

Opposites don't  
attract: granny in  
"black boy"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Isaac Newton, a prominent English physicist and mathematician, devised his 3rd law of motion: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the autobiography *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, a key influence in Richard's life is his grandmother, referred to as Granny throughout the book, who incessantly tries to make Richard embrace God; her attempts, though, are futile with someone as recalcitrant as Richard. In human terms, Granny and Richard's interactions substantiate Newton's 3rd law. When Granny tries to make Richard conform to her lifestyle, Richard retaliates and rebels just as vigorously.

Granny is fervently religious, her lifestyle metaphorically deemed a regime: a word which according to the Oxford Dictionary designates " a government, especially an authoritarian one". While Granny is not the only family member to try to influence Richard, she is notable because she does so ceaselessly and formidably. Even though Richard's mother is religious, she pales in comparison to Granny, who might be considered a religious fanatic. The first example of Granny's imposition of religion onto her family members is when Richard's mother " announced that we were going to to move, that we were going back to West Helena. She had since tired of the strict religious routine of Granny's home" (Wright 59). From an early age, Richard is disillusioned towards Granny's lifestyle; he is not fond of how she deems Ella's storytelling and books the " Devil stuff" (39) and bans him from her books, which are his sole source of stimulation. He also dislikes Granny's corporal punishment which is often doled out; this is portrayed when Granny, " with all the fury of her sixty-odd-year-old body"(41), beats Richard for mindlessly uttering a vulgar phrase. Richard believes that leaving West Helena will rid him of

Granny, who is a thorn in his side and only one more adult to berate and beat him. But fate did not proclaim it so.

Unfortunately, Richard and his mother wind up back at Granny's door when Richard's mother suffers a inopportune stroke and is unable to support herself and her children. Granny still has not ceased her way of life and continues to urge Richard to accept God into his life. Richard however is indifferent to Granny's rules and "[shirks] as many of the weekday services as possible" (111). Richard's blatant disregard for Granny's religious routine is displayed when he describes being hauled to church: " During the passionate prayers and the chanted hymns I would sit squirming on a bench, longing to grow up so I could run away, listening indifferently to the theme of cosmic annihilation, loving the hymns for their sensual caress but at last casting furtive glances at Granny and wondering when it would be safe for me to stretch out on the bench and go to sleep"(112). Richard gives up on Granny's mandates when he finds praying " a nuisance" (120), and begins to write hymns to appease Granny to pass the time, but is unsuccessful. One day he writes a story, and feels extremely accomplished. Richard decides he wants to pursue writing, and is ecstatic when a local newspaper publishes one of his stories. When Granny finds out about this she calls Richard's story " the Devil's work"(168). Richard becomes even more encouraged to write and prove Granny wrong.

Granny pressuring Richard to give his life to God makes Richard more rebellious in turn, and he starts to assert himself rather than silently and discreetly defying Granny. Richard lives in poverty, and desperately wishes to get a job so he can support himself with more food, better clothing, and

textbooks. Richard “ argues that Saturdays were the only days on which I could earn any worth-while sum”(126). Granny responds to this by quoting Scripture and saying that working on Saturdays is taboo because it is the Lord’s Day. Another instance where Richard stands up for himself is when he refuses to accept a beating and “ nimbly [ducks]” (134). This enrages Granny and other family members, as Granny falls backwards and gets herself lodged in the porch, but Richard declares himself innocent and says that it is Granny’s fault. Finally, in the ultimate act of opposition, Richard says,“ That old church of your is messing up my life” (144), and leaves Granny’s house against her wishes in order to work. Richard reaching the last straw, leaving Granny, and expressing his distaste for her church shows the reader that Richard is becoming increasingly independent as soon as he breaks free of the suffocating noose Granny has confined him with.

Richard’s opposition towards Granny is like a forest fire. The flames start quietly and unnoticeably with Richard’s silent dissent and escalate into blatant objection, gaining more power and growing stronger. Going back to Newton’s 3rd Law, you could say that every time Granny tries to push Richard into listening to her rules, Richard pulls away in the opposite direction, much like two magnets of the same pole. Without Granny’s pushes, Richard never would’ve pulled away and become the unconstrained person he is. Even though Richard considers Granny’s influence negative, it is perversely positive because it sets Richard on a journey throughout his adolescence. By the end of this journey, Richard has bloomed and has found himself and his purpose earlier than most people do.