



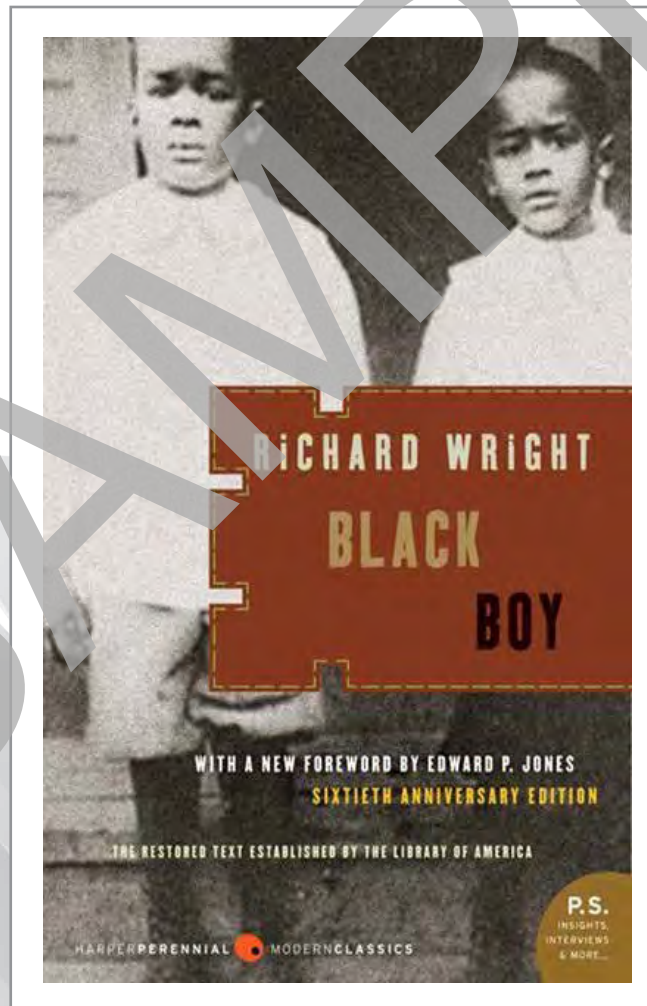
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Black Boy

Richard Wright



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Black Boy

Richard Wright

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

sales@novelunits.com

novelunits.com

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Identifying attributes,
analysis, compare/contrast,
brainstorming, identifying
stereotypes, paradox

Comprehension

Predicting,
summarizing,
cause and effect, inference,
main idea

Literary Elements

Characterization, setting,
allusion, simile, metaphor,
irony, stream of
consciousness, analogy

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, interview,
oral interpretation, oral
report

Writing

Description, report,
autobiography, narrative
poem, five-senses poem,
rap

Other

Art—drawing, collage,
painting, diorama;
Music—spirituals, blues, rap;
Current Events—newspaper
and magazine articles;
Social Studies—research, Jim
Crow Laws, U.S. Constitution

Information About the Novel

Genre: Autobiography

Main Character: Richard Wright

Setting: Roxie, Natchez, and Jackson, Mississippi; West Helena, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; Chicago, Illinois. From about 1912 (age four) until 1936 (age 28)

Themes: Racism; hunger (physical, mental, social, spiritual); quest for self-discovery and identity

Summary

Richard Wright's autobiographical narrative is divided into two sections: "Southern Night" and "The Horror and the Glory." Part One traces his life from his earliest memories at age four until his departure from the South on a northbound train at age nineteen. Part Two reveals his flight from the ostracism and rejection of Southern white people and his search for self-identity and dreams of a better life in the north.

As a child, Wright often suffers from hunger, both physically and symbolically. Some of his earliest memories focus on the strictness of his home and the rigid set of rules by which he must live in order to survive. His parents, and later other adult family members, meet transgression of those rules with quick and brutal discipline, not only to enforce their own code of conduct, but to help Wright learn to avoid brutality from the white community. He is taught by his family, the black community, and the white community that a black child has no chance of becoming more than or even equal to a white child. Yet his desire to learn and his inward rebellion against a repressive society alienate him from everyone.

Wright's father deserts the family early in Richard's life, and his mother's frail health often forces them to live with other family members and to subsist on substandard rations. Wright attends school when possible and works at many odd jobs, often leaving a job because of fear and oppression. His dream becomes focused on one thing: going north. After saving barely enough money to survive, Wright and his aunt leave for Chicago, planning to send for his mother and brother.

In Chicago, Wright does not encounter the racial discrimination he experienced in the South, but finds himself unable to change his outward conduct. He remains on guard and afraid. His series of jobs provide barely enough to live on and leave him emotionally and intellectually stifled. He ultimately joins the Communist party, seeing this as a chance to write and to help his own people. He becomes disillusioned and finally leaves the party, once more facing rejection from those he thought he could trust. Part Two ends with a statement reflecting his reason for writing—"to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside."

Initiating Activities

Choose one or more of the following activities to establish an appropriate mindset before reading the autobiography.

1. View a videotape of the documentary *Richard Wright—Black Boy*. To promote active viewing and improve comprehension, have students jot down events from different segments of his life and their reaction to these events. This can be done in a reading journal or on a handout.

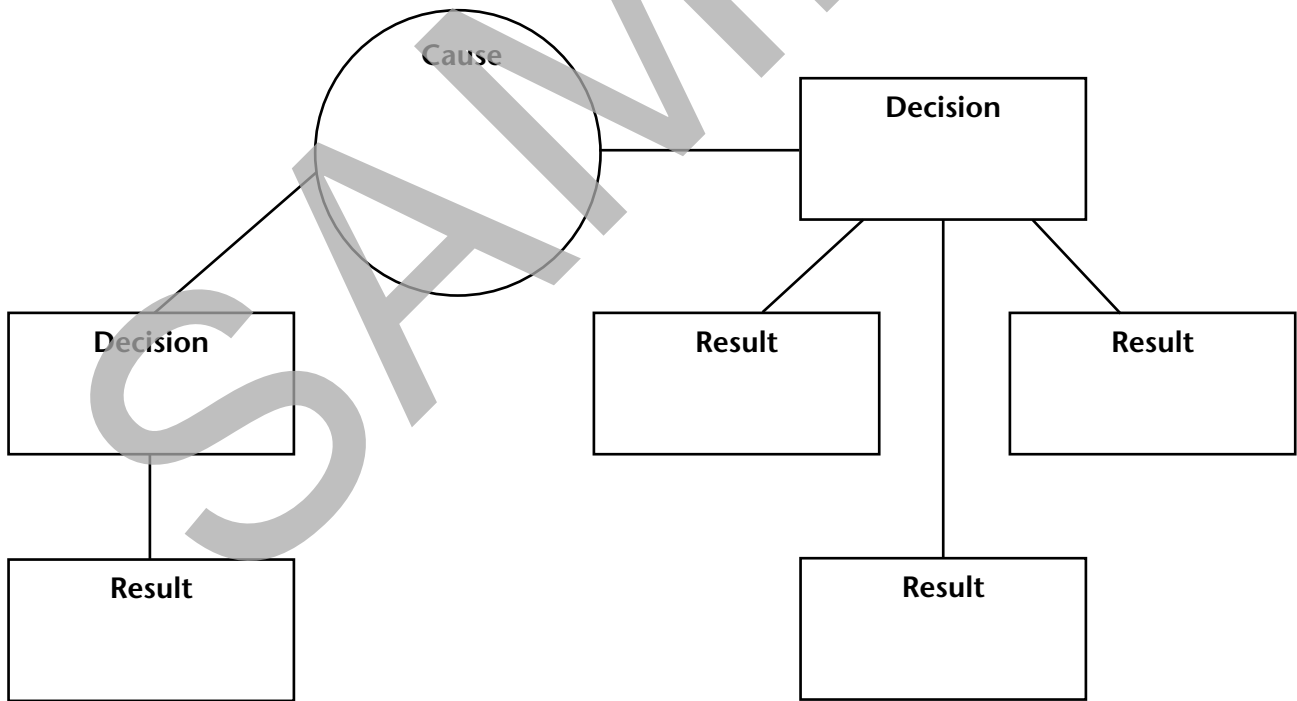
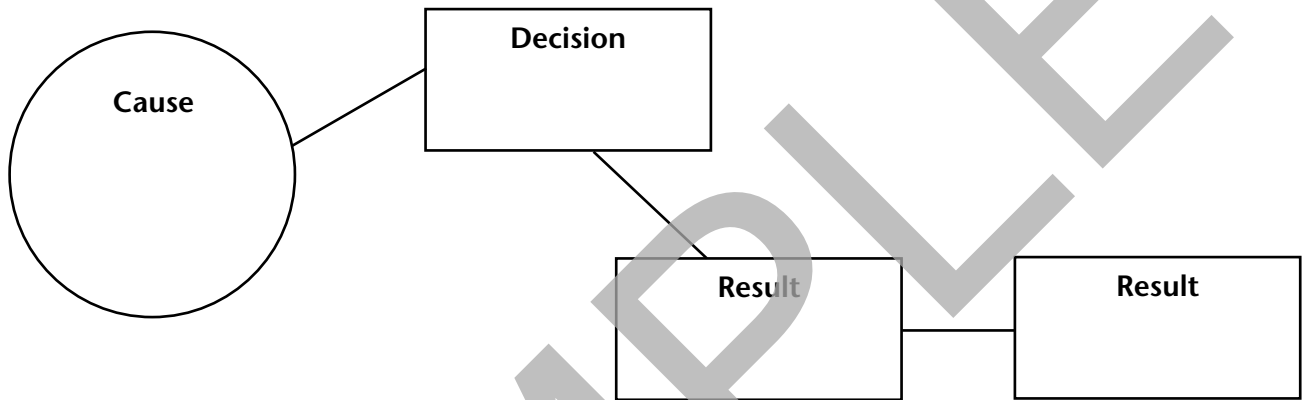
Richard Wright—Black Boy: 86 minutes; a presentation of the Mississippi Educational Television/BBC production; educational video available from California Newsreel, 1-800-621-6196. The documentary first aired on PBS on the 87th anniversary of Wright's birth, September 4, 1995. It depicts Wright's life and work by interspersing excerpts from his works and historical footage with recollections of some of his friends and associates and his daughter Julia. The film traces his quest for self-identity from the brutality and racism of his childhood through his development as a writer. It includes information about his experiences in Chicago with the Communist party during the McCarthy witch hunts and as an American expatriate in Paris.

2. Create Pre-reading Knowledge Chart (see Student Packet, Worksheet #1). Students complete chart independently; discuss after reading the book.
3. Read Langston Hughes' poem "Merry-go-round," which can be found in *Shakespeare in Harlem* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1942) and in *I Have a Dream* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1965). The latter book focuses on the dreams and goals of African Americans in the activist movement and takes its title from Martin Luther King's speech, "I Have a Dream." This is a good resource book.
4. Discuss the Jim Crow Laws (see page 7 in this guide). Focus on the role of African Americans in the South during the late 1800s and early 1900s.
5. Discuss the end of legal segregation. Ask students if they think discrimination still remains today.
6. Have students brainstorm associations with the word *racism* Use the following diagram on an overhead transparency. (A copy is included in the Student Packet for *Black Boy*.)

Racism		
Synonyms	Antonyms	Forms of racism
Groups that experience racism	Emotions associated with racism	Ways to combat racism

Cause/Effect Chart

Directions: Make a flow chart to show decisions a character made, the decisions s/he could have made, and the result(s) of each. (Use your imagination to speculate on the results of decisions the character could have made.)



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5. How does Richard entertain himself while his mother works? What are the repercussions from this? How does his mother handle the situation? (*pp. 20-22: He goes to a saloon, begs for pennies, and watches the saloon activities. When he is six years old, people in the saloon start offering him liquor; this becomes his obsession, and he becomes a child drunkard. His mother beats him, praying and crying over him and begging him to be good, then puts him in the care of a black woman who watches him every minute.*)
 6. Discuss Richard's early education. (*pp. 22-25: The coal man teaches him to count; his mother teaches him to read; he starts school at Howard Institute and learns four-letter words from older boys. He writes these words on neighborhood windows; his mother makes him scrub off the words.*)
 7. What events further deteriorate Richard's relationship with his father? What happens to the family? (*pp. 27-34: His mother takes his father to court, trying to get support money. His father convinces the judge that he is doing all he can; after that, Richard does not want to think about his father again. His mother becomes ill, and the children are placed temporarily in an orphan home, where Miss Simon tries to befriend Richard but becomes disgusted at his lack of response. Richard runs away but is found and returned. He begs his mother to take him home and agrees to go with his mother to ask his father for money. They find his father with another woman, he taunts them, and they leave. Richard does not see his father again for 25 years.*)

Supplementary Activities

1. Analyze the Wright's family structure. Discuss whether or not Richard's mother loves him and, if so, why she disciplines him so harshly. Compare their family with today's society, especially pertaining to child abuse and absentee fathers. Have students bring newspaper and magazine articles dealing with these issues.
2. Analyze the words "slave" and "slavery" and how Richard is a slave to the past and to his own memories. Discuss various ways in which people become enslaved and the lifelong effects of this "slavery." Suggestions: memories, substance abuse, prejudice, etc.

Chapter 2, Pages 36-77

Vocabulary

intangible (37)

surreptitiously (50)

asafetida (72)

emulate (73)

Summary

The family's move to Arkansas, with a stopover in Jackson, Mississippi, opens Wright's eyes to a deeper understanding of the "differences" between blacks and whites. He experiences racism firsthand when his uncle is murdered by whites. He becomes increasingly hungry for knowledge and finds a love for novels. His grandmother's oppressive religion causes him to develop a lasting aversion to Christianity.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain how Richard's life changes when he is taken from the orphan home. Where does he live? What happens to him there? (*pp. 36-45: His mother plans to take her family to Arkansas, visiting Granny in Mississippi on the way. At Granny's, Richard meets Ella, a young black schoolteacher who*

introduces him to novels. Granny's violent reaction to his reading the novels shows him her unbending, dogmatic religion. Granny and his mother beat him harshly for saying obscene words, even though he does not know their meanings.)

2. What is unusual about Granny? Why is this confusing to Richard? (pp. 23, 39, 47: *She is white as are other relatives. Richard has difficulty realizing what "white" means and why a "white" man would not beat a "black" boy if he wasn't his father.*)
3. How does the train trip to Arkansas reveal to Richard the clearly drawn lines between blacks and whites? In Arkansas, what strengthens Richard's knowledge of this distinction? (pp. 46-49, 53-54: *The two lines at the ticket window, Negroes are in one part of train, whites in another; Richard and his mother have a discussion about his ancestry. In Arkansas, Uncle Hoskins is killed by white people who want his saloon, and Richard's family flees in fear and despair.*)
4. Explain the significance of Richard's encounter with the two groups of black men: soldiers and chain gang. (pp. 55-59: *Both groups are in uniform, which makes them seem more like animals than people; he associates the convicts with elephants and zebras. He learns about war and the brutality toward black convicts.*)
5. Why does Richard's mother decide to leave Granny's? What new experiences does Richard encounter because of this move? (pp. 59-60; 65-68, 73: *They leave because of the oppressive religious routine. Richard encounters reverse prejudice [blacks against Jews], learns about prostitution, and experiences renewed fear of whites because of Professor Matthews and Aunt Maggie's flight.*)

Supplementary Activities

1. Read aloud and analyze the series of sentences on pp. 45-46. Note Wright's excellent descriptive writing. Using these sentences as models, have students write their own descriptions of events in their lives.
2. Analyze the superstitions on pp. 71-72. Have students share superstitions that are indelible parts of their lives. Discuss how superstitions get started and why they remain prevalent.

Chapter 3, Pages 78-101

Summary

As he grows older, Richard learns the "rites of passage" from childhood into adolescence, including deepening racial sentiments, interaction with girls, and boyhood camaraderie. He endures a variety of jobs. His mother's stroke disrupts the family structure and forces a separation.

Vocabulary

grapple (81)
elicited (92)

morose (86)
predilection (100)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the "touchstone of fraternity" that binds the black boys together? How do Richard and the other boys demonstrate this? (pp. 78-83: *Racial sentiment, their feelings toward white*)