we decided you are not man* reflects that she things more logic that Whites. She breaks the argument of the Whites with opinions that they created by themselves. The setting here refers to tense and serious situation. The protagonist involves herself in the debate with White. The protagonist tries to convince White that the slavery is something wrong. She breaks White’s opinion with opinions that created by themselves.

In summary, most of the setting in this analysis refers to tense situation and dangerous situation that the protagonist has to face. To release the tenses, she thinks think logically. She tends not to involve her feelings in every situation. To face the dangerous situation, she hides and learns the entire situation and

considers the risks that will occur. The conflict mostly comes from the internal of her when she has to face her own desire to run away and afraid of being caught. Those conflicts make her learns and works hard.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The Underground Railroad (2016), a novel by Colson Whitehead reflects the issue of seizing liberty. This issue refers to efforts of a young slave woman to get free from slavery by taking opportunities smartly and enhancing curiosity.

The protagonist takes some opportunities smartly to seize her liberty. She uses the opportunities that can help her to reach her goals. She takes opportunity to run away from her master's plantation and changes her identity. She uses the opportunities to get education and get a job. She changes her identity by changing her name, performance, and behavior. She prepares strategies to seize her liberty. The setting in this analysis refers to the tense atmosphere and dangerous situation that they have to face and fix. To release the tenses, she tends to be careful in everything she does. The conflict mostly comes from internal, which make her use her knowledge and her strong determination to seize her liberty.

Having high curiosity makes her asks lots of questions and tries to figure out the answer. It also makes her listen carefully in all information that she gets. She fulfils her curiosity and getting education by joining class and learning by herself. She grows into an open-minded woman and not judge or blame everything directly. She is not afraid to ask and admit her ignorance. She is not afraid to try new experience and take risks. She enjoys socializing and observing people around her. Most of the setting in this analysis refers to the tense and dangerous situation. To release the tenses, she tends to think logically. To face the dangerous situation, she hides and learns the entire situation and considers the risks that occur. The conflict mostly comes from the internal of her when she has to face her own desire to run away and afraid of being caught. She releases the conflicts by learning and working hard.

Everyone has the right to live peacefully and get liberty. People supposed to respect each other and being free from discrimination. People should know their value as human being and strive for their rights. They have to realize that they are the decision maker of their life and not let other people humiliate them because human being is precious. They have power to improve their life; all they have to do is struggling to get what they want. When they can take the possibilities and turn the impossible things become chances, there will be a great result on their life.

Through this analysis, the writer hopes that this analysis can be a reference for anyone to analyze the novel *The Underground Railroad*. The writer also hopes that there will be other and further researches about the novel *The Underground Railroad* that concern in other theories and fictional devices.

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