

The ethics of living jim crow



The Ethics of Living Jim Crow is an autobiographical account of author Richard Wright's education in race relations in a totally segregated south. Wright talks about his experiences growing up in the south and the racism he encountered. He attempts to show us what being on the receiving end of racism is really like, and the lessons he learned from them. I believe that Wright's intended audience seems to be directed towards white people so that they may gain an understanding of the hardships blacks went through early in our nation's history. Wright starts off by explaining where he grew up. The house he lived in was located behind the railroad tracks and his skimpy yard was paved with cinder blocks (600). To see green you had to look beyond the railroad tracks to the whites section of town. I felt that here the author seemed to know that there was a difference between the two, but at his young age he did not understand why the two were different. In the first part of the article Wright describes a fight that he gets into with some white boys and the punishment he receives from his mother for it. His mother tells him that he is never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again (601).

She goes on to say that he should be thankful that the white kids didn't kill him. I think that in telling Wright this, his mother is teaching him that blacks are not as good as whites and that he should be thankful that they allow blacks to exist in the same world as the whites. Wright goes on describing different jobs he had and the dealings he had with his white bosses. In one section the author talks about watching his white boss drag and kick a black woman into the store where he worked. After a few minutes the woman comes out bloody and crying.

The author explains what happened with some of his black co-workers. None of them are surprised by this and one adds that she was lucky to just have been beaten and not raped as well. I think the author here is showing that blacks in the early south were almost immune to this type of racism. It is so commonplace that the blacks hardly blink when it happens. Wright later talks about moving to a larger city and the interactions he had with the white people there. The author explains that the whites there were a little more accepting, and would actually hold conversations with the blacks.

The author points out that caution must be used when talking with whites on subjects like the Ku Klux Klan, Abraham Lincoln, the civil war, and any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro (610), should be avoided. Throughout this article Wright talks about learning his Jim Crow lessons. Jim Crow refers to the name of a character in minstrelsy (in which white performers in blackface used African American stereotypes in their songs and dances); it is not known how it became a term describing racial segregation. The term Jim Crow's literal definition means separate but still equal.

I believe the author finds the part about being equal very ironic with his title and when he mentions his Jim Crow lessons. The last part of the article describes how blacks felt about the way they had to live. A friend of the author summed it up by saying, Lawd, man! Ef it wuznt fer them polices n them ol lynch-mobs, there wouldnt be nothin but uproar down here! (610). With this, I believe, the author has come to the realization that when it comes to racism, the blacks in the south knew about it, received it frequently, and came to accept it and the atrocities that come with it.