



 Prestwick House

Activity Pack

BLACK BOY

BY RICHARD WRIGHT



Copyright © 2006 by Prestwick House, Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593. www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to use this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.

Item No. 301990

ISBN-13 978-1-60389-200-1

Written by Darcy Carmichael

Pre-Reading**Autobiography**

Objective: Writing your own autobiography

Activity

Black Boy is Richard Wright's autobiography. He is open and honest about his experiences. He does not write merely the facts of his life, but also describes his experiences creatively to make the book enjoyable to read. He incorporates all the aspects of a story (theme, plot, protagonist, etc.) and utilizes a number of literary devices, such as similes, metaphors, irony, etc.

Take a few moments to consider how you might write your own autobiography. Create an outline of your life. You do not need to mention everything that has happened to you, but choose those events that most influenced you. After you have a complete outline, transform it into a brief autobiography of your life.

Note to Teacher: As an alternative, students could give their autobiographies as speeches or create a piece of art to illustrate their autobiographies.

Chapter 1

Chapter Titles

Objective: Identifying main ideas and themes

Activity

Some authors use chapter titles to give an overview of a chapter's content or to point toward a significant incident or theme. Sometimes, a chapter title is taken directly from the dialogue or descriptions in the story. For example, Chapter 1 of *Black Boy* could have been entitled "Running from Ourselves" or "Starting Fires."

Richard Wright has not titled his chapters, although he has given the two sections of the book specific names: *Southern Night* and *The Horror and the Glory*.

As you read Part One, Chapters 1 through 14, write a title for each chapter. Your titles may repeat an important phrase or line from the chapter, may use a key word or words from the chapter, or may symbolically represent the essence of the chapter. Then, as you complete the second part, create titles for those chapters.

Titles Chart for Part One

Chapter	Your Title
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	
11	
12	
13	
14	

Chapter 3

Cause and Effect

Objective: Understanding how a crisis affects the characters and forms their views

Activity

Richard's life while living with his Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody is fulfilling and somewhat pleasant. He is able to gain some respect for himself at school and feels calm and full while at home. However, after Richard learns that a young boy died in his bed, in his bedroom, not long before his arrival, the calm and fulfilled feelings he has quickly disappear.

From Richard's perspective, compose a note to his mother, who is recovering from a stroke at Granny's home. Your note should focus on his recent discovery and how it has affected him. It can be as short or as long as you feel necessary and written in any tone that you feel best reflects his feelings. Be prepared to read your note aloud and discuss it with the class.

Sample letter:

Dear Momma:

I have been doing well at Uncle Clark's home. I have been trying to follow the rules and do the chores they have given me. I have been attending school every day and have not gotten into much trouble. I have a nice room, but I am frightened because a boy my age used to sleep there, and he has since died. He died in the very bed I sleep in now. I have a tough time sleeping, but Uncle Clark won't let me move. I don't feel safe in that room, and wish I could come home, but I will do whatever you want me to do, Momma. I hope you are getting better.

*Love,
Richard*

Chapter 6

Research

Objective: Relating literature to life

Activity

In Chapter 6, Richard Wright begins to fully appreciate the way he must act, speak, and behave around white people. Though society dictates that a black person must be silent, obedient, and submissive, Wright understands that doing so makes him the slave he is not supposed to be. As a result, he rebels when he can, where he can; ironically, this rebellion is usually against his own family. During this time period, so-called “Jim Crow” laws permeated the South, and Wright’s Uncle Tom is the very symbol of the behavior mandated by Jim Crow laws. His name itself is an allusion to the famous novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. He holds little hope for Richard; after Richard stands up to Tom and will not accept a beating by him, Tom says he is sure Richard will “end on the gallows.”

Using reliable resources, research the concept of “Jim Crow” laws. Make a list of some of the laws that were classified as “Jim Crow.”

Note to Teacher: To extend this activity, you could have students also list when the individual law was repealed, which state[s] had each law, the black/white populations of different states, etc. Also consider having students write arguments outlining why these laws should have been abolished. Students could even write a law that was discriminatory against a specific type of person, although this certainly depends on the individual class.

“Jim Crow” laws the students find might include the following:

- A black person must sit in the back of a vehicle being driven by a white person.
- Black and white children must be educated separately.
- Deceased black people must be buried in separate cemeteries from white people.

Chapter 10

Ethical Rationalization

Objective: Understanding a character's rationalization of ethical behavior

Activity

Wright holds some very convincing rationalizations for breaking the law and serving himself. His thinking has been shaped by his past, by how people treat him, and by his own prejudices.

Pretend you are a psychologist, and Richard has been referred to you for therapy. You have just listened to his reasoning for his actions of stealing money from the theater. Write up a report for your supervisor explaining Richard's rationalization and your beliefs as to why he rationalizes the way he does. Include your ideas on how to show Richard the error in his thinking.

Note to Teacher: The students should realize that Richard's rationalization stems from his past and experiences as a black boy in the South enduring the racial prejudices that were prominent at the time.

Chapter 13

Debate

Objective: Constructing arguments for and participating in a debate

Activity

This chapter raises questions about learning and reading. Wright acquires most of his knowledge through reading whatever he can get his hands on. He has a passion for books and uses his reading of fiction and nonfiction to understand both himself and the world around him more clearly. Many people believe, however, that one has to experience life, not just read about it, to reach the same understanding.

Your team will be assigned one of the following topics and positions to argue in a debate. In constructing an argument, debaters usually research their topic. If you feel you can build a strong enough argument without research by appealing to your audience on an emotional or purely logical level, however, you may also take that approach.

Debates will be conducted in the following format:

Position A gives opening argument. (3 minutes)

Position B gives opening argument. (3 minutes)

Position A makes rebuttal. (2 minutes)

Position B makes rebuttal. (2 minutes)

Position A makes closing statement. (1 minute)

Position B makes closing statement. (1 minute)

At the conclusion of each debate, the audience (your classmates) will vote as to which side argued its position more effectively. NOTE: Do *not* automatically vote for the team whose position you agree with; rather, concentrate on how well teams presented their arguments and responded to those of the opposition.

Topic #1—Reading teaches about life

Position A: Each student should read at least one book a month and write about how the book affected his or her life.

Position B: Students should not be expected to read anything other than textbooks.

Topic #2—Fiction vs. Nonfiction

Position A: Fiction is an appropriate way to learn about life.

Position B: Nonfiction is the only way to learn about life.

Topic #3—Life lessons

Position A: One can learn about life only through experience.

Position B: One can come to understand something he or she has never experienced through merely reading on the subject.

Note to Teacher: Above are three possible topics; there are many others that could be used for classroom debate:

- Neither fiction nor nonfiction is able to present a true picture of the human experience.
- If a reader has not had the experience an author is trying to present, the reader must inevitably accept the author's perspective on it.
- Facts in nonfiction are chosen to present an overall depiction of the topic, just as a fiction author chooses plot elements.
- etc.

Break the class into groups of three to four each. If your class has more than twenty-four students, consider having more than one group debating the same topic.

Chapter 15

Reading Body Language

Objective: Demonstrating ability to read body language

Activity

From experience, people understand that a large portion of language is communicated non-verbally. With this being said, we need to make sure we are reading those non-verbal cues. If we do not know how to interpret body language and facial expressions, we can vastly misread what another person means to say.

Wright states, “[H]ow grossly I had misread the motives and attitudes of Mr. Hoffman and his wife.” Because Wright was not versed in reading body language (especially that of white people), he incorrectly assumes how Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman would react toward him and his actions.

Use a sheet of paper of at least 8 ½ x 11 inches to make a collage of different facial expressions and body language. You should label each picture with the emotion or message you believe it conveys. Once your collage is complete and properly labeled, choose one of the images and write a brief paragraph on why you labeled it the way you did.

Note to Teacher: Another variation of this activity is to have each student pick one facial expression and/or type of body language to demonstrate in front of the class. The other students could then give explanations of what they think the student is trying to convey and how they came to this conclusion. This activity could be done numerous times with different results.

Chapter 16

Free Response

Objective: Writing for understanding

Activity

People choose to write for many different reasons. Some may think writing is purely for expressing ideas, opinions, and dreams; however, writing can also lead to an understanding of a subject, idea, or personal feelings.

Richard Wright came to the realization that his yearning to write may have been more to help him understand life better than to express himself. Choose one of the following topics and write for ten minutes about it. You don't need to worry about punctuation or spelling for this first step—just write as much as you can. After ten minutes, read over what you have written, and then write a few sentences about whether you wrote to express yourself, came to a better understanding of the topic through the activity, or experienced a combination of both.

Topic #1: dreams

Topic #2: goals

Topic #3: relationships

Topic #4: careers

Topic #5: money

Topic #6: racism

Topic #7: religion

Topic #8: education

Topic #9: power

Topic #10: happiness

Note to Teacher: You could choose to randomly assign the topics to make sure all are covered. You may also choose to do this activity more than once so students obtain a deeper understanding of the activity by noticing how their writing might differ from topic to topic.

SYMBOLISM CHART

Symbol	Description of Symbol	Explanation/Associated Meanings