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SYNOPSIS

Richard Wright, a major force in American autobiography and fiction, was a stirring example to his followers—Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Chester Himes, and Toni Morrison. In his honest study of his beginnings, he set standards for realism by chronicling his defiance of Jim Crow. From his portrayal of bigotry and violence came a deluge of black nonfiction and fiction, poetry, oratory, and literary criticism, much of which fueled the civil rights movements of the 1960s.

Chapter 1: Warming before the hearth at age four, Richard is fascinated by fire in his family's cabin outside Natchez, Mississippi. His brother, a year younger, warns him to avoid danger, but Richard sets fire to drapes. Obsessed with guilt that he left his grandmother inside a burning house, he hides under the floor near the chimney, where his father rescues him. His mother, Ella Wright, whips him so severely that he lapses into unconsciousness.

The family boards the *Kate Adams* and travels upriver to Memphis, where they move into a two-room apartment. Richard's father works as a night porter at a pharmacy. In comparison to the farm Richard roamed in babyhood, the city is bleak and oppressive. The stillness necessary for his father's sleep puts extra stress on the child, who feels unloved and rejected. After his father takes up with another woman, Ella is unable to feed herself and the two boys. She locates kitchen work and depends on Richard to buy groceries. When bigger boys attack him, he learns to fight. Without adult guidance, six-year-old Richard entertains himself by begging pennies at a saloon, where patrons give him liquor. Ella sues for child support, but the judge finds in the father's favor.

Chapter 2: Temporarily, Ella moves the boys to her sister's home in Elaine, Arkansas. In Jackson, Mississippi, Richard meets Granny Wilson, a severe light-skinned ex-slave. A local teacher who rents a room at Granny's house introduces him to *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*. Granny forbids the reading of fiction, which she considers sinful. Her fanaticism overrules most pleasure; the boy receives beatings for the slightest fault.

At Aunt Maggie and Uncle Hoskins's bungalow, Richard enjoys ample food. The unforeseen shooting of Uncle Hoskins by envious white competitors ends the family's security. Richard flees in terror with his brother, aunt, and mother. From Granny's crowded quarters, the family moves to West Helena, Arkansas. Maggie and Professor Matthews elope to Detroit. Once more, Ella supports the family by working in a doctor's office.

Chapter 3: Ella suffers a paralytic stroke. Richard writes Granny Wilson for help. She transports Ella by train to Jackson, where Maggie serves as her nurse and housekeep-

er. Richard is so disturbed that he sleepwalks. His relatives take control and send his brother to live with Maggie in Detroit. At age 12, Richard lives with his aunt and uncle in Greenwood, Mississippi. His mother goes to Clarksdale for an operation, but is not cured.

Chapter 4: Granny Wilson rules Richard's life and feeds him an insubstantial diet. As his ambition to write takes shape, no one in Granny's house approves his dreams. Granny forces Richard to frequent a joyless church and attend classes at a one-room religious school. When his Aunt Addie lashes him, he draws a kitchen knife. Ella halts their stand-off. Granny shames him for his evil ways.

Chapter 5: Richard longs to join other boys at the grocery store to buy lunch. He sells papers without realizing they are Ku Klux Klan propaganda. One night, when he ducks a blow from Granny, she falls down the steps and is injured. Addie blames him for the incident; Richard begins sleeping with a knife under his pillow. The summer before seventh grade, he assists an illiterate insurance agent. After Grandpa's death, Richard, who suffers shame for his ragged appearance, quits going to church and forces his family to allow him to work on Saturday. Only Ella appreciates his drive.

Chapter 6: Richard finds a job with a white family, where he stuffs himself with nourishing food when his employer is not looking. His mother manipulates him into joining the church. He is disillusioned by baptism and acceptance into the congregation.

Chapter 7: In the summer of 1924, Richard takes a job as waterboy for a brickyard. At age fifteen, he enrolls in the eighth grade and composes "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre" for the *Southern Register*. The editor offers no pay for the story, which is published in three installments, but does offer to teach Richard to write. Granny condemns the story as the devil's work. Richard dreams of moving north and learning to write.

Chapter 8: Richard locates work at a sawmill, then quits in anguish because his friend's brother was murdered by white men. He works for Mrs. Bibbs and attends ninth grade in rags. His sorrow increases when his scornful brother returns from Chicago. In 1925, at age seventeen, Richard completes the ninth grade and graduates top in his class. He rebels against an obsequious principal and delivers an original speech, thus destroying his chances for a scholarship.

Chapter 9: Richard finds work as a delivery boy for a clothier. White men offer him a ride on the running board of their car, then bash him with a bottle. He grows increasingly bitter and sullen. The boss's son fires him. Jobs come and go. Richard's friend Griggs tries to teach him subservience.

With Griggs's help, Richard applies to Mr. Crane's optical lab. As Richard begins to learn the trade, two white workers drive him away from a job they consider white man's work. Crane tries to sort out the details of their confrontation, but Richard decides to move north to escape racism.

BLACK BOY

Chapter 10: While saving for his emigration, Richard grows depressed with the Jim Crow image. At a Jackson hotel, he serves as hallboy and distributor of bootleg liquor for white prostitutes. At a black cinema, Richard robs the owner by helping Tel, the ticket agent, resell used stubs. He steals canned fruit preserves from a college and breaks into a neighbor's house and takes a gun. By selling the stolen items, he saves enough cash to pay for clothes, shoes, a cardboard suitcase, and his exodus from Mississippi. Leaving an invalid mother is also worrisome. Richard promises to send for her and tearfully boards the train for Memphis.

Chapter 11: Arriving in Memphis in November 1925, Richard rooms with Mrs. Moss, a scheming boarding house owner who tries to entice Richard to marry her simple-minded daughter Bess. He locates a job washing dishes.

Chapter 12: To use the skills he has already developed, Richard works at an optical company and names Mr. Crane as a reference. The company pays eight dollars week, but does not allow black workers to learn the trade. Richard runs errands and washes eyeglasses. Mrs. Moss weeps because he shows no interest in marrying Bess.

Richard reads intellectual periodicals from secondhand book stores. Mr. Olin provokes Richard to fight Harrison, a black whom Olin insists intends to knife Richard in a trumped-up entertainment for white factory workers. Richard refuses a knife fight, but agrees to accept five dollars for a fist fight. He and Harrison feel victimized by exploitative whites.

Chapter 13: Because of his interest in H. L. Mencken, editor of the *American Mercury*, Richard asks Mr. Falk for his library card. Using forged notes, Richard is able to check out *A Book of Prefaces*, then Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. That winter, Richard takes in his mother and brother and saves toward his escape to the north.

Chapter 14: After Maggie's mate deserts her, the family decides that she and Richard should move to Chicago and send for his mother and brother when he earns enough money to pay their passage. In 1925, Richard again boards a train bound for an unfamiliar city. Filled with the idealism of a youthful intellectual, he longs for a life of dignity and fulfillment.

TIME LINE OF THE ACTION

- 1875 Reconstruction Era corruption disenfranchises Mississippi's black population.
- 1908 Sept. 4 Richard Nathaniel Wright is born.
- 1909 Richard's brother, Leon Alan, is born. The NAACP is founded in New York.
- 1911 Nathan Wright deserts the family.
- 1914 The first black actors replace whites in black face on stage and in movies.
- 1917 Ella Wright moves with the boys to West Helena, Arkansas. A New York protest march of 10,000 blacks rallies against lynchings, most of which occur in the South.
- 1918 11% of American soldiers in World War I are black draftees.
- 1920 Wright and his family live with his mother's parents in Jackson, Mississippi.
- 1925 Nov. Wright travels by train to Memphis and later to Chicago.
- 1926 Carter G. Woodson initiates Negro History Month.
- 1927 Wright works for the post office.

The careers of Ethel Waters, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and the Harlem Globetrotters begin.

- 1930 Fard Mohammed founds the Black Muslims.
- 1935 Wright takes part in the WPA Illinois Writers Project and edits the *Daily Worker*, a communist newspaper.
- 1936 *Uncle Tom's Children* is published.
- 1937 He settles in Brooklyn and becomes active in the I. W. W., a leftist labor movement. He edits *Challenge Magazine*, which encourages realism.
- 1938 Billie Holiday and boogie woogie enliven black entertainment.
- 1939 Wright marries dancer Rose Dhimah Meadman; he divorces her six months later.
- 1940 *Native Son* is published. Life expectancy for blacks is 51, eleven years less than for whites.
- 1941 Orson Welles produces the Broadway version of *Native Son*. Wright marries Ellen Poplar and resigns from the Communist Party.
- 1945 *Black Boy* is published and dedicated to Wright's wife Ellen and daughter Julia.
- 1946 Wright emigrates to Paris, France, with his family.
- 1950 *Native Son* is filmed in Argentina, starring Richard Wright as Bigger Thomas.
- 1960 Wright dies in a Paris hospital and is buried in Pere Lachaise Cemetery.
- 1986 *Native Son* is filmed a second time.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born September 4, 1908, to teacher Ella Wilson Wright and Nathaniel Wright, her sharecropper husband, on a plantation in Roxie, Mississippi, twenty miles east of Natchez, Richard Nathaniel Wright became America's most honored and influential black man of letters, famous as essayist, autobiographer, poet, critic, lecturer, and novelist. He saw his family divided in 1911, when his father deserted Ella. She moved to Natchez with Richard and his brother Leon Alan, a year younger than Richard. In 1917, she rented half of a bordello in West Helena, Arkansas, then had to place her two sons in an orphanage while she recovered from a stroke. The area, noted for intense racism, proved unsuitable for the family.

As described in his autobiography, Wright lived with his grandparents and other relatives in Jackson from 1920 to 1925 and grew more rebellious against stringent Seventh Day Adventist teachings, particularly required Saturday church attendance and vegetarianism. He attended classes at Smith-Robertson and Jim Hill schools and, using a borrowed library card, read extensively, including the novelists of his day—Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. He was drawn to H. L. Mencken's *Book of Prefaces*, from which he developed his own writing style. He worked as delivery boy for a clothier, bellhop at Edward House, grocery stocker, and ticket seller for the Alamo Theater.

At fourteen, Wright published "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre" in the *Southern Register*. The three-part serial alarmed his fundamentalist grandmother, who considered his writing sinful. This familial alienation plus society's restrictions on blacks pushed him further from home toward an uneasy

BLACK BOY



manhood. Using money he skimmed from the Alamo box office, he moved to Memphis, then joined emigrés to Chicago's Black Belt in his late teens. In 1927, he found work as a post office porter, hospital orderly, and insurance agent. Between jobs, he struggled and for a time lived on welfare, which provided lard, flour, and molasses.

Ten years later, Wright settled in Brooklyn, New York, with friends Jane and Herbert Newton, became active in the I. W. W., edited Harlem news for the Communist *Daily Worker*, and submitted articles to the *New Masses*. The next year, under the aegis of the 1935 WPA Illinois Writers Project, he became publicist for the Chicago Negro Theater and completed his memoirs in the form of four novellas published together as *Uncle Tom's Children*. In response to this show of talent, he received a Guggenheim endowment and was named one of twelve distinguished U. S. negroes. About the time of the end of his six months' marriage to exotic dancer Rose Dhimah Meadman, he made his greatest literary statement with *Native Son* (1940), a bestseller. He based the novel on the life and 1938 execution of Robert Nixon. The book became the first fiction by a black author to be selected a Book of the Month. From the proceeds, Wright bought a home in Chicago for his invalid mother.

In 1941, while Wright retired to Mexico to work, Orson

Welles produced the Broadway stage version of *Native Son*, written by North Carolina playwright Paul Green. The production starred Canada Lee as Bigger Thomas, one of literature's most poignant and complex victims. The 1950 filming of the novel in Argentina starred Wright in the part of his fictional protagonist. The 1986 film, featuring Akousuwa Busia, Matt Dillon, and Carroll Baker, earned acclaim for its existential view of the black male who is willing to risk all for self-fulfillment.

At the beginning of World War II, about the time of his marriage to Ellen Poplar, Wright became dubious of Communist values. Frequently walking in Fort Greene Park to gather his thoughts or relaxing at Pigeon Cove, Massachusetts, he set to work on *Black Boy*, which he completed by the end of the war. The work also achieved Book-of-the-Month Club status. Joining the expatriates clustered about Gertrude Stein's salon, in 1946 he settled his wife and daughter Julia in Paris, where he remained until his death in a Paris hospital on November 28, 1960. His ashes and a copy of *Black Boy* were buried in Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. A continuation of *Black Boy* was published posthumously in 1977 as *American Hunger*.

BLACK BOY

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To relate the book to the struggle for civil rights
2. To discuss the reactions of individual characters to suspicion, deprivation, intimidation, cruelty, humiliation, and danger
3. To note unexpected acts of kindness, mercy, and sacrifice
4. To envision the physical environs in a crowded multi-family home and the performance of normal life functions, such as sleeping, eating, bathing, cooking, cleaning, relaxing, and working
5. To account for the importance of meaningful work and a chance for advancement
6. To analyze relationships among relatives and strangers
7. To discuss the themes of ambition, longing, and sacrifice
8. To note the effect of libraries and free reading on learning
9. To comment on the effect of an absent or invalid parent
10. To analyze behaviors that accommodate white perceptions of blacks
11. To account for the influence of autobiography on subsequent generations-
12. To express the significance of the Harlem Renaissance on rural America

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To comprehend the role of Ella as parent and victim
2. To contrast Ella with Granny, Maggie, Aunt Addie, Mrs. Moss, Bess, and Miss Simon
3. To note how the dissolution of the family worsens despair
4. To contrast Richard's ease among blacks with his tensions at the optical firm and in white people's kitchens
5. To analyze the insidious role of religion in Granny's household
6. To characterize examples of black lore, for instance superstition, pleasure, relaxation, values, and religious beliefs
7. To account for Mr. Falk's treatment of Richard
8. To project Richard and Maggie's chances of succeeding in Chicago
9. To account for Richard's enjoyment of autonomy and boardinghouse life
10. To discuss sources of Richard's frustration, namely promises by employers and mistreatment by Granny
11. To analyze Richard's objectivity

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Richard Wright's autobiography, present the following terms and applications:

bildungsroman [bihl' duhnz . roh . mahn] literally a "formation novel," which describes the coming-of-age of an untried or naive youth. The focus of Richard Wright's personal history is the maturing years when his ambitions are taking shape. Against the harsh background of an absent father, mother's illness, and breakdown of family authority are the numerous moves that rob Wright of security and order. His determination to improve opportunities highlights the importance of these years to his later achievements. From constant adjust-

ments to the racism and coercion of his youth, he learns to adapt and to await better times when he can seize autonomy, leave the South, and choose his own path in a more inclusive environment.

first-person narrative a story told from the vantage point of a single observer who lived the story and narrates events as they occurred. Wright's straightforward narrative describes in detail the events that influence his decision to educate himself to become a writer. The wretchedness of his young life becomes more poignant from his admission of powerlessness and victimization, for example, selling newspapers without realizing they contain Ku Klux Klan propaganda. However, the clarity with which he delineates these events suggests a man gifted with narrative skill and reflective powers, both important adjuncts to a successful autobiography.

realism a recreation of historical periods or a single life in theme, plot, setting, mood, tone, and characterization. Wright introduces the reader to his unhappy childhood by capturing the terror of a house fire, the hunger and shabbiness that impeded his school attendance, inadequate schooling, hatred for his father and grandmother, and disillusionment with Southern fundamentalism. Even in episodes that cast him as villain, thief, or con man, the value of details from his life overshadows the need to make himself into a hero. The reader profits from such realistic detail as disillusionment with baptism, his mother's collapse, and stealing from the movie theater because the speaker's life and self-evaluation includes misfortune as well as fault and foible as causes of his hard life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The milieu of *Black Boy* moves around the the Mississippi Valley as Richard Wright's family tries to stabilize itself. Scenes of poverty, religious ritual, violence, parental neglect, illness, shortlived jobs, and racism dominate the various moves as the family attempts to establish financial security. From Natchez, he moves to Memphis aboard the *Kate Adams*, a river steamer that plies the main channel to carry passengers and cargo to major riverfront trade centers. One of the South's most prosperous, uniquely ethnic boulevards, Beale Street, a Mississippi riverfront access on the Tennessee side, extends past churches, theaters, parks, homes, businesses, and tenements for a mile and a half. Settled in the 1830s, the area grew into a diverse home for free blacks and other minorities. Following the Civil War, it served as a lodestone to displaced former slaves, who sought communities in which they could be themselves without fear of reprisal.

Over a cornucopia of musical tastes and skills reigned W. C. Handy, the father of the blues, which he declared was a product of the Mississippi Delta. From 1909 into the 1920s, Beale Street musicians built jazz into the hallmark of the area and the music of preference for black Americans. In the 1970s, Beale Street blossomed once more as a tourist center and living museum of black history.

After living in a Jackson, Mississippi, orphanage, Richard gets to know Granny Wilson in her two-story frame house before moving to Elaine, Arkansas, with his prosperous Aunt Maggie and Uncle Hoskins. Violence drives the family back to Granny and on to West Helene on the eastern border of Arkansas before returning to Jackson after Ella Wright is stricken by paralytic stroke. Richard lives in Greenwood when Ella goes to Clarksdale, Mississippi, for surgery, then

BLACK BOY

returns to Granny's house for a miserable sojourn after medical treatment fails to relieve his mother's pain. Wright makes his break to Memphis in November 1925 and successfully prepares himself for flight from the South on the northbound train to Chicago.

Historically, the social and economic climate of the 1920s afforded little for a ragged, fatherless black boy seeking education and entree into a writing career. Shuttled among his kin in Mississippi and Arkansas, Wright profits from self-esteem and autonomy while he lives in a Memphis boarding house. Life near the black haven in Beale Street, Memphis, puts Wright in contact with a riverfront commercial center. The pride in earning money and aiding his family precedes his break from the South to unfamiliar demands of living in a city the size of Chicago.

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* should include these aspects:

Themes

- unstable family
- delinquency and crime
- victimization
- powerlessness
- dilemma
- ambition
- achievement
- autonomy
- self-esteem
- alienation

Motifs

- dissolution of the nuclear family
- combatting religious fundamentalism
- asserting self-control
- coping with insecurity and poverty
- acknowledging fear and dependence
- developing self-confidence
- learning a trade
- taking responsibility for actions
- sharing with family
- accepting the challenge of a new environment

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the autobiography. Explain each. Chapter and page numbers are given so that you can note the context from which each item is taken.

1. He worked as a night porter in a Beale Street drugstore and he became important and forbidding to me only when I learned that I could not make noise when he was asleep in the daytime. (Chapter 1, p. 16)
(Drugstores of this era also sold liquor, some of it bootleg. Richard's father's job probably entailed delivery of prescriptions and whisky and may have taken him to the seamier sections of west Memphis. This job contrasts with his agricultural work at the time of Richard's childhood and the sharecropping he was involved in when they reunited.)
2. A quarter of a century was to elapse between the time when I saw my father sitting with the strange woman and the time when I was to see him again, standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands—a quarter of a century during which my mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realized that, though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality. (Chapter 1, p. 42)
(Wright's autobiography distances him from his faithless and uncaring father who ended up as a sharecropper. As a sharecropper, the farmer subsisted almost on the level of pre-Civil War slave, sometimes supplying his own equipment, livestock, and seed. Because landlords lacked cash to pay laborers or buy updated machinery, they entered into agreements with farmers to share the cost of seed in exchange for room, board, and a portion of the yield.
The exploitation and poverty that usually accompanied sharecropping left many families condemned to malnutrition and poor health. Many families ended their children's education early so they could work in the fields. By 1890, much of the eastern U. S. depended on tenant labor. The greatest concentration of sharecroppers stretched from Louisiana to South Carolina. If Wright had accepted his father's offer of a home in childhood, he might have shared his father's hopelessness and squalor.)
3. "You stop that, you evil gall!" she shouted. "I want none of that Devil stuff in my house!" (Chapter 2, p. 47)
(Granny Wilson equates fiction with lies. After Ella, her tenant, reads aloud from Bluebeard and His Seven Wives to Richard, Granny asserts her power over the household by condemning literature and warning Richard of the punishments of hell for the wicked. His alienation, contrasting a delight in fiction, colors his reaction to all forms of religion, which he rejects totally. Upon joining the church, he grows more disillusioned and declares the entire process a sham.)
4. What's a chain gang? (Chapter 2, p. 67)
(Richard is unfamiliar with the use of felons as road laborers or lessees to farmers for contract work, such as levee repair, railroad repair, dam construction, felling trees, and clearing right of ways. Dressed in black-and-white striped uniforms, men worked in chains, sometimes linked in a line or attached to heavy iron balls. Guards shot men indiscriminately for any action suggesting insubordination, threat, or flight.
Poorly housed and safeguarded, many of the gang die of malaria, falls, snake or alligator bite, exhaustion, and exposure. In William Armstrong's Souther, the protagonist's father is so severely injured by an explosion that he is released from the chain gang and allowed to return home to die. A more extensive treatment of the chain gang system occurs in Toni Morrison's Beloved, in which men sleep in coffin-like boxes and communicate hope through coded messages passed along the tether that binds them.)
5. To the fat Jewish woman we sneered:
Red, white, and blue

BLACK BOY

*Your pa was a Jew
Your ma a dirty Dago*

What the hell is you? (Chapter 2, p. 71)

(In the progression of immigrants to America, there exists an opportunity for the last underdog to heap scorn on the newest, greenest arrival, especially those who follow an unfamiliar worship style or dress or act differently from average Americans. Blacks, who exulted in post-Civil War times and freedom from slavery, denigrate Jews as "Bloody Christ killers." No less vulnerable to persecution are Dagos, a vulgar slang term for Puerto Ricans, Italians, and Sicilians.

Historically, no group has escaped ridicule, suspicion, and discrimination. After the Irish immigration wave settled many workers in menial or domestic jobs, they bore their share of hatred. Before them, American Indians and Chinese coolie labor suffered the same status of menial workers in a hostile environment. The tradition of oneupmanship continues with negative stereotypes of Central Americans, Chicanos, Cubans, Haitians, Slavs, Russian emigrés, and Vietnamese and Laotian boat people.)

6. If I wore a bit of asafetida in a little bag tied about my neck, I would never catch a disease. (Chapter 2, p. 82)
(Among the list of common Southern superstitions is backwoods pharmacopia, which still prevails in the Appalachian hills. Dating to Cherokee and Iroquois folk healing, asafetida or asafoetida is an herb yielding a foul-smelling antispasmodic gum resin that oozes from the root and is used to cure whooping cough, throat irritations, flatulence, intestinal and stomach cramps, asthma, and parasites.)
7. Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshiping her God, which was her exaction for my keep. The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, . . . the Second Coming of Christ; chronicles that concluded with the Armageddon; dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead. (Chapter 4, p. 113)
(A sensitive, fearful child, Richard is repulsed by the horrifying symbolism of fundamentalist cosmology. The Seventh-Day Adventist sect, which evolved in the 19th Century, is millennialist and uniquely American in style and fervor. The faithful focus on the end of time, Armageddon—the final battle between good and evil, and the glorious return of Christ. Central to the Seventh-Day Adventist lifestyle are cleanliness, vegetarianism, exercise, and abstention from alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.)
8. What stories . . . I'm reading the serial of Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*. (Chapter 5, p. 141)
(Following the same tastes and interests that led him to Bluebeard and His Seven Wives, Richard seeks escape through adventure reading, including detective magazines like Flynn's Detective Weekly and Argosy All-Story Magazine and Zane Grey Westerns. Grey (1875-1939) began cranking out historical fiction in 1904 with Betty Zane and produced his most famous works—The Last of the Plainsmen and Riders of the Purple Sage—in 1908 and 1912.)

9. "Did you ever hear of the Ku Klux Klan?" he asked me softly. (Chapter 5, p. 145)

An outgrowth of poor whites' frustration with free blacks at the end of the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan began in the summer of 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee. A few Confederate veterans joined to harass blacks with harmless tricks and humiliation, then moved from mild amusements to serious terrorism. Night riders, often including the local sheriff, ministers, and the most prestigious land-owners and businessmen of the community, dressed in white hoods and robes. They sought examples of black enterprise or leadership to whip, mutilate, burn, bomb, poison, or hang to reestablish white supremacy.

To counter guilt, the famed hate group formed a meaningless hodgepodge of biblical and historical lore as justification of outright murder. Their ignorant doggerel appeared on pamphlets and leaflets dropped at public gatherings. These compendia evidenced their glaring hatred of blacks, which quickly spread to intolerance for Catholics and Jews as well as non-English-speaking immigrants, Muslims, and southeast Asians. The psychology of group membership required secret oaths administered at the foot of a burning cross, total allegiance to a central governing board, and a prevailing spirit blended of a perversion of patriotism and religiosity. Today, some local Klaverns or septs sponsor auxiliaries for wives and children. In more recent times, Ku Kluxers have targeted homosexuals, women, and other disenfranchised or underrepresented groups seeking civil rights.)

10. While waiting for my chance to grab and run, I grew used to seeing the white prostitutes naked upon their beds, sitting nude about their rooms, and I learned new modes of behavior, new rules in how to live the Jim Crow life. (Chapter 10, p. 221)
(Jim Crow, the outgrowth of a popular black-faced caucasian minstrel, is a derisive umbrella term covering all racist policies and attempts to segregate or deprive blacks of their rights. Jim Crow laws, which first appeared in the Reconstruction Era, circumvented voter registration, equal educational and employment opportunities, legal protection, and access to public facilities, e. g. libraries, sports events, toilets, drinking fountains, courtroom seating, barber shops, hotels, hospitals, theaters, restaurants, and modes of transportation.)
11. The next day when I was already in full flight—aboard a northward bound train—I could not have accounted, if it had been demanded of me, for all the varied forces that were making me reject the culture that had molded and shaped me. (Chapter 14, p. 281)
(Black flight to northern cities has formed pockets of Afro-American solidarity. Lured by black newspapers like the Baltimore Afro-American and the Chicago Defender, enterprising youth and desperate adults began streaming out of Southern rural poverty at the beginning of the 20th century. The first decade, 170,000 left; the numbers peaked at 749,000 in the 1930s, mostly bound for Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York. In tightly insular ghettos like New York's famed Harlem, black escapees indulged in home-cooked foods, fundamentalist religion, jazz, black dances and

BLACK BOY

musicals, and political blocs.

Gradually, urbanization robbed black emigrants of familial unity. As described in Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, children, enticed to earn fast money selling drugs, running numbers, or prostituting themselves, reached crisis proportions. Teens joined gangs, fought turf warfare, and exemplified shiftless, jobless layabouts. Illegitimacy and teen pregnancy ran rampant, assuring repeated generations dependence on welfare. By the late 1960s, the longed-for utopias North of the Mason-Dixon proved false.)

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

Questions 1-4 Literal Level

1. What forces shape the direction of Richard's early childhood?

(Richard, who lives in a rural Mississippi setting in childhood, learns early the taste and feel of keen, unrelenting discipline and subsequent guilt. For setting his family's cabin on fire at age four, he is so severely whipped that he loses consciousness and must be packed in ice. More debilitating to his self-esteem are the desertion of his father, who moves in with another woman, and the judge's rejection of his mother's suit for child support. A quarter century later, Richard has fond memories of his mother, but shares nothing more in common with his sharecropper father than a slight facial resemblance.)

Times grow more fearful after Ella Wright suffers a paralytic stroke. Richard summons his Grandmother Wilson, a humorless controller and religious fanatic. She takes charge of his mother and forces him to conform to rigid behaviors and beliefs or else face whippings, denigration, and tongue lashings. He grows thin on vegetarian food and wears rags to school. His family misconstrues his intelligence as defiance. The emotional climate of his home violates the needs of a child for security, acceptance, and love. The tensions and flare-ups resemble an armed camp.)

2. Where does Richard acquire autonomy?

(After living with relatives and in various insubstantial arrangements paid for by his mother and Aunt Maggie, Richard moves to Memphis and resides alone in Mrs. Moss's boarding house. Departure from his invalid mother brings tears, but he lives freer in his rented room than he ever has in relatives' homes, even Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody's house. With a definite plan of saving for emigration to Chicago, Richard applies himself to work and smokes and eats canned food in his room. Mrs. Moss's intentions of pairing him with her simple-witted daughter Bess fail to infringe on Richard's good will. He enjoys Memphis and eludes Mrs. Moss and her disapproval of his reading habits.)

Richard reflects on the difference between his hunger and despair in the past and his freedom in Memphis: "I learned the full degree to which my life at home had cut me off, not only from white people but from Negroes as well." After Richard's family joins him, he exults, "That winter my mother and brother came and we set up housekeeping, buying furniture on the install-

ment plan, being cheated and yet knowing no way to avoid it. I began to eat warm food and to my surprise found that regular meals enabled me to read faster.")

3. Where does Richard plan to settle?

(From the initiation of his mature ambitions, Richard plans to escape the South. He knows that Southern ways and attitudes will always be a part of his behavior and thinking, but he intends to distance himself from Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan, job discrimination, and subservience to hostile whites. Although he lacks the cash to make a clean break with Memphis, he comments, "sheer wish and hope prevailed over common sense and facts. [Aunt Maggie and I] discovered that if we waited until we were prepared to go, we would never leave, we would never amass enough money to see us through.")

Two days before the departure, Richard tells his employer that he is quitting. The boss teases him about falling in Lake Superior and asks, "You think you'll do any better up there?" Richard admits that he does not know. Word spreads to other workers, who warn Richard, "The North's no good for your people, boy" and "You'll change. Niggers change when they go north." Mentally, Richard notes that his intent in moving to Chicago is to change. Shorty envies him, yet never conceives of the significance of Richard's intent to find himself and fulfill his intellectual promise.)

4. How does Richard react to the realization of his dream?

(On the day of his departure, Richard pulls together a mental picture of the negative influences he has encountered in the racist South. He summarizes: "The face of the South that I had known was hostile and forbidding, and yet out of all the conflicts and the curses, the blows and the anger, the tension and the terror, I had somehow gotten the idea that life could be different, could be lived in a fuller and richer manner." Although nebulous, Richard's dreams see him through the anxiety of a break with the South.)

Vicariously through books, Richard had armed himself with a set of expectations that challenged the status quo in Memphis. With no firm grasp of what to expect in Chicago, he notes, "The substance of my hope was formless and devoid of any real sense of direction, for in my Southern living I had seen no looming landmark by which I could, in a positive sense, guide my daily actions." He describes his flight as "[flinging] myself into the unknown, to meet other situations that would perhaps elicit from me other responses.")

Questions 5-8 Interpretive Level

5. What does the autobiography of Richard Wright stress about family unity?

(From the opening chapter, Richard refers repeatedly to his parents, brother, grandmothers, and cousins, aunts, and uncles in terms of their importance to each other. When Ella weakens from stroke, Maggie returns to nurse and care for her. The two move out of Granny's house and attempt to make a living on their own. Richard appreciates both women, who have a positive impact on his attitude toward family.)

On the negative side, Richard loathes and withdraws from the narrow-minded religiosity of his

BLACK BOY

Grandmother Wilson, a driven woman who feeds and holds together a shifting household of personalities and who exacts from each an adherence to her beliefs in God, vegetarianism, rigorous worship sessions, and piety. A significant factor in Richard's running battles with Granny is the interpretation of the Sabbath. To Granny, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week—the day of rest. If Richard is to live in her house, he must not work, play sports, or seek entertainment on the Lord's day.

At length, the need for money outweighs Granny's dicta against sacrilege. Richard, who attends school in shabby clothes, stifles a growling stomach with water from the hydrant in the yard, and envies the other boys their pocket money, grows mature enough to assert independence and to find Saturday work to enable him to buy clothes and a few amenities and amusements. A pragmatist above all, Granny alters her attitude by respecting his position as wage earner.)

6. What does the episode concerning the sale of Betsy suggest about Richard Wright's ideals?

(An isolated moment in the autobiography delineates the price of Richard Wright's idealism. To ease hunger pangs, Richard determines to sell his poodle Betsy. He describes how he "had washed, dried, and combed her, she looked like a toy." Setting out house to house in a white neighborhood, he demands a dollar for his dog. A white woman examines the dog and offers him 97¢. Richard, who grows uneasy in her house and hesitates to sell his dog to whites, declines the offer or the compromise over 3¢.

When Richard returns home, Ella marvels that he rejected 97¢. He lacks the words to explain the psychology of the rejection. Motivated by personal values that his mother does not share, Richard mutters a few words of self-defense, then accepts his mother's estimation that he is "foolish."

A week later after Betsy is killed by a coal wagon, Richard weeps and buries his dog in the back yard and drives a barrel stave into the dirt to mark her grave. Ella Wright misunderstands the emotion that wracks her son. To her, the difference between wisdom and foolishness is recognizing the value of 97¢ worth of food. Oblivious to the depth of her son's yearning for autonomy and dignity, she notes sarcastically, "You could have had a dollar. But you can't eat a dead dog, can you?"

7. Why does the title suit the work?

(A regular pejorative for black males in the South is "boy," a sneering diminutive meant to keep males in a perpetual state of childhood. Some men, like Shorty, adapt to degradation and behave for whites as whites expect them to. Richard, endowed with dignity and strong idealism, refuses Shorty's method of racial accommodation and stays to himself. The perpetual loner, Richard develops few close friendships. Bolstered by reading in solitude, he knows that he will not live out his life a ragged, ignorant, superstitious black boy.

The force of his yearning impels Richard's behaviors throughout the autobiography. By the end of the autobiography, he departs not only the South and his family but also the stereotype of the black boy, the grinning, shuffling pickaninny who wears a good-natured

face regardless of the stress, threat, or danger that hovers. Richard Wright's declaration to the reader is a demand for "dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars.")

8. Why does Richard fail to understand white Southerners? (Woven into the text of Richard Wright's autobiography are repeated questions and misunderstandings about white behavior. In childhood, he remarks, "A dread of white people now came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination." Local gossip and fantasies feed the helplessness and victimization that he encounters or imagines in numerous face-to-face situations. He believes that "he is keeping [his] emotional whole, a support that enabled [his] personality to limp through days . . . under the threat of violence."

As Richard nears adulthood, he delivers lenses from the laboratory and meets a sympathetic white counter clerk at a department store. The man, a Northerner, asks if Richard is hungry. Richard replies, "Oh, no, sir." To the offer of a dollar bill, Richard stares at the ground in traumatized silence, unable to put together an expression of rejection. The conversation, according to Richard, "dealt with my welfare, but it had brought to the surface of day all the dark fears I had known all my life. The Yankee white man did not know how dangerous his words were." Oddly, Richard thinks of him as an enemy.)

Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. What types of reading material influence Richard? (A key alteration in Richard's lifestyle is his perusal of books. He begins with critical works by H. L. Mencken, a Baltimore critic who influences his writing style, and extends his reading list to fiction, drama, and poetry. Richard takes an interest in the novels of Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser, the outstanding fiction writers of his day, and Sherwood Anderson, realist and author of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Richard includes translations of European writers—Gorky, Baudelaire, Anatole France, Maupassant, Stendhal, Gide, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Zola, Balzac. English novelists and poets who intrigue him are Bennett, Hardy, Wells, Eliot, and Conrad.
- The development of a reading vocabulary takes Richard to the dictionary or back to the original for a contextual explanation. He realizes that words are "something terribly important in life." His imagination set free, he acknowledges a hunger for books, "new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different.")
10. How does Richard Wright's introspection differ from that of other black autobiographers? (Wright's dismal circumstances and sensitivity to degradation set him apart from less fearful or introspective black writers. Maya Angelou, whose best-selling *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first of a series of autobiographical works, employs humor and defiance as a

BLACK BOY

means of getting along in Arkansas and in her mother's homes in St. Louis and San Francisco. Unlike Richard Wright, who tends to brood about insults to his manhood and humanity, Angelou makes endless jokes about white bigots, like the nurse at the dentist's office whom Angelou imagines being turned into a crocus sack full of chicken feed or the personnel office secretary who refuses to hire a black girl as trolley car conductor.

Other writers depart markedly from Wright's dismay and desperation. Upbeat and hopeful is the scholarly approach of Booker T. Washington, who envisions learning and pragmatic skills as the way to combat racism. Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery and abuse in Maryland to join the abolitionist movement, cloaks himself in dignity and sonorous oratory in a direct confrontation with society's justification of slavery. Two twentieth-century autobiographers, comic and athlete Dick Gregory and cookie magnate Famous Amos, temper humor with determination and apply physical force and hard work to their flights from poverty and servitude. In general, most black autobiography lacks the introversion and the perpetual questioning of the self that Richard Wright applies to his behaviors and responses. The cause of Wright's tortuous journey north may be linked to an absent father and paralyzed mother, to the torments of his strict Granny Wilson, or to local events that deny Wright the opportunity to evolve a normal personality capable of ignoring or rising above hurt, prejudice, and cruelty.)

Questions 11-13 Creative Level

11. Compose a résumé for Richard Wright. Highlight his skills, education, publications, goals, and most responsible positions.
12. Write the opening and closing chapters of a book on racism in the South during the 1920s and 1930s. Stress subtle types of humiliation, exploitation, and servitude as well as frequent lynchings and the blatant cruelties of the Ku Klux Klan. Comment on the writing of Ida Wells-Barnett.
13. Outline a method of looking for work in an unknown city. Explain how Richard can make the most of his time and resources.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Math and Economics

1. Create a bulletin board illustrating current census figures concerning the racial makeup of the United States, both now and in the 1920s and 1930s. Highlight a map with graphs and data indicating what parts of the nation are the most racially diverse. Note the percentage of non-white peoples in Illinois, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. What parts of Chicago have the largest non-white populations?
2. Discuss the emotional harm done to families during the Depression. How does Richard Wright survive while writing?

Social Studies

1. Explain to a small group what survival techniques give black mothers like Granny and Ella the strength to face illness, poverty, homelessness, family disunity, and despair. Discuss why other characters, such as Shorty,

Harrison, Miss Simon, Uncle Tom, Grandpa, Richard's father and his girlfriend, hotel prostitutes, the school principal, and Mr. Olin, fail to earn the reader's admiration.

2. Divide the class into small groups to study the Civil Rights movement from pre-Civil War times to the present. Emphasize the promise of the vote, property ownership, and better education and work opportunities as opposed to the reality. List ways in which minorities are still persecuted. Name the twentieth century's black leaders.

Psychology

1. Organize a discussion of the harm done by race prejudice and other forms of bigotry, punishment, victimization, and exclusion. Answer basic questions, such as: What makes people hate identifiable groups, even babies and children? Why do people persecute or manipulate others in the name of religion or discipline? How do songs, movies, fiction, plays, monuments, music, poetry, history, ethnic celebrations, and other forms of creativity help quell hatred and prejudice?
2. Compose a short speech in which you describe how the constant change in living arrangements affects Richard. Explain how close quarters, hunger, family squabbles, distrust, religious fanaticism, capricious discipline, and lack of privacy harm human relationships.
3. Compose a character sketch of a male authority figure in Richard's life. Explain why these men are significant to Richard. Discuss how poverty and prejudice can destroy young men who develop no sustaining values or ambitions.
4. Analyze the multi-generational lifestyle of Richard's family. Discuss with a group the effects of having multiple authority figures and the differences in their control of his behavior. Explain why Richard arms himself with a razor and sleeps with a knife under his pillow.

Science and Health

1. Compose a lecture on the causes of the decline in Ella Wright's health during his youth. Make a chalkboard list of aspects of her life that endanger her strength and predispose her to stroke. Include stress, diet, and overwork.
2. List the dangers of living in a black ghetto. Explain to a small group what survival techniques Richard employs, such as work, reading, and living by his own moral standards.
3. Discuss Mrs. Moss's concern for Bess. Explain why the mother of a slow-witted girl would be concerned about the type of man her child marries. Explain alternatives Bess might consider, such as vocational training or a group home.
4. Compose a brochure assisting families in coping with invalids. Comment specifically on the needs of paralytic stroke victims like Ella Wright. What exercises and activities might relieve her depression and pain?

Language and Literature

1. With a group, list important vocabulary terms. Define each and explain how it applies to Richard Wright's autobiography.

BLACK BOY

2. Write several conversations which are only implied, such as Richard's farewell at the depot, his joy in having his brother and mother join him in Memphis, Harrison's response to the arranged boxing match, Aunt Maggie's ride with Richard on the train to Chicago, or his classmates' response to his valedictory. Act out your dialogue for an audio or video taping.
3. Organize a discussion of realism. Explain why Wright blends serious topics such as murder, beatings, and knife fights with humorous scenes, such as children peeking under a privy or scribbling dirty words in public.

Speech

1. Compose a short speech in which you describe how racism demoralizes minorities and encourages dependency.
2. Compose an extended explanation of ethnic pride. Discuss ways in which Richard might have prospered if he had been born in the current age, such as participation in Boy Scouts or sports, day care or kindergarten, a college education, a choice of high-paying summer jobs, better medical care and nutrition, and laws requiring fathers to support their children.
3. Read aloud from the autobiography. Determine points in the text that suggest self-pity or overdramatization.
4. Discuss your attitude toward subsidized housing for indigent people. Comment on areas of your state where first-time homeowners can receive support and funding. Explain why some people lobby against the placement of public projects in their neighborhoods.

Art

1. Using desktop publishing or other media, design a help wanted ad for an optical lab, a business card for Mr. Crane, a sign for the Memphis library or orphanage, an itinerary for the *Kate Adams* or a walking tour of Beale Street in Memphis, a train schedule for the route from Memphis to Chicago, a 1920s theater marquee, or a bulletin for the Seventh Day Adventist church.
2. Make a mural of significant scenes from the novel. Show Richard delivering a valedictory, working in the optical lab, traveling on the *Kate Adams*, pulling grass at the orphanage, drinking at the saloon, traveling alone on a train to Memphis, hiding beside the chimney, or talking with the Yankee who offers him a dollar for food. Emphasize Richard's size and economic and physical condition at each stage of the story.

Music

1. Listen to recorded music from the 1920s and 1930s. Choose a black composer or performer to introduce to the class, particularly Scott Joplin, Count Basie, Bessie Smith, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, or Thomas A. Dorsey.
2. Study lyrics from jazz, jive, boogie woogie, and rhythm and blues. Note the connection between black music and phrases illustrating privation, prejudice, exclusion, and low self-esteem. Contrast lively, uplifting songs that display the opposite view of life for minorities, e. g., the music from George and Ira Gershwin's folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

Law

1. Lead a debate about whether Richard should be prosecuted as an adult or a juvenile for theft. Discuss whether poverty and prejudice justify his crimes.
2. Launch an internet web site explaining how young people are drawn into crime. Contrast the types of criminals that flourish in rural areas with such big city type criminals as con artists, pimps and prostitutes, and bootleggers.

Religion

Chart how Seventh Day Adventists differ from other American religions in attitudes toward the sabbath, afterlife, marriage, family, worship, ritual, scriptural interpretation, and charity.

Cinema

View some of these films: *Lilies of the Field*, *Native Son*, *A Patch of Blue*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *The Associate*, *Glory*, *Mississippi Burning*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Boyz n' the Hood*, *The Color Purple*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Sarafinal*, *Malcolm X*, *The Power of One*, and *J.T.* Discuss with a small group the causes and results of racism.

Geography

1. Create a mural or web site that contrasts the settings of Richard Wright's numerous homes. Explain the importance of riverboat and rail travel to blacks escaping Southern racism.
2. Compose a paragraph justifying the black American expatriate's preference for Paris or communism rather than the United States and democracy.

Mathematics and Computers

1. Using desktop publishing, compose an annotated time line that indicates the rise of black rage in the United States.
2. Graph current census figures concerning the rise in black earning power since the 1920s. Divide figures by male and female earnings.

History and Current Events

1. Recreate by time line, webbing, flow chart, mural, or web site the milieu of the 1940s and 1950s. Explain why this era was crucial in American racial history. How did the resulting Civil Rights movement produce greater freedom and representation for blacks?
2. Write a brief address explaining the public's perception of Richard Wright as a model for young Southern black artists.

Education

Brainstorm a curriculum to help poor children complete their education. Emphasize American history, philosophy, world religions, health and hygiene, basic language and math skills, and family structure.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Compile a list of images from the autobiography that appeal to the five senses, such as "They searched through the dresser and found a dollar or two and sent for a doctor," "warming my hands over a mound of glowing coals," and "I was too weak from hunger to pull the grass; I would grow dizzy and my mind would become blank."

BLACK BOY

2. Describe aloud the change that takes place in Richard when he discovers the importance of reading to his education and ambitions. Make a list of current titles, newspapers, and magazines you would suggest for his shelf, for instance, *Ebony*, *Jet*, or *Emerge* magazines.
3. Contrast Richard's family experiences with similar situations in literature, particularly Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Yoko Kawashima Watkins's *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, Conrad Richter's *A Light in the Forest*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphin*, Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*, Gary Paulsen's *Nightjohn*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Read aloud sections that laud human adaptability.
4. Explain in a short speech the effect of despair, alienation, separation, loss, uncertainty, poverty, disunity, religious fanaticism, and fatigue on Richard's family. Describe how Ella Wright gives her children hope.
5. Compose a first person account of life in the south during Richard Wright's childhood. Explain why the hypocritical posturings of people like Shorty, Harrison, Tel, and the school principal denigrate human relationships and reduce self-esteem.
6. Discuss with a group the long-range effects of segregation, racial violence, and exclusion. Why is it important for people of different races and social class to shop, work, go to school, live, worship, and play together?
7. Read "Almos' a Man," *Lilies of the Field*, *Native Son*, *A Patch of Blue*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Hurry Sundown*, or *The Bluest Eye*. Discuss with a small group the difficulties blacks and whites encounter when they breach racial barriers and learn to know each other.
8. Listen to recordings of speeches from the era of the Great Society. Determine what black and white leaders such as President Lyndon Johnson, Malcolm X, Ralph Abernethy, and Dr. Martin Luther King had in mind for improved racial coexistence in the U. S. Suggest reasons why Richard Wright and his family chose to remain in France.
9. Compose an informal essay on the value of free libraries and reading to a self-educated person. Select writers and humanistic works that have influenced your life.
10. Discuss the different perspectives of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. How do both books view black and white families?

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. Contrast the autobiography's settings in Memphis, West Helena, Jackson, Elaine, Greenwood, Natchez, and Clarksdale.
2. Compose brief definitions of frustration as they apply to Richard, Granny, Grandpa, Harrison, Shorty, Bess, Mrs. Moss, Maggie, Aunt Jody, Uncle Tom, Aunt Addie, the principal, Mr. Crane, and Ella Wright.

3. List and describe scenes that depict conflict, particularly Mrs. Moss's interest in Richard's savings, the valedictory at the Jim Hill school, Richard's fight with Harrison, the librarian's suspicion of Richard's note, Richard's move to Chicago, Ella's inability to support her sons, Miss Simon's interest in Richard, Richard's theft of food from the college, working in an optical lab, playing pop-the-whip, and Ella's insistence that Richard be baptized.
4. Compose a scene late in Richard Wright's career in which he reflects on his childhood and on the people who encouraged or helped him.
5. Explain the importance of the following terms to the plot: pop-the-whip, walnuts, lenses, the end of World War I, Bolden, piety, moldy food, Union Army, stroke, duplex, poodle, razor, sawmill, clothier, gun, H. L. Mencken, Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow, *Book of Prefaces*, and Chicago.

WRIGHT'S OTHER WORKS

"The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," 1922
"The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," 1937
Guide to Harlem, 1937
Uncle Tom's Children, 1938
Native Son, 1940
"How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Saturday Review*, June 1940
Twelve Million Black Voices, 1941
"The Man Who Lived Underground," 1942
The Outsider, 1953
Savage Holiday, 1954
Black Power, 1954
The Color Curtain, 1956
White Man, Listen!, 1957
Pagan Spain, 1957
The Long Dream, 1958
Eight Men, 1961
Lawd Today, 1963
American Hunger, 1977

RELATED READING

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
William Armstrong, *Souther*
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
William E. Barrett, *Lilies of the Field*
Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man*
Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*
Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*
Alice Childress, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*
Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*
John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*
Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*
Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar*
Terry McMillan, *Mama*
Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*
Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
Scott O'Dell, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Sing Down the Moon*
Gary Paulsen, *Nightjohn*
Conrad Richter, *A Light in the Forest*
Theodore Taylor, *The Cay*
Yoko Kawashima Watkins, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*
Richard Wright, "Between the World and Me" and *Native Son*

BLACK BOY

CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

For more information about black history, Southern racism, Seventh Day Adventism, and other subjects and issues concerning Richard Wright, consult these sources:

Anticipating the Advent, Pacific Press

Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, African-American Image

Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. University of North Carolina Press

Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi

The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans, Macmillan

The Negro Almanac: A Reference Work on the African American, Gale

The Oxford Illustrated Literary Guide to the United States, Oxford University Press

Race and Prejudice in America Today, Knowledge Unlimited

Vision for Black Men, African-American Image

Also, consult these audiovisuals and websites:

"Richard Wright—Black Boy," (video) Mississippi Educational TV/BBC, 1994.

"Richard Wright—Black Boy," <http://www.pbs.org/rwbb/teachgd.html>.

"Richard Wright: 1908-1970," <http://educeth.ethz.ch/english/ReadingList/EducETH-Wright, Richard.html>.

"The Seventh Day Adventist Church History," <http://www.radiks.net/tjameson/History.htm>.

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- Miller, William, and Gregory Christie. *Richard Wright and the Library Card*. Lee & Low, 1997.
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BLACK BOY**VOCABULARY TEST**

From the list that follows, select a word to replace the work in boldface and fill in each numbered blank in this passage. You will have answers left over when you finish:

accordance	compute	militantly	profoundly	sullen
application	distrustfully	mustered	regulations	trifles
assured	justified	naive	satisfactorily	upbraid
boon	meager	organic	solace	
claim	mechanism	pension	substantiated	

Grandpa would lift his head from the pillow, take the letter from me and open it himself. He would stare at the black print for a long time, then reluctantly, **(1) doubtfully** _____ hand the letter to me.

"Well?" he would say.

And I would read him the letter—reading slowly and pronouncing each word with extreme care—telling him that his claims for a **(2) stipend** _____ had not been **(3) proven** _____ and that his **(4) request** _____ had been rejected. Grandpa would not blink an eye, then he would curse softly under his breath . . .

Often, when there was no food in the house, I would dream of the Government's sending a letter that would read something like this:

Dear sir:

Your **(5) appeal** _____ for a pension has been **(6) justified** _____. The matter of your name has been **(7) convincingly** _____ cleared up. In **(8) compliance** _____ with official **(9) rules** _____, we are hereby instructing the Secretary of the Treasury to compile and **(10) add** _____ and send to you as soon as it is convenient, the total amount of all moneys past due, together with interest, for the past _____ years, the amount being \$_____.

We regret **(11) greatly** _____ that you have been so long delayed in this matter. You may be **(12) certain** _____ that your sacrifice has been a **(13) blessing** _____ and a **(14) comfort** _____ to your country.

But no letter like that ever came, and Grandpa was so **(15) sulky** _____ most of the time that I stopped dreaming of him and his hopes.

BLACK BOY

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Identification (30 points)

Identify people and places described below. Choose from the list that follows:

Aunt Addie	Chicago	H. L. Mencken	Mr. Crane	Richard Wright
Aunt Maggie	Detroit	Jim Crow	Mrs. Moss	Shorty
Beale Street	Ella	Jim Hill	Mr. Falk	Uncle Clark
Betsy	Granny	Kate Adams	Olin	Uncle Hoskins
Bluebeard	Harrison	Mr. Burden	Richard Vinson	Zane Grey

- _____ 1. is paralyzed on one side by a stroke.
- _____ 2. is a bartender who is murdered by envious whites.
- _____ 3. makes peanut roast, mush, and flour gravy.
- _____ 4. influences Richard through *A Book of Prefaces*.
- _____ 5. lends Richard a library card.
- _____ 6. represents segregationist laws.
- _____ 7. considers Richard a potential son-in-law.
- _____ 8. insists that Richard inform on his schoolmates.
- _____ 9. accompanies Richard on the train to Chicago.
- _____ 10. tries to understand Richard's differences with Reynolds and Pease.
- _____ 11. feels victimized by whites who want him to fight Richard.
- _____ 12. is the subject of a novel that Granny's boarder reads to Richard.
- _____ 13. is the steamer that carries the Wrights to Memphis.
- _____ 14. terrifies Richard with stories of a dead child who once occupied Richard's room.
- _____ 15. is the school in which Richard skips a grade and graduates at the head of his class.

Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Granny allows Richard to help the insurance agent on Saturday if Richard promises to attend church on Sunday.
- _____ 2. Richard is embarrassed by his ragged clothes and rumbling stomach and insists on working a Saturday job to pay for school clothes.
- _____ 3. At age four, Richard abandons his grandmother in the family's burning cabin and hides by a chimney.
- _____ 4. Grandpa dies embittered that the U. S. government fails to pay his pension for service during the Civil War because of a mix-up in names.
- _____ 5. Richard denies hanging the cat and defies his father for disciplining him with a switch.
- _____ 6. Both Richard and his brother run away from the orphanage and arrive at the home of their father and his lover.
- _____ 7. While the family isn't looking, Richard steals food from the kitchen and wolfs it down.
- _____ 8. At the sawmill, Richard fears threats by the Ku Klux Klan.
- _____ 9. The winter in Memphis with his mother and brother brings Richard much contentment.
- _____ 10. The cache of bootleg liquor implicates Richard and an unidentified youth in illegal sales.

BLACK BOY

Part III: Completion (20 points)

Complete each quotation below with a word or phrase.

1. The _____ home was a two-story frame building set amid trees in a wide, green field.
2. A few days later my classmates came to me with baffled eyes, holding copies of the _____ in their hands.
3. A little while ago I went down to get a Coca-Cola and Harrison was waiting for you at the door of the building with a _____.
4. "I'm sending him two books," she said. "But tell _____ to come in next time, or send me the names of the books he wants."
5. He worked as a night porter in a _____ Street drugstore . . .
6. Granny was an ardent member of the _____ Church and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshipping her God, which was her exaction for my keep.
7. "Well, the paper you're selling preaches the _____ doctrines," he said.
8. I arrived in _____ on a cold November Sunday morning, in 1925, and lugged my suitcase down quiet, empty sidewalks through winter sunshine.
9. I was selected as _____ of my class and assigned to write a paper to be delivered at one of the public auditoriums.
10. One summer morning I stood at a sink in the rear of the factory washing a pair of _____ that had just come from the polishing machines whose throbbing shook the floor upon which I stood.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Select two and answer in paragraph form.

1. Explain why Richard is nervous and awkward around whites.
2. Discuss how Richard responds to city life and city people.
3. Describe the family tensions that assault Richard.
4. Compare Richard and his father in terms of morals and ambitions.

BLACK BOY

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Short Answer (30 points)

Supply a word or phrase in answer to the following questions.

- _____ 1. To whom does Richard write for help after his mother gets sick?
- _____ 2. How many years does Richard attend school?
- _____ 3. Where does Maggie take Richard's brother to live?
- _____ 4. Who undergoes surgery in Clarksdale?
- _____ 5. What work is published in three installments?
- _____ 6. To whom does Richard present forged notes?
- _____ 7. Whom does Mrs. Moss want Richard to marry?
- _____ 8. Who is murdered for being a successful bartender?
- _____ 9. Who convinces Richard to join the church?
- _____ 10. What does Brother Mance sell?
- _____ 11. What does Granny label *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*?
- _____ 12. What author influences Richard's style?
- _____ 13. What slang term describes the laws that support segregation?
- _____ 14. Whom does Olin want Richard to fight?
- _____ 15. What do saloon patrons give Richard?

Part II: Character Analysis (20 points)

Place an X beside each statement that is true of the South during Richard's childhood.

- _____ 1. Homeless black children are placed in integrated orphanages until they can be adopted.
- _____ 2. Housing for invalids is available in Clarksdale, Tennessee, but not in Arkansas.
- _____ 3. Black apprentices in optical companies receive training in lenswork.
- _____ 4. Work opportunities are limited to menial tasks and low pay.
- _____ 5. Religion offers an outlet for needs and an escape from fears.
- _____ 6. Black soldiers receive equal treatment and pensions from the government.
- _____ 7. Train travel allows blacks to flee to Chicago to escape oppression and degradation.
- _____ 8. Children are not allowed in Mississippi saloons.
- _____ 9. Prostitution, gambling, crime, and bootleg alcohol lure blacks into illicit activities.
- _____ 10. Public ridicule and black-baiting make life difficult for Richard.

BLACK BOY

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline the word or phrase that will complete each statement below.

1. Richard receives severe punishment for (killing a poodle, working in a hotel, setting fire to the cabin, disobeying the principal).
2. Ella encourages Richard to work and study hard and to fulfill his dream of (fleeing to Chicago, marrying Bess, becoming an optician, editing the Southern Register).
3. Ella insists that Richard (eat a nourishing breakfast before school, fight off bigger boys, visit his father at the plantation, sit with her at the hospital in Clarksdale).
4. Professor Matthews leaves with Maggie to (live in Chicago, settle Richard's quarrel with Shorty, make a home for Richard's younger brother, avoid arrest for arson).
5. Richard reads widely in (the Memphis library reading room, American fiction, the Bible, the *American Mercury*).
6. At Granny's house, Richard protects himself with (a knife under his pillow, a stolen gun aimed at Uncle Tom's children, threats against Richard Vinson, bullying and fistfights).
7. After 25 years' separation, (Richard sees his father, Maggie joins Ella in Chicago, Richard's brother returns to live with Granny, Bess visits Richard in Memphis).
8. Granny considers (baseball, boarding houses, insurance, train travel) a sin.
9. The judge (fines the white man who sells illicit liquor, refuses to order child support, sends Richard to an orphanage, requires Richard's father to visit his sons).
10. Richard is disillusioned by (*Riders of the Purple Sage*, baptism, Jim Crow, Tel's ticket theft).

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Select two and answer in paragraph form.

1. Account for Ella's positive influence on Richard.
2. Describe the types of jobs Richard takes and his success at each.
3. Discuss how Southern whites ridicule, victimize, and harass blacks.
4. Account for Richard's unpleasant memories of his father.

BLACK BOY

ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. distrustfully | 9. regulations |
| 2. pension | 10. compute |
| 3. substantiated | 11. profoundly |
| 4. application | 12. assured |
| 5. claim | 13. boon |
| 6. verified | 14. solace |
| 7. satisfactorily | 15. sullen |
| 8. accordance | |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Identification (30 points)

- | | |
|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Ella | 9. Aunt Maggie |
| 2. Uncle Hoskins | 10. Mr. Crane |
| 3. Granny | 11. Harrison |
| 4. H. L. Mencken | 12. Bluebeard |
| 5. Mr. Falk | 13. Kate Adams |
| 6. Jim Crow | 14. Mr. Burden |
| 7. Mrs. Moss | 15. Jim Hill |
| 8. Aunt Addie | |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. T |
| 5. F | 10. F |

Part III: Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. orphan | 6. Seventh Day Adventist |
| 2. Southern Register | 7. Ku Klux Klan |
| 3. knife | 8. Memphis |
| 4. Mr. Falk | 9. valedictorian |
| 5. Beale | 10. eyeglasses |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Short Answer (30 points)

1. Granny
2. 8
3. Detroit
4. Ella Wright
5. "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre"
6. librarian
7. Bess
8. Uncle Hoskins
9. Ella Wright
10. insurance
11. satanic lies
12. H. L. Mencken
13. Jim Crow
14. Harrison
15. pennies and liquor

Part II: Character Analysis (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. X |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. X | 9. X |
| 5. X | 10. X |

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

1. setting fire to the cabin
2. fleeing to Chicago
3. fight off bigger boys
4. avoid arrest for arson
5. American fiction
6. a knife under his pillow
7. Richard sees his father
8. baseball
9. refuses to order child support
10. baptism

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

BLACK BOY

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