"What is an American?"*

Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, popularly known as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, was educated in France and England and came to Canada in 1754 to serve under Montcalm. When the war was finished, he toured Pennsylvania, New York and the Atlantic coast, and in 1765 settled down to a peaceful life as a farmer in Orange County and began to write his *Letters from an American Farmer*. When the revolution broke out, Crèvecoeur fled America, and this is why his *Letters*, written between 1770 and 1775, were published, with some delay, in 1782 in London. They immediately became famous, and the third and best-known of them, entitled "What is an American?," contains the classic statement about the American nationality as the product of a melting of different nations into "a new race of men." - J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of 18th-Century America*, ed. by Albert E. Stone (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 68-70.

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*From Melting Pot to Multiculturalism*
AWARENESS
1 a) What would you answer to the question formulated in the title? (Try to avoid stereotypes.)
b) What do you think you would have answered 200 years ago?
2 What idealistic views do people tired of civilization have of life on a farm? Make use of the pictures on pp. 13 and 15.

COMPREHENSION
3 What are the main differences between Europe and America according to Crévecoeur?
4 State in your own words what, according to Crévecoeur, defines the Americans, this "new race of men" (II. 58f.).
5 What were the motives for Europeans to go to America in 1700 according to Crévecoeur?
6 America gave immigrants the chance to own land. What significance did this have?

ANALYSIS
7 Group the text into paragraphs, find a headline for each and write a short summary.
8 Define the steps by which European "wretches" (II. 6) are made into American "citizens" (II. 24), and make use of the cartoon about "The Mortar of Assimilation" (p. 14).
9 Find out which crown Crévecoeur refers to in II. 36.
10 Compare the definitions of the American given by Crévecoeur and Emerson 100 years later.
11 Crévecoeur refers to the immigrants as having been "useless plants" (II. 18) in Europe and then employs a whole word field that extends this comparison. List the relevant words and phrases and consider their implications.

OPINION
12 Make a list of the arguments for and against the possibility of an ethnic ‘melting pot’ and write a short essay in which you state and justify your position.
13 Consider the differences between the American of 200 years ago and today.
14 In parts of his letter not reprinted here, Crévecoeur calls Americans "tillers of the earth" and says about European immigrants that "the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them," and Thomas Jefferson observes in his Notes on the State of Virginia (1784/85) that "those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God." Take these statements into account, when you discuss Crévecoeur’s notion of owning and cultivating land as a precondition for "metamorphosing" immigrants into free citizens.

PROJECTS
15 Look up what the French Physiocrats (e.g. François Quesnay) or Adam Smith in An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776) had to say about land and agriculture being the sole cause of wealth, and use your findings to establish the intellectual context of Crévecoeur’s arguments.
16 Look up St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians 3: 9-11, and consider how far Crévecoeur’s notion of the American may be related to “the new man” whom the apostle admonishes the Colossians to “put on.” For further information consult Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 81-86.
17 When Crévecoeur wrote his Letters, “nine out of ten Americans were farmers living in a virtually classless society, and all of the best informed statesmen and political economists agreed that agriculture would remain the dominant enterprise of the young nation for centuries to come” (Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America [London: Oxford University Press, 1974], p. 115). Examine the ‘agrarian ideal’ of America as envisioned by Crévecoeur and others (think of Aldrich’s “later Eden planted in the wilds,” II. 11), and work out why a country that was supposed to become a pastoral Eden then turned into an industrial superpower.
for their labours; these accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freemen, and to that title every benefit is affixed which men can possibly require. This is the great operation daily performed by our laws. Whence proceed these laws? From our government. Whence that government? It is derived from the original genius and strong desire of the people ratified and confirmed by the crown. This is the great chain which links us all, this is the picture which every province exhibits [...] .

What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him; his country is now that which gives him his land, bread, protection, and consequence; Utis puni sibi patria is the motto of all emigrants. What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European, nor the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour: his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; it can want a stronger allurement? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all, without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord. Here religion demands but little of him: a small voluntary salary to the minister and gratitude to God; can he refuse these? The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American.

Vocabulary

“What is an American?”
5 alias (n.): a cry expressing sorrow, or fear - 4 wretch (n.): a poor or unhappy person - 8 sore (adj.): painful or aching, likely to cause (something) - 8 affliction (n.): suffering, grief - 8 trouble - 8 to pinch (v.): to cause - 8 penury (n.): poverty - 7 pejorative: of the state of being very poor - 12 severity (n.): severity of the state of being severe, i.e. causing harm, pain, want, or discomfort - 15 to regenerate (v.): to give or obtain new life - 19 vegetative (adj.): 7 vegetative - 1 (eternally) growing or capable of growing as plant - 20 mould (v.): modulation, transformation, or complete change from one form to another, esp. in the life of an insect; 7 indigent (adj.): allowing people to do what they want - 20 ample - 20 enough - 8 more than enough - 50 with plenty of space, large - 29 to accumulate (v.): to make or become greater in quantity or size - 29 to procure (v.): to obtain, esp. by effort or careful attention - 30 to confer on (v.): to give (a little, honor, favor, etc.) - 30 to rely on (v.): to approve and make official by signing (a written agreement) - 39 attachment (n.): fondness or friendship - 41 kindred (adj.): related, belonging to the same group - 42 cord (n.): a piece of thick string or thin rope - 44 consequence (n.): here importance - 50 prejudice (n.): an unfair and often unfavorable feeling or opinion formed without thinking deeply and clearly and without enough knowledge, and sometimes resulting from fear or distrust of ideas different from one’s own - 57 lap (n.): the front part of a seated person between the waist and the knees - 59 posteriority (n.): a person’s descendants - 62 vigour (n.): modum viget: forcefulness, strength; worn in power of action in body or mind - 64 scattered (adj.): small and far apart; widely and irregularly separated - 65 to incorporate (v.): to make (s/h) a part of a group or (s/h) larger to include - 70 discharge (n.): s/h. that attracts or charms - 74 morsel (n.): a very small piece of food - 75 frolicsome (adj.): playful - 76 exuberant (adj.): 76 luxuriant (adj.): of plants growing strongly and plentifully - 76 crop (n.): a plant or plant product such as grain, fruit or vegetables grown and produced or a farmer’s - 78 despotic (adj.): like a person who has all the power of government and uses it unjustly or cruelly - 78 obtrude (n.): a man who is the head of a religious establishment - 85 minister (n.): a person, the former in charge of a single congregation of Protestant worshipers - 83 involuntary (adj.): made or done without conscious effort or intention - 84 idleness (n.)

Explanations

“What is an American?”

In The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-1962), vol. IX, 1843 - 1847, ed. by Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson (1971), pp. 2991, the following entry for 1845 can be found:

Well, as in the old burning of the Temple at Corinth, by the melting & intermixure of silver & gold & other metals, a new compound more precious than any, called the Corinthian Brass, was formed so in this Continent, - asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, & Cossacks, & all the European tribes, - of the Africans, & of the Polynesians, will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages [...]