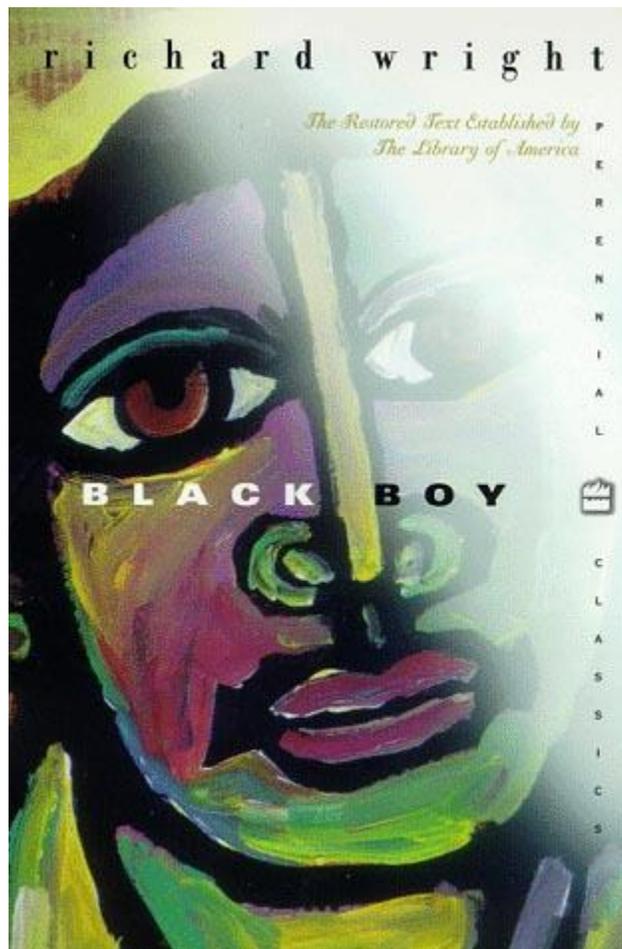


The American Place Theatre

Literature to Life

Teacher's Resource Guide

A companion guide to the *Literature to Life* production of:



Black Boy by Richard Wright

Pre-Show Activity: About the Author

Objectives:

- The students will learn about Richard Wright's life.
- The students will write interview questions based on Richard Wright's life.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

R.CCR.10: *Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.*

W.CCR.9: *Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.*

Introduction:

Review vocabulary: communism, share cropping

Exercise:

Provide each student with a copy of the biography of Richard Wright. Read the biography either individually or as a class. In small groups discuss the following: *What is Mr. Wright's theory that human behavior is determined by environment? Do you agree or disagree with his theory? What questions would you like to ask the author based on this biography? If you were to meet Richard Wright what other questions about his life or work would you like to ask him in an interview?*

EXTENSION: have a volunteer play Richard Wright and, with the help of the class, answer some of the questions generated from the group discussions.

RICHARD WRIGHT (author) was born on September 4, 1908 in Natchez, Mississippi. His father was a sharecropper; his mother a schoolteacher. At the outbreak of World War II when cotton prices plummeted, the family moved to the North in search of work in the industrial cities. The pressure of city living eventually became too difficult for the Wright family and Richard spent most of his childhood moving from one Southern town to another.

In 1938 Richard Wright's first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, was published. These stories depict a black man in revolt against his environment and reveal the depth of Wright's emotional ties to growing up in the South. Although this book is only the first of many works, it describes Wright's fascination with the theory that human behavior is determined by environment. In 1945 this theme was the subject of Wright's most celebrated novel *Black Boy*.

Written while Wright was a fervent Communist, *Black Boy* describes a society that is "pre-individualistic." In this type of society one group of people force another group of people to be anonymous due to racism and prejudice. In Wright's case, white Southerners separated groups of people according to race while black Southerners,

namely in his family, discouraged him from developing freely as an individual. The title, *Black Boy*, is significant because it is a non-specific name for a member of the African-American community and for a young child. At the time there was nothing unique or ambitious about a black boy's identity, explained Wright.

Richard Wright found pre-individualistic societies to be repressive and intolerable. *Black Boy* is both a chronicle of Wright's personal feeling of alienation as well as his attempt to "lend his tongue to other voiceless Negro boys." *Black Boy* is considered an American tragedy because it depicts both a personal struggle and cry of anguish for the entire human condition.

Other works by Mr. Wright include *Native Sun*, *The Outsider*, *Black Power*, *The Long Dream* and *Lawd Today*.

Pre-Show Activity: Civil Rights Movement Research

Objective: Students will gain an understanding of the cultural, political, and social context of the time period when novel *Black Boy* was written. Students will present research to the class.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

W.CCR.8: *Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.*

SL.CCR.4: *Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.*

Exercise:

Review the highlights on the Civil Rights Movement Timeline with your students. Have each student pick on event on the timeline to do further research on. Have students orally present their research to small groups and discuss similar themes of events.

1896 *Homer v. Plessy*: it was ruled that segregated railroad cars were not unconstitutional as long as they were "separate but equal" to the other cars. "The Fourteenth Amendment... could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color or commingling of the races."

1939 A Civil Rights Section is created in the Department of Justice to prosecute violations.

1940 Richard Wright's *Native Sun* is published.

1944 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York becomes the East's first black Congressman.

- 1945** Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is published.
- 1950** Gwendolyn Brooks is the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for her collection of poems, *Annie Allen*.
- 1952** NAACP brings cases against various school districts and universities to the Supreme Court to take issue with the policies of segregation under which they are run.
- 1954** The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* states that segregation in public schools violates the Fourteenth Amendment.
- 1955** December 1, 1955—Rosa Parks refuses to move to the back of a bus thereby violating the bus segregation ordinance in Montgomery, Alabama. A bus boycott organized by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. begins on Dec. 5th and lasts 381 days. 1960 Four black students sit at a “white only” lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. This sparks demonstrations and sit-ins throughout the South.
- 1963** Dr. Martin Luther King leads a march on Washington, DC.
- 1965** Civil Rights workers march from Selma to Montgomery.
- 1967** Thurgood Marshall is elected to the Supreme Court.
- 1974** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first volume of five in the autobiographical series by Maya Angelou, is published.
- 1988** Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize for Fiction for her novel *Beloved*.
- 1995** October 16th—the Million Man March is held in Washington, DC.

Pre-Show Activity: Judging a Book by its Cover

Objective: The students will discuss their expectations of *Black Boy* from looking at the words and images on the book's cover. Discuss the choices made by publishers and executives to put the images and words on the cover.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

SL.CCR.2: *Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.*

L.CCR.3: *Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.*

Warm-up:

Have the students brainstorm a list of the types of characters, situations, emotions, themes, locations, and images they think might be included in play called *Black Boy*. Write the list on newsprint. Post it before seeing the play.

Exercise:

Bring in a copy of Richard Wright's book *Black Boy*. Ask the students to look at the cover of the book and silently consider the following questions.

- Is there a picture or image on the cover? What function do those images have?
- What about the colors on the cover? What do the colors mean and why were they chosen?
- What words did the publishers choose to put on the cover?
- What font is used for the title of the book? What other words or phrases are on the cover?

Have students free write with the following prompt: *Do these images help sell this edition? Why or Why not? Do these words and phrases help sell this edition? Why or why not? Are you more likely to buy a book or magazine based on images or words? Are there images and words on the back cover? Why do you think Mr. Wright choose this title?*

Discuss thoughts as a class.

Post-show follow up: Ask the students to create a poster or book cover for *Black Boy*. They can cut images out of magazines and newspapers or draw them. What words will they include and why?

Post-Show Activity: Discussion and Essay Topics

Objective: Students will analyze themes from the novel/play *Black Boy* and support their ideas with evidence from the book, the *Literature to Life* presentation, and their own lives.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

R.CCR.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.CCR.3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

W.CCR.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

The following questions can be used as either discussion or essay topics:

- 1) Richard Wright said that one of the reasons he wrote *Black Boy* was to “lend his tongue to the voiceless Negro boys of the South.” Who do you consider to be voiceless in today’s society? Who is expressing for these people?
- 2) Richard Wright says, “I hunger for books, for new ways of looking and seeing.” What books have given you a new way to look and see? What other life experiences have expanded your thoughts about the world?

3) If Richard Wright was alive today, do you think he would be encouraged or discouraged about the change in our country? How is life in your community today different from the racial situation in the South in the early 1900's? How is it similar?

4) When Richard Wright first reads H.L. Mencken, he is astonished by the writing style. He says, "This man is fighting, fighting with words. He uses words as a weapon, uses them like a club. Can words be weapons?" Discuss words as weapons. Have you experienced the positive impact of words in your own life? Have you experienced the destructive power of words in your own life?

5) Ralph Ellison compares *Black Boy* to Blues Music. Ellison believes that the attraction of the blues is that "they express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit." Discuss. Write a Blues song based on Richard Wright's life or an event in your own life. Tell the same story in a Rap version.

6) How did seeing a live theatre performance contribute to your experience of *Black Boy*? How would it have differed if you had seen a movie version? Were there any additional scenes from the book, *Black Boy*, you would have liked included in the *Literature to Life* performance?

7) For what do you hunger?

Post-Show Activity: Status Role Play

Objective: Students gain an understanding of social status. Students relate the exercise to Richard Wright's experience of race and class as evidenced in his novel *Black Boy*.

Supplies: One deck of playing cards (or computer print outs of them) and safety pins or tape

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

SL.CCR.2: *Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.*

L.CCR.1: *Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.*

Exercise:

-Explain that the playing cards represent characters with different status levels. (Example: Face cards are royalty, 8-10 are high society, 5-7 are middle class, 2-4 are servants and the Ace is a street person)

-Each student has a card pinned to his/her back. They do not know what card.

-Students circulate the room as if at a party. They relate to the other characters based on their status level. (Example: If talking to a servant, the student might request a drink of water. If

talking to royalty, the student might request an autograph.) Each student tries to determine his or her own status based on classmates' reactions.

-Give the class 2-5 minutes to line up from highest to lowest status based on how others treated them during the party.

-Reveal the cards.

Discussion:

-What helped you determine your status level?

- Did your character's behavior change as you became more aware of your status level?

From *Black Boy*: "It was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time. I would remember to dissemble for short periods, then I would forget and act straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artificial status of race and class. It was the same with whites as with blacks; it was my way with everybody."

Discuss the status of race and class in *Black Boy*. How does status play a role in your life?

Post-Show Activity: Alphabet Race

Objective: The students will brainstorm ideas, themes, emotions, and contexts from the novel/play of *Black Boy*.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

R.CCR.2: *Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.*

R.CCR.7: *Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.*

Exercise:

Participants are split into two groups. Each group lines up behind a poster board which lists the letters A through Z. The first individual on line is asked to write one word that starts with "A" that captures a theme, feeling, idea, adjective, verb, or any word that comes to mind regarding *Black Boy* (you can limit the categories based on the level of your students). The participant then hands the marker to the person behind him/her, who does the same for the letter "B" and so on until "Z." Every participant should be involved and write a word in turn, but can also ask the group for help if he/she cannot think of a word. The first group to finish wins. When both groups complete the alphabet, they are asked to look at each other's words and circle the ones they disagree with. A debate could take place in which students have a minute each to explain why they agree/disagree with that word being listed.

Post-Show Activity: Writing a Critical Review

Objective: The students will critique the performance of *Black Boy*.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed:

W.CCR.5: *Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.*

Imagine that you are the theatre critic for a major newspaper. Your job is to attend performances and review them for the public. You have your own column and byline. You have been asked to write a review of *Black Boy*. Include in your review the following information:

- the name of the theatre
- the names of the actor, director, writer, playwright, and education facilitators
- the date you attended
- what you think about the performance

Before beginning to work on your review, read the reviews of theatre productions in newspapers. Cut out those that interest you and bring them to class. Note the style the critic uses as well as the content as you discuss the checklist. To prepare your review, consider responding to the following questions:

- What do you want to tell your readers about this play?
- What were some of the most memorable moments in the play?
- What were the surprising moments in the play?
- Was the actor believable or non-believable?
- How suitable is the play for young audiences and does it strike a chord with realities that youth face today?
- Why would you recommend it or not recommend it?
- On a scale of one to five, five being the highest, what rating will you give the play?
- Decide how you wish to organize the material, sketch out your review and begin writing.

After completing the first draft, read the review to yourself. Evaluate the choices you made in terms of content focus, style, and tone. Writing is synonymous with revising, so make any changes that will strengthen your writing. Upon making changes, begin writing a second draft. Again, read to yourself for possible revisions. Type or neatly print your final version in the form of a newspaper review column.