

Black Boy Study Guide

Black Boy by Richard Wright

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Plot Summary

Richard Wright begins the account of his life at age four, when, bored and restless, he accidentally sets his house on fire. His mother, both frightened and furious, beats him severely.

Richard's father abandons the family, and from that point on, hunger is a constant factor in their lives as Richard's mother struggles to provide for her family. Because she must work, Richard is left alone much of the time and finds his way into some of the local saloons. By the age of six he becomes both a drunkard and user of obscenities.

In desperation the family moves to Arkansas to live with his Aunt Maggie, and along the way they stop to visit his Granny who lives in Jackson, Mississippi. Granny disapproves of Richard's spirited personality and antics, and beats him for infractions he doesn't even understand.

Eventually they leave Granny's and continue to Aunt Maggie's. Her husband, Uncle Hoskin, runs a successful saloon and for the first time there is adequate food. But one night Hoskin doesn't return home. The family gets word that he has been killed by whites who were jealous of his profitable business. The family learns that the same whites have threatened to kill the whole family. They are forced to pack quickly and flee in the night back to Granny's.

After Richard's mother suffers a stroke, Richard lives temporarily with his Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody, but soon returns to Granny's. She and his Aunt Addie are physically and mentally abusive, always trying to force him to accept their God and religion. Eventually Addie and Granny give up on Richard. He is allowed to enroll in public school rather than the Seventh Day Adventist School where Addie teaches. Richard loves reading and writing and excels as a student, but he never has a chance to go to school for more than a few years at a time.

Richard's Uncle Tom comes to live at Granny's, and life gets even worse for Richard whose approach to life is so different than anyone else in the family. Uncle Tom thinks he is rude and says he will beat him for his insolence. Richard lives up to his vow not to let anyone ever beat him again, and fends off his uncle with razor blades. The family begins to think Richard is crazy, and Richard begins to realize that in his family's eyes, he is worthless.

Richard enters the working world where he encounters the brutal racism and violence of southern whites. He gets a job at an optical company, but even though the owner is kind, he is forced to quit because the white workers resent him and make it clear they will kill him if he stays. He knows that he cannot live under these conditions, and is convinced he must leave the South. He is so desperate that he resorts to stealing in order to get enough money to finance a move.



Richard finally gets to Memphis where he finds a boarding house run by a kind lady named Mrs. Moss. She thinks Richard would be a perfect husband for her daughter, Bess. Richard likes both Bess and her mother, but makes it clear that marriage is not an option. While living in Memphis he gets a job at another optical company. It is while he is employed there that he finds a way to get library books, a privilege denied to Negroes. Once Richard starts reading he doesn't stop. His hunger for knowledge equals his physical hunger. A new world opens to him and as he learns, he realizes how much he has been denied. During this time he works at his writing, and though his attempts are mediocre, he senses that this should be his life's work.

Richard's mother, brother, and eventually Aunt Maggie join him in Memphis. Once there is enough money Richard and Maggie move to Chicago followed by his brother and mother when they can finance it. In Chicago Richard continues to struggle with racism, hunger and poverty. He works at a number of jobs, but is treated with contempt and indifference by most. One employer, the Hoffman's, did treat Richard decently, but Richard leaves because he senses their pity, and for him pity is worse than abuse.

It is not long before the Great Depression hits, and Richard like so many others is out of work, hungry and destitute. He is finally forced to seek help from a government relief agency. He is assigned to a number of jobs by the agency. One is at a large Chicago hospital where he cares for the research animals. The doctors barely notice Richard, and when he asks questions he is ridiculed.

Richard meets other young men who think like he does, some of whom belong to the Communist Party. They urge him to join and eventually he does. He is most intrigued with their philosophy of fighting oppression and believes he can make a contribution to the Party through his writing. But as has always been his curse, his motives are completely misunderstood. The Party wants total commitment and conformity whereas Richard is a non-conforming individualist. He is soon at odds with the Party and eventually he is accused of being an intellectual and a traitor. Richard resigns from the party deeply disappointed in its failures, but he resolves to fight on trying to explain his way with words. Although his story ends at this point, we know he was successful and went on to publish many important books.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Black Boy is the autobiography of Richard Wright. It was published in 1945 and was both a best seller and a Book of the Month Club selection.

Chapter 1. The autobiography opens with 4-year-old Richard bored and restless. His mother continually scolds him and tells him to be quiet, because his Granny, who is living with them temporarily, is gravely ill. Because of his boredom and impulsiveness he accidentally sets the house on fire. His mother, both terrified and furious, beats him severely, nearly to death.

Hunger has always been part of his young life, but when his father abandons the family it becomes acute and severe. Eventually his mother gets a job as a cook and often takes him and his brother with her to keep them out of trouble. Richard watches “white people” eat lavishly while he has very little to eat. His anger at this injustice begins to form while his curiosity and fear of white people begins to emerge.

Richard is left alone a lot and starts hanging out in saloons where he learns lots of bad language, but at such a young age he does not understand the meaning of the words. He has become a foul-mouthed drunkard at the age of six even before he has started school. His mother who is frail and often ill cannot provide for her two sons, and has to place them in an “orphan home” temporarily. Richard is miserably unhappy and tries to run away, and again he is beaten.

Eventually Richard starts school, although he is older than most of the other children. He has a deep desire to know and understand everything, but his fear and unease often get in the way. Even when he knows answers he is often frozen by fear and unable to speak.

Chapter 2. Richard and his brother leave the “orphan home” and move with their mother to Elaine, Arkansas to live with his mother’s sister. Along the way they stop to visit with his Granny who lives in Jackson, Mississippi.

Granny, who is fervently religious, is deeply disturbed by Richard’s use of inappropriate language. She beats him, but he is totally confused because he has no idea what the words mean.

Eventually he leaves with his mother and brother and continues the journey to Arkansas to stay with Aunt Maggie. It is while they are waiting for the train that he notices there are “black” and “white” lines for almost everything. He asks his mother lots of questions as he always has, but as usual she becomes irritated with his constant barrage.

Aunt Maggie’s husband, Uncle Hoskins owns a successful saloon. One night he does not come home. After two days they learn he has been killed by whites who are jealous



of his success. These same whites are threatening to kill the whole family, and they must pack up quickly and flee to save their lives. There is no funeral, no flowers; they do not even know where Uncle Hoskins is buried.

They move in with Granny for a while, but Richard's mother grows tired of her strict religious rules and routine, and they move once again, to West Helena into a very undesirable neighborhood with brothels and much racial discourse directed at Jews.

Richard's mother is unable to earn enough money to provide for them, and once again hunger becomes a major issue in his life. Eventually his mother does find a job that pays \$5.00 a week, enough money for the boys to go back to school. Richard is happy to be back in school, but his fear and insecurity are so great that he freezes when asked to write his name.

Analysis

In the first two chapters the author sets the tone of his early years growing up in a racially segregated Jim Crow south. The reader learns immediately about the constant violence, fear and hunger that so define his young life. It is clear from the beginning that Richard is always misunderstood by the adults in his life. He receives very little love or nurturing and is left on his own much of the time. He is bright and curious and wants desperately to understand the world around him, especially the relationship between blacks and whites. He constantly asks his mother questions; questions about race and injustice that are too hard for her to answer, and because she doesn't have answers she gets angry.

There is much that this young boy wonders about. He doesn't understand why they didn't fight back when Uncle Hoskins was killed, and he vows that he will always fight back. His fear and anger towards whites is firmly entrenched. He realizes there are people who hold great power over him, but he resolves to never give in.

Vocabulary

License, barrenness, obscene, taunting, evasive, bungalow, crest, fiat, asafetida, flared, bulwark, enthralled, impressionable, vindictive, mulatto, galled



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3. Richard's mother becomes too ill to work, and he has to try and earn money to support the family. Richard and his brother are terrified when their mother suffers a severe stroke. His mother is partially paralyzed and very ill, and the decision is made to take her to Granny's house in Jackson. They travel by train with his mother on a stretcher. All of his mother's siblings are summoned to come help, and to try and figure out how they will deal with this calamity. Eventually the decision is made that Richard's brother will go live with Aunt Maggie in Detroit, and he chooses to go to his Uncle Clark's in Greenwood, because it is the closest to Jackson and his mother.

From the beginning Richard is uncomfortable at the home of his Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody. He tries hard to fit in and even enrolls in school. As it turns out he is not at the school for very long.

Richard learns that the next door neighbor's son, who has died, once slept in the room and bed that he now occupies. Richard becomes terrified and pleads with his aunt and uncle not to make him sleep in that room, in that bed. Richard is so frightened he cannot sleep and after a week is close to a nervous collapse. He begs to be allowed to return to his Granny and mother in Jackson, and eventually he is allowed to do so. His mother is better but still very ill.

Chapter 4. Richard's grandmother is a passionate, zealot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Her house is bound by strict religious rules which are the main focus of her being. Life there is harsh and food consists mostly of mush and greens. Granny is determined that Richard must accept her God if he is to be saved. Richard believes that none of her fanatical rantings are true. The battle for Richard's soul is waged by Granny and his Aunt Addie, who is as much a zealot as Granny. Richard is forced to attend the religious school where Addie teaches. He is accused of a silly infraction that he didn't commit. Addie is enraged and beats him. Richard makes a vow that he will never be beaten again. When his Aunt Addie prepares to beat him again when they return home, he snaps. He grabs a knife and threatens to harm her. Granny and his mother intervene, but when he tries to explain they will not listen.

Granny's efforts to have him accept her faith, are fierce and ongoing. He is forced to spend long hours in church praying and listening to hymns and sermons. At an all night prayer vigil he thinks he has found a way to get Granny to stop her unyielding attempts to bring him to her faith. He tells her that if he ever saw an angel like Job did he would be ready to fully accept God. Granny misunderstands and thinks he said he did see an angel and has accepted God. She joyfully shares the information with the elder. When Richard realizes she has misunderstood he feels he has to explain to the elder. Others overhear and Granny is humiliated and furious. He finally convinces her that he did not mean to hurt her, but the result is that she resumes her efforts to convert him. He feels



guilt for the pain he has caused and agrees to try to find God through long hours of prayer. He even tries to write verses for hymns, and says, "But I failed even in that; the Holy Ghost was simply nowhere near me."

Analysis

Chapters 3 and 4 continue to describe the bleakness of Richard's life. The poverty under which these people live is stark and real. Richard rarely has enough to eat. His schooling is constantly interrupted for a variety of reasons. His mother is sick and although there are relatives who are willing to care for him, things never seem to work out for Richard. He is very bright, but also very timid and sensitive. He has had very little nurturing and little chance to develop self confidence.

The author has never told us his brother's name or ever mentioned any particular relationship between them. When it is determined that his brother will move to Detroit with his Aunt Maggie, Richard feels disappointment that he will not be moving north, but never mentions any sadness at being separated from his brother. The reader has to assume that the brothers did not have a close relationship.

It is during these two chapters, when Richard endures many beatings, that he solidifies his determination to fight back and not let anyone beat him unjustly. He is a child who is full of anger and hurt in a life of despair and hopelessness. Yet this young boy with little formal education, at the age of twelve discovers a desire to express himself. He writes his first short story which, as he says, is without plot or action, but he has made something, and excitement and hope spring within him.

Vocabulary

Petition, conviction, paralytic, exaction, chronicles, salvation, secular, antagonism, gratuitous, cosmic, annihilation, discernable, hypothetical, blasphemy, salving, infallible



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5. For the moment, Granny and Aunt Addie have given up on Richard. They are cold and hostile, but at least they leave him pretty much alone. His mother has recovered somewhat and encourages Richard to study hard at the Jim Hill public school that he is allowed to attend. He has had only one year of continuous schooling, and the next four years will be his only opportunity for formal study. Even with his lack of continuous schooling he is assigned to the fifth grade, and within two weeks is moved to the sixth grade. Most of the boys in his class work, and Richard desperately wants to as well, but his grandmother will not allow him to work on Saturday, the Sabbath. He begs and pleads, offering to give Granny most of his earnings, but she is adamant that he will not work on Saturday. And so Richard continues to exist, “just on the borders of actual starvation.” At lunch time the other kids ask him why he has no lunch. Because he is embarrassed and ashamed of his poverty, lack of food, and strange home life, he lies and pretends that he is not hungry.

Eventually Richard gets a job selling papers. He starts to earn a little money and learn a bit about the outside world. However one day a customer points out that the paper preaches and supports the doctrines of the Ku Klux Klan. Richard is horrified and ashamed and immediately stops selling the papers.

One hot, summer night as his mother, Granny and Aunt Addie sit on the front porch, discussing religious doctrine, he impulsively blurts out a comment. Granny tells him to shut up and reaches to slap him across the face. When Richard instinctively ducks, Granny tumbles down the stairs and hurts her back. Richard is very frightened and runs to his room. His Aunt Addie confronts him, screaming that he tried to kill his Granny. He protests and tries to explain, but as always no one listens.

He does get a job towards the end of the summer, helping an illiterate insurance salesman with the writing and figuring of insurance policies. He accompanies Brother Nance on his trips to delta plantations, earning five dollars a week. But this too comes to an untimely end when Brother Nance dies. His grandfather dies that summer as well.

Richard enters the 7th grade still dealing with the hunger that has plagued him most of his life. His clothes are so shabby he is ashamed and once again begs his grandmother to let him work on Saturday. He threatens to run away and actually starts packing. She finally consents but tells him God will not forgive him. He knows now that he is totally dead to Granny and Aunt Addie, but his mother lets him know she is proud of him for defying them.

Chapter 6. His mother's health has improved, and she starts attending a Methodist Church. Richard goes also, but his motives are social not religious. He likes the warmth and diversity of this black church, but he never completely feels a part of it. There is a



great struggle to get him to join the church. The minister and congregation manipulate him into talking with the deacons. They use his mother's love as a way of putting pressure on him to "come to God." Richard is disgusted, but he finally gives in rather than humiliate his mother. He goes through with the baptism, but thinks it is all nonsense.

Summer approaches, and his mother suffers yet another stroke. There is not enough money to support the family, and so his Uncle Tom and family move into the 2nd floor of Granny's house. There is conflict between Richard and Tom that comes to a boiling point one morning when Tom wakes Richard to ask what time it is. Richard is half asleep and Tom doesn't like the way Richard speaks to him. Tom determines he will teach Richard a lesson. Richard has no idea what is going on, but he is determined that he will not allow Uncle Tom, or anyone else, to beat him. He gets two razor blades, and when Tom comes at him with a switch, Richards warns him that he will cut him if he tries. Uncle Tom eventually backs down.

Analysis

The author continues to detail the hardships of his life. He is always hungry, existing mainly on mush, a combination of flour and lard gravy, for breakfast and a plate of greens later in the day. It is not enough food for a growing boy, and as a result he is small, frail and lacking in energy.

Richard is momentarily happy with his grandmother and his Aunt Addie off his back. He has more freedom and is not continually bombarded with their efforts to force him to accept their God. As he says, "Instead of brooding and trying foolishly to pray, I could run and roam, mingle with boys and girls my age, feel at home with people, share a little of life in common with others, satisfy my hunger to be and live." But life never goes smoothly for Richard for very long. It seems that nearly all of the adults in his life misunderstand him and have a very low opinion of him. His Uncle Tom becomes furious when Richard runs to his house on Granny's instructions to tell him that Grandpa, Tom's father, has died. Richard has no idea why Tom has become so upset with him. He is often confused by how adults react to him. He wonders what's wrong with him and why he never seems to do things the way people expect, and why he so often evokes their hostility. He concludes that as far as his family is concerned whatever he does will always be the wrong thing.

The efforts to get Richard to find God continue as a major theme in the book. Although, his aunt and grandmother have eased up on their sometimes brutal attempts to cajole him into accepting their God, his mother, who has recovered a bit from her strokes, tries desperately to get him to join the Methodist Church she now attends. Richard is bombarded by everyone associated with the church to get baptized and join the church. It seems that none of the adults in his life will rest until he gives in, and in the end he does. But in his heart he never accepts their religion. He has seen and understood too much, and he sums up his feelings by saying, "This business of saving souls had no ethics; every human relationship was shamelessly exploited."

Vocabulary

Nonchalantly, emphatically, injunction, palatial, enthralled, blasphemous, yokels, solace, decisive, invectives, habitual, indifference, prevail, allegiance, baptism



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7. It is the summer of 1924, and Richard is 16. He tries to find a job where he can earn more money than his part time work doing odd jobs at a white woman's home. He gets a job temporarily at her husband's brickyard. He is not strong enough to haul bricks, but he gets the job of water boy, bringing water all day to the laborers at \$1.00 a day. The white boss's dog bites him badly on the leg, and when the boss takes a look at it, he laughs and says, "A dog bite can't hurt a nigger."

When the brick yard closes he gets a job as a caddie at a golf course five miles away, but that doesn't go well either since he knows nothing about the game of golf. Summer ends and he enters the ninth grade in a school across town. Just walking to school each day exhausts him after his meager breakfast of mush. He is bored and uninterested in school, and always hungry. He decides to write a story which he calls, The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre. The editor of the local Negro newspaper thinks it is good enough to publish. But as usual nothing good comes of this accomplishment. His class mates can't believe he wrote it, and accuse him of copying it. Granny considers it a lie and the Devil's work since it is fiction. His mother worries that people won't think he is serious. Uncle Tom is very critical and thinks it has no point, and Aunt Addie considers it a sin to use the word "hell" in the title. Richard is distraught, because with the exception of the newspaper editor, not a single person has given him the slightest encouragement. Once again he is at odds with the world around him.

Chapter 8. School is over for the year, and Richard wants to find a job where he can earn enough money to buy books and clothes for the next school term. He has no luck getting a job and the days without work are long, empty and very hot. Richard runs into Ned Greenly, one of his school mates, who tells him that his brother Bob has been killed by whites, apparently for "fooling around" with a white prostitute. Sad and deeply affected Richard realizes that white brutality, even if not done to him directly, completely controls his life

He returns to his work doing odd jobs and is able to earn enough money to buy supplies for school. During his ninth year in school his intelligence is recognized by his teacher who often turns the class over to his supervision. He is chosen valedictorian of his class and asked to write a speech. When the principal calls him in and hands him the speech that he is to deliver, Richard is shocked and refuses. The principal threatens him, and then tries to bribe him, but this young, strong-willed boy with a keen mind and strong sense of right and wrong will not give in to the principal's demands. He insists he will give his speech not the principal's. He delivers his speech to little applause or recognition and leaves immediately with no desire to ever see anyone there again.



Analysis

In these two chapters Richard broods over his future. He thinks about going north but worries about what might happen to his mother if he leaves. He is despondent over his life and full of fear. He recognizes there are little opportunities for him as a black male in the South, and that living as a Negro is cold and hard, but he isn't at all sure how he would manage if he moved north.

Many of the events that occur in these two chapters solidify his belief that there is no life for him here. His classmate's brother is killed by whites for fraternizing with a white prostitute, and Richard thinks, "Bob had been caught by the white death, the threat of which hung over every black male in the South." And he realizes that, "Indeed the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew."

His family shows him no support or encouragement in any of his endeavors. He feels isolated and rejected at every turn. Richard feels that because of his poverty, constant hunger, and "queer" family, he is never able to live a normal life or fit in with his classmates. They also reject him partly because he thinks so differently than they do. Their aspirations are very limited, while his are all encompassing. He dreams of going north and writing books. The north becomes the symbol of all his hope, and he imagines a different life with endless possibilities. He is building a dream that the Jim Crow laws were meant to stifle – dreams that the state has said were wrong, and the schools consider taboo.

Vocabulary

Taboo, articulate, aspirations, contemptuous, symbolized, galleys, manuscript, conviction, intuitively, bleakness, inconceivable, scaffold, compelled, encountered, intimacy, appalled, impetus, valedictorian, orating



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9. It is now essential that Richard find work and earn money. He takes a number of jobs, none of which work out. First he gets a job as a porter in a clothing store that sells cheap clothing to blacks. The white owners treat their black customers with contempt. Richard is particularly disturbed when the owners brutally beat a black woman for not paying her bill. That same day after making deliveries for the store, he is mistreated by a car full of white men when he forgets to address them as "sir." It is increasingly difficult for Richard to hide his feelings at the store, and he is quickly fired.

His next job is at an optical shop whose owner is a Yankee from Illinois. Mr. Crane wants to help Richard learn a trade, and instructs the two white workers to introduce him to the processes of grinding and polishing lenses. A month goes by and the men have barely spoken to him. When he reminds them that they are supposed to teach him the job, they react with violent hostility and inform him that the work is for white men only. When Mr. Crane is away from the shop they assault him. Richard realizes he has no choice but to leave. He wants to tell the owner what they have done, but knows the two men would kill him if he does. Mr. Crane knows that the men have been abusive, and he tries to get Richard to talk, but Richard knows it is useless.

Chapter 10. Richard is despondent over the loss of jobs, and the brutal treatment he has suffered at the hands of whites, but he knows he has to work. He finds a job at a drugstore and is determined that he will master this problem he has of infuriating white people, at least long enough to earn sufficient money to leave. He vows that he will keep his mouth shut and act in a subservient manner. He tries so hard to observe whites, to understand what they want, and to act like a black is supposed to that he becomes extremely fearful and full of anxiety. He drops a jug of syrup, and loses his job at the drugstore. He keeps trying, however, and gets a job at a hotel mopping floors. He enjoys interacting with the other black boys, but is amazed at how easily these boys accept the roles that whites have determined for them.

He realizes that at the rate he is saving money it will be two years before he saves the \$100.00 dollars he needs to make it possible to head north. Although Richard has never stolen anything, most of the black people he knows steal regularly from whites in one way or another. He begins to think stealing may be his only way to acquire the money he needs, although the prospect terrifies him. He gets a job at a local black movie theater and participates in a scam to keep some of the money from the ticket sales. He is very nervous and anxious, but in only one week he has made \$50.00. He pawns a gun that he has stolen from a neighbor's house, and sells some canned preserves he has stolen to come up with enough money to leave. He tells only his mother that he is leaving and explains that he can't live like this. She is sad, but glad he is going and tells him to send for her as soon as possible.



Analysis

Richard has finished going to school, and as he enters the white world in which he works, he sees and experiences white prejudice and brutality first hand. When he watches the black people in the clothing store being treated with contempt he cannot understand how blacks can accept such treatment. He is a proud and insightful young man who does not easily fit into the role that whites have deemed appropriate for blacks. Yet Richard knows that if he is to survive, and earn enough money to leave for the north, he must find a way to suppress his feelings and hatred toward white people. The effort it takes to do this sabotages him many times. He is so full of anxiety as he desperately tries to cover up his feelings that it brings on exhaustion and he makes mistakes. Even as he tries to hide his feelings, his eyes or just a slight facial expression give him away. He does know absolutely that he must leave this place; that he cannot live here where black people are treated so badly, and where there is little hope of any meaningful future. He feels like a non man, as something almost sub human.

It is a measure of his desperation that he eventually resorts to theft in order to get the needed money. He has extremely high standards, and stealing goes against everything for which he stands. Yet in the end he steals, because it is the only way he can think of to get free of this place. He pays a high price for his thievery in terms of his own fear, anxiety, worry and guilt, and hopes that he will never have to resort to such actions again.

Vocabulary

Flask, triumphantly, bleakly, dissemble, optical, aggressiveness, baffled, inference, stenographer, justification, implacable, apprehensive, aspire, preoccupation, unerringly, immobility, exasperating, filched, calculate



Chapter 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11. The year is 1925 and Richard arrives in Memphis. He finds Beale Street which is supposedly a place full of danger, but he finds a boarding house run by a Mrs. Moss who is

friendly and welcoming. She immediately likes Richard and soon makes it very clear that she thinks he would be a good husband for her 17 year old daughter, Bess. Richard likes Bess, but he is aghast that both she and her mother are so naive they would trust him implicitly after having just met him, and knowing little about him. Richard entertains the idea of getting involved with Bess, since it's clear she is more than willing to be intimate, but in the end he knows it wouldn't work, and that he does not want a relationship with her. Both Bess and her mother are hurt and upset, but when Richard tells them he must move, they beg him not to and leave him alone.

Chapter 12. Richard gets a job at an optical company where he meets and interacts with other blacks who work there. Shorty, who runs the elevator, is the most colorful and interesting. He is short, plump, savvy, proud of his race and "indignant about its wrongs," but in the presence of whites he resorts to the caricature of a complete clown. Shorty engages in ridiculous encounters with whites in order to get money. He banter with a white man on the elevator and eventually allows the man to kick him hard in the buttocks in order to get a quarter. Richard is disgusted and asks him how he can engage in such degrading acts. Shorty feels the only thing that matters is that he got the quarter.

Mr. Olin, Richard's white supervisor, tells him that he has heard that a black boy named Harrison who works across the street wants to hurt Richard - that he has a knife and is going to cut him. Richard can't imagine why, and though Mr. Olin has told him not to talk to Harrison, he does. Harrison tells Richard that Mr. Olin has told him that Richard wants to cut him. They figure out that the white men are trying to set them up and pit one against the other. They agree not to hurt each other, although each of them remains suspicious of the other, not totally sure they can trust each other. When they refuse to fight with knives, the white men urge them to have a boxing match offering them \$5.00. Richard wants nothing to do with it, saying it's degrading, and he'll feel like a dog. Harrison so wants the \$5.00 that he pleads with Richard to go through with it, saying that the white men already consider them dogs. Richard finally agrees, although he says he felt like he had done something unclean, "something for which he could never properly atone."



Analysis

Richard is learning how to survive as a black man living and working in the south. It is not as difficult as it was in Mississippi where he was always fearful for his life. He finds that here, even though contempt and hatred are readily apparent, physical and verbal abuse are less prevalent.

Richard makes a delivery to the optical counter of a department store where the man behind the counter is an unmistakable Yankee. The man can sense and see that Richard is very hungry and offers him a dollar to go buy some food. Richard is stunned and remains silent. The man continues to try to get Richard to take the dollar, but Richard denies that he is hungry and refuses the money. Richard avoids the man from then on, because what the man does not understand is that “the safety of my life in the South depended upon how well I concealed from all whites what I felt.”

Vocabulary

Disputable, bigot, reveled, flinched, foray, stunned, insistently, emphatically, demented, fathom, flabbergasted, unaffected, recounted, urbanity, theosophists, disdain, devastated, objectivity, incessantly, specimen, debased, loathing, latent, subordinate, capitulate, profound, recondite, elusive, provocation, tantamount



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13. Richard always arrives at work a little early in order to read the newspapers in the lobby of the building where he works. One morning he notices an article about H.L. Mencken, the editor of *American Mercury*. The article vehemently denounces Mencken, calling him a fool. Richard is stunned and intrigued. Mencken is white; what could he have done to arouse the hatred of the South? Richard wants to learn more. He needs books to learn, but blacks are not allowed to use libraries. Richard convinces a man at work who is Irish Catholic and also hated by the white men to let him take his library card and pretend that he is getting books for him. He manages to get two books by Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces* and *Prejudices*. Richard is amazed at what he reads. The author denounces everything American; he mocks God and authority, and laughs at the weaknesses in people. Richard suddenly realizes that words can be weapons. He is amazed that anyone would have the courage to write like that. He reads as many books as he can get, books like Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. The books open a whole new world to him, a new sense of life itself.

That winter Richard's mother and brother join him in Memphis. His brother gets a job and they start saving every penny for their planned trip to the North. Richard tells none of the white men at work his plans, because he knows they would change their attitude toward him and become hostile. They would consider his decision to leave an open challenge to them and their southern way of life.

Chapter 14. Richard's Aunt Maggie comes to visit. Her husband has deserted her. Richard, his brother, his mother, and Aunt Maggie now spend their time figuring out how they will manage the trip to Chicago. After much deliberation, they decide there is not enough money for them all to go at the same time. Richard and Aunt Maggie will go now, with his mother and brother to follow.

Richard does not dare to tell his boss the truth, and so tells him he is moving north to be with his paralyzed mother. He believes that he has to lie to conceal what he feels. He is confronted by the boss and the other white men who all assure him that he won't like it in Chicago. One of the men tells him that he'll change when he goes north. Richard assures him that he won't change, all the while knowing that he's leaving precisely so that he can change. Richard agrees with everything they say, but insists he wants to be with his mother.

Analysis

As Richard first reads the books by H.L. Mencken he reads about some of the great writers and thinkers of the time. People like Anatole France, Joseph Conrad, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Mark Twain and many others. He is awed and amazed by these



people that up until now he didn't even know existed. He cannot get enough of the ideas he is discovering, but with it comes a certain sadness as he realizes just how much he has never known; how much has been denied to him. He understands what it is to be a Negro; he can deal with the hunger and the hate, but to realize that there were feelings that had been denied to him, and so much of life that he knew nothing about and that seemed beyond his reach – that hurt more than anything he had endured. He knows now what he has missed by living in the South with his Jim Crow station in life.

Richard ponders his options. There is outright rebellion, but that would undoubtedly mean death. He could submit to the life he is living, that of a genial slave, but he knows he could never accept that. He could marry Bess and inherit the house, but that would be a different kind of slavery, and he would hate himself. He cannot imagine any life for himself here in the South. His reading has shown him another kind of life that seems unattainable. And as he says, "My days and nights were one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension, and anxiety. I wondered how long I could bear it."

Vocabulary

Denunciation, castigate, patronize, extolling, impulse, discerned, enabled, tantamount, repugnant, violate, prevailed



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15. Richard and his Aunt Maggie arrive in Chicago and rent a single room in which to live. The very next morning Richard gets a job in a delicatessen run by a Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman. When Richard has an opportunity to take a test for a postal position he does not dare tell the Hoffman's that he will have to miss work. He makes up a story about his mother dying and having to go to her funeral. The Hoffman's don't buy it. They know he is lying, but the more they tell him they know, the more he digs himself in deeper and deeper. Richard is amazed by two things; one; that they bothered to take the time to talk to him, and two; that they don't fire him, even though they know he has lied. Richard is crushed by the pity he knows the Hoffman's feel for him and he leaves to work in a café. Eventually he gets the temporary job at the post office which pays more and has better hours allowing him some time to focus on his desire to write. Richard hopes to get a permanent position at the Post Office, but weighing only 110 pounds he cannot meet the weight requirement of 125 pounds. Richard goes back to work at the café, and knowing that another postal examination is scheduled for the spring, he makes "eating" his full time obsession. Slowly his starved body begins to absorb the calories he is consuming, and he begins to gain weight, "counteracting the flesh-sapping anxiety of fear-filled days."

Chapter 16. Richard takes the postal examination and this time he passes. He starts to socialize with a group of his co-workers who share similar ideas. They are all very cynical and poke fun at everything from the government to religion. Richard refers to this period of his life as his "cynical stage." He meets with a Negro literary group and assumes he'll have much in common with them, but as it turns out he does not. The only group he encounters that truly intrigues him are the Garveyites whose main goal is to build their own country with a culture of their own making. Richard does not embrace their ideology which he knows is futile, but rather their emotions. They are endowed with a dignity that he has never before seen in Negroes.

Richard senses that something terrible is going on in the world, but he tries to shut it out of his mind. And then it happens, in the winter of 1929, the stock market crashes. Richard does not get an appointment as a regular clerk; his hours drop and eventually his job ends.

The economy continues to deteriorate, and one morning there is no food for breakfast. Richard is an extremely proud young man, but after much deliberation, he succumbs to reality and goes to the County Bureau of Public Welfare for help. As he says, "I knew I had come to the end of something."



Analysis

Richard does a great deal of soul searching in these two chapters, trying to figure out how he can fit in to this new social structure, a structure that he does not easily understand. There is no outright segregation – no separate seats or lines for whites and blacks – but he feels the racial prejudice and covert segregation everywhere. He ponders his future and his options, and they are dismal. He does not see how he will ever succeed or fit in with others. He is deeply cynical and deeply disappointed in America. He believes that racial discrimination towards Negroes is a deeply corroding and devastating attack upon the black man's personality. It breeds self hate, anxiety and insecurity.

Many leaders and agitators have embraced Communism and tried to adopt its ideas and appearances. But Richard, who has spent a great deal of time in and out of Negroes' homes when he was selling insurance policies, believes the agitators are completely out of touch with the average Negro whose aspirations are far simpler than the desire to start a revolution. Richard believes America does not have the maturity or the courage to deal with its problem of "color hate." And he knows that the Negro will continue to suffer because of that.

Vocabulary

Inefficient, balked, mechanism, paternalistic, tainted, tawdry, inclusion, suffused, convulsed, reconciled, manifestation, habituated, integral, oblique, Bohemian, enthralled, succumbed, remunerate, calculating, malingerer, indignation, dialectic, eschewing, buttressed, fanatical, intolerance, disdainfully, accosted, prerequisite, aspirations



Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17. After waiting for many hours, Richard receives assurance of food at the relief station. The relief agency assigns him to a variety of jobs, one of which is at a large research hospital where he cleans the cages of the lab animals. He works with four other Negroes who accept their lot in life much more readily than he does. Richard, as always, is curious and wants to learn. When he asks one of the doctors about some of the research, the doctor ignores his questions and says, "If you know too much, boy, your brains might explode."

Two of the other workers are older men, Brand and Cooke, who hate each other. One day their dislike and frustration come to a boil, and they get into a fight. When Richard realizes these two are seriously ready to cut each other, he steps in to break up the fight. In the scuffle, a whole tier of cages falls down. The dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, mice and rats are loose. The fight quickly ends as the workers, surrounded by chaos, realize that there is 30 minutes left of their lunch break before the doctors and lab assistants return. They furiously try to remember which animals go where, but because the professionals have never included them in anything, they have no idea what the words on the cages mean, or which animals are involved in which research projects. They know that their jobs are at stake, however, and working together feverishly they get the correct number of animals back into cages. No one ever figures out the mix up, but Richard knows that they have completely skewed any validity to the results of the research.

Chapter 18. Richard starts meeting with a group of white boys that he worked with at the post office. Many of these whites belong to the Communist Party and one, Sol, belongs to a revolutionary artist's organization called the John Reed Club. Sol finally persuades Richard to come to a meeting and Richard is intrigued but skeptical. He can't believe that Communists really care about the plight of the Negro, but after attending a number of meetings he agrees to join the club. Eventually he is coerced into joining the Communist Party as well.

One night a Jewish man appears at the club and introduces himself as Comrade Young of Detroit. From the beginning Richard feels something about Young is not quite right, but he can never quite figure out what it is. Young becomes an ardent and active member of the club. At one of the meetings, he accuses another member, Swann, of being a traitor. The group believes that Young represents the Party, and they are surprised and baffled since Swann is a highly respected and well thought of member. There are emergency meetings and bitter debates as the conflict escalates, until suddenly Young disappears. After much inquiry and searching, Richard discovers that Young had escaped from a mental institution, and had been apprehended and returned to the institution. Richard is horrified that a madman could infiltrate their organization and cause such havoc.



Analysis

After the incident at the hospital when the animals are haphazardly put back in cages, Richard deliberates whether he should go to the director and explain what happened. Richard realizes that none of the experiments will have any validity because the animals have been completely mixed up. But then he remembers how he has been treated at the hospital; how doctors thought nothing of walking with dirty feet over the stairs he had just cleaned; how he and the others were not even regarded as human beings, and he decides he needs the weekly \$13.00 he earns to support the four people who depend on him. Richard sees a similarity between how the black workers have been confined to the underworld corridors of the hospital where the animals are kept to the way America has kept Negroes locked in the dark underworld of America for 300 years.

When Richard gets involved with the John Reed Club he starts to have a little hope. He begins to let go of his cynicism, which had always been his protection against a country that had shut him out, and wonders if there might be a solution of unity between people. He is excited by the ideology of the Communist Party, particularly the idea that workers all over the world might unite. His hope, however, is tested as he deals with the workings of the party. He sees that the members of the party spend more time fighting each other than they do fighting the oppression of the working man.

Vocabulary

Timidity, stanch, enabling, collectivity, anarchy, contemptuously, cynicism, ferret, privations, irredeemably, sadistic, obviate, indecipherable, havoc, repercussions, hypothesis, validation, eminent, fathom, condescension, assumption, disinherited, symbolic, embodied, incumbent



Chapters 19-20

Summary

Chapter 19. Richard starts attending “unit” meetings of the Communist Party. He has decided that his contribution to the party could be his ability, through his writing, to explain the Negro soul to the other Communist members. However, he is met with skepticism in his every attempt to explain himself. Even his fellow Negro Communists laugh at him and accuse him of being an intellectual and a Bourgeois.

He begins a series of interviews with a man named Ross, a black member of the Party. His goal is to write a series of biographical sketches through which he hopes to explain the difficulties of the southern black living in an urban environment. When the Party learns that he is taking notes about Ross’s life, he is chastised and warned. One Black Communist tells him, “Intellectuals don’t fit well into the party.” Ross becomes fearful and suspicious of Richard and the talks deteriorate. Eventually the Party turns against Ross and Richard is warned to stay away from him.

Richard’s involvement with the Communist Party does not go well and he starts to minimize his involvement. Even though the Party is suspicious of him he is instructed to attend a writer’s conference at Carnegie Hall in New York City. The conference becomes secondary to Richard’s need to find a place to stay. He feels the sting of de facto segregation as he realizes he is not welcome at any of the hotels. He leaves the conference full of anger and shame.

Richard has another difficult interaction with party member Buddy Neelson who asks him to organize a committee protesting the high cost of living. Richard resists since he knows nothing about the project, but he is told he does not have a choice. Reluctantly Richard agrees to try it for a month. Before the month is out he is called again to a meeting where he is offered another opportunity, to go to Switzerland as a youth delegate. Richard declines, and at the next unit meeting he requests that he be allowed to drop out of the Communist Party. Neelson threatens to publicly dispel and destroy him, but Richard vows he will fight back. In the end, Neelson does not initiate a public outcry, but within the Party, Richard is shunned, and “branded a traitor, an unstable personality, and one whose faith had failed.”

Ross, who has publicly fought the Party, is put on trial. It is a very lengthy affair in which all the positive ideology of the Communist Party is passionately recounted as it applies to mankind here and around the world. This goes on for many hours, and when Ross has a chance to speak, he tearfully confesses that he is guilty and now understands where he went wrong. He begs forgiveness, and is able to remain a member of the Communist Party. In Ross’s confession, Richard sees a spectacle of both “glory” and “horror.”



Chapter 20. Richard is transferred by the relief agency to the Federal Writers' Project. Many of the other writers are Communists who shun him and actively try to get him fired. Richard tries to meet with the head of the local Communist party and attempt once more to explain how all of this is a complete misunderstanding of his motives. He is only permitted to meet with the leader's secretary who tells him that there is nothing they can do for him.

The union where he works has voted to march in the 1936 May Day parade, but they purposely give Richard incorrect instructions so he will miss the start of the march. He tries to join in with another group of Communists, but is assaulted and physically thrown out of the parade. Richard realizes that he is considered a traitor and there is nothing he can do to correct that false assumption.

Analysis

Although Richard supports the ideology of the Communist Party, he never fits in with the Party. He realizes there is no room to discuss ideas. Members are expected to accept whatever decisions the Party dictates even when they know they are wrong. He tries over and over to explain his position – that he only wants to help the white Communists understand the Negro and how deeply the brutality and limitations of the South have affected Negroes. But everyone, even fellow blacks, looks at him with suspicion and distrust. They consider him an intellectual, and in the Communist Party intellectualism is a bad thing.

Richard still embraces the ideas of the Communist Party, and believes that someday Communism will overcome the plight of the “workers,” and bring men together. But he fears that might take many years of blundering. The Party will have to grow up first and learn to follow its mission of fighting oppression instead of fighting each other. Richard realizes that his way will have to be the way of ideas. He will fight on, but it will be a solitary fight through his words not as a member of any organization.

Vocabulary

Reticent, obligatory, inherent, disaffection, engrossing, convened, implored, abstract, inconceivable, degenerate, quixotic, incriminated, imperative, postulated, irrefutably, truncated



Characters

Richard Wright

Richard is the author and main character of the book. He is an idealistic, intellectually gifted individual whose ideas never fit in with those around him. From the very beginning he is at odds with his family, his peers, and the Jim Crow image that the south has assigned him. This never really changes. Even when he leaves the South to pursue a life in the North where he advocates for understanding and acceptance of Negroes, he is misunderstood by the very people he wants to help.

Ella, His Mother

Ella struggles to provide for her sons after her husband leaves her, but her ill health often makes this impossible. She seems to care about Richard, but she is very hard on him and does not hesitate to beat him severely when she thinks he deserves it.

Richard's Father

Richard's father deserted the family when Richard was quite young. He does not play a role in Richard's life, but Richard resents him and blames him for their poverty and hunger. Many years later Richard visits his elderly father who is living on a plantation. He realizes their lives are light years apart, and that his father is, pathetically, a product of the segregated South.

Granny

Granny is Richard's maternal grandmother. She is the matriarch of the family and a fiercely devoted member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Her interpretation of the rules of the church and bible are harsh and demanding. There is little love or nurturing in her household. She never approves of Richard's independent mind and does not hesitate to punish him brutally. She devotes a great deal of energy into coercing Richard to accept her God, and when she fails she gives up on him.

Alan

Alan is Richard's younger brother. There is very little written about him. It appears that the brothers did not have a close relationship, although Richard brings him to Chicago and provides for him when he is ill.



Aunt Maggie and Uncle Hoskins

Aunt Maggie is the sister that Richard, his mother, and brother live with for a time in Elaine, Arkansas. Maggie seems to be the kindest of all his mother's siblings and even appreciates some of Richard's uniqueness. Her husband, Hoskins, runs a successful business, but is killed by whites who are jealous of his success.

Aunt Addie

Aunt Addie lives with Granny, and seems to hate Richard as much as Granny does. Like Granny she is a religious fanatic with a harsh interpretation of her religion. She seems threatened by Richard and tries to humiliate and physically abuse him whenever possible.

Uncle Clark

Uncle Clark is another of his mother's siblings. Richard goes to live with him briefly during one of his mother's illnesses. Neither he nor his wife Jody is physically abusive to Richard, but they do not understand Richard's terror of sleeping in a bed where a neighbor's son died. Richard is so terrified that he begs to be returned to his Granny's home.

Uncle Tom

Uncle Tom, who is the oldest of Granny's children, comes to live at Granny's during a tough economic time. He completely misunderstands Richard and considers him rude and insolent. He forbids anyone in his family to have anything to do with Richard.

Mrs. Moss

Mrs. Moss is the owner of the boarding house where Richard lives while in Memphis. She is friendly and trusting, and immediately takes to Richard, but she wants him to marry her daughter Bess. Richard is baffled by her trust in him, though he sees that there really are people who are kind and uncomplicated.

Shorty

Shorty works with Richard at the optical factory in Memphis. He runs the elevator, and although he is a proud man he will demean himself in order to get money from whites. He engages in ridiculous activities that are always at his expense. Richard finds this utterly degrading and cannot understand how Shorty can stoop to such behavior.



Mr. Olin

The supervisor at the optical factory who poses as Richard's friend when in reality he is attempting to pit two black boys against each other and have them engage in a fight with knives. He and his white colleagues think it would be fun to see two blacks hurt, or even kill each other.

Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman

The Hoffman's are the owners of the Jewish delicatessen where Richard gets a job in Chicago. They are decent people and do not treat Richard badly. When Richard needs time off to apply for a potentially better job at the post office, he does not dare tell them the truth. They know he is lying and attempt to get him to be honest, but Richard's instinct to protect himself from whites has always been to lie. What is most surprising to him is that they do not fire him.

Brand and Cooke

The two elderly black workers Richard works with at the Chicago hospital down in the bowels of the hospital where the research animals are caged. Richard is never able to figure out why, but these two men hate each other. They eventually get into a serious fight and as the other workers try to break it up before they kill each other, the cages are knocked over. The animals get loose, and there is chaos.

Comrade Young

Comrade Young is the person who shows up at a meeting saying he is a member of the Detroit John Reed Club and the Communist Party. He accuses another member, Swann, of being a traitor, collaborator, and an adherent of Trotsky. Young insinuates that he represents the Communist Central Committee, but before the situation is resolved, Young disappears. Richard eventually finds out that Young had escaped from a mental institution and had no connection to the Communist Party. Richard is shaken by the fact that a "madman" could so easily infiltrate and influence the Party.

Ross

Ross is the black Communist who Richard interviews in order to write a biographical sketch. When the Communist Party becomes suspicious of Richard's motives, Ross becomes fearful. Ross is openly critical of the Party, and is eventually charged with the crimes of ideological tendencies, class collaborationist attitudes, and ideological factionalism. He is subjected to a lengthy and passionate trial, and ends up confessing and begging forgiveness.



Objects/Places

Jim Crow Laws

From the 1880's to the 1960's many states, mostly in the South, enforced segregation through the Jim Crow Laws. The most common types of laws forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated. Officially the laws were supposed to create "separate but equal" conditions, but the reality was that the laws allowed whites to abuse blacks with impunity.

The Kate Adams

The Kate Adams is the boat that Richard and his family took when they moved to Memphis.

Jim Hall Public School

The Jim Hall Public School is the school that Richard is allowed to attend after his grandmother and Aunt Addie give up their attempts to have him accept their strict interpretation of their religion. Although Richard has had little formal schooling he is quickly promoted to a higher grade level.

Books

When Richard finds a way to get library books a whole new world opens for him. Some of the books he reads are: A Book of Prefaces by H.L. Mencken; Main Street by Sinclair Lewis, Sister Carrie by Theodore Dreiser, and many others by authors such as Dostoevsky, Maupassant, Stephen Crane, Balzac, O. Henry, T.S. Eliot, H.G. Wells, etc.

The John Reed Club

The John Reed Club is a revolutionary artist's organization that Richard joins in Chicago.



Themes

Racism

The first half of the book takes place in the segregated South of the early 1900's. The treatment of black people is brutal and dehumanizing. The author tells about the horrific treatment that he and other blacks suffer at the hands of whites. In the second half of the book he focuses on the effect of that brutal treatment on black people. Even when Negroes are able to leave the violent South with its Jim Crow laws, they have been so denied and beaten down that most seem unable to think for themselves or aspire to very much in life.

Violence

Violence is a part of Richard's life from his earliest days when his mother almost beat him to death. In his early years, before he has much association with white people, he suffers violence mostly from his family. Beatings are an accepted means of punishment in his family which is ruled by his fanatical grandmother.

As he grows older he becomes acutely aware of the brutality that is heaped upon Negroes by whites. He learns that his uncle was killed by whites who were jealous of his successful business. Richard wonders why no one ever fights back. He vows that he will not just take it, but will fight back. In the second part of the book, when Richard lives in Chicago, he does fight back, not physically but with his ideas and words.

Poverty and Hunger

Poverty and hunger are interconnected and both are terrifying aspects of Richard's life, especially during his younger years. He suffers from near starvation, and serious malnutrition. For many years he eats on mush for breakfast and a plate of greens for his second meal. Richard sometimes accompanies his mother to her job cooking for a white family. He watches as they eat lavish and bountiful amounts of food while he gets a few scraps.

Poverty and hunger figure as themes throughout the book as most Southern blacks never had enough money to get adequate and nutritious food. Richard sees some blacks, like Shorty, completely degrade themselves for money and food. Many Negroes steal from whites in order to augment their meager provisions.

Communism

The author writes extensively about his struggles with Communism. After initial skepticism, he embraces Communism and becomes a member of the Communist Party.



Much of the second half of the book addresses his struggle with Communism. It was inevitable that Richard, a strong individualist would be at odds with the Communist Party which favors collectivism not individualism. The reader needs to be aware that the time frame is the 1930's, during the Depression, and some years after the Czars of Russia have been overthrown. At that time, many in the United States idealized and embraced Communism for its ideology of fighting against the oppression of the working class.

Style

Point of View

Black Boy is the autobiography of Richard Wright, and thus it is written in the first person. It details his life from age four through approximately his twenties. Through the chronicles of his violent life in the segregated Jim Crow south, and the de-facto segregated north, the author demonstrates the terrible effects of brutal racism. He shows how poverty, violence, hunger, and ignorance shaped the southern black man.

Setting

The setting for this book is initially in the South. Richard is born in 1908 in Mississippi where racism and segregation were firmly entrenched. He moved often due to his mother's inability to provide for her two boys after their father deserted them. They lived in Tennessee, Arkansas, and later in Chicago, but wherever they lived they experienced the hunger, poverty and fear that were a constant condition for most Negroes.

Eventually they fulfilled their dream of moving to Chicago where Richard had pinned his hopes on a better life, but the reality of life in the North was still one of poverty, hunger and racism.

Language and Meaning

Wright's writing is both expressive and eloquent. He combines an amazing mixture of simplicity and majesty. This wasn't gained through formal education, of which he had little, but rather through his voracious reading of many of the literary masters, and his own intrinsic skill. His use of rich and vivid language to describe brutal, dehumanizing events provides an interesting and often chilling contrast to the violence in the book. Language has deep meaning in this novel, because it is through language that Richard finds his freedom.

Structure

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, Southern Nights, takes place in the segregated South and consists of 14 chapters. The individual chapters do not have titles. The second half of the book is titled The Horror and the Glory. It consists of 6 chapters that chronicle Richard's years in the North. Because this is an autobiography it does not have a "plot" as such. Rather the author has detailed events that he felt were important in his life. By telling the story of what life was like for a young Negro boy in the South, he gives voice to the condemnation of racism, segregation, violence and hatred.



Quotes

Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside staring at me gauntly. (Chapter 2)

A man will seek to express his relation to the stars; but when a man's consciousness has been riveted upon obtaining a loaf of bread that loaf of bread is as important as the stars. (Chapter 12)

This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled. (Chapter 14)

My cynicism, which had been my protection against an America that had cast me out slid from me, and timidly, I began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible. (Chapter 18)

I had fled men who did not like the color of my skin, and now I was among men who did not like the tone of my thoughts. (Chapter 19)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Why does Richard's family treat him with such brutality? Does he do anything to warrant the abuse heaped on him by his family? Why do Aunt Addie and Uncle Tom seem to hate him so? Is there evidence that his mother does care about him?

Topic 2

Richard seems to incite white people more than other young Negroes do. What is it about Richard that makes them so angry with him? Does he act any differently than the other Negro children?

Topic 3

What is the effect of Richard's constant hunger on his life? How might his life have been different if his mother had not always been ill? How might his life have been different if he had been able to get more education?

Topic 4

Why did Richard eventually drop out of the Communist Party? Was the Party justified in viewing him with suspicion? The party called him an "intellectual." Why was that considered a negative thing?

Topic 5

What effect did segregation have on the Negro, and on the United States? Discuss whether the outright racism of the South was worse than the de facto racism of the North?