

Race and identity in richard wright's black boy

Sociology, Identity



Stephen Donato Professor Schmitz HSF 20 September 2012 Race and Identity in Richard Wright's Black Boy Each and every person on this Earth today has an identity. Over the years, each individual creates their identity through past experiences, family, race, and many other factors. Race, which continues to cause problems in today's world, places individuals into certain categories. Based on their race, people are designated to be part of a larger, or group identity instead of being viewed as a person with a unique identity. Throughout Richard Wright's Black Boy, Richard is on a search for his true identity.

Throughout Black Boy, one can see that Richard's racial background assigns him with a certain identity or a certain way in which some people believe he should live his life. Growing up in the Jim Crow South, many young blacks, have their identities essentially already created for them based solely on the backgrounds and race. During this time period, whites expect blacks to behave a certain way, have certain traits, and treat them with absolute respect. Whites during Richard's time still feel they are much superior to the blacks they interact with, and have many expectations that would be considered racist today.

However, in his work, Richard Wright shows how one can break from this predetermined mold. In many instances during the work, Richard breaks from this identity to which he is assigned in order to create his unique identity and grow into the person he wants to become. Richard refuses to sit back and to be absorbed into the Jim Crow lifestyle of southern blacks. In Richard Wright's Black Boy, Richard's past experiences with both white and black individuals, family, and race issues shape his true identity and develop

him into the man of his dreams living the life which he chooses instead of the one assigned to him.

Richard Wright, a young black boy growing up in his family home in Mississippi, searches for his identity through many different experiences. A constant in his life which continues to shape his identity time and time again is his family. Throughout the work, Richard searches for a loving and caring family. Although his family may not fit the description at all times, they help him to form his independence, a big part of his true identity. As a young black male growing up in a house with his extended family, Richard did not have many freedoms. Throughout *Black Boy*, Richard's family constantly shelters him from the outside world.

The story begins in his grandmother's home in Mississippi where his family constantly reprimands him. For example, in the beginning of this work, Richard Wright's grandmother has fallen sick in the house. Therefore, Richard is expected to be quiet and not play with his brother. Richard, a young boy, just wants to have some fun, and proceeds to play with matches. He becomes more and more curious, and sets the curtains on fire, almost burning down the house. Because he was so sheltered, he became this curious little boy, causing trouble in his family home.

Consequently, Richard is beaten for his actions, which becomes a common theme through the work. Richard explains: I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still (Wright 7) Time and time again, family members or outsiders attempt to beat Richard. He learns his first real

lesson shaping his identity while trying to buy groceries for the house. After his father leaves, Richard's mother tells Richard he is now in charge of buying groceries.

Richard feels like the man of the house, and acts very confidently, until he needs to go buy the food. The first two times he attempts to buy food, a crowd of boys beats him and steals his money. However, his mother sends him out a third time equipped with a stick. Richard easily defeats the boys and claims that night he "won the right to the streets of Memphis" (Wright 21). In this situation, it seems that Richard's mom is not being fair by sending him out to get beat up time and time again. However, she is only doing this in order to help Richard survive in the future.

By winning the right to the streets of Memphis, Richard is growing more independent. He no longer relies on his father to bring home food because he is not coming back, and he is able to stand up for himself when the time comes. Richard becomes more independent throughout different experiences in *Black Boy*. Richard's grandmother, a devoutly religious person, has an underlying grievance with Richard because he is not religious. Richard's grandmother begins to shelter him by not buying him books which he needs for school. Richard explains, "I needed textbooks and had to wait for months to obtain them.

Granny said that she would not buy worldly books for me" (Wright 143). In addition, Richard claims that his Granny always burned the books he had brought into the house, "branding them as worldly" (Wright 151). Richard needed money to buy his books, some new clothes, and lunch during the week at school. However, his grandmother continues to shelter him by not

allowing him to work. When Richard asked to work on the weekends, Richard explains that “ she laid down the injunction that I could not work on Saturdays while I slept under her roof” (Wright 147).

These two instances with his grandmother show Richard's ambition. Richard wants to make something of himself, and does not want to sit back and live the usual life of a black individual. He wants to begin working in order to make money to buy his books so that he can study and live out his dream of becoming a writer. He begins to read articles in magazines from newspapers he sells, and learns of the vast world. He loves it, and he “ hungered for a different life, for something new” (Wright 151). Richard wants to get out and experience the world, and break the mold of the assumed black identity.

To begin this task, Richard begins writing his own stories. After Richard completes his first story, he brings it to his neighbor to read. Her reaction to his story was the common reaction: “ What's that for? ” (Wright 141). Later, Richard shows his grandmother his second piece, *The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre*. She has the same reaction as the neighbor, and begins to question him on what the story is about and why he is writing a story for the newspaper. According to her, he will not be able to get a job because people are going to think that he is weak minded (Wright 198).

Richard exceeds expectations and completes tasks that black people aren't supposed to do. Richard changes his identity from a subservient black boy into a sort of rebellious young man by beginning his writing career. Throughout the work, Richard introduces a countless number of jobs from working in homes of whites, to attempting to learn the trade of optometry. For one of his many jobs, Richard is working for a white family. While <https://assignbuster.com/race-and-identity-in-richard-wrights-black-boy/>

interviewing for this job, the mother of the family asks if he will steal from them, a common trait associated with black people.

While working for this family, Richard is having a conversation with the mother. She asks him, " What grade are you in school? " (Wright 173). Richard responds, " Seventh, ma'am" (Wright 173). She then asks him, " Then why are you going to school? " (Wright 173). This conversation shows that whites think it is unnecessary for blacks to go to school past the sixth grade because they should be working. Whites think that they will never amount to anything, and therefore should not be wasting their time in school. However, Richard wants to break this predetermined mold of who he is supposed to be.

He replies to his employer, " Well, I want to be a writer" (Wright 173). While working for this white family, Richard's predetermined identity and his plans to break from this mold are both shown. Eventually, Richard hopes to be able to write for a living, and continues to attend school to study to become the best he can be. Both his employer and his family tell him that he has no chance of becoming a writer, but he continues to prove everyone wrong by not worrying about his race. He dismisses the fact that there are no famous black writers, and continues to achieve his goals and continues to form his true identity.

Richard continues to press on and works hard each and every day in order to break the mold of his assigned identity due to his race. Richard eventually becomes the valedictorian of his ninth grade class, and has a huge disagreement with his principal. The principal summons Richard to his office and says to him, " Well, Richard Wright, here is your speech" (Wright 206).

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After Richard claims that he has already written his own speech, the principal tells him " Listen, boy, you're going to speak to both white and colored people that night. What can you alone think of saying to them?

You have no experience. . . ." (Wright 206). Richard continues to fight this assumption made by his principal that he cannot deliver a speech which will be acceptable for white people to listen to. Even when his Uncle Tom claims, " the principal's speech is the better speech" (Wright 209) Richard agrees. However, Richard wants to give the speech he wrote because it says what he wants to say (Wright 209-10). Richard did not care if the principal's speech was better than his; he wanted to deliver his speech the way he wanted to deliver it. Here, Richard continues to develop his true identity as a fighter who will not stand for this assigned identity. He wants to make a difference in the world, and he is fed up with everyone just taking the abuse they receive. He begins to build up a dream in himself which the educational system in the Jim Crow South had been rigged and designed to stifle (Wright 199). He was only fifteen years old, and already began realizing how the Jim Crow South worked. However, he did not like the system, and constantly fought against it. Growing up in Marlboro, New Jersey, race was not much of an issue for me.

Throughout my K-8 public education, over ninety-five percent of the students in my school were white, just like me. I had no problem fitting in, and was able to have many of the privileges spoken about in Peggy McIntosh's " White Privilege. " I got along with almost all of my classmates growing up, and was even friends with the few black kids in my school. Ben, a black classmate of mine became a close friend when we played on the basketball

team together. As I moved on from Middle School to a private, catholic high school, there were even less minorities. In my senior graduating class I had three black classmates.

These few individuals were sometimes segregated from the group, and might have felt uncomfortable during some circumstances. However, I did not realize at the time how sheltered I was from the world. I did not have many friends of different cultures and was not truly aware of the world outside of my high school and my hometown. I never truly viewed the other perspective; I took for granted my opportunity to go to school and get a good, public school education through middle school. I then again took for granted my ability to go to private high school to receive an even more personalized education in a smaller school.

I did not think about the poor ethnic groups living in the slums of places such as Haiti, or even in places such as Newark, NJ. I had this sort of mindset going through school that if it didn't involve me, it wasn't my problem to fix. Students in these poor, urban areas such as Newark and Camden in NJ tend to have a different lifestyle than students from Marlboro. In these poor communities, school is almost looked at as it is in black boy. Most kids from these areas will begin working when they graduate high school, and do not go onto college. Again, I took for granted my opportunity to go to a small, unique, private college.

Most kids in these areas I described don't even dream of going college because they believe it is just not a possibility for them. In my short time at Babson, I have met people from countries that I have never heard of before. I have acquainted myself with many different people of many different races,
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and I am beginning to learn a few facts about many different cultures. In this short period of time, my cultural horizon has broadened greatly. I cannot wait to see how much I will learn about so many different cultures and ethnic groups in my four years at Babson.

In conclusion, Richard Wright searches for his identity throughout his life in the Jim Crow South. Richard does not want to just be another drop in the bucket in this Jim Crow lifestyle, and does not want to fit the mold of a typical black male. He has dreams, aspirations, and goals which no other black youth has been able to accomplish. He continues to fight against the assumed black identity until he forms his own self-identity. Richard's race definitely lead to assumptions being made by different individuals, but he was able to break free of these assumptions and create a life in which he was in control.

Richard Wright broke free of the Jim Crow South and lived the life which he wanted to live while developing his own identity. Just as Wright did, every one of us struggles to define who we are, when in reality we are only who we are supposed to be. I pledge my honor that I have neither received nor provided unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work. Works Cited Wright, Richard. Black Boy (american Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1993. Print.