

## Paper 2 SL – Sample 2 – Persepolis, Black Boy

“Do works of literary merit both reflect the spirit of the time and challenge it?”

Why do people read memoirs? There is something fascinating about memoirs, because they transport readers to a different time and place. Memoirs allow you to step into someone else’s shoes and feel what it was like to be him or her. This is definitely the case for *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, written in 2000 and *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, written in 1945. In fact, you could say that these works are literary, because they offer insight into the times and places in which the author’s grew up. What’s more, they challenge the values of the cultures in which the authors grew up, making them even more literary.

One often associates literature with fiction, because fiction is the art form of telling make-believe stories. Telling true stories, however, can also be a form of art. Marjane Satrapi and Richard Wright both lived in extraordinary times, which makes their life stories interesting. What makes their life stories literary, however, is the way in which they are told. Both authors engage their readers in the opening pages of their memoirs by writing the unexpected. Richard Wright does not explicitly introduce his readers to the American South, racism and the 1920s in the opening lines, even though that is what the memoir is implicitly about. Instead he tells a story of how he, as a young boy, burned down his house, killed his cat and beat up the neighbor boys. These are small anecdotes that comment on his personal frustrations with his family. They are told through an intriguing use of first person narrative, where Richard is not the obvious hero. This is an artistic choice of the author.

Similarly the opening lines of *Persepolis* are not an explicit attack on Islamic fundamentalism, even though this is the subject of the graphic novel. Instead readers are offered a child’s perspective on growing up during the Islamic Revolution. The features of the graphic novel allow Satrapi to tell her story with voiceover boxes, a form of direct narration that is characteristic of memoirs, where the author looks back on her life. She writes ‘This is me when I was 10 years old.’ Furthermore she shows children on a school square playing with their veils in a child-like way. From the first pages it is clear that Satrapi uses the features of the graphic novel in an artistic way to juxtapose the innocence of youth with the horrors of autocratic rule.

Both literary works are set against a backdrop of oppression and injustice, which reflect the spirit of the times in which they lived. Because Richard Wright gives the reader a child’s perspective, racism seems like a complex set of rules that make no sense. In one passage he asks his mother why a white man was beating a black boy. Richard assumes that only fathers are allowed to beat their sons. It does not occur to him that the white man could not be the boy’s father. After all, Richard has a white grandmother and he is beaten by his father. Richard’s mother becomes frustrated by Richard’s questions, because she cannot explain why the South is the way it is, namely unjust.

*Persepolis*, like *Black Boy*, also depicts a child growing up in an oppressive situation. Unlike Richard’s mother, Marjane’s parents share her rebellious spirit. Her mother and father also want to have secret parties, break the law and dress however they want to. In one scene

Marjane helps her mother pour alcohol down the toilet while the Guards of the Revolution threaten to inspect their house. Her parents travel to Turkey, buy a poster of a Marjane's favorite rock star and smuggle it into the country for her. Her father looks ridiculous with rolled up posters in the sleeves of his trench coat, but he does this for his daughter who has to grow up under an oppressive police state. In fact, the decision to send Marjane to Vienna at age 14 is her parent's way of letting her escape the horrors of the Iran/Iraq war and Islamic fundamentalism. This is dissimilar to Richard's escape from the South, which his mother does not support. He has to steal money from a movie theatre and a gun from his neighbor to runaway to Chicago. His mother is unable to stop him and asks if Richard would send for her one day. He never sends for her though. He does not love his mother the way Marjane loves her parents. Rather than being on his side against racial oppression, Richard's mother is part of the system that keeps racism in place.

Both Satrapi and Wright could be considered literary authors, not only because they use artistic devices or reflect the spirit of their times, but also because they challenge the values of the cultures in which they grew up. For example Richard is frustrated with the church and the role that it plays in keeping racism in place. He stands up to his grandmother, who regularly blackmails him emotionally, saying that she cannot love him if he does not love God. He walks out of her house and speaks his mind openly. Just as Wright criticizes blacks and religion for keeping the system in place, Satrapi also criticizes Muslims for keeping the religious regime in power. She depicts children on the school square bragging about how often they pray every day. She shows how self-mutilation was taken to extremes during the revolution by fundamentalists. In one scene, young Marjane stands up to her teacher and tells her to stop talking about 'the blood of martyrs', which was metaphorically 'injected into the veins of the Iranian people.' Marjane explains to her classmates how Iran was actually killing and torturing its own people in the name of religion and the war against Iraq. In *Black Boy* and *Persepolis* the protagonists are commended for protesting against the oppressive, institutionalized religion. Both works, in fact, clearly make a case for atheism.

To conclude *Persepolis* and *Black Boy* have literary merit, because they use several artistic devices, they reflect the times in which they were written, and they challenge the values of the cultures in which the author's were raised. Satrapi uses the features of the graphic novel artistically to juxtapose the innocence of childhood with the atrocities of Islamic fundamentalism. *Black Boy* reads more like a novel than an autobiography, with a protagonist who is beset on all sides with injustice. Both authors, in a rather un-heroic fashion, manage to break free from the oppressive worlds in which they live. They challenge the reader to think about the role of religion in society.