

The lessons of loneliness and isolation in 'black boy'



There is an incomprehensible secret embodied in the highly intimate affair of someone else's emotions. Even when the thoughts of others come fully into the orbit of one's concern, they are often difficult to dissect and subsequently understand. This is true of all emotions, but notably that of loneliness. Usually characterized by the depressing feeling of being alone when one is destitute of companionship or affection, loneliness is one of the many psychological symptoms of exclusion. This phenomenon is brought to light in Richard Wright's autobiographical novel *Black Boy*. As Wright grows older, his constant exclusion from society informs his development as a character and further informs the person that he is to become, by virtue of the light he shines on his isolation from his family, the White world, and African American society. In doing so, Wright teaches his readers about the emotional repercussions of isolation.

From the onset of the novel, Wright delineates himself as an outcast from his family. The first way in which this is seen is when as a young child, he has hallucinations that his family does not take seriously. In the middle of the night, Wright would find himself " Shaking with terror because no one saw them but me." (7) Richard brings to the forefront of the consciousness of his readers that he is an alien in his own home. This is further bolstered by the passage during which Wright skips forward 25 years in time to the moment when he first sees his father again after having deserted him at the age of 5. Richard, in a moment of insight informs his readers that "[His] father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city...- that same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed shores of knowing." (35) By saying so,

Richard is effectively communicating that he and his father, though tied of blood made them kin and there is shadow of his own voice in that of his father, they are forever strangers, “ speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality.” (35) Subsequently, as Richard grows older, the divide between him and his family grows to unprecedented levels, and as an adult he describes his feelings towards his mother as “ frozen.” (100) Because for the entirety of his childhood and adolescence Richard was seen as different from the rest of his family, his psyche suffers and thus his emotions towards his family are altered as well. Rather than holding his kin in the high esteem that one would expect, he sees them as a burden standing between him and his goals.

This emotional disillusionment may very well have been the catalyst for Wright’s family that later on feeds into a lack of trust for those around Wright himself. By portraying it as so, Wright teaches his readers about the emotional repercussions of isolation. Wright is further emotionally influenced by the divide that he observes between himself and the White American middle class which he amicably refers to as “ the white world.” (145) His cognisance of the separation between himself and the bourgeoisie is chronicled by a moment of perspicacity saying: “ I liked it and I did not like it; I longed to be among them, yet when with them I looked at them as if I were a million miles away. I had been kept out of their world too long ever to be able to become a real part of it.” (151) Richard seems to be hyper aware of the fact that he is not a part of the society in which he longs to belong. He is overtly excluded from eating pancakes and eggs with the white family he works for, and is forced to eat stale bread and mouldy molasses instead.

Further catalyzing Wright's loneliness is the fact that he seems to be the only one who sees himself as removed from society in the way that he does. Even within the African American community, he is excluded and isolated because of his way of thinking. During an argument with one of his peers, Richard is told to "learn to live in the South!" (183) because his actions are not reflective of the social role to which he was prescribed; publishing a short story for example. This is most notably because of the widespread Jim Crow segregation contemporary to Wright. Because there was an intrinsic feeling of inferiority within the African American community, by way of the system, Richard is already removed from white society simply because of the colour of his skin, but is also excommunicated from his own community when he attempts to resist the system that is oppressing him. In describing his exclusion and isolation, Wright is able to highlight the pervasiveness of the system of segregation, as it becomes clear to readers that there is a mechanism in place that is meant to systematically break those who wish to diverge from the social standards which have been set, thus disincentivizing any kind of rebellion against the status quo.

In his descriptions of isolation and exclusion, Wright chronicles the emotional impact of his loneliness, while concurrently bringing to light the systematic breaking of the minds of the African American people. Wright is not only speaking of his own isolation, but the isolation of every single one of his contemporary revolutionaries, fighting against a totality of oppression. The emotional toll that the exclusion causes is excruciating, but then again, it has to be, because if it were easy, then everyone would be fighting against the widespread oppression and suffering that they find themselves

surrounded by. Wright teaches his readers about his need to struggle and the need to struggle for those around him.