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INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PACKET/TEACHING UNIT

Black Boy

RICHARD WRIGHT



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Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Black Boy

by Richard Wright

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Black Boy

Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the author's writing style, including using the following:
 - repetition
 - digression
 - events out of chronological order
2. recognize the dual first-person narration of Richard the character and Richard the author.
3. illustrate with detail from the text the characteristics the protagonist possesses that contribute to his decision to become a writer.
4. recognize the importance of education in discerning oppression.
5. cite incidents from the story to trace Richard's growing dissatisfaction with living in the South during the time of the Jim Crow laws.
6. explain how racial, socio-economic, and political prejudice can shape a person's growth and beliefs.
7. identify the tenets of Communism that attracted so many Americans during the Great Depression.
8. understand the human need to belong to a group and Richard's struggles to achieve an identity.
9. discuss the concept of the American Dream and how prejudice affects it.
10. connect the images of darkness and ignorance that are pervasive in the story.
11. define and cite instances from the book of the following literary terms:
 - flashback
 - epithet
 - sensory images
 - alliteration
 - irony
12. place *Black Boy* in its correct chronological period and understand how outside events helped mold Wright's life.
13. discuss various aspects of Wright's style of writing.

Short Summary of Richard Wright's Life

Richard Wright, 1908-1960, is credited with capturing the voice of the Southern black man in American literature. He was born near Roxie, Mississippi and graduated as valedictorian of the ninth grade class at Smith Robertson Junior High School in Jackson, Mississippi. At the age of twenty, he moved to Chicago in pursuit of his dream of becoming a writer. Wright published numerous articles, poems, and short stories and is noted for *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *The Long Dream*, and many other books. Wright died in Paris at the age of 52, having made France his home for over ten years.

Black Boy

Notes

Written in 1944, Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* was originally titled *American Hunger*. The autobiography is divided into two sections, "Southern Night," depicting Wright's life in the South before he moved to Chicago in 1927, and "The Horror and the Glory," tracing his experiences in Chicago into the 1930s. *Black Boy* is an autobiographical story fraught with the growing pains of creating identity, both of self and of a nation. "Southern Night" is a straightforward portrait of life as a black person in the Jim Crow South, focusing on the abject poverty and prejudices faced by a sensitive and gifted young Richard Wright. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this section for adolescent readers is the disparity between Richard the character and Richard the narrator, a wizened and often resigned first-person voice who hints at the outcome of the story, but allows the reader to experience it along with Richard the character.

"The Horror and the Glory" poses a much more challenging text for readers, as Wright delves deeply into the philosophical reasons for American prejudices and presents both the advantages and shortcomings of Communism. Wright views the concept of the American Dream as fiction for both African-Americans and immigrants and feels failed by the promises of equality America offers. Teen readers may find the second section of *Black Boy* hard to digest, particularly if they do not have a strong background in 20th century American history. However, much discussion can be generated on how the status and availability of the American Dream has changed since the autobiography and many students will enjoy projecting the persona of Richard Wright into today's society.

As a depiction of relations and prejudice in early to mid 1900s America, racial, stereotypical, and ethnic epithets do appear throughout the autobiography. These words represent a realistic view of the times and are not used for shock value. Rather, the shock for modern students should lie in the injustices experienced by Richard based on both race and economic status, not in the occasional presence of epithets. Additionally, Wright occasionally uses profanity and very slight references to sex in the book. We realize that many of our vocabulary words have more than one definition, but we have limited our definitions to those used in the context of the novel.

All references come from the Perennial Classics edition of *Black Boy*, published 1993.

Black Boy

Questions for Essay/Discussion

1. Which childhood incidents alert Richard to the existence of prejudice?
2. Trace Richard Wright's educational background. What events inspired him to become a writer?
3. What role does religion play in Richard's upbringing? Why does he consider atheism to be more logical than Christianity?
4. Richard's family migrates from home to home. How does this constant moving shape Richard's view of the South?
5. Analyze Richard's contacts with white employers. What does he learn about social expectations and his own viewpoints with each?
6. Explain the symbolism of the title of part one, "Southern Night."
7. Wright uses a style of commenting on dialogue to convey his emotions in "Southern Night." In "The Horror and the Glory," however, he uses the author's aside in long parenthetical comments for the same purpose. Why do you think this is the more appropriate style for part two?
8. Compare and contrast Richard's expectations of life in Chicago with the reality of actually living there.
9. Analyze Richard's devotion to the Chicago John Reed Club.
10. Why is Richard ousted from the Chicago Communist Party?
11. Analyze Richard's prediction that Communism is the government of the future.
12. Richard is constantly out of place—in his family, among his peers, in his society. If Richard Wright were alive today, would he still struggle to find his place in the world? Explain.
13. Explain Richard Wright's disillusionment with the American Dream.
14. In Chapter Fifteen, Wright describes America as an "adolescent." In what ways has America matured? In what ways is America still in need of growth?
15. Find examples of various literary terms:
 - Foreshadowing
 - Conflict
 - Aside
 - Metaphor
 - Symbol

Black Boy

Terms and Definitions

Aside - words spoken by an actor in such a way that they are heard by the audience but supposedly not by the other actors. These words usually represent the inner thoughts of the speaker. Example: In *Hamlet*, Polonius says while talking with Hamlet, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.”

Alliteration - the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words. Example: **M**ore **M**ischief and **M**erriment.

Autobiography - the relating of a person’s life by that person.

Conflict - the struggle that propels the action. There are three types of conflict: *man versus man* (Example: a typical Western, in which the sheriff confronts the outlaws); *man versus nature* (Example: a story about someone surviving in a small boat on the ocean); *man versus himself* (Example: the main character of a story fighting his or her own drug abuse). Most books include all three types of conflict.

Epithets - an adjective or phrase which delineates a personality by the attributes possessed by the person or thing. These epithets help the reader understand the characters’ important characteristics. Example: Achilles the invincible.

The Homeric epithet is a phrase, usually a compound adjective, which is used frequently to describe a thing or person. Examples:

- “rosy-fingered Dawn”
- “the wine-dark sea.”

Flashback - a scene that interrupts the ongoing action in a story to show an event that happened earlier.

Foreshadowing - the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come. Foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense.

Imagery - the use of words to evoke sensory impressions that are beyond the words themselves. Similar to *symbol* and *motif*. Example: “Get thee to a nunnery,” from *Hamlet* implies purity and chastity, not simply a convent.

Irony - a subtle, sometimes humorous perception of inconsistency in which the significance of a statement or event is changed by its content. For example: the firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic irony* - the audience knows more about a character's situation than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary from the character's expectations. The character's statements have one meaning for the character and a different meaning for the reader, who knows more than the character.
- *Structural irony* - a naïve hero whose view of the world differs from the author's and reader's. Structural irony flatters the reader's intelligence at the expense of the hero.
- *Verbal irony* - a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. Example: calling a stupid man smart.

Memoir - an account of one portion of a person's life, as told by that person; similar to an autobiography, but covering a smaller time period. Example: Nixon's *Six Crises*.

Metaphor - a comparison of two things that are basically dissimilar but are brought together in order to create a sharp image. Example: The moon, a haunting lantern, shone through the clouds.

Narrator - the one who tells the story. If the narrator is a character in the book, the term is first-person narration. (Example: *Moby Dick* is narrated by Ishmael, a crew member). If the narrator is not a character, the term is third-person narration. (Example: *Sense and Sensibility*).

Protagonist - the central or main character in a story around which the plot centers. Example: Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Sensory images - the use of details from the five senses to help describe the subject.

Simile - a comparison between two different things using either *like* or *as*. Example: I am as hungry as a horse.

Style - the way an author chooses and uses words, phrases, and sentences to tell the story. For example, in an action/adventure story, the author may use simple words and short, choppy sentences, because this style moves the story along quickly. But in a story about a college professor, the same author may choose to use polysyllabic, unfamiliar words and long, convoluted sentences.

Symbol - an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. Example: The sea could be symbolic for "the unknown;" since the sea is something which is physical and can be seen by the reader, but has elements which cannot be understood, it can be used *symbolically* to stand for the abstraction of "mystery," "obscurity," or "the unknown."

Black Boy

Novel Exam

For the following, choose the statement that best completes the prompt.

1. *Black Boy* can best be described as a/an
 - A. allegory.
 - B. biography.
 - C. fictional narrative.
 - D. autobiography.
 - E. moral fairy tale.
2. In an act of rebellion against his father's cruelty, young Richard
 - A. sets the curtains on fire.
 - B. disrupts his father's sleep with boisterous play.
 - C. kills a kitten.
 - D. refuses to eat.
 - E. reports his father to the Memphis police.
3. Why does Richard's mother threaten to beat him when he comes home empty-handed from the grocer?
 - A. She is angry that he has squandered the family grocery money.
 - B. She is too tired from her job as a cook to do the shopping herself.
 - C. She feels he is old enough to take on a daily chore.
 - D. She knows he must face his fears in order to survive.
 - E. She is frustrated because Richard's father has abandoned the family.
4. Richard's Aunt Addie
 - A. threatens him with a knife.
 - B. wants him to cease writing fiction.
 - C. beats him whenever he does wrong
 - D. accompanies him to work
 - E. teaches him the alphabet.
5. Through the death of Uncle Hoskins, Richard learns
 - A. racism exists and can be life-threatening.
 - B. owning a saloon is a dangerous job.
 - C. the Mississippi River is a powerful force that must be respected.
 - D. that circumstances can change drastically in a short time.
 - E. his grandmother believes God punishes those who engage in sinful living.

6. What does the illness of Richard's mother symbolize?
 - A. the lack of proper medical care for black patients
 - B. the internal rage Richard feels about the family's frequent moves
 - C. the strength and hope of an American family
 - D. the failure of religion as a salve for Richard's emotions
 - E. the poverty, ignorance, and helplessness of Richard's childhood
7. On a number of occasions, young Richard refuses to be beaten by relatives. What aspect of his character fuels these refusals?
 - A. obstinance
 - B. ignorance of wrongdoing
 - C. strong sense of self-worth
 - D. lack of respect for authority
 - E. intelligence
8. Richard views the efforts of the church to convert him and the other boys at the revival as
 - A. a display of enforced conformity.
 - B. a time of religious enlightenment.
 - C. a method of ensuring family tranquility.
 - D. a genuine interest in the status of their souls.
 - E. a stage show to earn more money for the offering plate.
9. Richard's agreement to spend an hour in daily prayer leads to
 - A. a greater appreciation for Granny's religious beliefs.
 - B. Richard's conversion to Christianity.
 - C. closer friendships with other believers at school.
 - D. a daily habit of writing.
 - E. Richard's plan to move to the North
10. What is ironic about Richard's job selling newspapers?
 - A. He spends more time reading the papers than peddling them.
 - B. The people who buy the newspapers are illiterate.
 - C. The papers contain Ku Klux Klan propaganda.
 - D. Richard spends more money distributing the papers than it is worth.
 - E. Richard copies the writing style of the adventure stories he finds in the papers.
11. When Richard is first published as a writer, in eighth grade, how do his family and friends react?
 - A. They are proud of his accomplishments.
 - B. They are jealous of the extra money he makes as a writer.
 - C. They fear that his success as a writer will make him more unruly.
 - D. They encourage him to keep writing short stories.
 - E. They ostracize him for embarrassing the community.

12. How is Richard's honor as valedictorian of his ninth grade class marred?
- A. Richard's grandmother refuses to attend the graduation because she feels that education is sinful.
 - B. Richard insists upon reading his own commencement speech rather than the one the principal prepares for him.
 - C. Richard's selection as valedictorian further alienates him from his friends.
 - D. The principal refuses to recognize Richard as rightful valedictorian because Richard is black.
 - E. A graduation prank disrupts Richard's commencement speech.
13. What does Griggs believe is Richard's basic problem with employment?
- A. Richard does not recognize and defer to the authority of white people.
 - B. Richard is too busy thinking about writing and does not pay attention to the task at hand.
 - C. Richard has not been trained in an employable vocation.
 - D. Richard is lazy and slow in performing his duties.
 - E. Richard has not had the opportunities for success that other black workers have had.
14. Why do Pease and Reynolds terrorize Richard at the optician's factory?
- A. They sense that he is afraid of them and take advantage of the situation.
 - B. They are threatened by the idea that Richard can do the same job as they do.
 - C. Richard fails to call them "Sir" when speaking to them.
 - D. They feel that Mr. Crane is showing favoritism to Richard.
 - E. Richard refuses to run errands for them on lunch hour.
15. What internal conflict does Richard face when he decides to move to Chicago?
- A. whether to take his younger brother with him or leave him in Mississippi
 - B. whether to save enough money for train fare or bus fare
 - C. whether to steal in order to hasten his departure
 - D. whether to put his savings in a bank account or hide them at home
 - E. whether to focus on his writing or keep his job at the movie house as a means of making money for the move
16. Why does Richard refuse to marry Bess?
- A. Her mother's boarding house is located in a seedy district in Memphis.
 - B. Bess is too fat.
 - C. Richard is determined to move Chicago and does not have the money to support a wife.
 - D. Richard barely knows Bess and feels she is both simple-minded and devoid of ambition.
 - E. Richard does not want the responsibility of running a family business with Bess and her mother.

17. Why does Richard resent participating in the boxing match?
- A. He feels his dignity has been injured.
 - B. He is gets badly injured.
 - C. He is unevenly matched with his opponent.
 - D. He does not feel that boxing is part of his job description.
 - E. He detests the idea of hitting a white man man.
18. What is the catalyst for Richard's decision to move from Memphis to Chicago?
- A. He is fired from his job at the optician's factory.
 - B. Aunt Maggie is returning to Chicago and needs a traveling companion.
 - C. Richard fears he will be lynched if he remains in Memphis much longer.
 - D. Richard is offered a job as a writer for the Chicago Times.
 - E. Richard sees a move to Chicago as his only hope for happiness and respect.
19. Once in Chicago, Richard views Negro life in the North as:
- A. a form of unconscious suffering.
 - B. a new land of opportunity.
 - C. hopeful and promising.
 - D. stagnant and stunted by poverty.
 - E. more prejudicial than in the South he left behind.
20. Why does Richard join the Chicago John Reed Club?
- A. He is new to Chicago and is searching for a group to associate with.
 - B. He is seduced by the prospect of becoming a published and respected writer.
 - C. He must first join the John Reed Club in order to be eligible for membership in the Communist Party.
 - D. He is overjoyed by the hospitality of the club members when he visits the club for the first time.
 - E. He is pressured into joining the club by his aunt, who wants the prestige associated with membership.
21. What is Richard's primary reason for joining the Communist Party?
- A. He does not wish to sacrifice his leadership position in the John Reed Club.
 - B. He fully believes in the tenets of Communism.
 - C. He feels that by supporting Communism, he will better his social status and that of all blacks in America.
 - D. He is moved by the power of the working class and hopes to help funnel that power toward the black sector of American society.
 - E. He feels betrayed by the American government, especially in New York.

22. Why does Richard feel the Communist Party fails him?
- A. The Party fails to recognize his talent as a writer.
 - B. The Party disappoints Richard because of its prejudices against blacks.
 - C. The Party expects obedience without question.
 - D. The Party cannot support Richard financially, even though it demands he work full-time for it.
 - E. The Party shifts its focus from the arts to politics.
23. Why does Richard give up writing biographical sketches of significant black comrades?
- A. His motives fall under suspicion by the Party leaders.
 - B. He has too much difficulty getting interviews.
 - C. The Party keeps him so busy writing pamphlets that he has no time for his project.
 - D. He is ostracized by his black comrades as being too intellectual and no one will consent to an interview.
 - E. He becomes too entangled in trying to save the Chicago John Reed Club from dissolution.

Essay (Answer any two)

1. Compare and contrast Richard with any other character in the book. Consider: intelligence, ambition, outlook, upbringing, etc.
2. Who or what do you consider to have had the greatest influence on Wright. Cite incidents from the book to support your opinion.
3. Do some research on the beginnings of Communism. Include why and how people in the United States became involved in the movement.
4. Wright uses many words for black people. List them and write a short paragraph for each explaining your opinion of the term.

Black Boy

Exam Key

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| 1. D | 13. A |
| 2. C | 14. B |
| 3. D | 15. C |
| 4. B | 16. D |
| 5. A | 17. A |
| 6. E | 18. E |
| 7. C | 19. A |
| 8. A | 20. B |
| 9. D | 21. A |
| 10. C | 22. C |
| 11. E | 23. A |
| 12. B | |

Black Boy

Study Guide Teacher's Copy

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

listlessly – tiredly, without energy

chastened – humbled

nostalgia – fond memories

tantalizing – tempting

tenement – cheap apartment

horde – large number

gaunt – extremely thin

insistent – firm

clamor – harsh noise

bewilderment – confusion

ramshackle – broken down

enthralled – thrilled

doggerel – poorly written verse

replete – filled

jauntily – buoyantly, self-confidently

vivid – sharp impression

gnarled – twisted, deformed

withering – wasting away

1. What causes Richard's house to catch on fire?

Four-year-old Richard, bored and angry that he must keep quiet during his grandmother's illness, becomes fascinated with the power of the flames. His experiment escalates from straw to the curtains and quickly moves beyond his control.

2. Why does Richard hide under the house?

Richard fears a beating from his mother and is overcome with guilt at the possible damage he has caused.

3. How does Richard's illness serve to chasten him from further misbehavior?

His mother beats him until he loses consciousness, and his subsequent fever causes hallucinations. He is humbled by the fact that she nearly kills him.

4. What emotions or concepts does Wright list in a repetitive style?

Among others, he lists wonder, delight, infinity, nostalgia, melancholy, desire, yearning, disdain, glory, alarm, languor, secrecy, death, thirst, panic, astonishment, love, cruelty, hunger, and terror.

5. What purpose does this series of “snapshots” of emotion serve?

Each instance reveals setting and Richard’s frame of reference. Most of the snapshots have a bittersweet tone.

6. Where does the family first move? What mode of transportation takes them to their new home?

The family moves from Natchez, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, on a steamboat named the Kate Adams.

7. Describe Richard’s father and Richard’s relationship with him.

Richard’s father is the lawgiver of the family. He works as a night porter in a drugstore and must sleep during the day. He is obese and has poor table manners. Richard fears his father, has never laughed in his presence, and describes him as alien and remote.

8. Why does Richard kill the kitten?

Richard hangs the kitten as an expression of hatred for his father. By killing the kitten, Richard successfully rebels against his father’s cruelty without the possibility of punishment.

9. How does the family fare when Richard’s father leaves?

Richard suffers from intense, palpable hunger; Richard’s mother takes a job as a cook and leaves the children unattended during the day with a single loaf of bread and a pot of tea.

10. What conflicts does Richard face when he becomes responsible for shopping for food for the family?

Richard faces external conflict with the group of boys who steal his money. He also has a conflict with his mother, who orders him to buy the groceries in spite of the boys. He must face internal conflict in dealing with his confusion about his mother wanting him to fight the boys and refusing to admit him into the house until he has the groceries.

11. Why does Richard resent watching the white family his mother cooks for eat?

He does not understand why some people have plenty of food to eat and he has to go hungry. He is angry that all he is offered is the occasional scrap.

12. Describe Richard's experiences in the saloon when he is six years old.

Unattended, Richard's curiosity leads him to a saloon where patrons give him whiskey and have him repeat obscenities. He quickly becomes addicted to drink and trades obscenities for whiskey until his mother discovers his activities, beats him, and places Richard and his brother with a woman in the neighborhood, who "watched me every moment...." (Pg. 22)

13. Describe Richard's first day of school.

Frightened at first, Richard attaches himself to a group of older boys, who teach him meanings for the obscenities. Although he learns nothing from books that day, he is definitely educated by his schoolmates. That afternoon, eager to display his new vocabulary, Richard writes obscenities on the windows of his neighborhood with soap.

14. Why does Richard dislike his preacher?

When the preacher visits, he eats the choicest pieces. Richard is angry and must eat soup before getting any chicken. In the meantime, the adults eat all the chicken.

15. Why must Richard live at an orphanage?

His mother becomes ill and money becomes so scarce that they lose their tenement. She places her sons in the orphanage so they will not starve to death.

16. Find an instance of alliterative language on page 29.

"Dread and disgust had already become a daily part of my being...."

17. After running away from the orphanage, Richard's mother presents him with a choice. What are Richard's options, and what does he do?

Richard's mother tells him he must either return to the orphanage or go live with his father, because she cannot take care of him while working. He chooses to visit his father, but does not stay because his father humiliates him and his mother.

18. Wright interrupts the narrator of his youth to interject an incident twenty-five years later. What happens? What revelation does he have? What revelation does he have?

Richard meets his father; the now-old man is working on a plantation, digging. Even though Wright recognizes similarities between them, he writes, "we were forever strangers...." (Pg. 34) Richard, grown up, realizes the two had not, nor could not, understand each other and that the city that had crushed the father, had "borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of learning." (Pg. 34) Wright also forgives and pities the old man.

Chapter 2

Vocabulary

dingy – gray, dull

intangible – unable to be touched

premeditatedly – deliberately

forbade – prohibited

distraught – emotionally upset

upheaval – turmoil

taunting – teasing

dissuaded – persuaded against

flourishing – growing

invocation – spoken prayers

ditties – songs

antagonism – dislike

emulate – imitate

spontaneous – on the spur of the moment

bulwark – fortification

diminished – lessened

1. In a narrative intrusion similar to an aside, what fallacy in the view of Black Americans does Wright reveal?

Wright states that, rather than an emotionally strong people steeped in tradition, Black Americans' strength has been mistaken for "negative confusions, our flights, our fears, and our frenzy under pressure." (Pg. 37)

2. Where does the family move?

The family moves in with their grandmother in Jackson, Mississippi.

3. What does Ella, the boarder at Granny's house, introduce to Richard?

Ella introduces the magic of fiction to Richard and piques his imagination and interest in learning to read.

4. Find a metaphor in this chapter.

Answers may vary.

Example: "I had tasted what to me was life...." (Pg. 40)

"...it was the gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land" (Pg. 40)

5. Describe the incident that leads to Ella's moving away from Granny's house.

While bathing him, Richard makes a vulgar remark to Granny that results in a chase and severe whippings from Granny and Richard's mother. Granny blames Ella for putting evil ideas into Richard's head and forces her to move.

6. What is the overall impression of the sensory images Wright uses in Chapter 2?

The imagery evokes contentedness and the earthy pleasures of country living.

7. On the train to Elaine, Arkansas, Richard questions his mother about race. Why does this anger his mother?

Richard's questions reveal that he naively has not noticed skin color and is just starting to recognize prejudices based on race. His questions reveal that although Granny's skin tones are white, she still is considered black. His mother's answers show an anxiety over a lack of knowledge of her family's genealogy because of their previous lives as slaves.

8. Why does Richard steal biscuits from Aunt Maggie's table?

He is so used to going hungry that he feels he must hoard extra food just in case there is none for the next day.

9. What makes Richard lose his trust in Uncle Hoskins?

Uncle Hoskins frightens Richard by driving the wagon into the Mississippi River. Although safe, the incident terrifies Richard, and the uncle "loomed before me like a stranger... a man with whom I could never share a moment of intimate living." (Pg. 52)

10. Why does Richard's family flee their home in Elaine?

Uncle Hoskins, who owns a saloon, is shot and killed by white men who are jealous of his thriving business. The women and children, fearing for their lives, escape during the night.

11. What does Richard mistake for a herd of elephants?

Richard sees a prison chain gang and mistakenly thinks their uniforms resemble "elephants," confusing elephants with Zebras. He also notices that the prisoners are all black and that the guards are white and have guns.

12. Why do Richard's mother and Aunt Maggie decide to return to West Helena?

They tire of the strict religious routines demanded by Granny.

13. How do Richard and the other children treat the Jewish shop owner?

They jeer at him with cruel chants. Wright recognizes that the racial prejudice he exhibits as a child is ironic, since the children themselves are victims of prejudice.

14. Why does Aunt Maggie suddenly leave the family?

Aunt Maggie is in love with “Professor Matthews,” a man wanted for murder. They flee in the night to Detroit.

15. Why does Richard attempt to sell Betsy, his poodle? Why does he change his mind?

Hungry once again, Richard takes his poodle to a white neighborhood in hopes of selling her for \$1. A girl offers him \$.97, but he refuses. Later, Richard tells his mother he did not really want to sell his dog to a white person.

Note to Teacher: Richard is called “nigger” for the first time in this episode. He, however, does not seem to find the word offensive, and merely relates the word’s use without any of his usual first-person narration comments.

16. While Wright is concerned only for his life and hunger, what events are occurring in the world?

World War I is being fought, and it ends at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 3

1. Describe the young adolescent “fraternity” to which Richard belongs. What is ironic about this group?

Richard’s acceptance into the young, male society is marked by bravado, racial hatred toward white people, and the use of excessive profanity and vulgarity. Ironically, the group uses these negative behaviors as a show of independence while they depend heavily upon peer approval and acceptance.

2. How would you characterize the comments Wright makes about the conversation he and his friends have at the beginning of this chapter?

Answers may vary.

Example: The technique seems to be an impersonal interpretation or stage direction intended to amplify the remark. The comments seem to show a shift of narration from the intimacy of a participant to the distance created by time, perspective, and maturity. In addition, very few are complete sentences, and no speakers are identified.

3. What precipitates the family's return to Jackson?

As Richard's mother becomes increasingly ill, the family moves from rental house to rental house. Richard's mother then suffers a stroke, and after a long wait, Granny comes to help nurse her. Granny contacts family members for money to transport the family back to Jackson. Aunts and uncles congregate at Granny's house to decide what to do with the children.

4. What insight about school life does Richard exhibit on his first day of school after Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody take him in?

Richard realizes that his social success at school hinges on his ability to prove himself in a playground fight. He later finds a ring to use as a potential weapon and is accepted by his peers.

5. Why does Richard leave Uncle Clark's home?

Richard is frightened by the landlord's tales of his dead son, in whose bed Richard now sleeps. Sleeplessness and agitation over Uncle Clark's lack of sympathy about Richard's fear lead to a series of events that cause Richard a great deal of misery in Uncle Clark's home. Uncle Clark sends Richard back to Granny's house in Jackson.

6. What are the circumstances of Wright's mother's second operation?

The operation takes place in a doctor's office and his mother goes to a rooming house to recover because "no hospital facilities for colored" exist in the town. (Pg. 99)

7. Richard views his mother's years of suffering as a symbol of what aspects of his life?

For Richard, her suffering symbolizes poverty, ignorance, helplessness, and hunger. Her illness casts a pall on Richard's attitude toward himself and others that will color his perceptions for years to come.

Chapter 4

Vocabulary

touchstone – criteria

feigned – pretended

profusely – a great deal

ardently – strongly

morose – sad, gloomy

atone – make amends for

comprising – making up, composed of

squalor – filth, dirt

sauntered – strutted

elicited – brought about

incur – be subject to

futile – useless

predilection – tendency

gainsay – speak against

1. What internal conflict does Richard face when Aunt Addie accuses him of eating in class?

Richard's loyalty to gang members in the past prevents him from defending himself in the church school classroom. He waits for the guilty student to make up a lie, but the other boy remains silent.

2. Why does Richard refuse to be beaten by Aunt Addie a second time?

Richard senses that the beating at school was more a result of Addie's frustrations with his lack of faith and a show of her power as a teacher than a punishment for breaking a school rule. When she attempts to beat him again at home that afternoon, Richard balks, and the two grapple with a knife on the kitchen floor.

3. Richard describes life at Granny's house as being part of a "religious regime." (Pg. 111) How does this "regime" affect Richard's belief in God?

Parochial school, forced prayers, long services, and Granny's strict religious practices push Richard farther from knowing God, despite the efforts of the church community. Richard's faith is "welded to the common realities of life" and he does not fear God. (Pg. 115)

4. What does Richard tell Granny to ease the pressure of her campaign to save his soul? How is the situation ironic?

Richard tells Granny at the revival that if he sees an angel, he will believe in God. She interprets him as saying that he has seen an angel, and she proclaims the good news to all in attendance. Granny is greatly embarrassed when Richard confesses the truth of what he said. Finally, to appease Granny, Richard agrees to spend an hour in prayer each day to try to save his soul. There are two ironies in this situation: The first is the misunderstanding at church involving and the second is the fact that Richard finds direction in his life through his inability to pray. It is during this prayer time that Richard discovers the soul-cleansing power of writing.

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

broached – brought up

injunction – law

acutely – strongly, pointedly

obscure – unclear

girded – covered, circled

doctrine – belief

blasphemous – anti-religious

extolling – praising highly

impending – upcoming, looming

substantiated – proven with evidence

mustered out – thrown out, dismissed

1. Why does Wright say, “suddenly the future loomed tangibly for me”?

He is assigned to the fifth grade at Jim Hill Public School and is promoted to sixth grade within two weeks. His academic success triggers great ambitions in the fields of science and medicine. Richard’s academic success gives him confidence.

2. Why does Richard willfully avoid eating?

Because of Granny’s flat refusal to allow to Richard to work on Saturdays (the Sabbath for Seventh Day Adventists), Richard claims to not be hungry at lunch hour and watches his friends eat. He does not go home in the afternoons to eat a plate of greens because Granny would not let him return to his friends. For the sake of exploring the lives of his new classmates, Richard often goes twelve hours or more without food.

3. Explain how Richard unwittingly becomes an agent for pro-Ku Klux Klan literature?

Richard and a friend sell newspapers through the neighborhood, both to make a little money and to have access to reading material. Each newspaper contains a fiction supplement that captures the boys' imaginations. Neither boy, however, reads the actual paper. Richard and the boy are greatly shamed when the content of the newspaper is brought to their attention and immediately discontinue sales.

4. Describe Richard's observations as Brother Mance's assistant.

Richard observes the "bare, bleak pool of black" sharecroppers' lives as he fills out insurance claims for Brother Mance. (Pg. 137) He also notices the approval of his mother, Granny, and even Aunt Addie as he contributes significantly to the family income. Unfortunately, Brother Mance's death ends Richard's tenure as an assistant insurance salesman.

5. What technique does Wright use to tell about Grandpa's younger days?

He uses a flashback to times before, during, and shortly after the Civil War.

6. How does Richard finally obtain permission to work? How does his mother now feel about her son?

After Grandpa's death, Richard's clothes become so shabby that he is ashamed. He has also reached the age where boys begin wearing long pants and he does not want to be singled out. He confronts Granny and threatens to move out of the house if he is not allowed to work. It is not until he packs a suitcase that Granny relents. She threatens Richard's damnation, however. Richard's mother is proud of his defiance.

Chapter 6

Vocabulary

incredulously – with great disbelief

deferred – put off

invectives – curses, threats

melancholy – sad

anointed – chosen

tic – twitch, jerk

1. Why does Richard leave his first job as a houseboy?

After only one day of work, Richard's pride is hurt by the assumptions the white owner of the house makes about his intelligence. He realizes that she thinks of all black people as simple children. Furthermore, the meal she provides as part of Richard's wage consists merely of stale bread and rancid molasses. She further insults Richard by telling him that it was foolish for him to continue school and even more so for him to aspire to become a writer.

2. What aspects of Richard's second position as a houseboy cause him stress? What are the benefits of the job?

Richard is shocked by the offhanded curses hurled at the breakfast table by the second family he serves. He tries unsuccessfully to sidestep the verbal abuse directed at both himself and the members of the family. The emotional trauma of serving this family cause Richard's grades to slip in school. For Richard, however, the benefits of this position are undeniable: he gets a hearty breakfast and makes enough money to be able to afford sandwiches at the lunch counter. He also has enough money to buy himself new clothes at the rate of fifty cents down and fifty cents per week, which he realizes cheats him, but about which he can do nothing.

3. Why does Richard get baptized in the Methodist church?

Richard enjoys people-watching and the fellowship of his classmates while attending the Methodist Church against Granny's wishes. At the revival, the preacher singles out the unsaved attendees and through thinly-veiled coercion, gets the boys to agree to baptism. Richard is disgusted by the entire process, but succumbs to the social pressures of claiming allegiance to the group. Throughout the experience, Richard maintains a staunch lack of religious conviction.

4. Why does Uncle Tom wish to beat Richard with a switch? How does Richard react?

Uncle Tom accuses Richard of being a sassy “black imp” because of his response to Uncle Tom’s inquiry about the time. (Pg. 157) Richard does not understand how his response is inappropriate and openly challenges Uncle Tom’s right to punish him. This infuriates Uncle Tom, who predicts that Richard will “end on the gallows.” (Pg. 159) Richard defends himself with razor blades, threatening to cut Uncle Tom if the man whips him. Uncle Tom relents, and Richard tells him that he sees Uncle Tom as a “warning” rather than as an example for living. (Pg. 160)

Chapter 7

Vocabulary

florid – reddish

aspirations – hopes

conceivable – believable

articulate – well-spoken

1. What internal conflicts are revealed in Richard’s emotions during the summer?

Richard still struggles with an ingrained sense of hunger. He is bothered by the paradox of living in a praying family that treats him as a stranger. He worries about his mother’s health and fantasizes about moving north. He is also concerned about the amount of money his friends spend on clothing and fears he will not be able to compete.

2. How do Richard’s friends and family react to the story that Richard gets published in a local black newspaper?

Richard’s friends accuse him of copying a story he had read earlier, and they cannot see why Richard would get a story printed if no one told him to do it. They suspect him of wrongdoing, which further alienates him from their group. Richard’s family is ashamed of what he has done: Granny states that fiction is the work of the devil; Aunt Addie blames his lack of upbringing; Uncle Tom criticizes the story as having no point; even Richard’s mother worries that he will be considered weak-minded for publishing fiction and may not be able to find a good job.

3. Use the quotation below to answer the following two questions:

Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air. (Pg. 169)

Wright describes a train speeding toward a collision to emphasize fifteen-year-old Richard's ambition of moving north to become a novelist. What might this quote foreshadow?

It shows his youthful naiveté, still unaware of the difficulties ahead of him, which are foreshadowed as a train wreck. In hindsight, Wright sees himself as naïve in his knowledge of the world and his place in it.

4. What literary term is used in this quotation?

It is a metaphor.

Chapter 8

Vocabulary

impetus – driving force

indulgently – leniently

1. What is the “white death”?

The “white death” occurs when a black person is murdered by whites. Richard comes face to face with the threat of death when a friend's brother is shot for alleged relations with a white prostitute. Richard realizes the danger of moving outside of what whites expect of his race.

2. What conflict arises when Richard is selected valedictorian of the ninth grade class?

The principal gives Richard his commencement speech, but Richard has already written one of his own. He refuses to read the principal's speech despite the offer of a possible teaching job for his compliance. Richard feels that it is his right to write his own speech and stubbornly maintains his position, despite pressure from the principal, teachers, fellow students, and his family.

3. What year is it when Richard completes his formal schooling? How old is he?

Richard completes ninth grade in 1925 at the age of seventeen.

4. Now that you have known him through this much of his life, what word or phrases do you think describe Richard?

Answers may vary.

Examples: strong willed, independent, sure of himself, confused, stubborn, proud, hopeful, naïve, troublemaker, rebellious, too smart for his own good, ect.

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

contemptuous – arrogant

cryptic – mysterious, hidden

1. What does Richard learn from the behavior of the clothing store owner where he works as a porter?

Richard sees the owner openly abuse black customers. He watches as the owner and his son drag a black woman to the back of the store. She emerges beaten and is immediately arrested by a white policemen for public drunkenness. Richard is called into the bloodstained storeroom and is offered a cigarette. He learns that he must keep quiet or risk the same treatment. Overall, Richard sees firsthand a contempt for black people.

2. Why is Richard pelted with a whiskey bottle?

Richard fails to say “sir” when asked if he wants a drink by a group of white men who have given him a ride after his bicycle tire is punctured. He is knocked off the moving vehicle and left bloodied, but largely unharmed, on the road. The white men tell Richard he is lucky to be alive.

3. Why is Richard stopped by the police?

Richard is making a nighttime delivery in a white neighborhood. He is stopped, searched, and fears for his life.

4. What advice does Griggs give Richard?

Griggs advises Richard to remember that he is black and that he is expected to defer to whites. Griggs observes that Richard does not appear to notice white people and that this in itself is causing Richard's employment problems. Griggs advises Richard to take his time and to show patience, especially when dealing with white people, or he will end up dead.

5. Why do Pease and Reynolds terrorize Richard?

Pease and Reynolds resent that Mr. Crane wishes to teach a black man the optician's trade. They do not see Richard as able to do the same job they do, so they terrorize him into leaving the factory. If Richard learns their trade, they will be on equal footing, and the two white men cannot accept this possibility.

6. What literary term is used in the last sentence of the chapter?

It is a simile.

Chapter 10

Vocabulary

implacable – unchangeable

transgressions – sins

apprehensive – worried, filled with dread

bestowed – given

nuance – subtlety

haughty – arrogant

unerringly – without mistakes, correctly

amass – collect, gather

aspire – hope

pliable – bendable, flexible

1. How does Richard's job as a hotel hallboy further his disillusionment with the other black workers?

Richard simply cannot make himself subservient to other people, whether white or black. He feels that his co-workers have somehow been conditioned to thrive in subservience and he cannot understand their automatic acceptance of the way things are.

2. Describe Richard's internal conflict with stealing.

Richard's impatience to move north, along with knowledge of widespread pilfering by his friends and coworkers, fuel his conflict over stealing. Richard does not feel a moral dilemma regarding thievery, but sees the action as futile; it will not change his situation. Richard also feels that stealing is expected behavior by whites and that the whites are threatened by a black man with self-esteem.

3. What crimes does Richard commit to earn money more quickly for his escape to the North?

Richard begins by selling bootlegged whiskey to white prostitutes at the hotel. He then takes a job at a movie house and participates in a ticket-selling scam. Out of fear of being caught and to hasten his departure, Richard steals and pawns a gun from a neighbor's house and later leads a break-in at the college to steal canned fruit.

4. What does the term "Jim Crow" mean? (You may refer to the dictionary or look it up on the Internet.)

Answers may vary.

Example: The term means a practice of discriminating against African-Americans through laws or behavior.

Chapter 11

Vocabulary

reputedly – supposedly, reportedly

fathom – determine, figure out

disreputable – shameful

flabbergasted – astonished, surprised

wincing – flinched

aggrandizement – glorification

1. At the boarding house in Memphis, what does Mrs. Moss propose? How does Richard react?

After only hours of knowing Richard, Mrs. Moss proposes that he marry her daughter Bess. Richard is flabbergasted by their absolute trust in him, a total stranger. Richard feels his isolation from other blacks as he was growing up makes this proposal ludicrous.

2. What amazes Richard about Bess?

Bess easily shares her feelings and intentions for Richard. He is amazed by her simplicity and her childishness, but Richard realizes that he has never experienced such openness. When Bess offers herself sexually to him, however, he refuses; he can see that he has nothing in common with her.

3. How is Richard duped by the black boy he meets on the banks of the Mississippi River?

Excited by the prospect of a new job and flabbergasted by the behavior of Mrs. Moss and her daughter, Richard is easy prey for a scam. The friendly boy gets Richard to help him sell a cache of liquor to a white man. Richard waits as the boy runs to a nearby store to get change so that they can split their earnings. Of course, the boy does not return, and Richard is amazed by his own naivete.

Chapter 12

Vocabulary

aimlessly – without purpose

tantamount – equal to

theosophists – people who enjoy religious arguments

elusive – unable to be found or caught

objectivity – impartiality

profound – deep meaning

latent – buried, beneath the surface

recondite – deep meaning, profound

hence – from this time forward

chasm – division, separation

capitulate – give up, surrender

provocation – goading

egging – urging on

1. Why does Mrs. Moss pledge that she and Bess will no longer pursue Richard?

Richard states that he should move out of the boarding house because of the pressure he feels concerning Mrs. Moss' matchmaking. She does not understand his reasons for turning Bess down and feels that a marriage is quite sensible when coupled with the offer of the house. Richard, however, has high motivations and a strong desire to leave for the North.

2. Why does Wright say about Shorty, the elevator operator, “psychologically, he was the most amazing specimen of southern Negro I had ever met”? (Pg. 229)

Although Shorty uses good sense, reads a lot, and is proud of his race, he habitually debases himself in the presence of whites. For a quarter, he allows himself to be kicked in the rear end. When Richard questions his sense of self-worth, Shorty states, “My ass is tough and quarters is scarce.” (Pg. 229)

3. What subjects are considered taboo for southern white men to discuss with blacks? Which ones are allowed?

Wright provides the following list of taboo topics:

“American white women; the Ku Klux Klan; France, and how Negro soldiers fared while there; French-women; Jack Johnson; the entire northern part of the United States; the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; U. S. Grant; General Sherman; Catholics; the Pope; Jews; the Republican party; slavery; social equality; Communism; Socialism; the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitutions; or any topic calling for the positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro.” (Pg. 231)

Sex and religion are the two topics that are discussed frequently between the races.

4. Explain how Richard is duped into fighting in a boxing match.

Richard’s boss begins by informing him that Harrison, a black young man who works in a rival optical factory, is waiting to attack Richard with a knife. Richard cannot think of any wrongdoing involving Harrison and cautiously approaches him. Both men perceive that the white bosses are simply trying to start a fight, so they can gamble and are aware that they are regarded in the same manner as fighting cocks or dogs. They are wary of each other, however, and after a couple of weeks of avoiding fighting, agree to a boxing match. Richard and Harrison conspire to fake the fight, but they realize too late that they know too little about boxing to fake it. The fight becomes violent and bloody. Richard leaves the fight ashamed of being duped and resentful of the five dollars he has earned for fighting.

Chapter 13

Vocabulary

castigate –rebuke, criticize

genial – happy, friendly

imponderable – unthinkable

repugnant – distasteful

1. What new hunger does Richard develop and why is it dangerous?

Richard becomes a passionate reader and even says, “Reading was like a drug or dope creat[ing] moods in which I lived for days.”. (Pg. 250) Richard’s reading is dangerous because the racial tension he had controlled returns, and he feels entrapped by his situation. Richard’s new knowledge from books makes it much more difficult for him to play his expected social role.

2. Besides moving north when he has saved enough money, what are Richard’s options and why does he reject them?

Richard sees his future in the South as bleak. The options he considers are:

- *fight the southern whites–He rejects this choice because he feels he would be lynched.*
- *live as a genial slave–He rejects this notion because his sense of self-respect is too strong.*
- *fight other blacks for money–He rejects this idea because he feels it is heartless.*
- *engage in sex and alcohol–He rejects this notion because of the devastation his father caused by choosing this path.*

Chapter 14

1. What is the catalyst for Richard’s move to Chicago?

Aunt Maggie returns to Memphis looking for work, and the family decides that if they wait until they have saved enough money to go, they will never meet their goal. It is decided that Maggie and Richard will go to Chicago and prepare the way for Richard’s mother and brother.

2. How does Richard’s boss react to the news that Richard is leaving? How does Mr. Falk react?

Richard’s boss attempts to persuade Richard to stay by telling stories of inclement weather and reminding Richard that he is treated quite well in his job. He even suggests Richard stay behind and send money to his mother. Mr. Falk calls Richard “lucky” for having engineered an escape from the South.

Chapter 15

Vocabulary

intermittently – occasionally, irregularly

translucently – unable to be seen through clearly

perplexing – confusing

paternalistic – like a father

superficial – on the surface, unimportant

travail – troubles, trials

reconcile – to accept

loathsome – repellent, horrid

rebuffed – pushed away

disconsolately – sadly

lucid – clear

libations – drinks

1. Describe Richard's first impressions of Chicago.

Richard is immediately intimidated by the sheer size of Chicago and the starkness of the cityscape. He is nervous about interacting with white people and is surprised to find himself, for the most part, ignored by passersby. He is disappointed to find that Aunt Cleo merely rents a room rather than an apartment and notices the beaten expression on her face. He is cold and feels very much the alien in this new environment.

2. Richard describes Negro life as a “sprawling land of unconscious suffering.” Explain why he feels the American Dream is a futile pursuit.

The devastation of racial prejudice keeps the American dream out of Richard's grasp. He feels the silent prejudice of the North as keenly as the open prejudices of the South, and he states that his own oppression of character leads him to hate both whites and himself. He dreams of fighting racial prejudice, but realizes that he will have to fight other Negroes to organize any semblance of a movement. Richard's hopes and dreams are dashed by widespread prejudice that he feels many fellow blacks fail or refuse to recognize.

3. Why does Richard lie to the Hoffmans about missing work at the delicatessen?

Richard fears that he will be fired if Mr. Hoffman knows that he misses work to take a postal test. In Richard's experience, Negroes would not be given time off to pursue another job. Mr. Hoffman recognizes Richard's lies, and Richard is ashamed at lying, from fear and misjudging the Hoffmans; consequently, he quits his job at the deli the following weekend.

4. Wright begins to use a series of parenthetical remarks, a digression from the story in this section. Why do you think he does so? To what could you compare this technique?

Answers may vary.

Example: Wright is commenting from a time ahead of the incidents he describes, with the advantage of hindsight and maturity. Most likely, he was not able to express his opinions concretely at the time of the actions, and he wanted to express them when he wrote the book. They can be compared to the fragmentary descriptions of comments in the beginning of chapter 3.

5. How does Richard compare himself to the waitresses who work at the restaurant?

Richard sees little similarity in his life as a black man to the lives of the white immigrant waitresses with whom he works. He neither holds them in esteem or hatred, but is aware of the shallowness of their daily lives. The American Dream is as much a fantasy for them as it is for him.

6. Explain Richard's view of the American Negro as a cultural paradox.

Although the Negro is an integral part of the nation, he is excluded by the directions of American culture. Richard states that until America recognizes the Negro as a part of its culture, the moral attitude of the nation will never evolve.

7. Richard compares the United States to an adolescent. In what ways does he see the country as being adolescent?

Richard states that America is "lusty" because it is afraid of change and insists on a dualistic view of the world: "good and bad, the holy and the evil, the high and the low, the white and the black...." Like a teenager, America damns what it does not understand. Richard characterizes the nation as "adolescent and cocksure." (Pg. 272)

8. Why does Richard not tell the boss about Tillie's spitting in the food?

He fears that he will not be believed because he is black, and he also fears he will be fired. Richard enlists the black salad girl to watch Tillie as well and, after several days, she musters the courage to approach the boss about Tillie's behavior.

9. What is ironic about a memory Richard has?

Richard recalls being fired once in the South for no reason except prejudice. He states, with sarcasm and irony, "And I wondered if a Negro who did not smile and grin was as morally loathsome to whites as a cook who spat into the food...." (Pg. 277)

10. Why does Richard have trouble maintaining close relationships with people?

Even among his family and colleagues, Richard feels both alienated and liberated by reading. None of the people he associates with see the good of reading, and Richard holds back emotionally from them. Although he does not feel that he debases them, his family and colleagues feel he fiercely rejects them as a result of his aloofness.

11. Why is Richard disqualified from a permanent position as a postal clerk?

He does not meet the minimum weight requirement of 125 pounds.

12. List some things Richard reads.

- *The American Mercury magazine*
- *A Remembrance of Things Past*
- *Three Lives*
- *The Red Badge of Courage*
- *The Possessed*

Chapter 16

Vocabulary

congregated – gathered

remuneration – payment

dialectic – argumentative

refute – argue against

annihilate – completely destroy

inveighing – proclaiming

illicit – illegal

1. Whom does Wright meet while working sorting mail?

He meets an “Irish chap,” who introduces him to a group of “cynical” friends who “ridicule” most of what they see around them. (Pg. 285) He also encounters a group of black “Bohemian” men and women intent on sex who “were afraid to live.” (Pg. 286) He also meets the Garveyites, named after Marcus Garvey, a black separatist.

2. Who are the Garveyites? How does Richard feel about the beliefs they espouse?

The Garveyites are a group of blacks who wish to return to Africa and eventually establish their own country. Richard admires their tenacity, but realizes that they can never achieve their objective because Africa is a product of Imperialistic Europe, and their own culture differs significantly from their African counterparts.

3. How does the stock market crash of 1929 affect Richard?

Richard loses his position at the post office because of a marked decrease in the volume of mail. He then hears about the Communist movement and realizes that his livelihood is dependent on the economy.

4. Why does Richard persist in his job as an insurance premium collector even though he knows the company cheats people?

Times are tough and Richard needs the money in order to survive. He sees the suffering and ignorance of the poor blacks of Chicago in his job but can do nothing to rectify the problem. Richard also gets sexually involved with a number of female policyholders, who are willing to exchange sexual favors for premiums.

5. How does Richard view the Negro Communists of Chicago?

Richard sees the Negroes embracing Communism as engaging in a form of mimicry. He sees them copying the clothing styles and mannerisms of Lenin and Stalin and spouting rhetoric of which they have no true knowledge. Instead of being liberating, Richard views this brand of Communism as a lower level of ignorance rather than a proponent of new ideas.

6. Why does Richard write "I Protest This Fraud" on his ballots at the election?

Richard wants the political machine to realize that at least one member of the "Black Belt" sees the corruption of the city government. He knows his gesture is futile, but he feels compelled to do it.

7. What must Richard do at the end of Chapter 16 that he finds necessary, but beneath his dignity?

Out of work and out of food, Richard must resort to standing in a bread line in order to feed himself and his mother.

Chapter 17

Vocabulary

stanch – constant

ferret – hunt, seek

insurgent – rebel

irredeemably – not able to be

intricate – complex, tangled

coagulated – thickened

meager – small amount

taciturn – quiet, reserved

incumbent – one in office

waxed – grew

conscientious – cautious, careful

adherent – believer, follower

fervor – ardor, zeal

1. Whom does Richard identify as the most dangerous members of society?

Richard identifies people who do not dream of the prizes the nation holds forth as those most likely to revolt.

2. Explain Wright's belief that "treason is a crime of the state" rather than of the individual. (Pg. 302)

Richard's knowledge of the country's responses to the plight of the American Negro makes him believe that treason is the desperate act of a person unable to share the spirit of his or her land. Wright finds the burden of responsibility for this act lies not with individuals, but with the land that has estranged them.

3. Explain how the "devocalization" of the dogs is symbolic to Wright.

Answers may vary.

The dogs without vocal chords make motions of barking, but they can make no sounds. This futility seems to remind Wright of his own predicament in which no one can hear (or understand) his feelings.

4. At the medical research institute, how does Brand trick Richard?

Obviously curious about the procedures the doctor was performing on dogs, Richard smells Nembutal, a sedative, when the doctor leaves the room. Brand rushes to Richard and runs him out of the lab seeking help. This ruse is a subtle reminder to Richard that he is overstepping his bounds at the research hospital and that too many questions will jeopardize his position.

5. What secret catastrophe is Richard involved in at the lab?

When the two elderly orderlies get into an idiotic fight over the weather, they overturn the cages holding the tested animals, and the animals are temporarily freed. Richard and the others struggle to place the animals in the appropriate cages, but the animals are hopelessly mixed up. The doctors at the institute never realize that a mix-up has occurred and go on with their study as if nothing has happened.

Chapter 18

1. What are Richard's first impressions of the Chicago John Reed Club?

Richard is skeptical about how civilly he is treated by the white members of the club and about the bright futures of the members he meets. The club publishes a magazine that is sympathetic toward the Communist movement.

2. As Richard becomes more involved with the Chicago John Reed Club, he becomes a published writer. What is his goal as a writer at this point?

Richard sees the chasm between the ideals of Communism and the reaction of the common people the movement is seeking to serve. Richard attempts to reconcile the two so that they can understand one another.

3. Explain the circumstances of Richard's decision to join the Communist Party.

Artists and writers become rival members of the John Reed Club. Richard is elected club secretary even though he has less than two month's experience as a club member and is not familiar with the tenets of the organization. He attempts to resign but is pressured into the position. Communist members of the club secretly meet to form a block vote that will favor Communist policy in the club. The club magazine is in danger, and Richard is given an ultimatum to either join the Communist Party or resign his leadership position in the John Reed Club. Because of his desire to be published, he consents to join the Communist Party.

4. Comrade Young causes upheaval in the Chicago John Reed Club by viciously accusing the artist Swann of a number of infractions against the Communist Party. What is ironic about this situation?

Comrade Young has actually escaped from a mental institution, and his charges, although taken quite seriously, are ludicrous.

Chapters 19 and 20

Vocabulary

rebuffs – rejections, snubs

obligatory – mandatory

patronizing – scornful, disdainful

discreet – cautious

bourgeois – middle-class

pending – upcoming

diverse – varied, mixed

incipient – latent, unborn, becoming

seraphim – angels

quixotic – imaginary, visionary

baseless – without foundation

tabulate – calculate, figure out

ideological – according to theory

imperative – mandatory, required

inconspicuously – barely noticeable

bane – evil, curse

kinship – close relationship

chary – careful

nullify – make worthless

mirthless – joyless

fagots – small pieces of wood

coercion – force

incipient – latent, unborn, becoming

baseless – without foundation

furtive – sneaky

allusions – references

tabulate – calculate, figure out

ideological – according to theory

entrenched – dug in

irrefutably – undeniably

erstwhile – former, previous

proletarian – communist

contingent – group

smarting – hurting

1. Why do the unit members laugh at Richard at his first Communist unit meeting?

The black members of the unit think Richard is an "intellectual." (Pg. 331) They laugh at his manner of speech and do not take his report seriously. Instead, they comment upon his shiny shoes, clean shirt, and tie. They view him as "bourgeois" and, thus, not one of them. (Pg. 331)

2. Why is Richard warned about his chosen reading material?

Richard is told that he should only read books that are approved by the Communist Party. Other choices would be dangerous. Richard questions the warning and sees a chasm spreading between him and the group with whom he has chosen to associate.

3. Why does the black Communist who visits Richard demand that Richard prove his loyalty to the Party?

The party is suspicious of Richard's interviews. The man argues that Richard does not show sufficient distaste for Trotsky, and that Wright's biographical sketches would unduly affect the Party. Richard is covertly threatened to stop the interviews and is clearly seen as a threat to the Communist Party.

4. What happens to Ed Green?

Green dies in the Spanish Civil war.

5. What makes Richard feel even more emotionally isolated than he did in his years in the South?

After being questioned by Ed Green, a member of the Central Committee, Richard's aims are more suspect than ever. His Party acquaintances ostracize him, and he is even suspected to be in league with the police force. No one understands his motives for wanting to write biographical sketches of black Communists.

6. What is the central question of Wright's short stories "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," and "Long Black Song"?

The question Wright is trying to answer in these stories is: what quality of will must a Negro possess to live and die with dignity in a country that denies his or her humanity?

7. Why is *Left Front*, the magazine for which Richard writes, voted out of existence?

At a Midwest Communist conference, the task of writers was debated. The party identified the task of writers as political rather than creative, so the magazine was ousted because it was counter to Communist policy.

8. In what city does Wright have another defining moment, this time at the YMCA?

It occurs in New York City.

9. Why does the Communist Party dissolve the John Reed Club system?

At a caucus, the Party decides that the John Reed Clubs do not follow the newly accepted People's Front policy. Furthermore, John Reed Club members are ineligible for membership in the new People's Front clubs. Basically, the Communist Party is reorganizing with entirely new people.

10. What problem does Richard face at the writers' congress?

As a delegate, Richard expects hotel accommodations. When the other delegates discover he is black, there is nowhere to house him. Richard is forced to find his own lodging and is once again disheartened by the blatant racial prejudice he experiences.

11. How does Buddy Neelson test Richard's loyalty to the Communist Party?

Neelson patronizes Richard as he talks about his goals as a writer and then assigns him the mundane task of organizing a coalition that traces cost of living expenses for blacks.

12. What does Richard do at his final Communist Party meeting?

Richard proposes, "that my membership be dropped from the Party rolls... I simply do not wish to be bound any longer by the Party's decisions." (Pg. 360)

13. Why does Richard have problems at the Federal Negro Theatre?

He wants the company to perform what he deems worthwhile productions, but the actors are more interested in blackface comedy. He is threatened at knifepoint by the actors and immediately requests a transfer.

14. What irony has Wright learned about racial hatred?

*He claims:
Racial hate had been the bane of my life, and here before my eyes was concrete proof that it could be abolished. Yet a new hate had come to take the place of the rankling racial hate. It was irrational that Communists should hate what they called "intellectuals," or anybody who tied to think for himself. I had fled men who did not like the color of my skin, and now I was among men who did not like the tone of my thoughts. (Pg. 369)*

15. How is Richard treated by the Communists at the May Day March?

Richard is first told the wrong time to meet his group. When then invited to march with the Southside group, Richard accepts and is bodily thrown into the gutter.

16. How does Ross' trial affect Richard?

Through the trial, he sees the horror and the glory of Communism

Black Boy

Study Guide Student Copy

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

listlessly – tiredly, without energy

chastened – humbled

nostalgia – fond memories

tantalizing – tempting

tenement – cheap apartment

horde – large number

gaunt – extremely thin

insistent – firm

clamor – harsh noise

bewilderment – confusion

ramshackle – broken down

enthralled – thrilled

doggerel – poorly written verse

replete – filled

jauntily – buoyantly, self-confidently

vivid – sharp impression

gnarled – twisted, deformed

withering – wasting away

1. What causes Richard's house to catch on fire?

2. Why does Richard hide under the house?

3. How does Richard's illness serve to chasten him from further misbehavior?

4. What emotions or concepts does Wright list in a repetitive style?
5. What purpose does this series of “snapshots” of emotion serve?
6. Where does the family first move? What mode of transportation takes them to their new home?
7. Describe Richard’s father and Richard’s relationship with him.
8. Why does Richard kill the kitten?
9. How does the family fare when Richard’s father leaves?
10. What conflicts does Richard face when he becomes responsible for shopping for food for the family?
11. Why does Richard resent watching the white family his mother cooks for eat?
12. Describe Richard’s experiences in the saloon when he is six years old.

13. Describe Richard's first day of school.
14. Why does Richard dislike his preacher?
15. Why must Richard live at an orphanage?
16. Find an instance of alliterative language on page 29.
17. After running away from the orphanage, Richard's mother presents him with a choice. What are Richard's options, and what does he do?
18. Wright interrupts the narrator of his youth to interject an incident twenty-five years later. What happens? What revelation does he have? What revelation does he have?

Chapter 2

Vocabulary

dingy – gray, dull

intangible – unable to be touched

premeditatedly – deliberately

forbade – prohibited

distraught – emotionally upset

upheaval – turmoil

taunting – teasing

dissuaded – persuaded against

flourishing – growing

invocation – spoken prayers

ditties – songs

antagonism – dislike

emulate – imitate

spontaneous – on the spur of the moment

bulwark – fortification

diminished – lessened

1. In a narrative intrusion similar to an aside, what fallacy in the view of Black Americans does Wright reveal?
2. Where does the family move?
3. What does Ella, the boarder at Granny's house, introduce to Richard?
4. Find a metaphor in this chapter.

5. Describe the incident that leads to Ella's moving away from Granny's house.
6. What is the overall impression of the sensory images Wright uses in Chapter 2?
7. On the train to Elaine, Arkansas, Richard questions his mother about race. Why does this anger his mother?
8. Why does Richard steal biscuits from Aunt Maggie's table?
9. What makes Richard lose his trust in Uncle Hoskins?
10. Why does Richard's family flee their home in Elaine?
11. What does Richard mistake for a herd of elephants?
12. Why do Richard's mother and Aunt Maggie decide to return to West Helena?

13. How do Richard and the other children treat the Jewish shop owner?
14. Why does Aunt Maggie suddenly leave the family?
15. Why does Richard attempt to sell Betsy, his poodle? Why does he change his mind?
16. While Wright is concerned only for his life and hunger, what events are occurring in the world?

Chapter 3

1. Describe the young adolescent “fraternity” to which Richard belongs. What is ironic about this group?
2. How would you characterize the comments Wright makes about the conversation he and his friends have at the beginning of this chapter?
3. What precipitates the family’s return to Jackson?
4. What insight about school life does Richard exhibit on his first day of school after Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody take him in?
5. Why does Richard leave Uncle Clark’s home?
6. What are the circumstances of Wright’s mother’s second operation?
7. Richard views his mother’s years of suffering as a symbol of what aspects of his life?

Chapter 4

Vocabulary

touchstone – criteria

feigned – pretended

profusely – a great deal

ardently – strongly

morose – sad, gloomy

atone – make amends for

comprising – making up, composed of

squalor – filth, dirt

sauntered – strutted

elicited – brought about

incur – be subject to

futile – useless

predilection – tendency

gainsay – speak against

1. What internal conflict does Richard face when Aunt Addie accuses him of eating in class?
2. Why does Richard refuse to be beaten by Aunt Addie a second time?
3. Richard describes life at Granny's house as being part of a "religious regime." (Pg. 111)
How does this "regime" affect Richard's belief in God?
4. What does Richard tell Granny to ease the pressure of her campaign to save his soul? How is the situation ironic?

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

broached – brought up

injunction – law

acutely – strongly, pointedly

obscure – unclear

girded – covered, circled

doctrine – belief

blasphemous – anti-religious

extolling – praising highly

impending – upcoming, looming

substantiated – proven with evidence

mustered out – thrown out, dismissed

1. Why does Wright say, “suddenly the future loomed tangibly for me”?
2. Why does Richard willfully avoid eating?
3. Explain how Richard unwittingly becomes an agent for pro-Ku Klux Klan literature?
4. Describe Richard’s observations as Brother Mance’s assistant.
5. What technique does Wright use to tell about Grandpa’s younger days?
6. How does Richard finally obtain permission to work? How does his mother now feel about her son?

Chapter 6

Vocabulary

incredulously – with great disbelief

deferred – put off

invectives – curses, threats

melancholy – sad

anointed – chosen

tic – twitch, jerk

1. Why does Richard leave his first job as a houseboy?
2. What aspects of Richard's second position as a houseboy cause him stress? What are the benefits of the job?
3. Why does Richard get baptized in the Methodist church?
4. Why does Uncle Tom wish to beat Richard with a switch? How does Richard react?

Chapter 7

Vocabulary

florid – reddish

aspirations – hopes

conceivable – believable

articulate – well-spoken

1. What internal conflicts are revealed in Richard's emotions during the summer?
2. How do Richard's friends and family react to the story that Richard gets published in a local black newspaper?
3. Use the quotation below to answer the following two questions:
Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my hear was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air. (Pg. 169)

Wright describes a train speeding toward a collision to emphasize fifteen-year-old Richard's ambition of moving north to become a novelist. What might this quote foreshadow?
4. What literary term is used in this quotation?

Chapter 8

Vocabulary

impetus – driving force

indulgently – leniently

1. What is the “white death”?
2. What conflict arises when Richard is selected valedictorian of the ninth grade class?
3. What year is it when Richard completes his formal schooling? How old is he?
4. Now that you have known him through this much of his life, what word or phrases do you think describe Richard?

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

contemptuous – arrogant

cryptic – mysterious, hidden

1. What does Richard learn from the behavior of the clothing store owner where he works as a porter?
2. Why is Richard pelted with a whiskey bottle?
3. Why is Richard stopped by the police?
4. What advice does Griggs give Richard?
5. Why do Pease and Reynolds terrorize Richard?
6. What literary term is used in the last sentence of the chapter?

Chapter 10

Vocabulary

implacable – unchangeable

transgressions – sins

apprehensive – worried, filled with dread

bestowed – given

nuance – subtlety

haughty – arrogant

unerringly – without mistakes, correctly

amass – collect, gather

aspire – hope

pliable – bendable, flexible

1. How does Richard's job as a hotel hallboy further his disillusionment with the other black workers?
2. Describe Richard's internal conflict with stealing.
3. What crimes does Richard commit to earn money more quickly for his escape to the North?
4. What does the term "Jim Crow" mean? (You may refer to the dictionary or look it up on the Internet.)

Chapter 11

Vocabulary

reputedly – supposedly, reportedly

fathom – determine, figure out

disreputable – shameful

flabbergasted – astonished, surprised

wincing – flinched

aggrandizement – glorification

1. At the boarding house in Memphis, what does Mrs. Moss propose? How does Richard react?
2. What amazes Richard about Bess?
3. How is Richard duped by the black boy he meets on the banks of the Mississippi River?

Chapter 12

Vocabulary

aimlessly – without purpose

theosophists – people who enjoy religious arguments

objectivity – impartiality

latent – buried, beneath the surface

hence – from this time forward

capitulate – give up, surrender

tantamount – equal to

elusive – unable to be found or caught

profound – deep meaning

recondite – deep meaning, profound

chasm – division, separation

provocation – goading

egging – urging on

1. Why does Mrs. Moss pledge that she and Bess will no longer pursue Richard?
2. Why does Wright say about Shorty, the elevator operator, “psychologically, he was the most amazing specimen of southern Negro I had ever met”? (Pg. 229)
3. What subjects are considered taboo for southern white men to discuss with blacks? Which ones are allowed?
4. Explain how Richard is duped into fighting in a boxing match.

Chapter 13

Vocabulary

castigate –rebuke, criticize

genial – happy, friendly

imponderable – unthinkable

repugnant – distasteful

1. What new hunger does Richard develop and why is it dangerous?
2. Besides moving north when he has saved enough money, what are Richard's options and why does he reject them?

Chapter 14

1. What is the catalyst for Richard's move to Chicago?
2. How does Richard's boss react to the news that Richard is leaving? How does Mr. Falk react?

Chapter 15

Vocabulary

intermittently – occasionally, irregularly

translucently – unable to be seen through clearly

perplexing – confusing

paternalistic – like a father

superficial – on the surface, unimportant

travail – troubles, trials

reconcile – to accept

loathsome – repellent, horrid

rebuffed – pushed away

disconsolately – sadly

lucid – clear

libations – drinks

1. Describe Richard's first impressions of Chicago.
2. Richard describes Negro life as a "sprawling land of unconscious suffering." Explain why he feels the American Dream is a futile pursuit.
3. Why does Richard lie to the Hoffmans about missing work at the delicatessen?
4. Wright begins to use a series of parenthetical remarks, a digression from the story in this section. Why do you think he does so? To what could you compare this technique?
5. How does Richard compare himself to the waitresses who work at the restaurant?

6. Explain Richard's view of the American Negro as a cultural paradox.
7. Richard compares the United States to an adolescent. In what ways does he see the country as being adolescent?
8. Why does Richard not tell the boss about Tillie's spitting in the food?
9. What is ironic about a memory Richard has?
10. Why does Richard have trouble maintaining close relationships with people?
11. Why is Richard disqualified from a permanent position as a postal clerk?
12. List some things Richard reads.

Chapter 16

Vocabulary

congregated – gathered

remuneration – payment

dialectic – argumentative

refute – argue against

annihilate – completely destroy

inveighing – proclaiming

illicit – illegal

1. Whom does Wright meet while working sorting mail?
2. Who are the Garveyites? How does Richard feel about the beliefs they espouse?
3. How does the stock market crash of 1929 affect Richard?
4. Why does Richard persist in his job as an insurance premium collector even though he knows the company cheats people?
5. How does Richard view the Negro Communists of Chicago?
6. Why does Richard write “I Protest This Fraud” on his ballots at the election?
7. What must Richard do at the end of Chapter 16 that he finds necessary, but beneath his dignity?

Chapter 17

Vocabulary

stanch – constant

ferret – hunt, seek

insurgent – rebel

irredeemably – not able to be

intricate – complex, tangled

coagulated – thickened

meager – small amount

taciturn – quiet, reserved

incumbent – one in office

waxed – grew

conscientious – cautious, careful

adherent – believer, follower

fervor – ardor, zeal

1. Whom does Richard identify as the most dangerous members of society?
2. Explain Wright's belief that "treason is a crime of the state" rather than of the individual. (Pg. 302)
3. Explain how the "devocalization" of the dogs is symbolic to Wright.
4. At the medical research institute, how does Brand trick Richard?
5. What secret catastrophe is Richard involved in at the lab?

Chapter 18

1. What are Richard's first impressions of the Chicago John Reed Club?
2. As Richard becomes more involved with the Chicago John Reed Club, he becomes a published writer. What is his goal as a writer at this point?
3. Explain the circumstances of Richard's decision to join the Communist Party.
4. Comrade Young causes upheaval in the Chicago John Reed Club by viciously accusing the artist Swann of a number of infractions against the Communist Party. What is ironic about this situation?

Chapters 19 and 20

Vocabulary

rebuffs – rejections, snubs

obligatory – mandatory

patronizing – scornful, disdainful

discreet – cautious

bourgeois – middle-class

pending – upcoming

diverse – varied, mixed

incipient – latent, unborn, becoming

seraphim – angels

quixotic – imaginary, visionary

baseless – without foundation

tabulate – calculate, figure out

ideological – according to theory

imperative – mandatory, required

inconspicuously – barely noticeable

bane – evil, curse

kinship – close relationship

chary – careful

nullify – make worthless

mirthless – joyless

fagots – small pieces of wood

coercion – force

incipient – latent, unborn, becoming

baseless – without foundation

furtive – sneaky

allusions – references

tabulate – calculate, figure out

ideological – according to theory

entrenched – dug in

irrefutably – undeniably

erstwhile – former, previous

proletarian – communist

contingent – group

smarting – hurting

1. Why do the unit members laugh at Richard at his first Communist unit meeting?

2. Why is Richard warned about his chosen reading material?
3. Why does the black Communist who visits Richard demand that Richard prove his loyalty to the Party?
4. What happens to Ed Green?
5. What makes Richard feel even more emotionally isolated than he did in his years in the South?
6. What is the central question of Wright's short stories "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," and "Long Black Song"?
7. Why is *Left Front*, the magazine for which Richard writes, voted out of existence?
8. In what city does Wright have another defining moment, this time at the YMCA?
9. Why does the Communist Party dissolve the John Reed Club system?
10. What problem does Richard face at the writers' congress?

11. How does Buddy Neelson test Richard's loyalty to the Communist Party?
12. What does Richard do at his final Communist Party meeting?
13. Why does Richard have problems at the Federal Negro Theatre?
14. What irony has Wright learned about racial hatred?
15. How is Richard treated by the Communists at the May Day March?
16. How does Ross' trial affect Richard?

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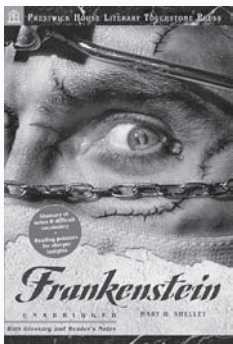
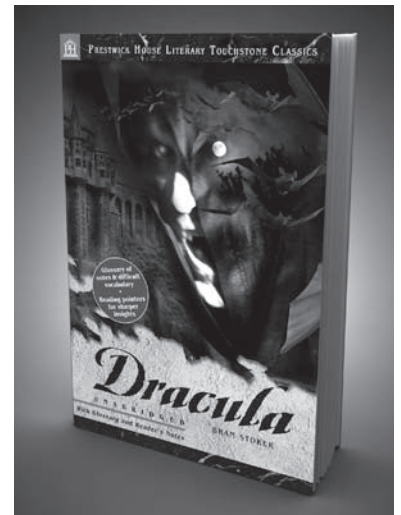
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Delivery Service

Most orders are shipped FedEx and you can expect delivery within 7-10 working days. Items in stock are usually shipped within one working day of receiving your order.

Expedited Delivery

for expedited delivery ask about the following options:

- Overnight Air
- 2nd day air
- 3 Day Select