

1. Why do you think Coates uses terms like “Tasked” and “Quality” instead of “slaves” and “masters”? What do you think the novel gains from this altered language?

2. Hiram says that the Tasked are “Blessed, for we do not bear the weight of pretending pure.” How does Coates define morality in the novel? In what ways does Hiram’s notion of morality differ from that of the Quality, or even Corinne?

3. What do you make of Howell Walker’s apology? To what extent does Coates humanize Howell? Why do you think he does this?

4. What roles do the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood play in the novel? How does Hiram define family?

5. Sophia tells Hiram, “But what you must get, is that for me to be yours, I must never be yours.” What is Coates saying about the particular struggles of black women in this novel? How does Hiram’s relationship with Sophia change over time?

6. Characters like Corrine risk their lives to work for the Underground, while also allowing Hiram and some of its other members to come to harm for the greater good of the organization. What might Coates be trying to say about the relationship between white people and racial justice with these characters?

7. Discuss Harriet’s role in the story. Did you know immediately who she was? What impact does the inclusion of a historical figure have on the narrative?

8. What is the significance of water throughout the book? Why do you think Coates chooses it as the medium for Hiram’s power?

9. Coates is best known for his works of nonfiction; THE WATER DANCER is his first novel. Why do you think he chose to explore the themes of slavery and the Underground Railroad through fiction? What is gained when the book isn’t tethered to historical fact? What is lost?

10. What does THE WATER DANCER add to our understanding of how enslaved people suffered? What does the novel add to our understanding of the agency, resilience and strength of enslaved people during that time?

11. How are the themes of THE WATER DANCER relevant to modern discussions of race, privilege and power?

