The Library Card Essay, Research Paper

?The Library Card,? by Richard Wright is a strong essay on how books can affect and influence readers. Richard Wright writes that his first experience of the real world is accomplished through novels. He read an article criticizing H.L. Mencken and it tempted him to read some of his books. The article labeled Mencken as ?a fool.? Wright wanted to know what this man had done to cause such hatred against him. ?I wondered what on earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn of the South. The only people I had ever heard denounced in the South were Negroes, and this man was not a Negro,? (pg.319) Wright writes that tells us that the South was filled with racism and hatred among the whites and blacks. Mencken must have had ideas that the South did not like. Since Wright had never been exposed to such hatred between the whites and blacks, he did not know what exactly was going on in the world around him.

Wright wished to dig in deeper into this issue and it motivated him to borrow a library card from a white man. Since he ?knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves any more than they were the parks and playgrounds of the city,? (pg.319) he had asked an Irish Catholic that was hated by the white Southerners. ?Richard, don?t mention this to the other white men,? (pg.321) the Irish Catholic said to Wright, which indicates that he is not a typical white southerner who is against the blacks. If there is anyone who is in favor of the blacks, they are automatically disliked by the other whites. The Irish Catholic has absolutely nothing again Richard taking out books to read. Other people will be suspicious and they think it is wrong for black people to read.

Richard was forced to forge a note to the librarian saying that the Irish wanted to take out books by Mencken. He wrote, ?Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken?? (pg.321) He used the words ?nigger boy? to make the librarian feel that he could not possibly be the one who wrote the note. The word ?nigger? was frequently used in the past, and it is still used today. A nigger is a black person, but it is used to insult them. The librarian asked many questions to Richard, to make sure that he wasn?t the one using the books. ?You?re not using these books, are you?? she asked pointedly. There is a strict rule in lending books to black people. The whites do not want to expand black people?s knowledge, since they just want them to be slaves. Back then, black people could hardly read or write and they were not offered the education to learn so. Once Richard took out the books, he headed back to the Irish Catholic and told him that the librarian might telephone him. It is to make sure that the books were for him and not for Richard. If Richard gets caught taking out the books and reading it for himself, he will get in big trouble for it.

Richard first book was ?A Book of Prefaces,? which was written by Mencken. He was surprised on how Mencken fought with words in the book, and he was shocked with his style. When he couldn?t understand some words, he had to use a dictionary to help him out. After he read the book, he felt that he had experienced something new, ?I hungered 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.? (pg.323) Books had made him view the world differently and they opened his eyes. Every time he read a book, he could not put it down. The mood of it lingered, coloring everything he saw, heard, did. He identified himself with the books he read, and it made him vaguely guilty. ?Would I, filled with bookish notions, act in a manner that would make the whites dislike me?? he questioned himself and it made him feel isolated from the world around him. Every time he reads a book, he learns something new. Reading grew into a passion for him. He could now identify his boss as an American type. He felt a vast distance between him and his boss but now, he felt closer to him. He forged more notes and took out more books from the library. ?Reading was like a drug, a dope,? (pg.324) he says. It is addicting and every time you start reading a book, you have to keep reading it until it is finished.

Richard had learned a lot from reading these books and it made him feel distant from the world. He was afraid that the white men he worked with could tell that he was changing. He looks at the world in a different way, and he learned things that he once did not know. Whenever someone sees a book in his hand, he had to cover himself and say that it was to kill time. ?You?ll addle your brains if you don?t watch out,? (pg.324) says one of the white men, that indicates that they think black people could not hold much knowledge. Richard?s landlady even said, ?I hope you know your own mind,? in a tone which implied that he had no mind. Richard read Dreiser?s ?Jennie Gerhardt? and ?Sister Carrie,? and it revived him a vivid sense of his mother?s suffering. He was overwhelmed and it made him wonder more about the life around him. He did not want to tell the white men what he was thinking because he did not want them to think of him differently. He had to keep everything he learned and read to himself.

Richard now knew what it means to be a Negro. He had learned to live with hate. ?I no longer felt that the world about me was hostile, killing; I knew it. A million times I asked myself what I could do to save myself, and there were no answers,? (pg.325) suggests that Richard is fighting to find ways for a better life. He feels that walls ring him and there is no escape. He did not want to talk to the Irish Catholic about his problems, which means that he has to talk about himself and that is too painful. Some of the white men at work noticed that he is beginning to change. They tell him to wake up and that he is beginning to broad.

That winter Richard began to eat warm food and three courses a day. He realized that the more the meals, the more better he could read. He also thought that he might have lived through illnesses and survived them, never suspecting that he was ill. Richard and his brother started saving money to head up north. Since he felt that the white men at his work would change toward him, he did not tell them about heading north. It would have made them feel that he did not like the life he was living in, since his life was completely conditioned by what they said or did.

He began to think about what he could do to help the lives of all black people. He could fight the Southern whites by organizing with other blacks, like what his grandfather had done. But he knew he could not win that way, since there were more whites than blacks. He could live the life of a genial slave, but that was impossible. All his life had shaped him to live by his own feelings and thoughts. He could also marry Bess and inherit his house, but that is also like living as a slave. He could also fight with Shorty and Harrison, but that means fighting against his own people. ?I had seen many Negroes solve the problem of being black by transferring their hatred of themselves to others with a black skin and fighting them.? (pg.327) He would have to be cold to do that, and he would never be. He could forget about everything he read, forget about the whites, and find release from anxiety through alcohol and sex. But the memory of his father stopped him from doing so. He did not know what to do and it seemed like everything he thought have has a negative effect to it. He was confused and he wanted to find answers.

Reading books can help people understand and realize what is going on around them. Richard lived his life thinking that he knew everything there is to know, and that he lived in a pleasant place. When he started reading, he learned that the world around him was not a good place at all. The whites ruled everything and the blacks were slaves. Books had changed his personality and his thinking. He now knew what it is like to be black and that the whites never respected him. This short story also implies that if one needs education to survive the world. This world is filled with hatred and racism, and it is better if everyone understands it. Books open up the mind, and it is the key to understanding the world we are living in.

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