Black Boy

Concept/Vocabulary Analysis


Summary

Richard Wright recounts vivid details, memories, and times of his life from childhood to adulthood in this biography. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, Wright recounts a childhood that is full of hunger, fear, physical beatings as discipline, and racism. At six he is a drunkard, going into saloons to beg drinks. After his father leaves the family his mother struggles to support the family for a while before moving to Arkansas to live with Wright’s aunt and uncle. While he is there, he learns how to fight to fit in, and that adults cannot be trusted. After his mother suffers a stroke Wright moves with his family to his grandmother’s house, after which he and his brother are sent off to live with other uncles. However, he soon returns to his grandmother’s house after not being able to endure conditions at his uncles house. While at his grandmothers’, he has to deal with angry and religious family members that are constantly chastening him, in addition to his mother’s ever-present illness. By the time that he graduates from ninth grade as a valedictorian, he has only been to a few full years of school. He graduates with a dream to move with his mother and brother up North. He also dreams of writing, and is always challenging his racial place in society and its lack of intelligence. When he saves up enough money, he moves to Memphis and works independently until he has enough money to bring his mother and brother to live with him. During this time he holds a variety of jobs, experiences hunger, and is able to feed his appetite for books. He moves again with his family to Chicago, where he becomes more involved with reading and writing, primarily through the Communist party. This is the time of the Great Depression, however, and he and his family have to work hard and often go hungry. After some time, Wright leaves the Communist party because he doesn’t believe in the way they conduct themselves among the party, even though he still believes in some of their ideas of equality.

Organizational Patterns

Black Boy is organized into numbered chapters, which range from five to twenty pages in length, and are untitled. They are then divided into two parts. The first part is named Southern Night, and the second part is The Horror and The Glory. These two parts are very significantly

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named, because the first part is about his life in the South, and the second is about his life living in the North. Wright’s story is in biography form, through his own eyes and with his own perspectives, questions, and thoughts.

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue**

How does one fit into the society in which they live, despite societal challenges, economic difficulties, and prejudices?

- How does one confront or deal with prejudices or discrimination?
- How do you determine who you are as an individual in spite of what others or society tells you?
- How do you function within your society?

**Issues Related To This Study of Literature**

**THEMES**

**Racism is a social construct that can be challenged by learning.** Because Wright is black, he faces many challenges and abuse at the hands of a racist society in the 1910’s, 20’s, 30’s, and on. He is frequently the victim of Jim Crow laws and of a family who does not seek to learn or move up in society, but merely to survive: the fate of many black people at the time. However, Wright has a questioning personality from the beginning, and he constantly questions his place in society relative to race. He refuses to debase himself, and does not restrain himself when it comes to learning, reading, and writing; things that are not common among African Americans at the time. There are two distinctions to be made between racism in the South and the North, and Wright encounters both of these in the places that he lives. He reacts to both, and is constantly determining his place in society as well as the place and future of African Americans as a people. He frequently examines his place as he differs from or suffers with people of his same race. Additionally, fear is a tool used by many who subscribe to racism or used by those who reinforce their place in society.

**Hunger of A Physical and Mental Kind.** Hunger is a constant presence in Wright’s life, from the time he was born, growing up, and even into adulthood. His and his family’s physical hunger is accentuated by their poverty, living in the South, and by the Great Depression. However, Wright has his own personal hunger: that for knowledge. He excels in school when he is actually there long enough to participate, and he is constantly finding things to read. Reading opens up a new world for him, one that he constantly craves and seeks after. He even borrows a library card from a white man at the place he works, just so he can go and check out books at the local library, something he would not otherwise be able to do because of his race. A few times when Wright is growing up he writes stories that get published in a local newspaper, but he does not come fully into writing until he moves to the North. He starts out slow, struggling to write even simple sentences that show the complex things that he is thinking and feeling. However, he teaches himself how to write, and eventually begins to write and participate in more intellectual conversations as he joins a club that is part of the Communist Party.
Although he eventually leaves this party, he gains much experience with writing and with discovering the things that he really wants to write about.

**Personal strength can help you defend yourself against limits that others put upon you.** Wright is a rare example in his time of a black person that holds himself to a higher standard. He has a strong moral conscience. He is extremely adverse to lying, stealing, and cheating—things that are commonplace among others of his race at the time. Instead, Wright relies on hard work and his own moral strength and direction to survive. However, there are a few numbered times in which Wright does submit to stealing and lying, and he discusses in great length how despicable it made him feel, and how doing it makes him feel even lower than he already is in society. Throughout his life, Wright relies on his personal strength to guide him through hard times and tough decisions. He strives constantly to remain true to his own moral sense and act with dignity and pride.

**The Power of Art.** From a young age Wright recognizes the power in the written word and its ability to transport the reader to a different place, as well as its ability to convey ideas. Also, art is one of the only things that ever move Wright emotionally. There are a number of times that he has very emotional responses to stories or to books. These include when he hears Bluebeard’s story from the schoolteacher, when he writes the story of the Indian girl, when he reads scientific and horror fiction, when he uses the library card of his white coworker and reads H.L. Mencken, when he writes the short story “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre”, and when he writes for the Communist party. Writing is a way of redemption for Wright, even as he writes this novel as his biography, and as he finds a creative way to express himself, his ideas, and his passion. He uses writing to make meaning of himself and the world around him.

**SETTING**

The major locations of this novel are in Memphis, Arkansas, Mississippi (on the streets and Granny’s house), and in Chicago. On a more general level, it’s important to note that there are clear distinctions between the setting in the South and the setting in the North; for the most part these are racial distinctions as well as differences of the attitudes of the people inhabiting the place. Each separate setting effects Wright in different and notable ways.

**NARRATIVE VOICE**

Wright’s novel is in biography form, through his own eyes and with his own perspectives, questions, and thoughts. Wright is curious as a young child, always getting into trouble that almost always ends up in his being whipped or beat. He never stops wondering about the world around him, and constantly asks questions—when he is young these questions are aloud—but as he gets older these questions turn into musings, thoughts, and questions about his life and the society that surrounds him. He challenges racism by his very questioning nature and refusing to accept his place in a racist society; a place where the black man acts stupid, submissive, and never has a desire for education. Throughout his life as he tell it in this novel, Wright is
constantly working hard, going hungry, and fulfilling his insatiable appetite for art through the written word. Additionally, students should consider how Wright’s story is only told through his perspective. This might be limiting inasmuch as it does not show the thoughts, motivations, or points of view of any of the other characters. Wright does often present their actions accompanied by his beliefs about why they acted that way, and students might find that helpful as they seek to better understand the people that surround Wright.

**Conflict**

**Internal:** Wright has many internal conflicts throughout his life. Many of these are related to his place in a racist society. Wright struggles with how so many black people around him are sunk in poverty, with nowhere to turn except for their equally poor families who are also mired in the stereotype of the dumb and submissive black man and are subject to racist Jim Crow laws, particularly in the South. Wright constantly questions his place in this society. He also finds that many black people steal, lie, and cheat in order to get a little bit ahead or to even just survive. Many times Wright is faced with opportunities to do this, and many times he refuses. There are a few notable moments when he succumbs to this temptation, such as when he takes advantage of his white boss in the movie theater, steals and sells fruit preserves and a stolen gun. He does this in order to move to the North and get out of the highly volatile racial situation in the South, hardly a trifling cause.

**External:** Not only is Wright struggling internally with his thoughts about his society, but he faces countless external struggles as well. These come in the form of violence. He meets with violence at almost every other moment in his life. As a small child, this violent conflict comes when he challenges the commands of his parents and gets whipped. As he gets older, he must fight to establish his place in the schoolyard. When he begins to work, he is constantly in the middle of violent racial prejudice with his coworkers. Many times, particularly when he works in the optical shop in Mississippi, he becomes the victim of discrimination and petty tricks played on him by the other white employees. Even when he moves North to Memphis and Chicago he is constantly struggling against the black man’s place in society, which is often a very literal place: at the back of the theater, in separate facilities that are in terrible condition. Wright overcomes some of this conflict as he joins the Communist party and becomes the secretary of the local club, but still faces it in his everyday life as he tries to earn a living for his family in the times of the Great Depression. Wright faces a very literal, violent struggle against the world to survive.

**Genre**

Genre is an important vocabulary term to consider. *Black Boy* is a biography, and it is the story of the author’s life told from his point of view. Students should explore what this means to the writing and how they should consider it. First, they should consider it as an eyewitness’ account of what life is like in a Jim Crow South and a racist society in general. They should

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understand that Wright’s experiences were real, and that they are personal, painful, and valid. The power and emotion in his experiences should be explored, especially because it is Wright himself that is telling them. Also, students should consider the narrow perspective of a biography because it is written from only one point of view. Students may find it interesting to consider some of the perspectives of the other people in the novel, and think about the kind of experiences that they had living in the same time and places the Wright lived.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

Students might be able to relate to Wright in some ways, but hopefully none of them have gone through such things as Wright has, at least to the intensity that he experienced it. However, Wright tells of many experiences that students might be able to relate to in some way. Some might be able to sympathize with the discrimination that Wright has faced. Students might have been discriminated against for things such as their gender, height, weight, race, education, age, group of friends, etc. They might be able to tell of a time when they felt someone did not give them a fair chance or judged them prematurely without even getting to know them. They might then ask themselves if they do this as well. Most likely the students won’t be able to relate to the full scale racist society that Wright had to deal with, but many might have an experience where they have been discriminated against or been judged on some supposed characteristic.

Additionally, students might be able to relate in a mild way to some of the other experiences that Wright had. They might have known or felt the effects of physical violence and abuse, as well as emotional abuse. These things are very sensitive topics, and the teacher should be aware of the students in the class that might be having or have had a hard time with some of these things. The teacher should be sensitive to these issues. They might feel comfortable talking about how Wright experiences them, but they should be extra sensitive if they think that they should relate these issues to the students.

On a lighter issue, the students might be able to relate to a time when they found relief or joy in the power of art. Many students might have experienced this through music, art, writing, or other creative expressions. Wright found great joy and expression through writing, and students might have experienced similar feelings through their own artful escape and sanctuary.

Additionally, students would be able to relate, especially at this time in their lives, with Wright’s struggle to determine his identity, morals, and place in society. They might feel social pressures to fit in, to be responsible, and to find out who they are and what they believe in. Wright had a continuous struggle with this, always facing new challenges brought upon him by society. He was constantly struggling with trying to find his place in his racist society while remaining true to his guiding moral conscience. Students might find his personal strength admirable and be able to relate to some of his struggles.

**Vocabulary Issues**

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Because Wright is educated, well read, and a professional writer he draws from a rich vocabulary as he tells of his experiences. All of the words that students might not know are too many to list concisely, but students should develop skills to find out what words are through their context and also by looking up some of them. However, in general, these words are not too difficult that a grade level reader would struggle very much at all. Wright writes with passion, power, and emotion, and students will find that while he is a sophisticated writer this text might present some challenges, but none to formidable that they don’t have a hope of understanding.

There is a vocabulary word that is absolutely critical in their understanding of the novel, and of our society and history in general. That word is *nigger*. Students should learn about the context of this word and of it’s history. They should learn about the context in which Wright uses it in this novel, and it is extremely important that they learn about the context and use of it in our society today. They should understand that it is an extremely derogatory term, and that it was used in Wright’s time to emotionally debase, abuse, and put down others. It was, and still is used among African Americans as they speak to and about each other, and the uses and implications of this should be understood by the student. This is a big issue and vocabulary term that students should not ignore and should understand by the end of the novel.

**Background Knowledge**

There are two contexts, or historical times, that a student must be familiar with in order to understand this novel. They must be familiar with the racist history of America, particularly in the South. They should learn about Jim Crow laws, and how they affected lives of African Americans in America during the time period. This understanding will enhance their understanding of Wright’s experiences as he lived during that time period.

It also would be helpful for students to activate prior knowledge of slavery in the United States. They should understand the issues related to slavery, and the long struggle that people living in America had with slavery and slave practices. By understanding this, students will be better able to understand the implications of the racist practices in America during Wright’s time.

Additionally, students should activate some background knowledge of the Great Depression. Wright lived and suffered during these times, and makes references to the Depression in his novel. Many of his acute times of hunger and helplessness happen during the Great Depression. Not only should students understand this historical time, but they should also see the kind of affect that it had on African Americans, who were not only dealing with the hard times of the Great Depression but also with issues of racism. Students’ understanding of this time in history will help them to better understand the kinds of experiences that Wright went through.
Implications for Student Diversity

This novel deals with issues relating to racial diversity at almost every moment. There are many painful experiences that Wright describes that are a result of his own racial diversity as an African American. This issue of racism is one that should be addressed and understood by the class. However, it is also a delicate issue, so teachers must be sensitive as they talk about this issue. In order to do this, it is important to discuss the context of racism in Wright’s novel. Students should talk about the effects of discrimination on society and the individual in Black Boy, but also in their own lives and society as they face or understand discrimination in a variety of ways and reasons.

Students should also understand issues of economic diversity. This can relate to discrimination as well, but it can also have a wider reach, especially in Black Boy. Wright and the African Americans weren’t the only ones who suffered from poverty in America during the Great Depression. Economic diversity is important to understand as it effects how people live their lives. Wright is an example of this as he always strives to be better than his situation in life, and be educated and involved, despite his poverty.

Gender Issues

Black Boy does not specifically address gender issues, but it is apparent that there are gender differences between men and women. Wright’s mother is an excellent example of this, as she continually struggles to support her family, oftentimes failing to do so because she cannot work, earns small wages, and is sick. Wright also mentions things such as prostitution of sorts, especially with the African American women in the hard times of the Great Depression. However, Wright speaks more of the issue of racism, which falls on every black person—man, woman, and child. It is important to note differences between men and women, and how racism and poverty effects each. This would be a good way to bring up the issue with students: How does racism and poverty affect people of different gender?

Research Issues/Project Ideas

CONTEXT PRESENTATIONS: Students can get in small groups to do a presentation on one of the contexts or backgrounds of the novel. Possible topics could be the Great Depression, poverty, racism, Jim Crow laws, urban and suburban life, the Communist party, etc. Students need to come up with a visual way to represent their context; this can be done with a poster, power point presentation, a series of pictures, etc. They should give information to help the class better understand some of the background contexts of the novel.

GROUP SWITCH—PSYCHOLOGICAL/SOCIAL ISSUES: Students may also give presentations about emotional issues addressed in the book. This should be done in a sensitive manner, and a good way to do this would be in small groups. Students could gather in to small groups, each with a topic. Relevant topics could include: bullying, fighting at school/among peers, drinking, intimidation, physical abuse, emotional abuse, discrimination, etc. Each group picks a topic, then works and researches together to become an expert on the topic. They then can

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switch groups- each new group having a student from a group with a different topic. They then can share their information in a creative and sensitive way that will help the class to understand some of the emotional and psychological issues in the novel.

TIMELINE/CHRONOLOGY: There are a lot of events taking place in the novel, as well as significant experiences that Wright has. Students can individually, as they read or after they read, create a timeline to help them sequence the events in the novel. This timeline should include events in Wright’s life such as when and where he moves, etc, as well as events that are taking place in America and the world at that time, such as the Great Depression, World War I, etc. It should be visual and easy to understand.

MORAL DECISIONS: Students should take note of the very significant moral obstacles that Wright faces. They can make connections with this in their own lives. After studying some of Wright’s internal struggles, they should think about their own similar moral struggles or understandings. For a certain period of time they can observe this in their own life. At the end of this period of time they can right a reflection on the consciousness of their own moral decisions and how they are similar to or differ from Wright’s.

INTERVIEWS: The characters in Black Boy are real people. Students can come to understand these characters better by conducting mock interviews. (They might even be able to find real interviews with Richard Wright himself.) They can construct their answers based upon the characters’ actions in the novel, Wright’s perception of them, and their own inferences based upon their reading and the context of the novel. The students should structure their answers in the voice of the character.

Enrichment Resources

Students may also want to read the novel Native Son, also by Richard Wright, and see how it compares to his biography in Black Boy.

Unpacking Standards

Grade Level: 11th

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Subject: American Literature (English)

Enduring Question: How does one fit into the society in which they live, despite societal challenges, economic difficulties, and prejudices?

Standard:
1

Emphasized Objective(s):
2

Emphasized Sub-Standard(s):
2 c: Determine word meaning through contextual inference

Standard:
1

Emphasized Objective(s):
3

Emphasized Sub-Standard(s):
3 d: Analyze how culture—the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors of a particular society at a particular time and place—is an element of setting.

At the end of the unit, students will KNOW:
- word meaning
- culture (shared beliefs, values, behaviors, society, time, and place)
- culture as an element of setting

If students know the above, they will be able to demonstrate that knowledge by DOING:
- determining meaning through inference
- analyzing aspects of setting

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Final Assessment:
- Students will write a paper on the topic of how they fit into their specific society

In order to do the above, students will use the following COGNITIVE DOMAINS:
- analysis
- comprehension
- application