

# Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad*

by Dr. Bernd Klewitz



© RAABE 2021

© Andrey Semenov/Adobe Stock

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 beklemmende Einblicke in die Sklavenhaltergesellschaft 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 Sklavenmädchens Cora und ihr Kampf gegen den Sklavenjäger Ridgeway sind in der Erzählung verbunden mit Zeitbezügen 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.

# Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad*

by Dr. Bernd Klewitz

Facts	1
Notes on the material	2
Topic 1: Exploring the novel	4
Topic 2: Inventory of characters	15
Topic 3: Life on a cotton plantation	19
Topic 4: Fiction and fantasy	27
Topic 5: Declaration of Independence and Manifest Destiny	32
Topic 6: The history of the underground railroad	38
Topic 7: From Anne Frank to Charlottesville	44

© RAABE 2021

## 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:

<b>A</b> Analysis	<b>C</b> Comment	<b>CT</b> Creative Task
<b>D</b> Discussion / debate	<b>G</b> Group work	<b>P</b> Working with a picture
<b>PR</b> Presentation	<b>R</b> Research	<b>RC</b> Reading comprehension
<b>S</b> Summary	<b>T</b> Working with a text	<b>VI</b> Working with a video
<b>W</b> Writing		

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

#### Creative activity



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  
I say;  
Roll, Jordan, roll  
Roll, Jordan, roll  
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 try its mapping. But in the novel, Whitehead uses this metaphor to adjust the common notion of what the underground railroad was and deconstructs an oral tradition that 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.



© RAABE 2021

© The National Geographic Society; found at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/maps/undergroundrailroad/> [last access: 04/03/2021]