

## ***Black Boy*** By Richard Wright

Background Information on *Black Boy*:

<http://www.gradesaver.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/blackboy/about.html>

Recently named among the top 25 non-fiction works of the century, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* has made a strong impact on American literature with its strong commentary on the cultural, political, racial, religious, and social issues of 20th century American society. Critics often describe the novel as a superb example of subtlety-crafted narrative describing Wright's journey into adulthood. It is agreed that the book monumentalizes an important piece of American, as well as African-American, history.

*Black Boy* celebrates Wright's talent for narrative in its description of the brutal South from the black perspective between 1900 and 1945. Perhaps not meant to be a social commentary, *Black Boy* has nevertheless become an integral piece of African-American literature, dealing with the prejudices of Jim Crow laws and the unity of the black community. Wright criticizes black culture for not providing a strong foundation for its race, but place hope in the idea that African-Americans will overcome and defeat racism. Wright is able to depict being a black male in an oppressive society by selecting symbolic moment from his own life, drawing insights from his own personal experience.

More true, however, is that *Black Boy* is able to transcend what appears at first glance to be a novel from a limited perspective - that of the black male in American society. Rather, Wright discusses a universal existence by discussing religion, intellectual hunger, and basic human emotion.

Published in 1945, *Black Boy* has become a celebrated document of prejudice in the South and struggle in the North for African Americans, as well as a depiction of Richard Wright's version of the "American Dream." The novel met some opposition, not only because of its violent depiction of the South but also because of its in depth analysis of Communism. Apparently Part II of the novel - The Horror and the Glory - was edited out of the first edition copy. The Library of America published the later portion of Wright's autobiographical manuscript, entitled "American Hunger," for the first time in 1991. Whereas Part I ended with a tone of optimism, Part II presented the reader with what critic Jerry W. Ward, Jr. describes as "a lamentation, an extended riff on {Wright's} hazy notion that wholeness and decency and redemption lay up North."

But perhaps the most intriguing lesson learned in *Black Boy* is how Richard discovers the power of his own words, his own writing. Whether or not Wright predicted the profound effect the novel would have on the world of American literature and history is betrayed in his closing:

"I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human."

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## Questions prior to reading *Black Boy*

- What were "Jim Crow" laws? In what part of the U.S. could you find such laws?
- What conditions existed in the Southern U.S. that led many African-Americans to move to northern cities?

**Answer all questions in complete sentences, restating the questions. These answers must be typed, following Typing Guidelines. (numbers in parenthesis are for the orange colored book)**

### **Read Chapter 3: pages 91-96 (78-101).**

1. What is the MAIN point of the conversation on pages 93-94 (79-80)? In your answer, quote the sentence that is most relevant to this question.
2. According to the text, why did Black people want to move North? What was different in the North?
3. Why did these Black youths talk so negatively about White people – page 93 (80)? Be specific.
4. What is the MAIN point of the second paragraph on page 97 (second paragraph pg 83)?

### **Read Chapter 6: pages 171-176 (145-160).**

5. According to the author, how did White people view Black people? Site a specific example to support your answer.
6. How did the author react to what he learned about White people?

### **Read Chapter 8: pages 201-211 (170-178)**

7. Select the sentence on page 201 (170) that you think is the most relevant to the author's views on race relations.
8. Why was the professor surprised at Wright's position on the valedictorian speech?
9. If you had been Richard Wright, what choice would you have made (valedictorian speech)? Explain your answer, thinking about YOUR values versus Richard's - **BE SPECIFIC!**

### **Read Chapters 9 and 10: pages 211-231 (179-207)**

10. According to the text, what was Dick's "problem"?
11. Why was the author excited about the job at the optical company prior to starting it?
12. Why did the White workers change their opinion of Dick?
13. Why didn't Wright tell Mr. Crane the truth?
14. What was the difference between Mr. Crane and most other White people that Wright had dealt with?
15. Compare Wright's reactions to White people in what you have just read (chapters 9 and 10) to his reaction to being told what to say in his valedictorian speech. Explain the difference(s)

### **Read Chapter 13: pages 288-299 (244-257)**

16. Write a paragraph summarizing this chapter

### **Read Chapter 15 pages 310-317 (261-283)**

17. What dreams did Wright have? Did he feel that he could ever attain them? Explain your answer.
18. Why was Wright surprised by this interaction with White people?

**After completing the assigned readings (above), answer the following questions in complete sentences, restating the questions.**

19. What "unwritten" rules did Blacks have to follow during this period of time (in the South)? What would happen if these "rules" weren't followed?
20. Based on what you have learned so far, what is the image of African-American culture today? How has it changed over the last 50 years? Is there anything that seems not to have changed?
21. What does the term alienation mean? How is this term relevant to *Black Boy*?
22. In one of his first contacts with Whites, Wright feels himself tensing up with confusion and suspicion over how to act. Discuss the various forms that tension takes in the course of *Black Boy*. Does Wright glimpse any relief from this tension?
23. What was the result of the lack of educational opportunities for Black Southerners? Do these results still influence in some way African-American attitudes about public education in the South? Explain.
24. Do you think Wright blamed others for his problems? If you had been Wright, how would you have dealt with your "problems?"
25. Discuss the nature of prejudice and how prejudice was and continues to be an exceptionally powerful force in American life. According to what you read, how did Wright deal with prejudice?

Some information in this handout based on <http://www.newsreel.org/guides/richardw.htm>, as well as Harper Collins.