

Wright's Climb Up the Racial Mountain

A 21st century Caucasian would have a difficult time fathoming the persecution that African Americans have faced throughout history. However, Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, makes this partially possible by providing insight into the life of a 20th century African American man. Through his direct and blatant writing, Wright depicts his own social and economic injustices in such a way that one could have a glimpse of what it truly was like to be a "black boy" at this time. Through the telling of his own life and the persecution he faces, Wright represents not just himself, but an entire nation of African Americans. In this way, *Black Boy* can be connected to the ideas presented in Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in that Richard rejects the "white is right" ideal and strives to express himself. In addition, the autobiography can be seen through The Paris Review interview with Ralph Ellison. This is due to the fact that Richard is forced to conform to certain social roles, and through his enlightenment and own efforts, he breaks free from these roles. Through these texts, the idea of "black consciousness" (how African Americans became aware of their skin color and the way it affected their lives) can be seen.

Langston Hughes addresses the importance of black self-expression in his article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". He explains how African Americans are taught by their society to hold whites to a higher standard than themselves, and as a

result, African Americans never realize or celebrate their true beauty. Hughes concludes, “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter.” Richard Wright in *Black Boy* strives to express himself in a constraining society just as Hughes explained, and he does so through his reading and writing. The very first time Wright hears a story from a book he feels an emotional and mental impact, “I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breathtaking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me... I had tasted what to me was life, and I would have more of it, somehow, someway” (Wright 40). Richard’s hunger for books continues to grow as he later uses another man’s library card to secretly obtain novels, and joins the Communist party so he would be able to write. Those around him, who don’t believe that writing is meant for him, discourage Richard from his interest in books. Wright’s grandmother condemns books as the work of the devil, and a white woman discards Richard’s dreams as well, “‘You’ll never be a writer,’ she said. ‘Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?’” (Wright 147). Richard however, is never discouraged by any of this criticism, and it is in this way that he complies with Hughes’ idea that others’ disapproval does not matter: “If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either.” Lastly, The autobiography ends with Wright’s intended plan to write until he is heard, “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight... to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (384). Not only does Wright accomplish his goal of being a writer,

he makes it his purpose to continue to write and express his ideas in the future. In the way Richard works to voice his ideas on a paper, and doesn't let others' opinions affect him, the ideals set forth in Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" can be seen.

Black consciousness can be seen in these events in that Richard becomes aware of what others think of his writing. The people around Richard make it especially clear that a Negro would not and could not be successful in life as a writer. Whites, such as the woman mentioned previously, discourage his creativity, and his own family even scolds him for wanting to read and write. In these ways, Richard becomes conscious of how his skin color can hold him back from doing the things he loves. However, through his rejection of society's "rules" and attempt to become a writer, Richard's drive and individualism are also demonstrated.

Not only can *Black Boy* be seen through the lens of "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", but also through the lens of The Paris Review's interview with Ralph Ellison. In this interview Ellison states:

...Each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing: 'Keep this nigger boy running.' Before he could have some voice in his own destiny, he had to discard these old identities and illusions; his enlightenment couldn't come until then.

Ellison is describing how his character in *Invisible Man*, and many oppressed African Americans for that matter, had certain roles in society that they were expected to

willingly play. Wright experiences this same difficulty in his own life. Ever since he was a young boy he was expected to act a certain way by his family, neighbors, and especially his grandmother. Wright's grandmother, being a fervent member of the church, continuously enforces her own religious morals and beliefs on Richard in hopes to save his soul, "Granny made it imperative, however, that I attend certain all-night ritualistic prayer meetings... she felt that if I were completely remiss in religious conformity it would cast doubt upon the stanchness of her faith..." (Wright 111). She also condemns him for reading books and forbids him to work on Saturdays. Richard's inability to conform to his grandmother's and his society's standards is also seen when young members of the church come to speak with him. Richard's grandma had sent the boys over in order to convince him to have faith, however, he openly admits he has none due to all the suffering that's in the world, "...I had had my doubts. My faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life... and nothing could ever shake this faith, and surely not my fear of an invisible power" (Wright 115). In not sharing the same religious beliefs as the rest of his community, Richard outcasts himself and does not live up to the social role that's expected of him.

In addition to forming his own identity, Richard became aware of the oppression in his society that was designed in order to "Keep this nigger boy running" (Ellison):

I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness... I was

beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong...”

(Wright 169).

It was this enlightenment that led Richard to have a “voice in his own destiny” (Ellison). This is especially seen when Richard is selected as valedictorian of his ninth grade class and has to prepare a speech for graduation. After he completes his speech, his principal informs him that he will instead recite an oration that the principal wrote, or read nothing at all (as there will be whites at the graduation, and the principal warns that a student-produced speech could be disastrous). The principal even goes on to threaten Richard’s future in teaching if he does not comply, however Richard realizes his superior’s motives, “He was tempting me, baiting me; this was the technique that snared black young minds into supporting the southern way of life. ‘Look, professor, I may never get a chance to go to school again,’ I said. ‘But I like to do things right’” (Wright 175). In rejecting the principal’s demands, and not conforming to his school’s desires, Richard becomes even more of an individual, just as Ellison described.

All of these events contribute to Richard Wright’s black consciousness. He realizes that because of his skin color, his schooling system won’t let him grow and succeed due to the disapproval from whites it would receive. He also knows that his dream to become a writer is frowned upon also because of his skin color, but still wants to attempt to achieve his goal. Although racial fear was very strong from his youth to adulthood, Richard becomes aware of ways to better himself. He tries to overcome his circumstances by educating himself secretly with books, and heading North to escape the Southern life that had held him back for so long.

Overall, *Black Boy* can be viewed through the lenses of “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” and The Paris Review’s interview with Ralph Ellison. All of these texts intertwine and touch upon the oppression African Americans faced, as well as support the idea of black consciousness. While the treatment of African Americans has drastically changed since Wright’s time, many issues involving racism and prejudice still plague the 21st century United States. Hopefully in the near future these problems can be completely overcome.

Works Cited

Chester, Alfred, and Vilma Howard. "Ralph Ellison, The Art of Fiction No. 8." *The*

Paris Review. The Paris Review, n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2015.

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation*. The Nation,

11 Mar. 2002. Web. 25 Feb. 2015.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: HarperCollins, 1944. Print.