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Auszug aus:

Colson Whitehead: "The Underground Railroad"

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Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad*

by Dr. Bernd Kiewitz



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Die Geschichte der Sklaverei und damit der Ursprünge der African American community ist literarisch selten so eindrucksvoll gestaltet worden wie in Colson Whiteheads Roman *The Underground Railroad*. Er bietet nicht nur bemerkenswerte Einblicke in die Sklavengesellschaft der USA vor Ausbruch des Bürgerkriegs, sondern begündet in seiner Metapher 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 ihr Kampf gegen den sklavereigenen *Highway* sind in der Erzählung verbunden mit Zeitzeugen und Dokumenten, welche die Schülerinnen und Schüler als intertextuelle Bilderhugen erschließen und auf der inhaltlichen Ebene interpretieren. Dabei werden auch historische Ereignisse und Ereignisse erarbeitet.

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by Dr. Bernd Klewitz

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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

Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad*

Facts

Colson Whitehead, American novelist, born in 1969 and raised in Manhattan, is the author of seven novels, including his debut work, the 1999 book *The Intuitionist*, and *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which won the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize. He has also published two books of non-fiction and presently lives on Long Island with his family. The African American writer's story about two runaway slaves trying to escape to their freedom by accessing the abolitionist network, the underground railroad, was included in the selection of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club and the summer reading list of former U.S. President Barack Obama.

Cora and Caesar, enslaved on the particularly gruesome cotton plantation of the Randall brothers in antebellum Georgia, try to escape on the subterranean train to freedom, relentlessly pursued by the self-appointed slave catcher Ridgeway and manage to temporarily shake off his crew in South Carolina. What makes this story special are two elements: after a conventional depiction of the slave system in the South of the USA in the early and mid-1800s, the story crosses the line into magic realism by presenting the underground railroad – other than its metaphor for freedom of slavery as hidden routes and safe houses – as an actual railway with engineers, conductors, tracks and tunnels. Cora, however, is repeatedly caught by Ridgeway and temporarily made to live an Anne Frank existence in an attic, an intended historical parallel by the author. There are also implicit references to the present-day ethnic troubles in the USA and the *#blacklivesmatter* network, founded three years before the novel's publication. Whether Cora will make it to the North and find freedom from slavery is shown in a decisive showdown between herself and the slave catcher at the end of the novel. Barry Jenkins, well-known for his film *LaLaLand*, has directed a limited TV series based on the novel, starring Thuso Mbedu as Cora. The series is set to premiere in 2021. A trailer can be watchd here: https://raabe.click/en_um_trailer_UR [last access: 10/03/2021]



Notes on the material

It is advisable to encourage students to read the entire novel in preceding school holidays, before starting the teaching unit. In this way, they can familiarise themselves with the main characters and the plot. Also, they would be able to do some research on historical and current topics touched by the narrative and indicated in the timeline (M1). The results of student research will then accompany the individual teaching steps during the approximately eight double periods needed for the complete unit, which can be evaluated in an essay assignment.

In **topic 1**, students explore the novel's basic elements such as contents, locations and issues contained in the narrative. They use the timeline in order to place events and characters. **Topic 2** provides an inventory of characters. As much as topic 1, this module is fleshed out more extensively and is more time consuming, so it is too much for one sitting. Once completed, it is available as a point of reference later in the unit.

Topic 3 focuses on life on a cotton plantation and presents different perspectives at the novel's starting point – Cora persuaded to run away –, her experiences as a “living exhibit” uncovering the pertinent racism at the time and the roots of slavery in the triangular trade. The film *12 Years a Slave* provides a contrasting view. In **topic 4**, the genre of magic realism is discussed and examined with evidence from the novel, thereby demonstrating that intertextuality not only provides an important element in analysing complex meaning but can also help to uncover historical and political messages in reference to racism and genocide. **Topic 5** provides further examples of intertextuality in *The Underground Railroad* and connects the narrative with important documents from the history of the United States like the Declaration of Independence – repeatedly referred to in the novel in different connotations – and the ideology of Manifest Destiny. In the attempt to map the underground railroad, contradictory at first glance as an attempt to deal with a metaphor, **topic 6** is useful in revealing the motives of the abolitionist network's leaders, but also to show what it means to the antagonists in the story – freedom for the runaway slave Cora and a personal nemesis for the slave catcher Ridgeway. **Topic 7** contains one of the most dramatic episodes of the novel and parallels this quite openly with Anne Frank's fate in the Netherlands. The comparison

between North Carolina as a state without slaves and a Nazi Germany self-acclaimed “free of Jews” (“judenfrei”) in 1942 is a gruesome lesson from history. As a result, the novel manages to draw attention to three genocides: the Native American removals, the victims of the slave system and the Holocaust. A current look at existing tense race relations may include the Charlottesville riots of 2017.

Literature and useful links

Edition of the novel used for this unit:

Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad*. Fleet, London, 2016.

- **Davis, Kenneth C.:** *Don't Know Much About American History*. First Perennial, New York, 2004.
- **Encyclopedia Britannica.** Volume 9. The Encyclopedia Britannica Company, London, 1939.
- **Foner, Eric:** *Gateway to Freedom. The hidden history of the underground railroad*. Norton, New York, 2016.
- **Nelson, Rebecca, ed.:** *The Handy History Answer Book*. Visible Ink Press, Canton, MI, 1999.
- **Roth Pierpont, Claudia:** *The Measure of America. How a rebel anthropologist waged war on racism*. In: *The New Yorker*. March 4, 2004.
- “A Moses of her People”: The story of Harriet Tubman:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2ZMxNhDMIQ> [last access: 04/03/2021]
- A historical play about Harriet Tubman from 1964 (as a black and white documentary):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7J-yWP1f7w> [last access: 04/03/2021]
- The enactment of an interview with Harriet Tubman:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U109jwM9F98> [last access: 04/03/2021]

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