

Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad*

by Dr. Bernd Klewitz



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Die Geschichte der Sklaverei und damit der Ursprünge der *African American community* ist literarisch seitens so vieler Völl gestaltet worden wie in Colson Whiteheads Roman *The Underground Railroad*. Er bietet nicht nur beklemmende Einblicke in die Sklavenerhaltungsgesellschaft der USA vor Ausbruch des Bürgerkrieges, sondern begründet in seiner Metaphorik auch prägende Einsichten in die Hintergründe und historischen Wurzeln von Holocaust und Genozid, begangen an religiösen und ethnischen Minderheiten in Europa und den USA. Die Geschichte des entlaufenen Sklavemädchens Cora und ihres Kampfes gegen den Sklavensucher Ridgeway sind in der Erzählung verbunden mit Zeitbezug und Dokumenten, welche die Schülerinnen und Schüler als intertextuelle Beziehungen entschlüsseln und auf der inhaltlichen Ebene interpretieren. Dabei werden auch historische Ereignisse und Hintergründe erarbeitet.

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Facts

Notes on the material

Topic 1: Exploring the novel

Topic 2: Inventory of characters

Topic 3: Life on a cotton plantation

Topic 4: Fiction and fantasy

Topic 5: Declaration of Independence and Manifest Destiny

Topic 6: The history of the underground railroad

Topic 7: From Anne Frank to Charlottesville

Competences and skills:

By working with the novel *The Underground Railroad* as well as several non-fiction texts, students practise their **reading competences** and enhance their **analytical and interpretive skills**. They gain knowledge of the historical background and demonstrate their **viewing and listening skills** when engaging themselves with videos. By completing research tasks, they acquire additional **media competences**.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A Analysis

D Discussion / debate

PR Presentation

S Summary

W Writing

C Comment

G Group work

R Research

T Working with a text

CT Creative Task

P Working with a picture

RC Reading comprehension

VI Working with a video

Topic	Material	Methods skills
1: Exploring the novel	M1–M2	D, G, PR, R, RC, T
2: Inventory of characters	M3	A, CT, D, T, W
3: Life on a cotton plantation	M4–M7	A, C, S, T, VI, W
4: Fiction and fantasy	M8–M9	RC, T
5: Declaration of Independence and Manifest Destiny	M10–M12	A, D, G, RC, T
6: The history of the underground railroad	M13–M15	D, P, PR, RC, S, VI, W
7: From Anne Frank to Charlottesville	M16–M19	C, D, G, R, RC, T, W

Topic 2: Inventory of characters

M3 Worksheet – Inventory of characters


Approaching the novel



1. Study the structure of the novel. Work in a double circle and change partners once.
 - a) From whose perspective is the story told? Who are the major and minor characters? What are the reasons for their actions?
 - b) Identify the different locations in the text. What happens at each location?
 - c) When does the story take place? To which historical events is it connected?

Analysing the characters



2. Copy the grid below. While (re)reading the novel, fill in the grid. Write down important information about the listed characters, either focusing on key quotations or inferred traits of character. Use the pages provided but also search for other text passages. Compare findings with a partner and in plenary.
 

Character	Key quotation	Character traits	Pages
Cora			17, 29, 117, 128, 327
Ridgeway			91, 97/98
Caesar			9, 53/54, 58/59
Royal			310

Creative



3. Choose one of the runaway ads from the novel and rewrite it in a modern form (e. g. *Twitter* or *Facebook* post). You find them on pp. 12, 100, 170, 238, 284, 356.

Discussion



4. Discuss the function of the runaway ads.

M6 *12 Years a Slave*

During the 19th century, the spiritual ***Roll, Jordan, Roll*** (written by Charles Wesley one century earlier) became well-known among American slaves and was used as a coded message for escape during the American Civil War. It helped inspire the blues and was presented as one of the theme songs in the film ***12 Years a Slave*** which tells the story of Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York, who was abducted and sold into slavery for 12 years before being released.

Lyrics: *Roll, Jordan, Roll*
 Went down to the river Jordan
 Where John baptised three
 Well I walked to the devil in hell
 Sayin John ain't baptise me
 My soul arise in heaven, Lord
 For the year when Jordan roll
 Well some say John was a baptist
 Some say John was a Jew
 But I say John was a preacher of God
 And my bible says so too
 I say;
 Roll, Jordan, roll
 Roll, Jordan, roll
 My soul arise in heaven, Lord
 For the year when Jordan roll

Roll, Jordan, Roll lyrics: traditional

Topic 6: The history of the underground railroad

M13 Mapping the railroad

Since the underground railroad is (just) a metaphor, it seems contradictory to map it. But in the novel, Whitehead uses this metaphor to adjust the common notion of what the underground railroad was and deconstructs an oral tradition of imagined coded messages, placed on fences and in hiding spots to guide slaves fleeing from the South to freedom. The truth is that the underground railroad was so much more.



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