Black Boy Essay, Research Paper

Black Boy, Richard Wright’s autobiography, covers his childhood and early adulthood. It opens with four-year-old Richard’s rebellion against authority, an important motif in Black Boy. At the time, Richard was restless and resentful of his mother’s injunction of silence. Richard accidentally burned down his grandparents’ house in his attempt to find something to occupy his time. After his mother determined that he was unharmed, she beat him so badly he lost consciousness.

When Richard and his brother were very young, Nathan Wright, their father, abandoned the family, plunging them into poverty. Richard’s constant hunger made him extremely bitter toward his absent father. Over the next few years, Ella, Richard’s mother, would desperately attempt to feed, clothe, and shelter her children. Her long hours of work often meant leaving her children with little supervision. When Richard was six years old, he began begging drinks in a nearby saloon where the customers plied him with nickels if he would repeat various curse words and offensive phrases. When beatings proved ineffective in breaking her son of his growing obsession with alcohol, Ella engaged the babysitting services of an older black woman in the neighborhood.

Ella moved in with her sister, Maggie, and Maggie’s husband, Silas Hoskins. Hoskins was the proprietor of a successful saloon, so there was always more than enough food to eat. Nevertheless, Richard was unable to lose the fear that his hunger would return anew, so he hoarded food all over the house. Unfortunately, the newfound stability was not destined to last. The local whites were jealous of Hoskins’s profitable business, so they murdered him and threatened to kill the rest of his family. Maggie and Ella fled with the two boys to live in another town. Maggie and Ella’s combined wages proved adequate to feed and clothe Richard and his brother, but Maggie became involved with “Professor” Matthews, a wanted man. Ella and the children fled to the North after Matthews killed a white woman; Ella once again had to work alone to provide for herself and her children.

Ella’s health began to deteriorate. Lacking rent money, she and her sons were forced to move several times. A paralytic stroke disabled her, so Richard was forced to write to his grandmother for help. Ella’s siblings gave what help they could, but none of them could take on the responsibility for both of her children. Richard’s grandmother took on the responsibility for caring for Ella. Maggie took Richard’s younger brother to be raised in Detroit, while Richard chose to live with his Uncle Clark, who lived close to Richard’s grandmother. However, Richard ultimately could not get along with Clark and his wife, Jody, so he returned to Jackson to live with his mother in his grandparents’ home.

Richard’s grandmother was a strict Seventh Day Adventist, but Richard was an atheist from an early age. He also had aspirations to be a writer, a profession that his grandmother distrusted as “worldly.” His relationship with his grandmother was, therefore, a never-ending confrontation. His Aunt Addie eventually joined the crusade to save his soul, and Richard was enrolled in the religious school where she taught. One day, she beat Richard in class for an offense that he did not commit. She tried to beat him again after school, but Richard fought her off with a knife. In the following years, Richard would have to arm himself against the violence of various members of his family.

Despite his erratic schooling, Richard managed to graduate from the ninth grade. He tried to work to save money in order to move to the North, but he found himself unable to assume the role of humble inferior to his white employers and co-workers. During this time, he suffered numerous frightening, often violent, confrontations with white racism. He moved to Memphis where the atmosphere was less dangerous. He rebuffed the attempts of his kindly landlady, Mrs. Moss, to marry him to her daughter, Bess. Meanwhile, he began saving in earnest for his escape to the North. His mother, brother, and Aunt Maggie joined him in Memphis and later moved with him to Chicago.

Chicago awakened new desires and dreams in Richard, but he was still too afraid to fully acknowledge them. Mired in the sadness and chaos of the great depression, Richard found an ideology that appealed to him in Communism. He felt that he could aid the Communists in spreading their message via his writing, but to his horror and dismay, he soon discovered that petty rivalries and paranoia ran deep among his comrades. He found himself the object of suspicion and distrust because he was branded an “intellectual.” After a series of political battles and a great deal of persecution, Richard became estranged from the Party. He was ousted by several Communists when he tried to march in a May Day parade, but he did not let this rejection defeat him. Instead, he resolved to find his own forms of expression and self-realization through his writing.