

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Black Boy
by Richard Wright

written by Michael McCoy

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Foreword

1. *Black Boy* influenced the writer of the foreword greatly. It was the first non-picture book that he ever read, and he still has the same copy his teacher gave him. All of us have parts of our lives that, even though they occurred when we were children, still affect us as adults.

Make a list of some of the elements of your early childhood that greatly influenced you. Choose a few of these and write a sentence or two explaining why you were affected by them.

2. *Black Boy* is an autobiography of Richard Wright, a man who was born in 1908. His book was not published until 1945. At this time, World War II was ending, and the Civil Rights movement wasn't far off. Imagine you were growing up during this time of turmoil in the United States. Write a journal entry about what struggles you are facing at this time. What specific challenges would an African-American face that other citizens wouldn't?

Chapter 1

3. Whether it's talking when he should be quiet, lighting his house on fire, or killing a kitten, young Richard Wright is no stranger to trouble. As he reflects back on these episodes in *Black Boy*, it is clear that Wright knew what he was doing was wrong yet continued to do them despite this knowledge. While he doesn't directly apologize, we are lead to infer that he is sorry.

Think of a time when you did something that you knew was wrong and write an apology to the person you hurt. If you can't think of a time in your own life, write a card to Richard's mother as if you were Richard Wright. Be specific regarding how you feel.

4. Throughout his childhood, hunger is never far from Richard Wright. In *Black Boy*, he remembers, "whenever I felt hunger I thought of [my father] with a deep biological bitterness." Associating your father with something as painful as extreme hunger is not healthy for anyone, especially a young child.

Imagine Wright is now a teenager and you are his psychologist. How would you help Richard forgive his father and move on with his life? What would you ask him and what would you expect him to say in return? Write a script of his visit to your office using the prompt below.

Psychologist: Richard, how did it feel when you father left? Did your feelings change after he had been gone for a long period of time?

Richard: I feel...

5. As Richard grows up, we see his mother place more responsibilities on him. For example, Richard has the grocery money stolen from him repeatedly. Seemingly callous, his mother refuses to let him into the house until Richard has done his job. Do you think this is the right thing to do? Write an advice column as if Richard's mother had written to you asking your opinion.

Chapter 2

6. Whether it's in church, at school, or various other places in society, there are times when people need to feel like they fit in. Richard admits he has felt that way many times in his life, but the place where that feeling was the strongest was at church. Because his family were all religious, they put a strong emphasis in being "saved." No matter how hard he tries, Richard explains he just can't feel God, but goes along with the church rituals anyway just so he will fit in.

Can you think of a time at school where you were "acting in conformity with what others expected?" Write an article for the school paper about the pressure to fit in and address whether this is a good thing. If you think it is a bad thing, suggest ways to resist the pressure.

7. At the train station on his way to Arkansas, Richard begins to notice that members of different races are treated differently. It is then that he begins to question his mother as to what it means to have different color skin, especially as it pertains to his family. Richard is angry at the end of their conversation because he feels that she left information out, specifically the attitudes and feelings people have about skin color.

Write a conversation between Richard and his mother as if she did tell him about what being black meant to society at that time. Include whether it would have helped Richard for his mother to address more of his concerns. Do you think it was better for Richard to grow up not knowing what white people, in general, thought of him?

Black Boy

8. When Uncle Hoskins is killed, the reader is not filled in on all the details. After his death, Richard learns that the murder was at the hands of white men who were jealous of Uncle Hoskins's flourishing saloon. Instead of fighting back, though, Richard's family immediately moves away and puts the death behind him. Wright reports they didn't even have a funeral or time to grieve; instead, Uncle Hoskins was gone like he had never been there before.

At this time, the newspapers in the area were mostly run by and staffed with white men. Because of the racial tension, their reporting might not have been as objective as we have come to expect now. Knowing this, come up with a headline for the article that might have appeared in the newspaper regarding Uncle Hoskins' death.

9. Despite the fact that black people were frequently persecuted during this time in American history, in Chapter 3 we see Richard and his friends harassing another person just because he is different. Because the owner of the local corner store is Jewish, Richard and his friends feel like they are superior to him based on religion. Imagine you are the storeowner and are bothered by what Richard is saying. Write an e-mail telling him how you feel and explaining a little bit about Judaism and how its fundamental values are similar to those of Christianity. You may need to consult the Internet or other source.

Chapter 3

10. Even at a young age, Richard and his friends have hostile feelings toward white people, mainly as a result of things they have heard from their parents. It is a common understanding in Wright's group that white people are enemy number one to black people. First, make a list of reasons that are mentioned in the conversation between Richard and his friends that show why black people are justified in hating white people. Do you think their judgment is fair? In one or two paragraphs, write a persuasive argument either for or against this statement:

The black community that Richard Wright belongs to is justified in hating white people.

Use the list of arguments to support your side or refute these arguments with stronger points.

11. When Richard's mother falls ill, it becomes clear that she will no longer be able to care for her sons. Aunt Maggie takes Richard's brother to Detroit with her, and Wright is taken to Greenwood with Uncle Clark. For the first time in his life, Richard is living without his mother, father, or brother. Have you ever been away from home for a long period of time? What did you miss while you were away? Write a letter home describing how you felt, and highlight any similarities you think Richard may have felt.
12. Not long after moving to Greenwood, Richard requests to be sent back to his grandmother's house. This request comes after he refuses to sleep on a bed where a girl had died. Uncle Clark says to Richard, "We tried to make you happy," even though he insisted Richard use that bed. Pretend you are Uncle Clark, and you now have to write a letter back to Grandma to ask if Richard can come to live with her. Explain the situation, and how you feel about the incident. In your letter answer this question:

Do you think Richard asked to leave Uncle Clark's because he was genuinely scared of the bed or because he missed his mother?