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Rebellion in *The Underground Railroad*

If actions truly do speak louder than words, then Cora is screaming. Every major choice Cora makes in *The Underground Railroad*, by Colson Whitehead, is done out of spite towards her mother and the men that betrayed her. Her rebellious and persistent attitude is what motivates her character's actions.

One of the first signs of rebellion towards men from Cora's character is when she destroys Blake's doghouse. "Her first blow brought down the roof of the doghouse..." (19-20). Not only was this surprisingly violent for a woman from the Hob to do, but it was also shocking because Blake was a large man compared to Cora. "Blake was a big oak, a double-ration man..." (17). Cora had to destroy his doghouse in order to prove her dominance over the few things she owned and that she was not one to mess with. Whitehead writes "... but the girl did not falter" (20). Many believe Cora is weak because she is living in the Hob with the other ostracized women on Randall's plantation that are considered different, and, maybe, broken. "Cora slunk to the Hob, where they banished the wretched" (16). Men like Blake were the reason that Cora decided to live in the Hob, with only female occupants, in the first place. It is noted that the majority of rapes occurred at night because the enslaved were all forced to sleep in the same room. When Cora was first raped, as a young girl, "If anyone heard or saw, they did not intervene" which only strengthened her hatred towards the men on the plantation (21). With Cora's mother being gone, she was forced to advocate for herself by retaliating against the awful men on the plantation, like Blake who thought he could take the only thing her mother had left to

her before she disappeared forever. Although Cora is not a big fan of the men around her, she is still willing to protect an innocent man's life. "A feeling settled over Cora. She had not been under its spell in years, since she brought the hatchet down on Blake's doghouse..." (34). She recalls feeling the same sense of injustice she felt when she destroys Blake's doghouse as she does when Chester, a fellow enslaved man, was being beaten for spilling a drop of wine on Terrance Randall (34). Here, Whitehead is proving to his readers that Cora is a morally strong person that wants to do the right thing. The right thing to do is put herself first in most cases because no one was there to do that for her when she was younger. Cora's ethics is what makes her persistence to be free become so strong and her rebellious attitude envious.

The desire to do the right thing for the men on the plantation is also what led to the beginning of her rebellious actions aimed toward her mother. Caesar, an enslaved man that worked on the same plantation as Cora, asks if Cora would run away with him. "He thinks I'm good luck, because my mother was the only one," Cora tells Lovey in reference to how her mother was the only enslaved person on the Randall's plantation to ever be known to escape alive, or so they believe (58). Cora agrees to run away with Caesar because she sees something different in him that by helping to save Chester seems to have brought to her attention the good in some men. Again, this is Whitehead showing that Cora knows how to make good decisions. The main reason why he wants Cora to run away with him, though, is that he thinks that she will grant him better luck when running away because of her mother's successful journey to freedom; somehow Cora knows the secret to successfully running away. Caesar also sees the rebellion and strive that Cora has that will continue to motivate her in order to escape a lifetime of enslavement like her grandmother, Ajarry, had nearly experienced. Cora does not have as

pleasant of thoughts of her mother, though, because her mother "... gave no indication of her intentions..." (40) to Cora before she escaped because "When Mabel vanished Cora became a stray" (14). In her eyes, Mabel left Cora on the plantation to live a life of enslavement while she led a free life without her. This resentment from her mother only festers as Cora grows older and makes her want to show the men on the plantation that, yes, she is also capable of escaping the Randall Plantation. This need to escape, in order to prove that she is just as good as her mother, comes up once again when she makes her final escape through the Underground Railroad. "She discovered a rhythm, pumping her arms, throwing all of herself into the movement" (309). For Cora, this was the last step to her Freedom and she was digging it herself, without anyone's help. She was going to be free, just like her mother and she was going to do it alone, just like her mother.

Since her mother was supposedly able to escape the many slave catchers, like the famous Ridgeway, Cora knew that she could escape them, too. Or rather, that she must escape them at all costs in order to prove that she is just as brave and strong as her mother was when she escaped many years prior. The only problem is that Cora could not escape them without resorting to homicide. When Cora first ran away, she was almost caught by a few men that had heard about the bounty the Randall's had on her if she was caught (59). If she had not murdered one of the young men that was fighting to capture her, then she may have never escaped enslavement. "The boy's death was a complication of her escape... Cora had been grieving for him, too..." (225). Yet again, Whitehead shows the audience that Cora is a moral person by explaining how she felt guilt towards the family of the poor boy, but that she knew what she was doing. For Cora, it is either kill or be killed. Cora also most likely has a more difficult journey when running away

than her mother probably would have. This is due to the fact that many of the White men searching for Cora also believe that her mother had escaped to freedom without ever being caught.

“... but it was Mabel who first laid him low. It flowed from her mother, his mania over their family. If not for her, the slave catcher wouldn't have obsessed so over Cora's capture. The one who escaped. After all it cost her, Cora didn't know if it made her more proud or spiteful toward the woman” (307).

By making her journey more difficult, Cora's spite towards her mother only grows as the novel progresses. In fact, by her mother disappearing and driving Ridgway mad, he became a maniac and obsessed over Cora. He is so maniacal that she is forced to murder him in order to escape yet again. “... she held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness” (308). The anger she projects onto Ridgeway is not only from him trying to capture her but also pint up anger from the years of solitude spent without her mother whom Cora believes was living her best life without her very own child.

Without Colson Whitehead's inventiveness when creating Cora's spiteful and rebellious nature, the novel would not have been so moving. Cora's attitude, although generally negative, is an inspiration to others to also rebel in order to fight for what they believe in.

Works Cited

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Penguin Random House, 2016.