

THE
AMERICAN PLACE
THEATRE
LITERATURE
TO LIFE[®]

Black Boy

by Richard Wright

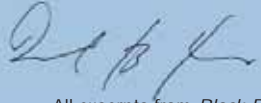
TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE



LITERATURE TO LIFE® is a performance-based literacy program that presents professionally staged verbatim adaptations of significant American literary works. The program gives students a new form of access to literature by bringing to life the world of the book with performances that create an atmosphere of discovery and spark the imagination. *Literature to Life* encourages reading, writing, and critical thinking and provides a catalyst for learning and self-expression.

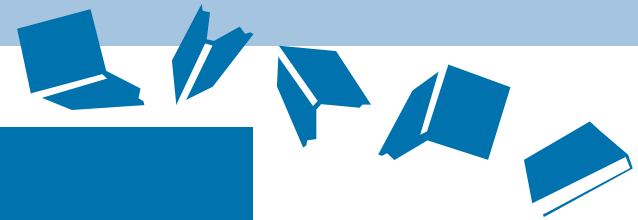
This *Literature To Life* Teacher's Resource Guide was written by professional teaching artists with vast experience implementing effective, hands-on strategies in the classroom. It is designed for educators to introduce drama-in-education to their students, as both a pre- and post-*Literature to Life* performance guide. The activities presented meet the Learning Standards for English and the Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts. The exercises can be adapted (simplified or extended) according to the students' special needs, maturity, interests, and abilities.

Forging the connection between theatre, literature and education is no longer a privilege—it is our responsibility as educators to not only open these doors, but to charge through them with purpose and certitude.



David Kener, Executive Director
The American Place Theatre

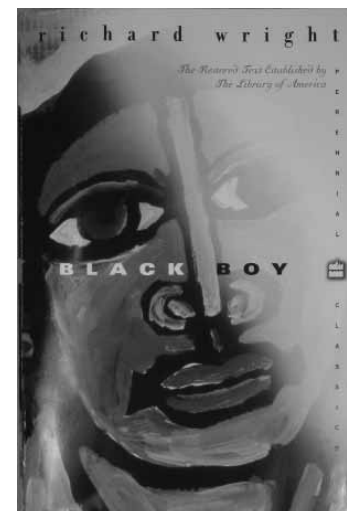
All excerpts from *Black Boy* by Richard Wright are reprinted here with permission. The text for the *Literature to Life* performance of *Black Boy* is taken directly from the book. All rights reserved.
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Theatre Etiquette

To make the theatre-going experience more enjoyable for everyone, a code of behavior has been established. When attending theatrical performances, remember these simple rules of conduct.

- Be on time for the performance.
- Do not eat, drink, or chew gum in the theatre.
- Turn off all cellular phones and pagers.
- Be sure to use the restroom BEFORE the pre-show discussion begins.
- Talk before and after the performance only. Remember that the people near you and on stage can hear you.
- Be an active participant in the pre- and post- show discussions in order to further deepen your experience with *Literature to Life*.
- Appropriate responses to the performances, such as laughing and applauding, are appreciated.
- Act with maturity during romantic, violent, and other challenging scenes.
- Do not leave after the performance, a post-show discussion will follow including a Q&A with the actor.
- Open your eyes, ears, and mind to the entire theatrical experience!



The following exercises are designed to be used BEFORE seeing the play!

Section 1: Introduction

Overall Objective: The students will have an introduction to Richard Wright and *Black Boy*.

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.
-

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*.

Exercise

Provide each student with a copy of the biography of Richard Wright. After everyone has read it, discuss Mr. Wright's theory that human behavior is determined by environment. Do you agree with his theory?

As an extension, have a volunteer play Richard Wright and, with the help of the class, answer some of the questions on the other student's lists.

Brainstorm from the Title

Objective: The students will explore the title of *Black Boy*.

Exercise

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

Discussion: 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.

Exercise

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

- Is there a picture or image? What function do those images have? Note, too, the colors on the cover. What do the colors mean and why were they chosen? Do these images help sell this edition?
- What words did the publishers choose to put on the cover? In what font is the title of the book? What other words or phrases are on the cover? Do these words and phrases help sell this edition? 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 did Mr. Wright choose this title?

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?

Discussion: Hunger and Human Life

Objective: Students will become familiar with the text and themes in *Black Boy*.

Passage A:

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but when I was five years old I began to wake up at night to find hunger at my bedside, staring at me. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger, it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for a crust of bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But now for the first time in my life, I have to pause and think of what's happening to me.

Discussion:

- The first hunger we feel as children is physical. As we mature, how do our hungers change to encompass our psychological and social needs?
- Richard Wright uses a metaphor to describe hunger in *Black Boy*, "Hunger stole upon me so slowly..." Discuss ways in which hunger is a thief.
- Create your own metaphor for hunger.

Passage B:

Now I hunger to share the dominant assumptions of my time and act upon them... Why do I do that? My problem is here, here with me, here in this room, and I will solve it here alone or not at all. Yet I do not want to face it; it frightens me. I go out into the streets. Halfway down the block I stop. Go back. I return to my room determined to look squarely at my life. Well, what did I get out of living in the city? What did I get out of living in the South? What did I get out of living in America? I know that all I possess are words and dim knowledge that my country has shown me no examples of how to live a human life. All my life I have been full of a hunger for a new way to live.

Discussion:

- What does Richard Wright mean when he writes, "I know that all I possess are words and dim knowledge that my country has shown me no examples of how to live a human life?"
- What do you think it means to live a "human life?"
- Do you agree or disagree that the role of a community, city and country is to give people guidance on how to live a "human life?"
- What role has your community, city and country played in developing the kind of person you have become?

Section 2: Events in the Civil Rights Movement

Selected highlights.

- 1896 Homer vs. 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 a 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.



Pictured above: Members of the black community vote in a South Carolina Democratic primary for the first time since 1876 on August 10, 1948. In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that blacks cannot be denied the right to vote in primary elections. AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Exercise

Please review the highlights of the Civil Rights Movement with your students and ask them to each research and present one event from the list below to the class.

The following exercises are designed to be used AFTER seeing the play!

Section 3: Post-show Activities

Discussion

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? Writers, musicians, artists . . . ?
- 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 Southern California today different from the racial situation in the South in the early 1900’s?
- 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. Could 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?



Pictured above: Richard Wright, author of *Black Boy*, shown here at his typewriter in New York, March 27, 1945, is militant in his determination to help blacks win economic rights. AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Biography

Objective: Students will research important events in Richard Wright's life and present the research through tableaux.

- Divide the class into 5-6 groups. Assign each group a time period in Richard Wright's life. (Example: Birth to six, six to twelve, teens, twenties, thirties, and later life)
- Using either the text of *Black Boy* or a time chronology of Wright's life, each group will choose a significant event in that time period. (Example: burning down the house at age four)
- The group will present a frozen picture of this event. Every member of the group must be in the picture but they need not all be human characters. (Example: one student can be young Richard, another student can be the fire)
- Present the tableaux chronologically.

Discussion:

- What event do you think is being depicted? What is the emotion of the tableaux? What do you think each character is feeling or thinking? Have each group discuss why they picked that particular event.

"THE POSITIVE IMPACT THE PLAY HAD ON STUDENTS AND THE AUDIENCE AS A WHOLE WAS UNBELIEVABLE. WE...WERE OVERWHELMED BY THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF YOUR PERFORMANCE."

-MEREDA DAVIS JOHNSON, DEKALB LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

Status Role Play

Objective: Students gain an understanding of social status. Students relate the exercise to Richard Wright's experience of race and class.

Supplies: One deck of playing cards and safety pins

- 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?

Character Echo

Objective: Students will create the end to an improvisational situation. Students will practice using dialogue and characterization.

- Divide the room into two lines facing each other. Designate one line Character A and the other line Character B. Their partner is the student directly across from them.
- Write the first four lines of an improvisational scene on the board.

Example:

A: It's time to go

B: I'm not ready.

A: But we had a deal.

B: I'm busy.

- Say the opening lines. Have each line of students "echo" you when you say their characters' lines. Each A/B pair will then decide on their characters, the relationship and the specific conflict. Each pair will add their own dialogue to create an ending. Have them think about the physicality of their characters (old, young, shy, outgoing, etc...).
- Share scenes.
- repeat activity with a situation from *Black Boy*.

Richard: I'm hungry.

Mother: Jump up and catch a Kungry.

Richard: But I'm hungry.

Mother: There is nothing to eat.

Father: Here's a nickel.

Richard: I don't want to take it.

Father: Don't be a fool.

Richard: I don't want to live with you.

Again, each A/B pair will then decide on their characters, the relationship and the specific conflict. Each pair will add their own dialogue to create an ending. Compare the students' endings to the endings in *Black Boy*.

Alphabet Race

Objective: The students will brainstorm words, ideas, and feelings from the novel/play of *Black Boy*.

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.

Sculptures

Objective: Students will practice using their bodies to communicate an idea or theme. Students will reflect on the varied interpretations of the theme.

- Divide students into pairs. Student A is the artist. Student B is the sculpture.
- Have student A create a sculpture of B on the theme of "future visions" (Examples: Flying Cars, world peace, destroying the environment, graduating from college. Sculptures can be realistic or symbolic, personal or global)
- Have each student title their sculpture and present to the class.

Repeat exercise with B becoming the artist and A being the sculpture.

Discussion:

- What might Richard Wright have sculpted as his vision of the future?
- Do you think that we have achieved his vision?

Repeat activity with themes brainstormed in the Alphabet Race exercise. For example using the theme of "Hunger."

Writing a Critical Review

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

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.

Using other art forms to explore themes in *Black Boy*:

Richard Wright used writing to communicate and connect. Discuss with your class their choice for self-expression.



Creative Writing

- Write a poem on the theme of hunger.
- Write a poem with these alternating lines:
I used to be . . .
But now I am . . .
Discuss what Richard Wright might have written in this format.
- Write an essay, poem, song or newspaper article with the opening line: "Words as weapons"
- "One writes to make a home for oneself, on paper." (Alfred Kazin)
Discuss this quote with the class, then using phrases and images, have each student attempt to "construct a home on paper." Do you think that Richard Wright was able to construct a home for himself through writing?

Visual Art

- Using pictures and words from magazines, construct a collage that represents the theme of hunger as expressed in the production of *Black Boy*. Do the same activity to construct a collage for and about you. Include images of who you are now as well as images that reflect your dreams and aspirations.
- Create a collage of words as weapons. Create a collage of words that unify.
- Create a classroom mural that reflects the individual and collective hungers of your class. Use quotes from the text of *Black Boy* and write your own thoughts on hunger.

Music

- Bring in selections of Blues, Hip-Hop and Classical Music. Have students write in a journal while playing short selections of each type of music. Discuss whether music shapes your writing? Did it affect your mood?
- Compose or select music for a production of *Black Boy*. Share your selection with the class and explain why you chose that particular piece of music and how it helps to further the story.
- 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."
- 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. How does the style of the music change the story?

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-DORIS JACKSON, ATLANTA-FULTON PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS



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-WILFRED SAMUELS, UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

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We Want to Hear from YOU and your STUDENTS!

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What to Do After You See the Performance

Please encourage your students to reflect on the play in some of the following ways. We would love to have copies of some of the writings or artwork your students create!

Write

- Write a review of *Black Boy* as if you were a journalist or news reporter.
- Write a letter to the actor, director, or teaching artist in response to the play.
- Write a letter to Richard Wright in response to the novel.
- Write a monologue as Richard Wright, or as one of the characters in *Black Boy*.
- Write an epilogue. For example, what happens to Richard after the story ends?
- Write your own theatrical adaptation for one chapter of *Black Boy*.

Draw

- Draw the world of one or more of the characters.
- Draw images from the production.
- Draw a poster for our production of *Black Boy*.
- Create a collage of images from magazines in response to the play.

Wynn Handman, Artistic Director/Co-Founder
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