Black Boy Essay, Research Paper

3. Black Boy, Richard Wright

Black Boy, is both an indictment of American racism and a narrative of the artist’s development. As a child growing up in the Jim Crow South, Richard faced constant pressure to submit to white authority. However, even from an early age, Richard had a fierce spirit of rebellion. Had he lacked the resilience to be different despite the pressure to conform to social expectations, he would probably never have become an internationally renowned writer. The entire system of institutional racism was designed to prevent the American black’s development of aspirations beyond menial labor. Racist whites were extremely hostile to black literacy and even more so to black Americans who wanted to make writing a career.

However, Richard did not only face opposition to his dreams from racist whites. In many ways, his own family and the black community fiercely opposed his aspirations. His grandmother, a strict, illiterate Seventh Day Adventist, considered reading and writing about anything other than God sinful. Richard’s peers considered him silly and unrealistic and maybe dangerous. Throughout his childhood, Richard suffered violence at the hands of his family for daring to rebel against his assigned role of humble silence. In Black Boy, he often charges the black community with perpetuating the agenda of white racism.

Throughout his childhood and adulthood, Richard reacted with bitter contempt toward what he saw as the submission of other black people to white authority. Wright has often been criticized for failing to acknowledge or appreciate the richness of the American black community. However, his personal experiences clearly affected his relationship with it. Just as he suffered abuse and hostility from his own family, so did he receive little comfort from the larger black community. Wright constantly clashed with what he saw as Black American submission, and, for personal reasons, clashed with all religious dogmatism. The black community reacted to his rebellion in kind, and Richard suffered intense isolation and loneliness during the formative years of his life. He did not understand until later that his family and the black community discouraged his rebellion because pragmatic submission to the expectations of racist whites was a means to ensure the collective survival of the community. A rebellious act of one individual not only represented a threat to his or her life but also to the lives of his or her family and the black community as a whole. This tension, between the need to conform for survival and the need to rebel in order to achieve individual and community dreams, is one that animated Wright’s life and his autobiography.

In the book, Richard lays bare the paranoia and difficulty of being a black man in America, even the supposedly non-racist America of the North. When he fled from the south to Chicago, Wright suddenly entered a new environment: The culture was more tolerant, but lingering beneath was a latent racism. Richard found that the fear of uncertainty engendered by this racism, by the constant subconscious knowledge that blacks in America were second class citizens, could drive many American blacks to submit to white authority simply because it offered the security of knowing what to expect. In the North, Richard could sit next to white man on public transportation, and he could even accuse a white co-worker of spitting in the food at a restaurant where he worked. However, for a long while, Richard did not know how to act. He, like many blacks, feared committing an offense that might lead to the revocation of the meager rights they had finally achieved.

Richard’s search for belonging eventually brought him to Communism. But just as Wright found insufficient the dictates of the black community and of religion, he soon came to find the paranoia, fear, pettiness, and dogmatism of the communist party to be too much. He agreed with Communist political philosophy but not with its practice. Wright’s search for self, a theme that runs throughout his life of rebellion