Black Boy Book Report Essay, Research Paper

﻿Black Boy

I. Summary

Black Boy by Richard Wright is an autobiographical look at his life. It covers his life from the age

of 4 years to his mid 20’s. The book shows the life of a young black man growing up in the south

with Jim Crow laws and the general hate for blacks by whites. After realizing that the color of his

skin limited his opportunities in the south he dreamed of moving north for a different life.

Eventually he moved north to Chicago, but only saw little difference in racial equality. In Chicago

he began associating with the communist party: because of their fair treatment of blacks. Black

Boy illustrates the plight of black America and how Wright dealt with it through education and

reading. In his quest for knowledge, Wright stirred up animosity among both blacks and whites.

William Wright was born September 4,1908 on a farm in Mississippi. He was the oldest of two,

his brother Alan was a year younger. Wright had a rough childhood; plagued by poverty,

abandonments, and constant beatings by family members. Through all of his hardships Wright

never lost sight of what was important, his education and his self-esteem.

At a very early age Richard has to deal with some extremely tough issues. At the mere age of five,

Richards father left him and the family behind for another woman. This financially ruined his

family even worse. His mother had to get a job to feed them. His father offered no financial

support nor did a court order him to. Because his mother could not earn enough money to buy

food, Wright went out to find work to help; foregoing an education. At age 8 his mother suffered

a stroke which paralyzed her, this made her unable to work. She required constant medical

attention. Wright, his mother and brother moved to his grandparents house. Wright spent most of

his childhood living at his grandmothers. He is treated very poorly by his grandmother and his

aunt Addie. They are constantly beating him for no apparent reason. These beatings go on for a

long time, but he fights back several times against his grandmother, aunts, and uncles. Wright had

a great deal of independence and self-reliance, probably gained by the abandonments suffered as a

young man. Another source of turmoil in Wrights life while living in his grandmothers house was

a matter of religion. His grand mother went to church all the time and was constantly quoting the

bible, but Wright did not believe in God or the church. His grandmother hated him for this

Race relations did not affect Wright through out his early childhood. He did not even realize there

was a difference in color until his early teens. A black in the early 1900’s was supposed to act a

certain way in front of whites: like they were sub-human. It took Wright a long time to learn that.

He would act like anyone else not recognizing whites as superior just equals. He almost got killed

because of it. One day, when Wright was a teenager, a group of white men offered Wright a ride

he said”sure”. Half to town they threw him out of the car and told him the next time a white man

offers you a ride you better say “Sir” or they’ll kill you!

In his teens Wright learned of the north and how much better it was for blacks than in the south.

He worked long hours and tried to save his money but his contributions to his grandmothers

house took most of his money. He could only save $1 dollar a week, he needed $100 for his trip

to Chicago where he had relatives. He resorted to stealing from his boss. He got enough money in

three weeks. He left his grandmothers house which he hated. He promised his mother that he

would send for her when he got settled a promise he would always keep. Although he hated his

family he loved his mother and brother dearly. He stopped in Memphis on his way to Chicago. He

settled there for a little while. He got a job and rented a room with a nice family, but this family

had a daughter that they wanted to marry off but Richard wanted no part of that and moved rather

quickly. While in Memphis he sent for his Mother and Brother. After they arrived they preceded

to Chicago.

Chicago was very different than Mississippi, he saw blacks and whites would walk past each other

on the streets and blacks would not have to avoid whites. There was no threats of lynching and

open violence directed at blacks. Work was also plentiful. Wright never had problems finding

work. Even during the depression Wright had no problem finding work. At this time Wright is

very well read, he is reading some of the best works of his time and through these readings he

develops a very good knowledge of how the world works. He is the epitome of a self taught man,

his intelligence is self-evident. Walking home from work one night he heard a speaker talking

about working class people uniting and taking charge. It is Communism, and from the very

beginning he is taken by its philosophies. He is most impressed on its stand on racial equality. He

joins the communist party and becomes passionately active. Eventually Wright leaves the

communist party because of differing views on the way the party is headed, but he still believes

with the ideology of communism to his death. Black boy ends with Wrights leaving the

communist party. He wrote the end of the book as a foreshadowing of what America and race

relations are headed for. A very grim future.

II. Concepts

a. Culture. A shared way of life: The beliefs, values, behavior, and material objects shared by a

particular people. Richard Wright shows the behavior of blacks around whites. Never looking

them directly in the eye, getting out of their way when a white came by on the street or at work.

Always be obedient around whites. He shows this on page 218 when talking to his friend about

how he acts in front of whites.

b. Stratification. A system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy. The

stratification of Richard Wrights society is one that puts black below that of whites and possibly

even animals. Wright uses an example of stratification on page 43 when he talks of western

civilization and how blacks were kept out.

c. Norms. Rules that guide behavior. Richard grew up with norms like no cursing or using the

lords name in vein. Some rules that were given to blacks by whites are, blacks must say sir when

addressing a white, they must never look a white in the eye when speaking. Stealing is a norm that

Richard shows a different outlook on. (P. 240.)

d. Values. Standards by which members of a culture distinguish the desirable from the

undesirable. One value that Americans possessed is the pursuit of material wealth. Page 321

explains what Wright see wrong with this.

e. Mores. Norms that have great moral significance. Murder is an example of a mores. It is a more

in any time period. Murder among and of blacks was often over looked in Wrights time. He

explains this on page 269, how a black man was lynched and there was no one arrested form

murder.

f. Folkways. Norms that have little moral significance. The way people are expected to dress.

Wright at an early age wants to conform to the way his school mates dress by buying long pants.

(P. 160)

g. Socialization. Lifelong social experience by which individuals develop human potential and

learn the pattern of their culture. Socialization through family and peers were the most important

to Wright. Page 91 shows Wright and his peers and how they live in a separated society. Pages 54

and 55 shows how Wrights mother explained the differences of black and white.

h. Role & Status. Status is a recognized social position that an individual occupies. Role is a

pattern of expected behavior attached to a particular status. Wright had several Role & Statuses

growing up, as a child he was expected to be obedient and respectful of his family. As a black

adult he was expected to become a worker for a white family or boss and be nothing more than

janitor. He was not expected to be able to read and write so well it got him in trouble. Wright

experienced a lot of trouble in his life because he did not always fit in to the role and status he was

expected to. (P. 421)

i. Deviancy. The recognized violation of cultural norms. Richard Wright shows deviance almost in

his entire life. From his fighting back against the excessive beatings he received from his aunts(P.

126). To his aspirations of an education and a better life(P. 390).

j. Primary Group. A small social group in which relationships are both personal and enduring.

Richard Wrights primary group consisted only of his Mother, Brother, and Aunt Maggie.

k. Secondary Group. A large and impersonal social group based on a specific interest or activity.

Wrights secondary groups would consist of his job at the post office, his membership to the

communist party.

l. Significant Other. Is the person that someone would like to emulate. Wright through out his life

did not want to emulate anyone in his race and whites. Wright wanted to emulate writers because

of there skills and what they provided to their readers. He wanted to give readers meaningful

things to read that would effect their lives.

III. Methodology

Black Boy is an autobiography of Richard Wright. Although this is autobiography Richard Wright

tells it like a novel, and is in Participant Observer method. Although in a true participant observer

the person voluntarily puts himself in the group he is studying. Wright was born into the situation

he is in. When he writes this Wright offers insight to what is going on in his mind and also a

retrospect of what he feels when he was writing Black Boy almost 20 years after. He does this as

almost an omnipotent narrator.

IV. Opinion

I would highly recommend this book to people. It is a well written book that reads fast and is very

entertaining. I think it should be required reading for everyone in college. It offers a view that

most white people don’t understand. It would give them a new insight on race relations and look

at themselves as how they perceive blacks. Black children of the 90’s should read this because I

feel it would give them new insight on their own heritage and struggle of blacks after slavery. It

would show them how much they can accomplish even in the face of oppression.