

INFORMATIVE— LITERARY ESSAY

The essay that follows was written in response to this assignment: “Reflection Topic #3: Pride and Acceptance. Wright struggles to find his ‘place’ in society. He refuses to forgo his morality and beliefs to conform to the status quo. Examine Wright’s pride. Find examples in the text that demonstrate the influence pride has on Wright’s actions. How does his pride influence his decisions? Is pride a positive or negative influence in Wright’s life? How does Wright’s pride affect how his family members treat him?” Students had one week to complete this assignment. The maximum length allowed was three pages.

Marching to His Own Beat

Pride is often criticized by society and habitually seen as a negative characteristic evoking such connotations as conceit, egotism, arrogance, and hubris. In Richard Wright’s struggle to find his “place” in society in *Black Boy*, pride has both negative and positive connotations. Despite the negative consequences, pride allows Wright to maintain his moral compass, oppose conformity, and pursue his passion of writing, thus demonstrating pride’s positive influence on Wright’s life.

Wright’s pride prompts him to make principled decisions and carry out actions that illustrate his morality and inherent beliefs. Wright refuses to neglect his values and chooses right over wrong even when he recognizes that failure to adhere to what is expected of him will ultimately result in negative and often violent consequences. When he receives the title of valedictorian and refuses to read the speech prepared for him by his principal, choosing instead to present his own speech in spite of the threat of being held back, Wright’s pride is demonstrated. Although he comprehends the consequences and the gravity of his decision, Wright refuses to compromise his beliefs: “I know that I’m not educated, professor. . . But the people are coming

to hear the students, and I won’t make a speech that you’ve written” (174). Though urged by his family members and his classmates to avoid conflict and to comply with the principal’s demand, Wright refuses because he does not believe it is the morally correct thing to do. Even though his pride is negatively perceived by his peers and relatives as the source of defiance, they fail to realize that his pride is a positive factor that gives him the self confidence to believe in himself and his decisions. Wright’s refusal to acquiesce to his family’s ardent religious values is another illustration of his pride. Wright is urged by his family and friends to believe in God and partake in their daily religious routines; however, he is undecided about his belief in God and refuses to participate in practicing his family’s religion because “[His] faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life, anchored in the sensations of [his] body and what [his] mind could grasp, and nothing could ever shake this faith, and surely not [his] fear of an invisible power” (115). He cannot put his confidence into something unseen and remains unwavering in his belief. Pride allows Wright to flee from the

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oppressive boundaries of expectations and to escape to the literary world.

Wright's thirst and desire to learn is prompted by his pride and allows him to excel in school and pursue his dreams of becoming a writer. The reader observes Wright's pride in his writing when he wrote his first story. Pleased with his work, he "decided to read it to a young woman who lived next door. . . [He] looked at her in a cocky manner that said: . . . I write stuff like this all the time. It's easy" (120–121). This attitude of satisfaction permits Wright to continue to push himself to improve and pursue his craft. Pride eventually leads Wright to submit his work to the local newspaper; his obvious pride in his work is clearly portrayed when he impatiently tells the newspaper editor, "But I want you to read it now" (165) and asks for his composition book back when he does not immediately show interest in his story. Pride in his academic achievements motivates him to excel in his studies; after Wright advanced to sixth grade in two weeks, he was elated and thrilled at his astonishing accomplishment: "Overjoyed, I ran home and babbled the news. . . I had leaped a grade in two weeks, anything seemed possible, simple, easy" (125). Wright's pride in his intelligence and studies allows him to breeze through school: "I burned at my studies. . . I read my civics and English and geography volumes through and only referred to them in class. I solved all my

mathematical problems far in advance" (133). Pride provides him with the self-confidence and contentment that his family and society fail to give him. It removes Wright from both the black culture and the white culture and moves him rather to the "art culture", in which Wright can achieve higher than what is anticipated of him.

Wright's ability to oppose conformity and forego the status quo also stems from his pride. Pride propels him to assert himself even if it defies what is expected of him as a black individual. Upon telling one of his old employers, a white woman, that he wants to be a writer, she indecorously scoffs at him and makes an impudent remark "You'll never be a writer. . . Who on earth put such ideas into your. . . head?" (147). This remark causes him to almost immediately quit his job; Wright remarks, "The woman had assaulted my ego; she had assumed that she knew my place in life. . . what I ought to be, and I resented it with all my heart" (147). Wright's refusal to simply go along with what is expected of him, thoroughly disappoints and aggravates his family and society, yet his pride has a positive influence on his life; pride allows Wright to not only remove himself from the boundaries of the black vs. white society and the insidious effect of racism but it also sets Wright free from the constraints of acceptance. Pride ultimately frees Wright to pursue his passion and identify himself not as a black or white person but rather as a

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“writer”.

In Wright’s struggle to overcome the overwhelming expectations he is faced with by society, pride puts him at odds with his family and society but ultimately serves as a positive influence, allowing him to withstand conformity and escape the status

quo. This attitude allows Wright to maintain his moral compass, believe in his self worth, and pursue his passion. Pride is more than pure arrogance and haughtiness. To Wright, pride is something far greater: pride is the characteristic that gives him the strength to march to his own beat; to the beat of the literary world.