Violence In Black Boy

In Richard Wright’s autobiographical novel, Black Boy, he shares his personal experiences growing up in an America that was racially divided. Throughout this novel, Richard adds fabricated details into his real-life experiences. This allows the reader to better comprehend the emotions felt by African Americans in the racially divided South. At a time in the south that African Americans as a whole were struggling to achieve equal treatment, Wright conveys personal experiences that challenge the reader to recognize the evolution of civil rights during the past century.

Violence is understood to be a natural occurrence in area where tensions between whites and blacks run high. Throughout Richard Wright’s life we see violence as having many different purposes. He encounters violence inside the home, at work, in his neighborhood, and in the streets of town. Richard uses violence in different contexts to communicate to the reader the purpose of violent behavior. Richard Wright conveys the theme of violence by illustrating events through the course of his childhood and adolescence where violence has been experienced as a means of parental discipline, providing self-defense, amusement for the condescending white population, and, ironically, a behavior that strengthened the bond between black boys in the community.

The environment in which Richard Wright grows up in instills in him a normalized view of violence. Richard becomes exposed to violence within the home and recognizes it as a natural occurrence in the everyday life of an African American living in the Jim Crowe South. Before being exposed to racial violence between whites and blacks, Richard experiences violence within the home. This novel quickly shows the prominence of violence in Richard’s early childhood within the first scene. Richard’s mother and father scold and beat him so severely that he loses consciousness and nearly dies (7). This is the first time that Richard is physically punished by his family members. Richard’s parents use this physical punishment to force Richard to meet their expectation. As the novel progresses, this trend continues. In certain instances, Richard received beatings for things he did not do. Each time that Richard stands up to his elders, they beat him without considering if his motives are right or wrong. In one instance, Richard feels that he is unjustly being punished by Aunt Addie. Aunt Addie begins to beat Richard for throwing walnuts on the classroom floor without allowing Richard to explain the situation. Richard explains, “I did not want to be violent with her, and yet I did not want to be beaten for a wrong I had not committed” (107). Ultimately, Richard resorts to grabbing a knife in an attempt to control his aunt. In this instance, Richard responds to the wrongful accusations and judgments placed upon him by Aunt Addie with his own act of violence. Richard's explanation for his actions demonstrates his strong desire for fair treatment.

Not only was violence used as a form of discipline by Richard’s elders, but it was also taught to be a self-defense mechanism among the white population. African Americans growing up in the Jim Crowe South relied on violence as a way to protect themselves from the poor treatment of whites. Blacks faced dangerous, violent situations every day on the street. It was important for parents to instill in their children the strength and knowledge they needed to protect themselves from the violence. Richard’s mother suggests for him to use violence as a way to protect himself from the intimidating white children in the streets. Richard faces a group of intimidating

white boys on his way to buy groceries for his mother. Richard acts cowardly when he returns home to his mother seeking protection. For the first time, Richard's mother encourages him to use physical violence to defend himself. Richard remains terrified at the idea and finally, his mother turns to violence herself in an attempt to get Richard to face his fears. Eventually, Richard reluctantly returns to the streets to face the boys. He uses the advice given by his mother to intimidate these boys enough to make them scatter in the street, and he triumphantly returns home with the groceries. Richard recognizes this moment in his life as the time that he "won the right to the streets of Memphis" (18). During this confrontation, Richard gained respect for himself and from his peers. Richard realized that he was capable of standing up for himself, and he would use this confidence to protect himself and his reputation leading into adulthood.

Whites in the Jim Crowe South intimidate blacks into fighting for their own entertainment and as a way to show white superiority. In the novel, Richard's employers instigate and encourage a fight between Richard and Harrison, someone he considers a friend. Olin, Richard's boss told fabricated stories to each boy suggesting the other had a desire to cause them physical harm. Although they agree to have no issues with one another, they cannot escape Olin's desire for them to fight. Richard and Harrison have different views of the fight and why they should or should not participate in this fight. Harrison feels intrigued to fight because he believes the cash offer is worth the dehumanizing fight. Richard, on the other hand, felt ashamed to appeal to the desires of the white men because they will view the violence as a comical form of entertainment. Harrison responds to Richard with the realization that white men laugh at them every day. After the fight, Richard feels that he "had done something unclean, something for which I [he] could never properly atone" (243). Richard felt ashamed for conforming to the desires of the white men. By doing this, he feels that he has allowed the whites to maintain their superior status. The author used this example to communicate to the audience the purpose of violence between blacks as a form of entertainment and as a way to show white supremacy.

During Richard Wright's adolescence, violence served as a means of unification for African Americans in their quest for equality. Violent fights between whites and blacks maintained a constant racial divide among them. While the fights increased tensions and further divided the two races, each of the racial groups develop a stronger sense of unity with the boys of similar color. In the novel, Richard joins a gang of older black boys in his neighborhood, and these boys share similar feelings in their hatred for white people. These "gangs" developed through the mutual understanding of the life of blacks in the Jim Crowe South. The boys engage in conversations discussing the animosity felt for the white population. Through these dialogues, it is apparent that the boys are aware of the racial divide. They understood racial division also created a physical division within the neighborhoods, the groups fought bloody fights to honor those divisions. Each side acknowledges the roles assigned at birth. The black boys in the neighborhood develop a stronger bond and commitment with one another over the course of the novel. Richard shows that his commitment to his fellow gang members is stronger than the promise he made to his mother to stop fighting. Richards supports his decision to continue fighting by saying, "if I kept my word, I would lose standing in the gang, and the gang's life was my life" (83). By not participating in these violent acts Richard would jeopardize his commitment to the gang. While acts of violence do not typically bring about positive images, the violence in this example serves as a binding factor for the adolescent boys who face racism in the Jim Crowe South.

Throughout this autobiographical novel, Richard Wright uses violence in different contexts in

order to communicate the roles of violence in the racially divided South. Examples in the text help to further develop the theme of violence throughout the novel. According to the experiences of Richard Wright, violence was used for discipline, self-defense, entertainment, and as a means of unification in the Jim Crowe South. Richard realizes that violence will be a natural part of life as long as racial divisions remain between whites and blacks. I feel that Richard Wright did an outstanding job of portraying his experiences of growing up in an America that was racially divided. This book opened my eyes to the real-life struggles that African Americans faced each day. Unlike any other historical novel, I have read, Richard Wright's combination of factual, heart-wrenching information truly grasped my attention and provoked an emotion within me. After reading this book, I have a better understanding of the unfair, harsh treatment African Americans endured each day. Although the racial tensions between whites and blacks have lessened, I think that this book is still relevant in America today. There are a number of African American organizations that advocate for the equal treatment of blacks. One of the most well-known groups, "Black Lives Matter", works to prevent violence and unfair treatment by law enforcement agencies in predominantly black neighborhoods. Wright's autobiographical novel challenged me to analyze the role of violence among the racially divided South, and I now have a new respect for those that struggled to gain equality during this era.