

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Black Boy

by Richard Wright

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Black Boy

Short Summary of Richard Wright's Life

Richard Wright, 1908-1960, is credited with capturing the voice of the Southern black man in American literature. He was born near Roxie, Mississippi and graduated as valedictorian of the ninth grade class at Smith Robertson Junior High School in Jackson, Mississippi. At the age of twenty, he moved to Chicago in pursuit of his dream of becoming a writer. Wright published numerous articles, poems, and short stories and is noted for *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *The Long Dream*, and many other books. Wright died in Paris at the age of 52, having made France his home for over ten years.

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Notes

Written in 1944, Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* was originally titled *American Hunger*. The autobiography is divided into two sections, "Southern Night," depicting Wright's life in the South before he moved to Chicago in 1927, and "The Horror and the Glory," tracing his experiences in Chicago into the 1930s. *Black Boy* is an autobiographical story fraught with the growing pains of creating identity, both of self and of a nation. "Southern Night" is a straightforward portrait of life as a black person in the Jim Crow South, focusing on the abject poverty and prejudices faced by a sensitive and gifted young Richard Wright. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this section for adolescent readers is the disparity between Richard the character and Richard the narrator, a wizened and often resigned first-person voice who hints at the outcome of the story, but allows the reader to experience it along with Richard the character.

"The Horror and the Glory" poses a much more challenging text for readers, as Wright delves deeply into the philosophical reasons for American prejudices and presents both the advantages and shortcomings of Communism. Wright views the concept of the American Dream as fiction for both African-Americans and immigrants and feels failed by the promises of equality America offers. Teen readers may find the second section of *Black Boy* hard to digest, particularly if they do not have a strong background in 20th century American history. However, much discussion can be generated on how the status and availability of the American Dream has changed since the autobiography and many students will enjoy projecting the persona of Richard Wright into today's society.

As a depiction of relations and prejudice in early to mid 1900s America, racial, stereotypical, and ethnic epithets do appear throughout the autobiography. These words represent a realistic view of the times and are not used for shock value. Rather, the shock for modern students should lie in the injustices experienced by Richard based on both race and economic status, not in the occasional presence of epithets. Additionally, Wright occasionally uses profanity and very slight references to sex in the book. We realize that many of our vocabulary words have more than one definition, but we have limited our definitions to those used in the context of the novel.

All references come from the Perennial Classics edition of *Black Boy*, published 1993.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the author's writing style, including using the following:
 - repetition
 - digression
 - events out of chronological order
2. recognize the dual first-person narration of Richard the character and Richard the author.
3. illustrate with detail from the text the characteristics the protagonist possesses that contribute to his decision to become a writer.
4. recognize the importance of education in discerning oppression.
5. cite incidents from the story to trace Richard's growing dissatisfaction with living in the South during the time of the Jim Crow laws.
6. explain how racial, socio-economic, and political prejudice can shape a person's growth and beliefs.
7. identify the tenets of Communism that attracted so many Americans during the Great Depression.
8. understand the human need to belong to a group and Richard's struggles to achieve an identity.
9. discuss the concept of the American Dream and how prejudice affects it.
10. connect the images of darkness and ignorance that are pervasive in the story.
11. define and cite instances from the book of the following literary terms:
 - flashback
 - epithet
 - sensory images
 - alliteration
 - irony

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Which childhood incidents alert Richard to the existence of prejudice?
2. Trace Richard Wright's educational background. What events inspired him to become a writer?
3. What role does religion play in Richard's upbringing? Why does he consider atheism to be more logical than Christianity?
4. Richard's family migrates from home to home. How does this constant moving shape Richard's view of the South?
5. Analyze Richard's contacts with white employers. What does he learn about social expectations and his own viewpoints with each?
6. Explain the symbolism of the title of part one, "Southern Night."
7. Wright uses a style of commenting on dialogue to convey his emotions in "Southern Night." In "The Horror and the Glory," however, he uses the author's aside in long parenthetical comments for the same purpose. Why do you think this is the more appropriate style for part two?
8. Compare and contrast Richard's expectations of life in Chicago with the reality of actually living there.
9. Analyze Richard's devotion to the Chicago John Reed Club.
10. Why is Richard ousted from the Chicago Communist Party?
11. Analyze Richard's prediction that Communism is the government of the future.
12. Richard is constantly out of place—in his family, among his peers, in his society. If Richard Wright were alive today, would he still struggle to find his place in the world? Explain.
13. Explain Richard Wright's disillusionment with the American Dream.
14. In Chapter Fifteen, Wright describes America as an "adolescent." In what ways has America matured? In what ways is America still in need of growth?

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Chapter 1

Vocabulary

bewilderment – confusion
chastened – humbled
clamor – harsh noise
doggerel –poorly written verse
enthralled – thrilled
gaunt – extremely thin
gnarled – twisted, deformed
horde – large number
insistent – firm
jauntily – buoyantly, self-confidently
listlessly – tiredly, without energy
nostalgia – fond memories
ramshackle – broken down
replete – filled
tantalizing – tempting
tenement – cheap apartment
vivid – sharp impression
withering – wasting away

1. What causes Richard's house to catch on fire?

2. Why does Richard hide under the house?

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

acutely -- strongly, pointedly
blasphemous – anti-religious
broached – brought up
doctrine – belief
extolling – praising highly
girded – covered, circled
impending – upcoming, looming
injunction – law
mustered out – thrown out, dismissed
obscure – unclear
substantiated – proven with evidence

1. Why does Wright say, “suddenly the future loomed tangibly for me”?

2. Why does Richard willfully avoid eating?

3. Explain how Richard unwittingly becomes an agent for pro-Ku Klux Klan literature?

Chapter 12

Vocabulary

- aimlessly – without purpose
- capitulate – give up, surrender
- chasm – division, separation
- egging – urging on
- elusive – unable to be found or caught
- hence – from this time forward
- latent – buried, beneath the surface
- objectivity – impartiality
- profound – deep meaning
- provocation – goading
- recondite – deep meaning, profound
- tantamount – equal to
- theosophists – people who enjoy religious arguments

1. Why does Mrs. Moss pledge that she and Bess will no longer pursue Richard?

2. Why does Wright say about Shorty, the elevator operator, “psychologically, he was the most amazing specimen of southern Negro I had ever met”?
