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THE USA: POLITICS, CULTURE, SOCIETY – BETWEEN TRADITION AND CHANGE

Das Themenfeld *The USA* stellt die historischen und aktuellen Gegebenheiten in den USA in den Mittelpunkt. Um die globale Rolle der USA als eine der größten Volkswirtschaften der Welt und als eine der führenden Demokratien erfassen und verstehen zu können, ist es unerlässlich, dass sich die Schülerinnen und Schüler eingehend mit den historischen Hintergründen und gesellschaftlichen Konzepten beschäftigen, aus denen sich das Land in seiner heutigen Ausprägung entwickelt hat. Dazu gehören beispielsweise *The Founding Fathers*, *Slavery and Civil War*, *The Immigrants' Experience*, *The American Dream* sowie *The Civil Rights Movement*.

Mit fundiertem Hintergrundwissen werden die Schülerinnen und Schüler in die Lage versetzt, das aktuelle politische, soziale und kulturelle Geschehen einzuordnen, kritisch zu beurteilen und im interkulturellen Vergleich zu reflektieren. Gleichzeitig trägt eine intensive Auseinandersetzung mit dem *American Way of Life* dazu bei, möglicherweise bestehende Vorurteile abzubauen und interkulturelle Handlungsfähigkeit zu erweitern.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912)

by James Weldon Johnson

The excerpt from the novel is set in New York in the late 19th century. The protagonist is biracial but has a very light complexion.

Then I met her, and what I had regarded as a joke was gradually changed into the most serious question of my life. I first saw her at a musical which was given one evening at a house to which I was frequently invited. I did not notice her among the other guests before she came forward and sang two sad little songs. [...] She was as white as a lily, and she was dressed in white. Indeed, she seemed to me the most dazzlingly white thing I had ever seen. But it was not her delicate beauty which attracted me most; it was her voice, a voice which made one wonder how tones of such passionate color could come from so fragile a body.

[...]

Up to this time I had assumed and played my rôle¹ as a white man with a certain degree of nonchalance, a carelessness as to the outcome, which made the whole thing more amusing to me than serious; but now I ceased to regard “being a white man” as a sort of practical joke. My acting had called for mere external effects. Now I began to doubt my ability to play the part. I watched her to see if she was scrutinizing me, to see if she was looking for anything in me which made me differ from the other men she knew. In place of an old inward feeling of superiority over many of my friends, I began to doubt myself. I began even to wonder if I really was like the men I associated with; if there was not, after all, an indefinable something which marked a difference.

But, in spite of my doubts and timidity, my affair progressed; and I finally felt sufficiently encouraged to decide to ask her to marry me. Then began the hardest struggle of my life, whether to ask her to marry me under false colors or to tell her the whole truth. My sense of what was exigent made me feel there was no necessity of saying anything; but my inborn sense of honor rebelled at even indirect deception in this case. But however much I moralized on the question, I found it more and more difficult to reach the point of confession. The dread that I might lose her took possession of me each time I sought to speak, and rendered it impossible for me to do so. That moral courage requires more than physical courage is no mere poetic fancy. I am sure I would have found it easier to take the place of a gladiator, no matter how fierce the Numidian lion, than to tell that slender girl that I had Negro blood in my veins. The fact which I had at times wished to cry out, I now wished to hide forever.

During this time we were drawn together a great deal by the mutual bond of music. She loved to hear me play Chopin, and was herself far from being a poor performer of his

¹ rôle dated spelling of role

compositions. I think I carried her every new song that was published which I thought suitable to her voice, and played the accompaniment for her. Over these songs we were like two innocent children with new toys. She had never been anything but innocent; but my innocence was a transformation wrought by my love for her, love which melted away my cynicism and whitened my sullied soul and gave me back the wholesome dreams of my boyhood. There is nothing better in all the world that a man can do for his moral welfare than to love a good woman.

[...]

One evening, a few days afterwards, at her home, we were going over some new songs and compositions, when she asked me, as she often did, to play the “13th Nocturne.” [...] An impulse which I could not control rushed over me, a wave of exaltation, the music under my fingers sank almost to a whisper, and calling her for the first time by her Christian name, but without daring to look at her, I said, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” My fingers were trembling, so that I ceased playing. I felt her hand creep to mine, and when I looked at her her eyes were glistening with tears. I understood, and could scarcely resist the longing to take her in my arms; but I remembered, remembered that which has been the sacrificial altar of so much happiness – Duty; and bending over her hand in mine, I said, “Yes, I love you; but there is something more, too, that I must tell you.” Then I told her, in what words I do not know, the truth. I felt her hand grow cold, and when I looked up she was gazing at me with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen. Under the strange light in her eyes I felt that I was growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired. She appeared not to have comprehended what I had said. Her lips trembled and she attempted to say something to me; but the words stuck in her throat. Then dropping her head on the piano she began to weep with great sobs that shook her frail body. I tried to console her, and blurted out incoherent words of love; but this seemed only to increase her distress, and when I left her she was still weeping.

When I got into the street I felt very much as I did the night after meeting my father and sister at the opera in Paris, even a similar desperate inclination to get drunk; but my self-control was stronger. This was the only time in my life that I ever felt absolute regret at being colored, that I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins, and wished that I were really white.

984 words

Johnson, James Welden (2022): *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. MacMillan Collector's Library. Dublin. pp. 155–157.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

Assignments

1. Outline the information about the female character.
2. Analyse the way the male protagonist is characterised.
3. Choose **one** of the following tasks:
 - 3.1 “Then I told her, in what words I do not know, the truth. I felt her hand grow cold, and when I looked up she was gazing at me with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen. Under the strange light in her eyes I felt that I was growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired.” (ll. 48–51)
Taking the quotation as a starting point, assess the protagonist’s decisions – against the historical background of his time – to first pass himself off as a white man and then to tell his girlfriend the truth.
or
 - 3.2 Your school is taking part in an international school project on racism in today’s world. You are to contribute to the project’s website.
Taking the cartoon as a starting point, write an article in which you comment on the situation of Blacks in the USA today.



Fresson, R.: For a few weeks, black lives mattered. Now what?
(Zugriff von <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/21/black-lives-mattered-revolt-cultural-debate-hostile-establishment> am 02.02.2023)