



RICHARD WRIGHT AS THE SELF-APPOINTED SPOKESMAN TO SPEAK VEHEMENTLY ABOUT THE BLEAKNESS & BARRENNESS OF THE BLACKS: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This article is speaking about the spokesman Richard Wright's diverse works filled with rebellious attitudes and associated with many of the major social and intellectual movements. He was a precursor in the obvious sense of having been the first black novelist to achieve fame and fortune in the United States. He strongly expose to White America the psychological disturbance produced by the resentment, rootlessness, violence, alienation and hostility that are the creation of the poverty and humiliations attendant upon racism led him, through a grim determination of his personality, to blaze a trail that opened new worlds to countless young blacks.

Key Words: Marxism, Rootlessness, World Politics, Poverty and Humiliation.

Richard Wright is a fascinating figure not only for literary critics but also for historians, sociologists and philosophers. He was actively associated with many of the major social and intellectual movements of the first half of the twentieth century, and much of his fiction and non-fiction were focused upon them. The rise of science, the ramifications of industrialism, the effects of Marxism, and the emergence in world politics of new power configurations composed of ex-colonial peoples, the growth of secularism, the development of modern philosophies of existence – all are treated by Richard Wright in his diverse works. Richard Macksey and Frank. E. Moorer comments:

“Seen in perspective, then, both the life and the achievement of Richard Wright are rich sources of paradoxes. Despite his claim of being ‘rootless’ he carried his earliest experiences of the rural South close with him through the landscapes of the industrial cities that are the terrain of so much of his fiction. A ‘loner’ by choice, he still sought to be accepted on his merits by an aristocracy of the mind. He was fond of insisting, “I am a very average Negro”, and yet he constantly strove to be ‘representative’ in a much more Emersonian sense of the term” (P 15).

While introducing Richard Wright's book, *Whiteman, Listen*, John A. Williams said:

“one thought pervaded all of Wright's work: that the perennial human failing –man's gross inhumanity to man – had to be abolished” (PXI).

Richard Wright was the breakthrough man who came all the way up from all the way down. He was suckled on resentment and hate, nurtured on anger and fear, grew up on restlessness and tasted every violent flavor of alienation and hostility. But his bitter strong will to expose to White America the psychological disturbance produced by the resentment, rootlessness, violence, alienation and hostility that are the creation of the poverty and humiliations attendant upon racism led him, through a grim determination of his personality, to blaze a trail that opened new worlds to countless young blacks.

Born on 4th Sep 1908 into the poverty of Sharecropper life on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, Richard Wright grew up in Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee and Arkansas. At the age of fifteen, he



left Memphis to go north. When he arrived in the ghetto of Chicago, he discovered with an atrocious sense of shock that North or South, farm or city was the same for a black in the America of the 1920's. He was never free from his daily lessons in the curriculum of Jim Crow. As a result, Richard Wright had a deep-rooted hatred for the Whites like almost all Negroes. Like Ely Green, another Negro writer, Richard Wright was determined to be a man not a “nigger” not a “boy” – as Blacks were generally addressed by the Whites. Richard chose to reject the social mask of inferiority and invisibility and in doing so, became a full-fledged rebel.

Right from his childhood, Wright had been taught to fear and hate the Whites. These two negative feelings gave rise to his rebellious attitude, which in turn gave power and strength to whatever he wrote. For Richard Wright, literary achievement was not the only goal in life or the sole governing principle. A man's writing is certainly never a series of unrelated acts anymore than it is the resume of his life. Richard Wright the man transcends Richard Wright the novelist; one novel *Native Son*, his autobiography *Black Boy and American Hunger* and a dozen stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Eight Men* distinguished him as one of the most significant American prose writers and certainly the most important novelist. He was a precursor in the obvious sense of having been the first black novelist to achieve fame and fortune in the United States. In addition, the honour of being the first Black in America to have accomplished a certain thing, only serves to indicate the status of an oppressed minority within its historical context. Michel Fabre, the French biographer of Wright proudly remarks:

“In history, therefore. Wright may be more widely known as one of the first to have thrown the truth of his resentment in the face of White America. *Native Son* was an act of defiance, an ideological bomb with which Wright frankly proclaimed his fear, sense of deprivation and hatred. But the wide success historical situation, since other Blacks had, through their actions and writings done the same thing before him with some, though lesser, results” (Fabre XVII).

When Richard Wright left South at an early age, he was intent upon discovering whether or not he, a part of south, could be transplanted to an alien environment and there grow differently become healthy, perhaps to bloom. He realized that he would always carry the South with him, for he was its child. Nevertheless, he envisioned himself as a hopeful experiment. In his autobiography, Wright comments thus:

“so in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns and perhaps to bloom...And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that Southern Swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even out of the blackest of the Southern night. I would know that the South too could overcome its fear, its hate, its cowardice, its heritage of guilt and blood, its burden of anxiety and compulsive cruelty” (PP 284-285).

Certainly he was motivated in writing *Black Boy* as in writing *Native Son*, like the slave narrator, by a political need to expose publicly the psychic destruction of personality resulting from America's racism: his experience was that of many a black man in America. *Black Boy* therefore is a loaded pistol. It is a personal form of psychoanalysis. In distilling the essence of his childhood coming of age in the South at the beginning of the century, he recreates a total environment of violence and counter violence, of too acute sensitivity, of ambivalent love, of pervasive and inescapable oppression, out of which his consciousness evolved. In reacting to the oppressive environment against which as a lonely



individual he felt impotent, the child internalized that impotence, emotionally channeling it into fantasies that the older Wright called ‘moral bulwarks’. The fantasies allowed him to maintain some semblance of power and masculinity while living in a world permeated with fear, hatred and violence. Later he found such momentary liberation, control, will, in writing. Writing an autobiography became a vehicle for liberating the imprisoned self from the oppressive burden of past experience. At an early age, Richard perceived the power of words. Through the medium of words, Wright expressed his fear and hate, for the white man. He wanted the White man to listen to him. **White Men, Listen!** is a title of one of his books. Richard Wright did not write for the black people but for Whites because the Whites know nothing of the problems confronting Blacks whereas Blacks know it. **Native Son** is a weapon, a loaded pistol at the head of the White world. On the whole, the black writers including Richard Wright embarked upon a new direction and in so doing, emphasized the idea that the novel should be a vehicle for protest.

As a product of the Deep South, of the Depression, of poverty, of a broken home, and of other handicaps which the black poor have with them, always Richard Wright is the ideal writer to speak vehemently about the bleakness, the barrenness in Negro life. He was the self-appointed spokesman of his people:

“Having learned from Mencken and the naturalists that literature could be a social weapon, Wright ruthlessly forced his America, to look at how the ‘monster nigger’ was the inevitably pathological result of fear, shame, guilt and anger” (Stern 179).

Summing up the theme of Richard Wright, Arthur P. Davis comments:

“He did not believe that black was beautiful. He felt that black life was ugly, brutal, violent, devoid of kindness and love. And he places much of the blame for this bleakness on that great fog of racial oppression that hung over the Negro like a tremendous, compelling, natural force, expelling him from the finer things of western civilization, dehumanizing and brutalizing him, physically and spiritually. In one sense, this is Wright’s only theme” (P 149)

He wanted to express the great social crime that America perpetrated upon the black masses and the effect of that crime on the life and personality of the Negro. As a result, fear and hate sizzle through all his works but explode into living beings in **Black Boy** and **American Hunger**, his autobiographical works.

The civil war brought an end to slavery. Instead, patterns of disenfranchisement, segregation and racial subordination became the new way of life. The slave system was merely replaced by the race system. The demise of slavery produced segregation and discrimination; the legal ending of segregation and discrimination produced economic and social problems of a magnitude as great as that of slavery and legal segregation. Analyzing the patterns of slavery in American autobiography, Sidonie Smith says:

“Thus, as the experience of the escaped slave prophesied, freedom was a Chimera. The Black American, though he was no longer three-fifths of a citizen. Consequently, he found himself plagued by a dual identity and dual reality – the promised reality of full American Citizenship and the daily reality of the status of a Negro that belied that promise” (PP 28-29).



The Black Boy is emotion recollected in turmoil. It was a bitter fruit of an old injustice. Wright's fertile imagination helped to create an environment both terrible and strangely remote – as he explains, “something whose horror ad blood might descend upon me at any moment” (*Black Boy* 151). *Native Son* is not a novel for the hopeful or the faithful but one which results from the inability of men to fulfil the tenets of their own tablets of the law.

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