

Literary analysis of richard wright's black boy

Literature



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“ What is a rebel? A man who says no. ” (Albert Camus, *The Rebel*) *Black Boy* is more than a mere autobiography, dealing with a man during the time of Jim Crow laws. Indeed, though the book is generally advertised as such, the greater theme here is not of the black man versus the white; it is of Richard's fight against adversity, and the prevalent and constraining attitudes of not just his time, or the “ White South”, but of the attitude of conformity throughout all time.

Richard develops from birth to become a nonconformist; a rebel, and we can see this attitude throughout his whole life. As a child, he refuses to simply follow orders if they make no sense to him; for this, he is lashed repeatedly. As he grows older, he begins to recognize why he refuses to conform, instead of doing so instinctively, clashing with his uncles and grandmother. Later on, as a man, he flees to the North, becoming a writer, and eventually joining the Communists of America.

But even there, he finds an air of conformity; even amongst the rebels and outcasts of Marxist America, there is a game of politics, which one must conform to, or lose to the system by. Richard Wright is a man of principles, and of nonconformity, which leads him to clash, pity, and hold those who have given into the system in contempt. Richard Wright is very much both a product of the times, as well as his upbringing and attitude. It is very often said that a child's personality is mostly determined by the age of four. Nothing is more true with Richard Wright.

The resounding impact his father and mother have on him can be seen throughout the whole book. In many ways, his mother and father act as antitheses of each other: one acting as the moral figure, teaching Richard

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morality, and the strength to hold onto it, while the other acts as a figure of repression, the force which Richard will rebel against for his whole life. This relationship is established most strongly by Richard's killing of the cat as a child. " I resented his shouting and it irked me that I could never make him feel my resentment.

How could I hit back at him? Oh, yes... He had said to kill the kitten and I would kill it! ... I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority... I had made him know that I felt he was cruel and I had done it without his punishing me. " (Wright 11-12) He sees his father as the figure of cruel oppression, which he rebels against but after he kills the kitten, his mother comes and forces him to bury it and repent for his actions.

" " Get out there and bury that poor kitten,' she ordered. He has a traumatic experience from this (evidenced by the fact that this particular memory was put into this book) and never does anything of the sort again — his morality is reinforced. At this point in time, he is alone; he connects little to the other children of his school, and later, orphanage. "... I did not even think of saying goodbye to the boys and girls with whom I had eaten and slept and lived for so many weeks. " He is the " odd one out" the one who refuses to associate or make friends.

This attitude will continue as he grows older, causing him to have no true friends — the kind that you can trust, and stay with you your whole life. As Wright grows older, he is able to give more voice to for what purpose he rebels. He rebels against unreasonability, cruelty. The only way he will be beaten is if his consciousness is first beaten. " " But, mama, she'll beat me, <https://assignbuster.com/literary-analysis-of-richard-wrights-black-boy/>

beat me for nothing,' I said. " I'm not going to let her beat me; I don't care what happens! '" (Wright 109) Aunt Addie tries to beat him " for nothing" and he doesn't let it happen.

He even goes so far as to get a knife to stop her. His resistance is still there, but now it resistance of a different kind. He is able to both physically resist these beatings, while justifying it to the moral values he has learned. He will not let himself be beaten simply because Aunt Addie is angry; that is a violation of his moral code, and he will go as far as he needs to in order to enforce it.

Even though he will not let himself be beaten for no reason, if he has made an inadvertent mistake, he will try to correct it, as he does with his grandmother, after accidentally embarrassing in church. Later, I convinced her that I had not wanted to hurt her and she immediately seized upon my concern for her feelings as an opportunity to have one more try at bringing me to god. She wept and pleaded with me to pray... I promised; after all, I felt that I owed her something for inadvertently making her ridiculous before the member of her church. " (Wright 119) And he follows through with that. He prays, daily, for an hour. That hour is torture, but he keeps his promise, abiding by his moral code.

He is different from the boys and girls of his church congregation, and class: they have been indoctrinated and do as they are told, docilely. One boy walks up to Richard, prompted by the congregation, who think that Richard is doomed to burn in Hell, and tries to convert him; it is obvious that the boy has no real conviction in God of his own, rather, the belief in God has been forced upon him by his parents and community. " Though older than I, he

had neither known nor felt anything of life for himself; he had been carefully reared by his mother and father and he had always been told what to feel. (Wright 116)

Meanwhile, Wright, in stark contrast, resists the attempts of his Grandmother and extended family to indoctrinate him into religion, instead deciding to work things out for himself. " My faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life, anchored in the sensations of my body and in what my mind could grasp, and nothing could ever shake this faith, and surely not my fear of an invisible power. " (Wright 115) Richard is different than those around him; he questions, he and thinks for himself, not blindly accepting what is told to him.

Richard Wright eventually works his way to the north, working odd jobs around cities and heading, eventually ending up in Chicago. It is there that his intellect truly flourishes as he comes unto his own as a thinker, and eventually, writer and Communist. He begins to actively see how he is different than the others. He begins to view the other African-Americans around him as without substance, " Though they did not know it, they were naively practicing magic; they thought if they acted like the men who had overthrown the czar, then surely they ought to be able to win their freedom in America. (Wright 295) He can see through their false illusions of authority, in effect, " cut through the crap".

He can see how the others are being lead by sheep, to blindly believe without understanding. At one point, he talks to a " Negro Communist" about the bonus marchers in Washington. "... one Negro Communist speaker said: ' If he drive the bonus marchers out of Washington, the people will rise up and

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make a revolution! ' ... 'You know that even if the United States Army actually kills the bonus marchers, there'll be no revolution,' I said. ' you don't seem to know what it takes to make a revolution,' I explained. ' Revolutions are rare occurrences. '" (Wright 296)

A few days later, after Hoover disperses the marchers, and the Communist speaker is proven wrong, Wright goes back to him and says, "' What about that revolution that you predicted if the bonus marchers were driven out? '" (Wright 296) to which the man shrugs and vaguely mutters, "' The prerequisite conditions did not exist. '" (Wright 296) It is doubtful that the man knows what even those words mean, and is merely parroting, as those words happen to paraphrase Wright's earlier statement about there not being the right conditions. Wright walks away reflecting on their foolishness, acting like children, and living only in the present, while admiring their willingness to act. His ability to see through the palaver of others comes from his ability to question their motives, and his experiences of seeing others do the same thing throughout his childhood.

Wright, since childhood, is taught to rebel, and more importantly, to question. This skill develops as he grows, and combined with his nonconformist attitude, leads to ostracization — others fear him. They fear him for not being the same them, for not being scared of authority, like they are, and for not conforming, though they are all black. We can see this throughout Wright's lifetime, from his time in the orphanage, where it less pronounced, all the way to his time with the Communists of America.

Wright is the only one who is willing to see through the illusion and pretense put up by others, and because of this, is ostracized. But has never been the

only one. Throughout history, those who have been different, have been separated, shunned. The African Americans were enslaved because of skin color; the irony is in when Wright is shunned by these very people. Albert Einstein, the classical example was a poor pupil in school. Bill Gates quit Harvard, and Ford had to try many times before he was successful. So, then, why are those who are different so ostracized by society when they have so much to offer?