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Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur

"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.



1 [...] In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have
by some means met together, and in consequence of
various causes; to what purpose should they ask one
5 another what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of
them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about,
who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene
of sore affliction or pinching penury - can that man call
England or any other kingdom his country? A country
10 that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him
no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the
rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments,
who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of
this planet? No! Urged by a variety of motives, here they

came. Everything has tended to regenerate them: new 15
laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here
they are become men: in Europe they were as so many
useless plants, wanting vegetative mould and refreshing
showers; they withered, and were mowed down by
want, hunger, and war; but now, by the power of 20
transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root
and flourished! Formerly they were not numbered in
any civil lists of their country, except in those of the
poor; here they rank as citizens. By what invisible power
hath this surprising metamorphosis been performed? By 25
that of the laws and that of their industry. The laws, the
indulgent laws, protect them as they arrive, stamping on
them the symbol of adoption; they receive ample rewards



This painting by F. F. Palmer from the year 1864 provides an idyllic view of Americans cultivating their own land.

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 Crèvecoeur?
- 4 State in your own words what, according to Crèvecoeur, defines the Americans, this "new race of men" (ll. 58f.).
- 5 What were the motives for Europeans to go to America in 1700 according to Crèvecoeur?
- 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" (l. 6) are made into American "citizens" (l. 24), and make use of the cartoon about "The Mortar of Assimilation" (p. 14).
- 9 Find out which crown Crèvecoeur refers to in l. 36.
- 10 Compare the definitions of the American given by Crèvecoeur and Emerson 100 years later.
- 11 Crèvecoeur refers to the immigrants as having been "useless plants" (l. 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, Crèvecoeur 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 Crèvecoeur'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 Crèvecoeur's arguments.
- 16 Look up St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians 3: 9-11, and consider how far Crèvecoeur'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 Crèvecoeur 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 Crèvecoeur and others (think of Aldrich's "later Eden planted in the wilds," l. 11), and work out why a country that was supposed to become a pastoral Eden then turned into an industrial superpower.



This cartoon, entitled "The Mortar of Assimilation," appeared in Puck, 26 June 1889. It shows an allegorical America stirring the melting pot with the ladle of "equal rights." While all the other immigrants seem to be content, a rebellious Irishman refuses to 'melt.'

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 the 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; can it want a stronger allurements? 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.

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, 1960-1982), vol. IX, 1843 - 1847, ed. by Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson (1971), pp. 299f., the following entry for 1845 can be found:

Well, as in the old burning of the Temple at Corinth, by the melting & intermixture 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 [...]

Vocabulary

"What is an American?"

5 alas (interj.): a cry expressing sorrow or fear - **6 wretch** (n.): a poor or unhappy person - **8 sore** (adj.): painful or aching; likely to cause difficulty or anxiety - **8 affliction** (n.): suffering, grief, trouble - **8 to pinch** (v.): to cause pain - **8 penury** (n.): /'penjʊəri/ the state of being very poor - **12 severity** (n.): the state of being severe, i.e., causing harm, pain, worry, or discomfort - **15 to regenerate** (v.): to give or obtain new life; form or grow again - **18 vegetative** (adj.): /'vedʒɪtətɪv ɪl-,tɛtɪv/ growing or capable of growing as plants; productive - **18 mould** (n.): modAmE 'mold': loose earth that is easily broken into small pieces, esp. good soft soil that is rich in decayed vegetable substances - **19 to wither** (v.): to become or cause (esp. a plant) to become reduced in size, color, strength, etc. - **19 to mow down** (v.): to cut (grass, corn, or what grows in a field) with a mower or scythe; to kill, destroy, or knock down, esp. in great numbers - **25 metamorphosis** (n.): /,metə'mɔːfəsis ɪl-,ɪ-/ a complete change from one form to another, esp. in the life of an insect - **27 indulgent** (adj.): allowing people to do what they want - **28 ample** (adj.): enough or more than enough; with plenty of space, large - **29 to accumulate** (v.): to make or become greater in quantity or size; to collect or grow into a mass - **29 to procure** (v.): to obtain, esp. by effort or careful attention - **30 to confer on** (v.): to give (a title, honor, favor, etc.) - **36 to ratify** (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 - **53 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 posterity** (n.): a person's descendants - **62 vigour** (n.): modAmE 'vigor': forcefulness; strength shown 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.th.) a part of a group or of s.th. larger; to include - **73 allurements** (n.): s.th. that attracts or charms - **74 morsel** (n.): a very small piece of food - **75 frolicsome** (adj.): playful; merry - **76 exuberant** (adj.): /ɪɡ'zjuːbərənt ɪl ɪɡ'zuː-/ (of plants) growing strongly and plentifully - **76 crop** (n.): a plant or plant product such as grain, fruit or vegetables grown or produced by a farmer - **78 despotic** (adj.): like a person who has all the power of government and uses it unjustly or cruelly - **78 abbot** (n.): a man who is the head of a religious establishment - **80 minister** (n.): a Christian leader in charge of a single group of Protestant worshippers - **83 involuntary** (adj.): made or done without conscious effort or intention - **84 idleness** (n.):



Asher Brown Durand,
The First Harvest in the Wilderness (1855)

state of being lazy - **84 servile** (adj.): behaving like a slave - **86 subsistence** (n.): the ability to live, esp. with little money or food

Emerson's Notebook Entry

4 precious (adj.): /'preʃəs/ of great value and beauty

Explanations

"What is an American?"

Intro/2 Montcalm: Louis-Joseph Montcalm-Gozon (1712-59) was the commander of the French troops in Canada. After initial success in his operations against the British, he was placed on the defensive in Wolfe's siege of Quebec, and in the subsequent battle both he and Wolfe were killed. - **44 Ubi panis ibi patria:** where there is bread, there is one's fatherland - **57 Alma Mater:** fostering mother

Emerson's Notebook Entry

4 Corinthian Brass: brass is an alloy essentially of copper and zinc, which is harder than copper and capable of being hammered into thin leaves; among the types of brass known in classical antiquity, Corinthian brass was considered the most valuable. Emerson refers to the historically unfounded legend that this type came into being by accident when, during the burning of the city in 146 B.C., the golden, silver, and brazen implements of the temple melted together and resulted in a new and precious alloy. - **7 Cossacks:** bands of warlike horsemen from the early 15th century who roamed the steppes north of the Black Sea along the frontiers of Russia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire - **12 Dark Ages:** originally a term of opprobrium that identified the 1,000-year period between the end of the Roman Empire and the intellectual Renaissance of the 15th century; now used mainly to describe the 5th to 10th centuries, during which Europe suffered an economic and demographic decline and experienced considerable barbarism