

Black Boy and the Quest to Be Distinct

Daniel Addis

INTRODUCTION

Society and the individual are engaged in a dance. Just as no one can waltz or tango alone, our identity cannot come into being alone. Our growth and development is inextricably bound to our society. Even the personality of a hermit is constituted of elements that resulted from his interaction with society.

However, there is freedom in our dance if we choose to lead it. The leaders of the dance make choices based not on emulation or compliance but on what they think is right, proper, or preferable. The conditions of life limit their options, but they persistently make choices based on reflection, self-examination, and intuition. They are, as David Riesman says, “inner-directed” rather than “other-directed,” and, as a result, they are distinct human beings.

People who make choices based solely on what society or other individuals think are less distinct. They act to please, impress, and placate, or to provoke and irritate others. They embrace beliefs, attitudes, tastes, and styles in order to belong to a group. They emulate the clothing, appearance, and attitudes of others. They follow traditions, customs, and styles. They adopt doctrines and dogma because their church or leader advocates them. They surrender control of significant aspects of their identity to society and thereby become inconspicuous.

Some societies coerce people to surrender much of their identity. In certain neighborhoods, gang members pressure youths to join their gang. In racist societies, the authorities, customs, and majority community impose subservient attitudes to the minority community. Nationalism pressures people to adopt certain dogma and behave aggressively against an enemy. Oppressive governments, especially religious ones, demand that their citizens act according to a code. Even in fairly free societies, the fear of losing power, wealth, popularity, or one’s job impels people to espouse certain values, display certain demeanors, and execute certain deeds. One has to be very brave and determined to maintain one’s authenticity under these conditions.

There are other ways an individual interacts with society, but in this unit we will concentrate on these three: *leading oneself*, *following others*, and *being coerced to follow*.

Black Boy, the autobiography of Richard Wright, poignantly and passionately portrays these three interactions. Richard Wright summarizes his narration with these words: “I was aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others” (38). His father demands obedience and subservience. His grandmother and aunt try to persuade and then coerce him to embrace their close-minded religion. His principal and

companions try to coax him to be a subservient Negro. Prejudiced white workers try to induce him to be an “Uncle Tom” clown. Meanwhile, we read of characters in his life that conform, placate, and demean themselves. However, Richard will not yield. He is determined to think and act the way he thinks is best, and much of the assistance he needs to pull away from the clutches of society are literature and writing. Reading literature makes him more aware of life. Writing gives him the instrument to lash out at society and reprehensible people and express his passions and conceptions.

With literacy, Wright manages his alienation, develops his self, and ascends out of his social condition. Although he despises the faults and evils of certain people, institutions, and beliefs, he does not become withdrawn, violent, depressive, or dissolute. He courageously and persistently strives to develop his self by becoming a cultured, perceptive, eloquent, and provocative writer.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of this unit is to use *Black Boy* and the accompanying work to spur students to become inner-directed. They will learn how society compels and coerces people to be other-directed and realize how a significant amount of their actions are other-directed. As they read, discuss, and write about *Black Boy*, they will focus on the ways Richard refused to placate and surrender to others and persisted to be inner-directed. Realizing how much they are other-directed and seeing the courage of Richard to be inner-directed will encourage many of the students to be inner-directed.

In addition, as the students examine the elevating role literature and writing had in Richard Wright’s life, they will realize the enriching power of literacy—how it widens one’s awareness and deepens one’s perception, how it promotes the development of one’s self, how it serves as an outlet of emotional and intellectual energy, and how it makes one more complex or more cultured—in sum, a more substantive human being. The realization of the power inherent in literature and writing will motivate the students to read and write more.

Becoming a writer gave Richard Wright a quest, a strong reason to be persistent, strong, and enduring. Without this quest he may have become apathetic and dissolute, like some of the other characters in *Black Boy*, or violent like some alienated criminals we see on the evening news. Students often hear about the importance of a goal, but Richard Wright’s desire to be a writer was more than a goal. It was a dream that was sought with great passion and which had great meaning for him; writing was his life. So, the teacher ought to emphasize Richard’s quest and impel the students to examine how it gave meaning to his life and spurred him to overcome such prodigious obstacles so that they will be encouraged to find an object of a quest and pursue it.

Finally, the study of *Black Boy* will fulfill the generic objectives of an English teacher. As the students read, discuss, and write about *Black Boy*, they will think

critically. They will formulate conclusions that are substantiated. They will challenge the views of other students by articulating the flaws in their arguments. They will dispute the teacher as he plays the devil's advocate.

When the students write, they will utilize the writing process. They will brainstorm, organize their thoughts in an outline, elaborate in an organized fashion, write for a specific audience, substantiate their view with reasons, elaborate those reasons with evidence, revise, and proofread. They will write descriptively, use figurative language, and summarize.

As they read and discuss and write about what they read, the students will develop their high level reading skills. They will infer, generalize, compare and contrast, and interpret figurative language.

The interest that students will have in the subject matter of this unit will motivate them to work hard on the challenging assignments and spur them to attain these subjective goals and academic objectives.

DISCUSSION NOTES ON *BLACK BOY*

Introduction

In this section I have noted details from *Black Boy* that pertain to the three types of interaction that an individual has with society: *leading oneself*, *following others*, and *being coerced to follow*. From these notes, teachers can frame questions to induce students to think about Richard Wright's interaction with society and, more significantly, their interaction with society. This is not a comprehensive analysis of *Black Boy*, but it is one that is intended as a springboard for teaching this important story.

I also need to comment that *Black Boy* reads more like a novel than a biography. Richard Wright chose to narrate certain episodes in his life, and he interweaves them to develop themes. He uses symbols and metaphors to vitalize them. And he keeps the story focused on the quest of the protagonist to be an individual, one who is inner-directed.

Discussion Points

The Fire of Alienation

A writer often begins a biography or a novel about a character's life story with a description of his birth, his family ancestry, or the conditions of his birth. Wright begins with a scene of the time he burned down his house. A house is a society of family members. Therefore, we can say that Richard's house symbolizes his society. He wants to destroy his society, and the rest of the book explains why. Moreover, writing this book is

another way of lashing out at his childhood society and burning away some of his resentment.

Later in the autobiography, Aunt Maggie's friend sets fire to the house of a white racist, and he must hide. Richard, too, must hide after he set fire to his family's house. He knows he will be beaten, and he is beaten almost to death. If we continue the metaphor of the burning as a lashing out at society, Richard's beating reveals that attacking society, opposing traditions, or even reforming society, brings a painful price. A comparison of *Romeo and Juliet* can be advanced: Did not they pay a heavy price for going against the custom of their society?

Alienated Language and Behavior

As a little boy, Wright continues lashing out against his society. He takes up drinking and using foul language: two anti-social behaviors. He becomes fascinated with foul words and writes them on the windows of houses throughout the neighborhood.

Alienated from Father

One source of Richard's alienation is his negligent father. When he was with the family, he did not act paternal. Wright narrates no memories of father-son interaction. On the contrary, when his father comes home, he goes to sleep, and Richard and his brother cannot play because the noise of the playing will disturb him. Later, the father abandons the family, causing the family to starve. Richard experiences hunger throughout his childhood: physical and emotional. Later in the biography, Wright writes about the "hunger of the human heart" and "the thirst of the human spirit" (131). Clearly, his father causes him physical hunger and does very little to satisfy the hunger of his heart and spirit.

The Boat and the River: Symbols of a Miserable World

Another episode that has metaphorical connotations is when Richard and the family plan to travel on a boat up the Mississippi River to Memphis. A boat sailing on the sea or river has a long literary history: the ark, *The Odyssey*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The boat is the world or society. The water is the primordial sea—the cosmos, and it bears and destroys life. The destructive nature of the river is demonstrated in *Black Boy* when Uncle Hoskins drives Richard in his carriage into the Mississippi River, and Richard feels terrified because he thinks the river is going to kill him. Later, Wright highlights the pernicious character of the cosmos by commenting that he does not believe "anything can stop [the suffering in the world]" (128).

When Richard hears that the family will sail to Memphis, he thinks they will travel on a grand boat to a place where he will live securely. However, when Richard sees the boat, he is thoroughly disillusioned. The boat is tiny, dirty and "not at all like the boat I

had imagined. On board, the Negroes were throwing dice, drinking whisky, playing cards” (16). This is Richard’s society—corrupt, pitiful, and dissolute. One could go further and focus on the card and dice playing. Wright believes there is no meaning to life. It is a crapshoot. In Memphis, his father abandons the family, and they suffer through intense hunger.

Language as a Weapon

Before abandoning the family, Richard’s father dominated it. Wright calls him “the lawgiver” (17). His word must be followed. If we continue reading this biography as a novel, Richard’s father represents an authority figure, one that coerces and controls others. Wright is in awe of him and resents him. He wants to lash out at him, and the weapon Richard uses is language. When a mewling kitten is disturbing his nap, Richard’s father rhetorically shouts at Richard to kill the kitten. Richard understands that his father did not literally mean kill the kitten, but to make his father guilty, Richard interprets his words literally and cruelly hangs the kitten. Richard uses his father’s words to condemn him. He is doing the same by writing this autobiography. Wright deals with his alienation through language. It is his tool to strike back.

Death as the Ultimate Oppressor of the Self

Richard’s mother makes him repent his act, not through violence, but by haunting him with death. She makes Richard bury the dead kitten, an act that terribly frightens him. Later in the story, Richard is equally as frightened of death when Uncle Hoskins drives the wagon into the Mississippi River so that the water is coming into the wagon. A few years later, Richard is terrified to sleep in a certain bedroom because he discovered that someone died there. He goes days without sleep because he will not go to the bedroom at night.

Richard may see death as the ultimate oppressor of the self. His society has been oppressing his self, but he has the power to overcome his society and develop into a distinct personality. However, he is helpless to fight death.

Perhaps Richard’s religious beliefs, or rather, his lack of religious beliefs induces his fear of death too. He does not believe in God and says nothing can stop the suffering in the world. Richard lacks a belief system that helps him come to terms with death.

Religion as Subjugation

The severity and inhumanity of Granny’s religion is the primary reason why Richard turned against religion. Granny’s religion is a threat to Richard’s self-development. Her religion demands obedience, inspires fear, prohibits self-discovery, and severely restricts freedom. She proclaims that those who do not believe her doctrine will go to hell. She says that reading literature is the devil’s work. She and Aunt Addie often slap, hit, and

abuse Richard only because he asks questions. Apparently, it never occurs to Granny and Aunt Addie that “God is love,” (*Letter of John*) and that Jesus preached love, forgiveness, and mercy. A scene of metaphorical significance is when a preacher comes to Richard’s house, and Richard eagerly anticipates eating a hearty meal; however, during the dinner, the preacher eats so rapidly Richard fears the preacher is going to eat all the chicken before he has a chance to eat one piece. Metaphorically speaking, the preacher, instead of satisfying Richard’s spiritual hunger, is depriving him of the means to satisfy this hunger. Granny, by not allowing Richard to read, is committing the same offense. Later in the biography, Richard comments, “Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual of group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power” (150). The religion Richard knows closes off the self.

Literature as a Door to Self-Development

Reading literature illuminates the world for Richard and awakens his inner being. Wright comments that when he finally persuades the teacher who is living in their house to read to him, something Granny had forbidden, “a reality welled up from somewhere within me. The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. Reality changed, the look of things altered, the world became people with magical presence” (47).

Verbally Lashing Out at Granny for Barring the Door

When Granny comes across the teacher reading to Richard, she shouts, “You stop that you evil gal! I want none of the Devil stuff in my house!” (47). The next scene is more than just a childish prank. Richard tells Granny to kiss his behind. He affronts his grandmother because she prohibited the teacher from reading to him. And like the time he lashed out at his father when he killed the kitten, Richard uses language as the tool of attack. Ironically, Granny blames the teacher for Richard’s indecent comment, but it was Granny’s prohibition of reading that provoked the comment.

Wright associates Granny with the oppressive white authorities of the slavery era, the ones who forbade the teaching of reading and writing to black people and who enforced this code with strict punishment. Just like those authorities, Granny tries to prohibit Richard from reading, and when that failed, she castigates him continually for reading. Wright reinforces the association of Granny with white oppressors by describing Granny as being “as nearly white as a Negro can get without being white” (48).

Placating White People

Another oppressive force Richard faces is the pressure to suppress and even demean oneself in order to placate prejudiced white people. The principal urges Richard to read a graduation speech that will please the white members of the audience. Shorty, an African-American elevator operator, acts like a buffoon for a white man so he can get a quarter. The employees at the optical business fabricate a conflict between Richard and

another black man so they will fight, and eventually they do for money. The experience leaves Richard and the other man feeling ashamed.

Striving for Self-Expression

Being independent and wanting to develop his self makes Richard distinct. Wright says that he had a yearning for a kind of “consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed” (187). When he writes a story, something unheard of for a black man to do in that environment, he thoroughly puzzles the people around him. They ask him several times why he wrote it. Richard does not have a clear answer; no author would have a clear answer to the question, “Why did you write that story?” Finally Richard says that he wrote the story because “I just wanted to” (133). Wright comments that writing was “alien” in the environment which he lived, and just as alien was the desire “to express one’s self in writing” (133). Richard gets the same bewildered reaction when he publishes a story. When he is pressed for the purpose of writing the story, he says, “Because I wanted to” (184). In other words, writing is an expression of Richard’s self.

Racism Suppressing the Self

The burying of one’s identity because of racism is shown by the tale of his grandfather. He is denied a pension from the army because his name was improperly written and he cannot “persuade the authorities of his true identity” (154). His identity is not substantiated just like millions of other people’s identity is not substantiated because they are not full-fledged human beings in this racist society.

Richard, though, is determined to develop his self by enlarging his awareness of the world. He sells a certain newspaper so that he can read the stories in them; however, his gateway to the world is closed when he discovers that the newspaper contains racist propaganda. Richard is enclosed in a racist world. It seems impossible to escape it. Even literature that awakens him is enveloped in racism.

Overcoming Racism on Road to Individuality

To his credit, though, Richard does not surrender; he is determined to be inner-directed. He becomes the top student at the high school, and he attains his demand to give his own speech at the graduation ceremony. He says, “I served notice that I was making my own decisions from then on” (197). After the speech, fellow students invite him to a party, but Richard declines because he does not want to see any of his placating classmates again. He is an alienated individual pursuing self-fulfillment to the exclusion of his fellow classmates.

Another obstacle still facing Richard, though, is the racist society. Richard cannot walk freely, for he may get beaten. If he is in the wrong neighborhood, he is suspicious. He cannot have decent employment because the white men, feeling threatened by him, intimidate him. He cannot even use the library. He has to persuade a sympathetic white man to lend him his library card.

Richard believes he must leave the South and live in the North so he can be free to develop his self. The biography stops with his plans to move to Chicago, but if we read the outline of his life in the back of the book, we realize that the North did not let him live freely either. Wright leaves the entire country and lives in Europe.

Escape to Freedom

Richard's saga makes me think of Daedalus, the prisoner who escapes Crete by making wings and flying off. Wright tries to physically escape the oppression of his self by fleeing, but his true wings were literature and writing.

DIRECTED READING OF *BLACK BOY*

Black Boy will be studied through directed reading and writing. A way to encourage participation is to give the students the option to work with one or two partners or by themselves. Since teenagers are so sociable, they work well in a group. Moreover, some lack the self-discipline to work well alone; they will procrastinate, seek entertainment, or even try to go to sleep. Some need help from others. Then there are those who prefer to work alone, so I give them that option.

The groups will have three members. A group of three works well because it is not too large so that it allows some members to mangle, and it provides the students with enough partners to help them figure out problems and keep themselves on task. Although the students are in a group, they all must turn in work. I use to let the members write their names on one sheet of paper and work together, but I have found that one student did almost all the work or they would take turns doing the questions and reading. Therefore, I let them discuss among themselves, but I want all of them to elaborate their responses in writing.

Through the years I have tried various directed reading methods, such as oral reading, silent reading with questions, and assigned reading for homework with a reading journal. These have not been very successful. Lately, I have devised the following system: I write questions on a transparency, questions that require the students to reflectively read a certain section; I reveal one question at a time by covering the rest with a sheet of paper; I tell the students to read from one point to another and then answer the question projected on the screen; I walk around and check off correct answers or tell a student who wrote a weak answer to reread or think some more.

When a befuddled student asks for help, I ask him a more elementary question, one whose answer will lead him to figure out the answer to the assigned question. For example, the question may be “How does the narrator feel about death?” I will answer that question by asking, “What do you think he was thinking when the story mentions that he stayed awake late at night staring at the darkness?” My question should lead a student through the thinking process. The students must learn that in order to answer a complicated question, one must ask and answer elementary questions.

Besides checking the students’ answers, I point out grammatical errors. The most common infractions are the misuse of *there*, *their*, and *they’re*, using *don’t* as a singular verb, and using singular verbs without an *s*. I have tried requiring them to correct sentences with these errors and then discussing the mistakes with them. I have tried circling misuse in their essays. These methods have had only marginal success. However, pointing out these errors just after they wrote them, face to face, is more potent and has been more successful. Sometimes students ask me to explain the grammatical mistake.

When about all of the students have answered the prescribed question, I start a discussion, not about the question, but about other important aspects of that passage, such as figurative language, tone, character, or theme. I especially bring up provocative issues in order to stimulate discussion and involve the students in the tale.

To break the routine and enliven the class, I interject oral reading. I do this with dramatic passages or ones that have a spirited conversation. Students especially enjoy hearing me read an argument out loud. If I have a student who is adept at reading aloud with emotion, I ask her or him to read to the class.

This directed reading method has other advantages. It gives the students a chance to earn a grade for reading, a factor which is most important because most high school students, even the advanced ones, will not do an activity with much effort if they do not get a grade for it. Furthermore, when the teacher walks around and checks off the students’ answers and praises their thoughts and comments, he motivates them to continue reading. The questions on the transparency focus the students on the passage and facilitate their comprehension. Varying silent and oral reading reduces monotony. Mixing reading with discussion gets the students responding so that they will not get bored or weary from the silent reading. Assigning a specific passage and revealing a question only for that section keeps the students on the same part of the story and it allows the teacher to concentrate on details of that section. Also, the teacher can bring up provocative and interesting issues of the section to stimulate interest and suspense that will motivate the students to read some more.

DIRECTIVE WRITING ABOUT *BLACK BOY*

Before we begin reading *Black Boy*, I will assign an essay about the main themes of this unit: *following others, being coerced to follow, and leading oneself*. Details of this assignment are in the “Lesson Plan” section of this unit. I distinguish between a full-length essay and a short essay. The former has three to five paragraphs and has an introduction, body, and closing. The short essay is usually a paragraph that has a topic sentence, supporting details, and a closing sentence. After the students read a chapter or a significant passage of *Black Boy*, I will assign a short essay about an aspect of that chapter. I will lead the students to formulate an outline. On the board, I will write *Topic Sentence* and write a question whose answer will be the thesis of the essay. Under that, I will write *Details* and with the class, we will note down details from the chapter that support the thesis. When there are two possible theses, I will lead them in formulating two lists that note details supporting each point of view. Then, under that, I will write *Closing*. To further assist them, I will list descriptive words that pertain to the essay’s topic. I also will emphasize elaborating the notes, not writing them word-for-word. I will give them an example by verbalizing an elaborated version of the outline. Hearing me do this gives the students the gist of what they should do.

I will project some essays on the screen with an OPAQ projector, and lead the class in evaluating them. As I read an essay, I will pause at appropriate times and ask the class about the writing style. I will focus on what is good and, when a shortcoming is apparent, inquire what can be done to improve it. Teenagers are especially sensitive about their writing, so I sympathetically lead the class through this evaluation. I make a point to find aspects to praise because praise powerfully motivates and enforces good habits. As the class participates in this evaluation they are learning about fine writing.

When I grade essays, I give simple comments about the style, such as, “Needed more elaboration.” I also comment on the content so that the writers will feel I am reading their work because I am interested in their point of view. Other times, I have the students assess each other’s essays. On the board, I list the basic elements of the short essay, such as topic and closing sentences and supporting details. I also include questions that the essay should have answered. In general, the rubric is this: if the essay has a topic and closing sentence and is elaborated well, the grade will be in the 90’s, (left to the judgment of the evaluator); if the essay needed more elaboration but has a topic and closing sentence, the grade will be in the 80’s; if the essay is elaborated poorly and did not have a closing, the grade will be in the high 70’s; if the essay lacked organization and elaboration, the grade will be in the low 70’s. In addition, the students will deduct one point for each grammatical error, so that, for example, if an essay was an 85, but had three grammatical mistakes, it will be an 82. I adjust the rubric to fit the individual essay.

The value of this exercise is that it imprints in the minds of the assessors the basic components of a good essay, and it provides them with good and bad examples of writing. Moreover, it allows teachers to assign a healthy amount of writing because they will not become burdened with a huge amount of grading.

LESSON PLANS

A Prelude Essay

At the start of this unit, the students will write an essay that contrasts other-directed and inner-directed behavior and then explains which mode of living is better. This essay will be a good way to teach the students the main themes of this unit: *following others*, *being coerced to follow*, and *leading oneself*. The students will learn what is inner-directed and other-directed behavior. They will learn that two modes of other-directed behavior are persuasion and coercion. Then they will choose which is the best way to live.

The essay question will be: *Should you follow and obey others or should you make decisions on your own without caring whom you displease?*

I will begin this lesson by introducing the terms *other-directed* and *inner-directed*. *Other-directed* means being influenced and controlled by people, institutions, and customs. *Inner-directed* means reflecting on the available options and choosing the best one. To clarify *other-directed* behavior, I will ask for ways people, institutions, and customs influence and control us. Then I will ask for examples of times when they reflected and made a choice independently, and we will discuss it.

Next, I will lead the students in formulating an essay outline. The first component is the introduction, and I will explain the *Defining the Issue and Taking a Stand* type of introduction. The issue in this essay is how people make choices—following, obeying, and leading themselves. After defining these, the students will state which is the best way to live. On the board I will write:

Introduction

–*Explain “other-directed”*

–*persuasion*

–*force*

–*Explain “inner directed”*

–*(Thesis) Which way is the best way to live?*

Next I will lead them to outline the body. I will ask, “What does the body need to explain?” My questioning should draw out an outline like the one below:

Body

- *State one reason why being inner-directed is better. Then elaborate it with examples.*
- *State another reason why being inner-directed is better. Then elaborate it with examples.*
- *State a third reason why being inner-directed is better. Then elaborate it with examples.*

Then I will elicit an outline of the closing:

Closing

- *In an eloquent way, emphasize why leading oneself is the best way to live.*

After the outline as been composed, I will elaborate the logic behind the outline structure and emphasize to them how effective this structure is. We present the issue, take a stand, and then explain why our stand is correct. In addition, I will explain how useful an outline is. An outline directs our writing. It provides us with a structure to follow. Consequently, we can concentrate on how to explain well.

I have also found it effective to verbally compose the essay to them. Students tend to write coarsely and blandly. They do not include elaborated details and vivid descriptions. To remedy this, I orate portions of the essay, such as the introduction, parts of each body paragraph, and the closing. From this verbalization, the students get a better understanding of how they should elaborate; consequently, they develop their composition better.

Reading Chapter One

The Title

After discussing *following others*, *being coerced to follow*, and *leading oneself* and writing an essay about these issues, we will begin reading *Black Boy*. I will first lead a discussion about the title, using the “Questions about the Title” as a springboard for discussion.

Questions about the Title

1. What does the title mean?
2. What are the connotations of the word *boy* when it is used in the context of calling a black person *boy*?
3. Why does the author use the adjective *black*?
4. Does the adjective *black* have a positive or negative connotation? How?

5. What emotion does this two-word title convey? —Joy, anger, sadness, pride? Why?
6. Since this is the story of the author’s life, why did he entitle it *Black Boy* instead of *The Childhood of Richard Wright*? —What is Wright trying to say by giving his work this title?

Silent Reading and Discussion of Chapter One, Pages 9–14

In the Harper Perennial edition of *Black Boy*, Chapter One begins on page nine. I will have the students read pages nine to fourteen, which is where a catalogue of descriptions begins. After they read each page, the students will answer the question of that section in writing. All of the questions are listed below under “Reading Question.” The questions will be on a transparency, and only the question of that section and the previous questions will be revealed. The subsequent questions will be covered with a piece of paper. When I see that some of the students have finished and are writing, I will walk around the classroom and check off some of their answers. After it is apparent that all or almost all have finished reading that section and answering the question, I will lead a discussion about that section using the questions listed under “Discussion Questions.” After concluding the discussion of that section, the students will read the next section, and I will finish checking off the answers of the students that I missed prior to discussing that section. As I check their answers, I will instruct them to correct grammatical errors or elaborate more. This pattern will be followed until they have finished reading page fourteen.

Reading Questions

1. (page 9) Why is Richard upset with his mother?
2. (page 10) Do you think Richard’s actions were childish innocence or did he intend to do this for a specific reason? Explain why you think so.
3. (page 11) Explain how Richard is feeling and why he is feeling this way.
4. (page 12) Explain Richard’s relationship with his father.
5. (page 13) Explain in descriptive language Richard’s condition.

Discussion Questions

Page 9

- What is the figurative meaning of Richard’s mother ordering him to keep quiet and obey? —How do these orders pertain to life?
- Why do you think Wright begins his tale this way? —What is he trying to say about his life?

Page 10

- What is the figurative meaning of Richard being interested in fire and then setting fire to the broom, the curtains, and then the house?
- Discuss what fire does. (Answer: *Destroys and then produces new life—e.g. forest fire, the Phoenix*)

- Discuss the symbolism of fire—mention that it symbolized the Holy Spirit in Christianity
- What does the meaning of fire telling us about this tale?

Page 11

- Continue discussing the figurative meaning of this episode: Richard setting fire to his house connotes attacking and destroying his society and its customs; therefore, what does his realization that he must hide figuratively mean? What does the danger of his grandmother, mother, and brother figuratively mean? (Answer: when one attacks society, he puts not only himself in jeopardy, he puts others, including his loved ones, in jeopardy.)

Page 12

- What does this section tell us about Richard’s relationship with his father?

Page 13

- Continue discussing the figurative meaning of this episode: Richard setting fire to his house connotes attacking and destroying his society and its customs; therefore, what does his beating signify?
- Wright comments, “My body seemed on fire.” What is the meaning of that figurative statement?
- In his stupor, Richard saw “huge wobbly white bags” suspended above him, and he was terrified that they would fall and drench him with a horrible liquid. What is the meaning of that figurative description?
- Wright comments that “Exhaustion would make me drift toward sleep and then I would scream until I was wide awake again; I was afraid to sleep.” What are the figurative meanings of *sleep* and *wide awake*. How is *wide awake* a metaphorical description of Wright composing this biography?
- Wright comments, “I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me.” His mother literally almost killed him. In an intellectual sense, how could his mother have *almost killed* him?

After reading these pages the students will write a short essay, a paragraph about a page long.

Short Essay

What do you think bothered Richard about his society that he, in a figurative sense, wanted to destroy it? Answer this question in a paragraph. Use the following format.

Topic sentence: answer the question.

Body: explain in detail your response, using examples

Closing: eloquently restate your main point

I will lead the students in brainstorming the possible problems Wright faced as he grew up. The students should come up with responses pertaining to racism, parent-son

conflict, poverty, and problems at school. I will jot these on the board in the form of headings. I then will ask them for specific examples for each response and note them down under appropriate heading. For example, I will ask them, “What were the racial problems during the first twenty or thirty years of the twentieth century in the South?” Under *Racism* I will jot down, *segregation—blacks not aloud*. The students will elaborate these notes in their short essay.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, Houston A. "Reassessing (W)right: A Meditation on the Black (Whole)." In *Modern Critical Views of Richard Wright*. ed by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
A discussion of how Richard Wright, in his works, captures the essence of being African-American in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Brignano, Russell Carl. *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970.
A discussion of Wright's artistry as a writer and his major public concerns.
- Erikson, E. H. *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968.
Adolescents face a conflict between identity and identity confusion: identifying with others versus developing their own identity.
- Kent, George. "Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture." In *Modern Critical Views of Richard Wright*. Ed by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
A discussion of Richard Wright's depiction of African-Americans' connection to Western culture.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
The individual has the freedom of choice; on him lays the burden and the exhilaration of free will.
- Margolies, Edward. *The Art of Richard Wright*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1969.
An analysis of the works of Richard Wright.
- Monroe, William. *Power to Hurt*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
An examination of alienation using various works of literature.
- Riesman, David. *The Lonely Crowd*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956.
A discussion of the way that one kind of social character, which dominated America in the nineteenth century, is gradually being replaced by a social character of a different type.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is Humanism." in *European Existentialism*. ed by Nino Langaullio. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997.
Human beings have the responsibility to choose. We are how we act—existence precedes essence.

Smelstor, Marjorie. "Richard Wright's Beckoning Descent and Ascent." in *Richard Wright, Myths and Realities*. ed by C. James Trotman. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988.

An analysis of *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*.

Stepo, Robert B. "Literacy and Ascent: *Black Boy*." In *Modern Critical Views of Richard Wright*. ed by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.

An analysis of *Black Boy*, focusing on how literacy help Richard Wright ascend out of his oppressive environment.

Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

A discussion of individuality and how individuality is connected to our social condition.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1937.

Richard fights off the molding power of society to become a distinct personality and writer.