

RICHARD WRIGHT - BLACK BOY

A Teacher's Guide for Secondary and Post Secondary Educators

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INTRODUCTION

Although **RICHARD WRIGHT: BLACK BOY** focuses mainly on the life and history of an internationally acclaimed American author, the visual and audio components of the documentary richly contextualize the literature that Wright produced. In that sense, the documentary synthesizes a great amount of historical, social and cultural information about the twentieth century. It can be used to prompt extensive discussions, to stimulate students to undertake special research projects, to write papers or combine the arts and/or cultural knowledge into a learning experience.

Since the documentary is ninety minutes in length, planning and scheduling viewing time for students is essential so that the documentary can be viewed in either one or two class periods.

Teachers are encouraged to view and discuss the documentary together and decide whether it is more efficient to use it in teaching one discipline or if students might profit more from discussions that are not discipline bound.

The Teacher's Guide is designed for those teachers who want to use **RICHARD WRIGHT: BLACK BOY** to enhance the experiences of their students as they explore many and various school subjects.

The guide is not designed to be exhaustive. It provides ideas for student activities and assignments, bibliographies of Wright's work, and a selected listing of background sources. Some older materials are included to suggest the state of scholarship and thinking about issues within Wright's lifetime or as reminders of what works might have influenced his thinking. In making assignments, it is suggested that the teacher add current articles and books that are deemed appropriate.

The pre-viewing questions and activities are designed to help students gain background knowledge. The post-viewing student assignments focus on ways Wright's works mentioned in the documentary can be used to promote broader inquiries among the disciplines. Because the documentary contains scenes that portray Negro lynchings and an African woman's bare breasts, it is recommended that teachers and administrators below the college level review the program before showing it to students.

Questions and activities are provided in the following disciplines: History, Education, Psychology, Literature, Sociology, and Political Science/Cultural Studies. The bibliography completes the guide. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the suggested questions and activities to the appropriate grade level and developmental level of their students.

RICHARD WRIGHT: AN OVERVIEW

Richard Nathaniel Wright, the son of an illiterate sharecropper father and a school teacher mother, was born on September 4, 1908, on a Mississippi plantation some twenty miles from Natchez, in the community of Roxie. His parentage is emblematic: his father may be seen as the soil, the concrete in life; his mother as the world of ideas, the abstractions that shape our sense of reality. The trajectory of Wright's life from his birth in Mississippi to his death in Paris on November 28, 1960, at 52 years of age, marks a long and unfinished quest for the liberation of the mind and the human spirit.

What seems to have driven Wright's quest might be described as the multiple dimensions of hunger. During his boyhood, Wright's hunger was often physical due to his father's desertion of the family when Wright was only seven years old. In fact, the absence of food and of his father became interchangeable in the boy's mind. When, as a man of thirty-seven, Wright reflected on his black childhood and youth in the Deep South, he exposed his pain in words that are haunting: "As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness." The bitterness, however, is not only directed against his biological father but also against a whole society that provided grounds for hunger. The painful knowledge that in the South of the early twentieth century, the ceiling of a brilliant

BLACK BOY's possibilities was indeed low, thus creating a vast need for fulfillment in Wright's young life. Wright's hunger to develop as a whole human being was social, psychological, and spiritual. This hunger to be, to know, and to understand was pervasive, formative, and motivating throughout his lifetime.

Wright's hunger could not be satisfied by the success of **Uncle Tom's Children** (1938), the fame that came with the publication of **Native Son** (1940), or **Black Boy** (1945). These books made Wright a spokesperson for an entire generation of Black Americans.

Wright could write passionately and eloquently about the meaning of suffering in the lives of oppressed and exploited people because that suffering was an integral part of his own life. Wright's material success only seemed to intensify his awareness that hunger of the spirit is implacable. The Communist Party had been the only one to take a deep interest in Richard Wright's life and had at one time offered to teach him to write.

As one views RICHARD WRIGHT: BLACK BOY, one should be very attentive to what is revealed about Wright's sustained interest in language and in the affairs of the world. Wright was an especially keen observer and recorder of the human condition in the twentieth century, and his mode of engaging issues and ideas was that of the participant-observer.

In the books that followed **Black Boy**, Wright expresses his deep interest in the large questions of authority, power, and freedom. Like Cross Damon, the hero of **The Outsider** (1953), Wright himself had existential longings. If one understands this novel as one segment of Wright's intellectual autobiography, it is easier to understand why and how he situated himself in non-fiction works and why he was so fascinated by modern psychology in **Lawd Today, Savage Holiday**, and **The Long Dream**. Whether Wright was analyzing the independence movement and African culture in **Black Power** (1954), reporting on a conference at which Asian and African nations debated what should be their future in the global order in **The Color Curtain** (1956), or examining the political and religious intricacies of Catholic culture in **Pagan Spain** (1957), Wright was always the engaged writer, the brother in suffering. It is the ethos of Wright's voice, his ability to be both victim and asserter, that insures his authority and is the most enduring quality of his literary legacy.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES BEFORE VIEWING

1. Richard Wright was born in 1908, and died in 1960. What significant developments or major changes occurred in the sciences, American government, economics, politics, literature, technology, and the arts between these dates?
2. What amendments were added to the United States Constitution during the period 1908 to 1960?
3. What major changes occurred in race relations between 1908 and 1960? Especially address those that occurred in 1954 and later.
4. Interview people who were born in the 1920's and 1930's. If available, use the Internet for interviews. How do the interviewees remember and describe social and cultural changes prior to 1960?
5. Interview family members or others, born before 1960, who have lived in Mississippi, Chicago, New York, Paris, or West Africa. Inquire about the problems that were of special importance to them. Do any remember the Great Depression?
6. What did the term "Jim Crow" mean in the South?
7. What economic and social conditions may have encouraged large numbers of blacks from the South to migrate to urban areas in the northern and western parts of the U.S. in the early twentieth century? Did this migration have an impact on the South as a region?
8. What was the impact of World War I on the Southern economy? Was the impact of World War II radically different?
9. Discuss or write a report on the Harlem Renaissance. Who were some of the major writers and artists during this period? How does the Harlem Renaissance differ from what has been called the Jazz Age? Were basic American values modified by changes in music, dress, and entertainment during the period of the Harlem Renaissance?
10. What are the major differences between plantations before the Civil War and those that still existed in the twentieth century?
11. What is sharecropping? Is the analogy between economic slavery and sharecropping a fair one? Why?
12. Who was H.L. Mencksen? Why did many Southerners dislike him?
13. Define the following terms: socialism, fascism, capitalism, democracy, colonialism, marxism, communism. What philosophical and political beliefs are embedded in each of these terms? Discuss how one might become disillusioned with each of the above philosophies and/or political belief systems.
14. Who was Karl Marx? Identify several of his major works. Why did his theories about social organization and the relation between labor and capital have international appeal in the twentieth century?

15. In what areas of American life did Communism have the strongest influence between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II? What was the reaction of the U.S. to the 1918 Bolshevik Revolution?
16. What does the term "alienation" mean? How is it used in psychology? How is it used in discussions of political behaviors?
17. What is the image of African-American culture today and how has it changed over the last fifty years? What seems not to have changed?
18. Define the word "ghetto." What is the historical meaning of the term? Do we use it appropriately today in discussions of urban life?
19. What is the image of African-American culture today and how has it changed over the last fifty years? What seems not to have changed?

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES AFTER VIEWING

1. Richard Wright was born in 1908, and Eudora Welty was born in 1909. Both spent their formative years in Jackson, Mississippi. Compare Wright's depiction of his childhood in **Black Boy** with Welty's reflections in **One Writer's Beginnings**. What images of a Southern urban community emerge from the two readings? Create a drawing, painting or three dimensional representation of your image.
2. After reading **Black Boy**, write your own autobiography. In what ways are the dominant images in Wright's autobiography similar or dissimilar to those in your own?
3. Identify the following people who are mentioned in the documentary: Langston Hughes, Benjamin Davis, J. Edgar Hoover, James Baldwin, Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, Orson Welles, Margaret Walker Alexander, Joyce Ann Joyce, William Faulkner, John Reed, Jack Conroy, Studs Terkel, Arna Bontemps, Kwame Nkrumah, Katherine Dunham, Frank Yerby.
4. What impressed you the most about the documentary? Write a poem, story, or narrative about what had the greatest impact on you. Illustrate your work.
5. Read some of Wright's short fictional works. Write a one act play based on one of these stories or dramatize a section of **Native Son**.
6. Do you think that growing up in the South during Richard Wright's time was better or worse than today? Give some reasons for your opinion.
7. Have you visited any of the places mentioned in the program? Contrast what you saw when you visited and what you saw on the program.
8. What reasons can you give for Wright joining the Communist Party and what reasons can you give for Wright leaving the Party and moving to Paris?

9. Assemble a collection of newspaper clippings and magazine articles about changes that are occurring on the African continent. Discuss these stories in relation to the segment of the film that deals with Wright's visit to Africa.
10. Write a paper on crime and violence from a teenager's perspective. Compare your ideas with the stories of adolescent crime and violence in **Native Son** and **Rite of Passage**.
11. Watch broadcasts of trials on TV and read the trial section of **Native Son**. Report to your class on the difference between contemporary court procedures and those represented in Wright's novel.
12. Write a brief paper on American writers who have chosen to live in foreign countries. How were their choices similar or different from those Richard Wright made in choosing exile?
13. If you have access to the Internet, contact students in several of the countries that Richard Wright visited. Ask them how familiar they are with Wright's works or the places mentioned in the documentary.

HISTORY: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Native Son, Black Boy, 12 Million Black Voices, The Long Dream, Uncle Tom's Children, Black Power, The Outsider, and White Man Listen! are Richard Wright's works that are relevant in the study of history.

1. Wright subtitled **12 Million Black Voices**, "A Folk History of the Negro in the United States." What is a folk history? What are the implications for how we came to understand history if Wright's book is considered a valid example?
2. In what way might Wright's **Black Power**, which does not pretend to be history, challenge and supplement official histories of the Gold Coast (Ghana)?
3. Discuss what uses a historian might make of RICHARD WRIGHT: BLACK BOY. Compile a short bibliography of reference works that would help a historian probe more deeply into the events that can only be sketched in the documentary.
4. Write a brief research report on American Communism from 1920 to 1945. How was the growth of the Communist Party in the United States made easier by the mood of the country during the Great Depression years? How active were Communists in the labor movement or in efforts to achieve racial justice?
5. Read **The Long Dream** and examine to what extent it could be used for understanding southern history just prior to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. What caution must be observed in using fiction to understand history? Debate the validity of using fiction by such southern writers as William Faulkner, Ellen Douglas, Eudora Welty, and Shelby Foote to gain new perspectives on history.

EDUCATION: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Richard Wright's works that may be used in educational studies: **Native Son**, **12 Million Black Voices**, **BLACK BOY**, **The Long Dream**, **Rite of Passage**, **The Outsider**, **Black Power**, **Pagan Spain**, **The Color Curtain**, and **White Man, Listen!**

1. Discuss the result of the lack of educational opportunities for black Southerners as these are reflected in **Uncle Tom's Children** and in Wright's autobiography **Black Boy**. Do these results still influence in some way African-American attitudes about public education in the South? Explain.
2. In **12 Million Black Voices** (1941), Wright noted that even if black schools "were open for the full term our children would not have the time to go." To what peculiar feature of black education in the rural South of the early twentieth century was Wright referring? What forces led to the eradication of this peculiar feature?
3. Read Wright's essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" in **Uncle Tom's Children**. Discuss how the nature of Wright's education and social norms might illustrate the tension that still exists between the ideals of classroom education and what students actually learn in the world beyond the school.
4. How does Wright describe political education in **Pagan Spain**?
5. Examine Wright's depiction of adolescents and anti-social behavior in **Rite of Passage**. Does this book provide a frame of reference for a discussion of the reasons for high dropout rates in many contemporary school systems?
6. Use **Black Power** and **The Color Curtain** as focal points for a forum on education in former colonies in Africa. Involve African students and students from so-called Third World countries who are attending schools in the United States. Have we freed ourselves from the biases implicit in Wright's commentaries?
7. Consider that **Black Power**, **Pagan Spain**, **White Man, Listen!**, and **The Color Curtain** were not received favorably by critics or the reading public. If hostile reviews were based on the claim that Wright lacked the insights and authority to make pronouncements about foreign cultures, what kinds of special training might be most helpful for those who might eventually teach in foreign countries? Can Wright's books help us to identify danger points in the assumptions upon which American or Western education rest?

LITERATURE: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The Richard Wright Newsletter" (Richard Wright Circle, 480 Nightingale Hall, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115) provides discussions of new developments in Wright scholarship and contains an annual bibliography.

1. Write an assessment of **RICHARD WRIGHT: BLACK BOY** with regard to its usefulness in showing connections between the facts of a writer's life and his works.
2. Compare **Black Boy** with **Coming of Age in Mississippi** by Anne Moody. Despite the differences in age and gender, do both writers suggest that a sense of place has special importance for the African-American writer from the South?
3. Compare **Black Boy** with **Hunger for Memory** by Richard Rodriguez. Write a paper on how an autobiographer, considered to be in a minority group, uses diverse strategies to control self-representation against the constraints of ethnicity and language.
4. In 1940, the year **Native Son** was published, John Steinbeck's **The Grapes of Wrath** (1939) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Examine the critical reception both of these novels received. Discuss why these equally compelling books occupy rather different places in American literary standards.
5. Compare the small number of Wright's haiku in print with classical Japanese examples of this poetic form. Explain the aesthetic difference between Wright's poems and those he might have used as models. Write some haiku of your own.
6. **Black Power, Pagan Spain, The Color Curtain, and White Man, Listen!** are some of Wright's works. Compare the prose in Wright's early essays from the late 1930's and early 1940's with the prose of one of the books listed above. What remarkable differences do you detect?
7. Examine **Uncle Tom's Children, Black Boy, and Native Son** and try to identify what might be called existential elements. To what in Wright's life experiences might we attribute his affinity for existentialism?
8. Clips from the movie versions (1951 and 1987) of **Native Son** are used in the documentary. View these movie versions after reading the novel. How does the modification of the plot in these movie versions affect your regard for Wright's novel?

PSYCHOLOGY: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Native Son, Black Boy, Rite of Passage, Lawd Today!, The Outsider, The Long Dream, Uncle Tom's Children, Eight Men, Savage Holiday, Black Power, and The Color Curtain are some of Richard Wright's works that may be used in the study of psychology:

1. What do Wright's writings reveal about his understanding of African-American psychology?
2. Discuss the terms "paranoia" and "paranoid." Do you think Wright could have suffered from delusions of persecution? Why or why not?
3. Was Wright depressed? What symptoms of depression, if any, did Wright exhibit in his writings?
4. One portion of Wright's original **Black Boy** manuscript was published as the essay, "I Tried to be a Communist" in **The God That Failed** (New York: Harper, 1950). Discuss how Wright weighs his alienation from Communism with his basic faith in the principles of Marxism. Explore the special topics of Wright's alienation from organized religion in **Black Boy** and from certain aspects of West African culture in **Black Power**.
5. Discuss Wright's depiction of adolescent psychology in **Rite of Passage**. How does it differ from his depiction of the same in **Native Son** and **The Long Dream**? How do you account for the differences?
6. Discuss the nature of prejudice and how prejudice was and continues to be an exceptionally powerful force in American life. What does the documentary enable you to discern about Wright's responses to prejudice?
7. Do you think Wright blamed others for his problems? Do you think it is psychologically healthy to place blame on others? What is the healthy way to handle problems, feelings, and fears both real and imagined? Could Wright have handled his problems in another manner?
8. Define the psychological term "projection." Do you think Wright projected his own feelings on to others? Is projection a defense mechanism? Of what was Wright afraid?
9. Debate whether the traumas Wright reports that he suffered during his childhood and youth are responsible for his essentially negative portrayals of women in his fiction.
10. Many artists, writers, musicians, poets, actors, etc., have dealt with personal pain through their artistic endeavors. Discuss the negative and positive aspects of going through pain in this manner. Discuss what human needs are met by using this manner of dealing with problems. Did Wright deal with his personal pain through his writings? What personal needs did this satisfy for him?

SOCIOLOGY

Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (1945) by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, **Native Son**, **Black Boy**, **The Outsider**, **Lawd Today!**, **Rite of Passage**, **Uncle Tom's Children**, **12 Million Black Voices**, and **The Long Dream** are relevant in discussions of the sociology of the South, race, and culture:

1. What type of society was present in Paris for young black artists and writers that was not present in the United States during the same time? Has this changed?
2. What reasons can you give for the Communist political party encouraging Richard Wright's efforts and offering to teach him how to write?
3. What description of gangs does Wright provide in **Native Son** and **Rite of Passage**? Do you discern any subtle distinctions in his portrayal? Is the concept of a gang radically different fifty years later?
4. Review several sociological studies of Chicago prior to 1950. How do they describe what might be understood as the parallel yet connected societies inhabited by blacks and whites in an urban environment? What insights about this phenomenon can be gained from reading Wright's introduction to **Black Metropolis**?
5. Write a critique of the lawyer's defense of Bigger Thomas in **Native Son**. What are the weaknesses of trying to make a case on the grounds of criminal causation? How are the specifics of sociological investigations transformed by the language used in the courtroom or by the lawyer's rhetorical strategies?
6. Discuss the caution that should be used in reading fiction that incorporates sociological information. Use **Native Son** and **Rite of Passage** as test cases for discussion.
7. How does Wright treat the subject of accommodation in **Black Boy** and **The Long Dream**? To what degree of cooperation and domination does he draw attention?
8. How did role expectation and role conflict seem to function in Wright's life? How are they reflected in his autobiographical writings and in his fiction?
9. Is the frequently used term "ghetto" both an accurate and adequate description of urban black communities in various regions of the United States?
10. Describe the social class to which Wright belonged at various periods in his life. What does the documentary illustrate about social mobility? How was Wright's life effected?
11. Examine **The Long Dream** for its portrayal of Southern black middle class life. Does Wright use stereotypes or is his treatment consistent with sociological descriptions prior to 1960?
12. Do you think the Communist Party wanted to control Wright's writings? Did they want him to leave the Party? Did Wright think that the Communist Party should fight more for the plight of the Negro race? Discuss your ideas.

13. What happened to Wright's finances after he moved to Paris? Discuss how being black and poor or white and poor in the United States would be different in Paris.

POLITICAL SCIENCE/CULTURAL STUDIES: QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

For the purpose of cultural studies, all of Wright's works are relevant. For studies in political science, special attention should be given to **Native Son, The Outsider, Uncle Tom's Children, Eight Men, and Rite of Passage.**

1. Why did Communism ultimately fail as an alternative political movement in this country?
2. Discuss what political conditions in the United States made Communism attractive to Richard Wright and a number of other black intellectuals. Why did Wright leave the Communist Party?
3. After viewing the documentary, examine the term "ideology." How did the program represent the ideological dimensions of Wright's life and work? What distinction should be drawn between ideology and core political values (criteria by which people make political decisions and evaluation)?
4. What features of political economy in urban areas did Wright seem to be most concerned about in his work?
5. What does the documentary urge us to consider about the importance of race and class in the study of international politics? How did Wright's sense of himself as a man of the West compromise his authority to speak for non-Western people?
6. Wright attracted unusual attention from government agencies in the United States, Great Britain, and France. Consider the nature of politics during the Cold War. Why might Wright's work have been seen as politically threatening?
7. Discuss to what degree the whole of Wright's works constitutes a model for an individual's study of culture and change.

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