

Themenkreis „Short Story“

The life cycle of disadvantaged black Americans as described in Julius Lester’s short story “The Child”

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Kompetenzprofil

- Niveaustufe: gymnasiale Oberstufe, Stufe 11 (Europäischer Referenzrahmen)
 - Kompetenzbereiche: *Reading, language, writing, speaking*
 - Aufgabenformate: *Pre-reading activities, analysing language, analysing the narrative perspective, writing, a characterization, comment, discussion, presentation, creative writing*
 - Medien: Kurzgeschichte
 - fachübergreifende Aspekte: Gesellschaft, Politik, Ethik
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The life cycle of disadvantaged black Americans as described in Julius Lester's short story "The Child"

Julius Lester's short story "The Child" was published in 1963 as part of a collection of multi-ethnic short stories for young adults and is set in an unnamed, big city in the USA. At the heart of the action is the seventeen-year-old black American Karen who finds herself confronted with a major emotional crisis. The time span covered in the short story is probably not longer than twenty minutes. The framework of the main action – a black American female teenager waiting for the underground train to arrive and riding on the subway – is interspersed with the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist. Additionally, a small number of flashbacks support the reader's understanding of the protagonist's general plight. Karen has found out that she is pregnant. When she reveals this to her mother, she has to face a fit of anger on her mother's part. The whole situation is made unbearable by the fact that Karen's boyfriend Philip refuses to accept his responsibility as a father.

"The Child" is told from a limited omniscient point of view. The narrator exclusively delves into Karen's thoughts and emotions.

On a structural level, "The Child" can be referred to as a well-written short story: It begins in the middle of a ongoing situation, depicts a single moment of crisis, deals with a limited number of characters and has an open ending. Despite the single moment of crisis, "The Child" tackles a number of topical – or even timeless – issues, such as motherhood, family relationships, growing up in difficult social and economic circumstances, social inequality, racism, dreams and a sense of belonging. Consequently, the short story appeals to readers' hearts from different walks of life and age groups.

About the author

Julius Bernard Lester was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1939. He was the son of a Methodist minister. In 1960 he received his BA from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He had majored in English and minored in Art and Spanish. In 1961 Lester moved to New York City where he hosted the radio show "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and recorded two albums of traditional and original songs.

Worksheet: "The Child" (extract no. 1)

Pre-reading activity

1. Describe what you associate with a story called "The Child". Take notes first before you talk to a fellow student. Finally, talk to the entire class about your ideas.

Language

2. Briefly explain the function of the sentences in direct speech in the given excerpt (ll. 21–22, ll. 33–47, l. 54) from "The Child" by Julius Lester.
3. Find the words in the text that match these definitions.

Definition	Word
a) A continuous shaking movement or feeling	
b) Special, good or unusual and therefore remembering or easy to remember	
c) The outside limit of an object, a surface or an area; the part furthest from the centre	
d) Having a useful aim; determination	
e) To walk with weak unsteady steps, as if you are about to fall	
f) A gate at the entrance to a public building that turns in a circle when pushed, allowing one person to go through at a time	
g) To make a sudden, unsteady movement forward	

Working with the text – Use your own words as far as possible

4. Describe the general situation the teenager Karen finds herself in in the given excerpt from "The Child" by Julius Lester.

B) Questioner

Your tasks: Read the extract silently. Jot down a minimum of 5 questions about the extract triggering a response from the members of your group. Encourage your classmates to ask further questions of their own.

C) Personal response

Your tasks: Read extract no. 2 silently. Choose a character, a line or a complete passage that is meaningful to you. Make notes. Explain two choices to your group.

4. Take a look at the photo of a young African-American woman.
5. Imagine that Karen and this woman happen to meet one day. Think of questions that Karen might ask her? What would she like to know from her?
6. a) Interpret the ending (lines 1077-1080) of the short story.
b) Explain the message the author intends to convey with this specific ending.

Comment

7. Comment on the impact of education for an individual's choice in life.

Further studies and activities

8. Do some research on the concept of the American Dream. Give a 2-minute talk to the entire class on this topic.



Karen – a characterization

Language

1. Draw up a list of words, expressions and phrases relating to the protagonist Karen. Briefly state plausible conclusions on the reader's part. Refer to both extract no. 1 and no. 2 from the short story "The Child".

Words, expressions, phrases	Plausible conclusions