Richard and Wole

How is the character 'Richard' established? Even as he grows up and matures, he has certain values that are apparent from a very young age. What are these characteristics and values? How would we define Richard?

Often times it is easier to define one character in contrast to another. By looking for similarities and differences between two people we get to know them better. Below are two passages: one is taken from *Black Boy*, the other is a poem by Wole Soyinka called 'Telephone Conversation'. Look at the list of adjectives below and state which describe Richard, Wole or both. As you place each adjective in one of the boxes below, justify your answers with evidence from the text.

- naïve
- blunt
- honest
- violent
- ironical
- respectful
- brave
- devious
- curious
- angry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Richard</th>
<th>both Richard and Wole</th>
<th>Wole</th>
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Black Boy
Richard Wright
1945

‘What was Granny’s name before she married Grandpa?’
‘Bolden.’
‘Who gave her that name?’
‘The white man who owned her.’
‘She was a slave?’
‘Yes.’
‘And Bolden was the name of Granny’s father?’
‘Granny doesn’t know who her father was.’
‘So they just gave her any name?’
‘They gave her a name; that’s all I know.’
‘Couldn’t Granny find out who her father was?’
‘For what, silly?’
‘Just to know.’
‘But for what?’
I could not say. I could not get anywhere.
‘Mama, where did Father get his name?’
‘From his father.’
‘And where did the father of my father get his name?’
‘Like Granny got hers. From a white man.’
‘Do they know who he is?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Why don’t they find out?’
‘For what?’ my mother demanded harshly.
And I could think of no rational or practical reason why my father should try to find out who his father’s father was.
‘What has Papa got in him?’ I asked.
‘Some white and some red and some black,’ she said.
‘Indian, white, and Negro?’
‘Yes.’
‘Then what am I?’
‘They’ll call you a colored man when you grow up,’ she said. Then she turned to me and smiled mockingly and asked: ‘Do you mind, Mr. Wright?’
I was angry and I did not answer. I did not object to being called colored, but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know; and she became angry when I prodded her. All right, I would find out someday. Just wait. All right, I was colored. It was fine. I did not know enough to be afraid or to anticipate in a concrete manner. True, I had heard that colored people were killed and beaten, but so far it all had seemed remote. There was a kind of vague uneasiness about it all, but I would be able to handle that when I came to it. It would be simple. If anybody tried to kill me, then I would kill them first.

Guiding questions
• How is dialogue used to establish characterization?
• How is this passage important to the Richard Wright’s autobiography?
Telephone Conversation
Wole Soyinka

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. "Madam," I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey—I am African."
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lipstick coated, long gold rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was foully.
"HOW DARK?" . . . I had not misheard . . . "ARE YOU LIGHT
OR VERY DARK?" Button B, Button A.* Stench
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.
Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis--
"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
"You mean--like plain or milk chocolate?"
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. "West African sepia"--and as afterthought,
"Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
"DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
"THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
Facially, I am brunette, but, madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused--
Foolishly, madam--by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black--One moment, madam!"--sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears--"Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather
See for yourself?"

Guiding questions
• How is this text a poem, and how is it a short story?
• What kind of person is Wole Soyinka, base on your understanding of this text?