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Richard Wright's "Black Boy"

The book "Black Boy" is a memoir of Richard Wright's life, from his younger years to his adult years. Wright lived in the south for most of his childhood, and eventually moved to Chicago during his adult years. The time era ranges from about the 1910's to 1930's. Jerry W. Ward states in the Introduction "Here was a book that nicely blended the meaning, the challenge, and the significance of being Southern, black, and male in America." While I agree with this statement, I also believe it is more than that. This piece of literature holds great importance, in not only a historical way, but also in a life teaching way. The book "Black Boy" gives the audience a deeper, more in-the-face look at mistreatment of African Americans. However, the audience also gets to see the struggles of a young African American man searching for acceptance, not only in a world constantly downtrodden by white people, but among his own people.

In Chapter 8, we get to see Wright at the beginning of school break, desperately looking for higher paying work. Mainly to help pay for school books and better clothes. During this time, he experiences a variety of different things, that not only leaves him feeling isolated, but fortifies his dislike for the south, and wanting to get out of it. From constantly worrying about the "white death" that hangs over him, and every other black male in the south (Wright 172), to his aggressive debate with the school principal, about wanting to give a speech, that he himself

wrote for his graduation (Wright 174-176). The principle tries to argue, that it is in Wright's best interest to read the speech the principle has written, because there will be white people present. The principle did not feel Wright was smart enough to give a proper speech, despite Wright becoming valedictorian. However, Wright stood his ground. He stood his ground against the principle, friends, family, and anyone else, that tried to convince him to read the principal's speech. After Wright successfully gives his speech, he is still left with a feeling of disgust, and a deeper dislike of his life in the south.

In Chapter 16, we see Wright much older, and living in Chicago. He has found a steady good paying job, and has been mingling with different groups, to hopefully meet others like him. Once again, he finds problems with fitting in with any of these groups, due to his unconfoming personality. A little further into the chapter, Wright's life takes an unexpected downward turn, as the nation becomes overtaken, by what we called "The Great Depression". Wright eventually loses his job and finds work with a shady insurance company. Even though Wright's sense of justice makes him want to quit, he knows that he has to do whatever he must to survive, even if it means performing unfair actions against people of his own race. Wright even states "I did not feel that being honest was worth the price of starvation." (Wright 293). In this chapter, he also speaks of the many people, especially black people, who he passes every day, preaching from soap boxes. Wright constantly criticizes them, for speaking of starting a revolution of some kind, without any real knowledge, or willpower to take on such a task. Although, Wright admits, that he himself would not know either. Furthermore, while Wright does say that he feels that unless African Americans can cast off the fear, and corruption, caused by three hundred years of oppression, that they may not be able to rise to such a task. But Wright also believes that America itself, needs to fix the issues, that is slowly causing it to lead to a type of self-

destruction, and believe that African Americans were the best people to fix this issue, because of how much they had been outcasted (Wright 298).

Often when being taught American history, we are only given a glance into the mistreatment of African Americans, usually via stories of slavery. Furthermore, we only get to see it through limited points of view, usually a white person's view. In Wright's "Black Boy", we get to see the many challenges that African Americans faced in getting an education, finding work, getting proper medical treatment, and simply for being who they were.

Works Cited

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. Cutchogue: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1945. Print.