

## CHAPTER III

RICHARD WRIGHT, AUTHOR OF BLACK BOY

## IV.1. RICHARD WRIGHT, THE AUTHOR ( 1908-1960 )

Wright was born near Natchez, Mississippi. When he was five, his father abandoned the family - Wright, his younger brother, and his mother - and for the next ten years Wright was raised by a series of relatives in Mississippi. By 1925, when he went to Memphis on his own, he had moved twenty times.

Extreme poverty, a constantly interrupted education that never went beyond junior high school, and the religious fundamentalism of his grandmother, along with the constant experiences of humiliation and hatred in a racially segregated South; all these contributed to Wright's growing sense that the hidden anger of black people was justified and that only by acknowledging and expressing it, could they move beyond it.

The title of *Native Son* made the point that the United States is as much the country of black as of white; the story showed that blacks had been deprived of their inheritance.

Two years after moving to Memphis, Wright went north to Chicago. Here he took a series of odd jobs and then joined the WPA Writer's Project ( a government project of the depression years to help support

authors ) as a writer of a guide books and as a director of the Federal Negro Theater. He began to study Marxist's theory contributing poetry to leftist literary magazines and joining the Communist Party in 1932.

By 1935 he had become the center of a group of black Chicago writers and had started to write fiction. He was influenced by the naturalistic fiction of James T. Farrell, whose study of sociology at the University of Chicago had helped give structure to his popular Studs Lonigan trilogy about Irish working people. Wright moved to New York in 1937 to write for the New York Writer's Project and as a reporter on the Communist Daily Worker.

In 1938 he published Uncle Tom's Children, a collection of four short stories ( an earlier novel, Lawd Today was not published until after his death ). Set in the rural South, the stories center on racial conflict and physical violence. Wright's theme of the devastating effect of relentless, institutionalized hatred and humiliation on the black's male's psyche was paramount in all of them. In 1938 he won a prize of \$500 with his novelette Uncle Tom's Children. Later, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

In 1940, his story Native Son received the Spingarm Medal, highest award for work done in the Negro interest. Twelve Million Black Voices, 1941, is a history of the persecution of the American Negro.

After Native Son, Wright turned to autobiographical writings that eventuated in Black Boy, published in 1945. Many consider this to be his best book, and such writers as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin took it as a model for their own work in the 1950s and 1960s. A Communist activist in the early 1940s, Wright became increasingly disillusioned and broke completely with the party in 1944.

Visiting France in 1946, he was warmly received by leading writers and philosophers. In 1947 he settled permanently in that country, where he was perceived from the first as one of the important experimental modernist prose writers, and ranked on a level with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner.

An existential novel, The Outsider (1953), was followed by five more books: two novels and three collections of lectures, travel writings, and socio-political commentary. The collection Eight Men was the last literary project he worked on and appeared the year after his death.

Wright's immersion in Marxist doctrine gave him tools for representing society and as divided into

antagonistic classes and run for the benefit of the few. But in each of his works he portrays individuals who, no matter how they are deformed and brutalized by oppression and exploitation, retain a transcendent spark of selfhood. Ultimately, it is in his spark that Wright puts his faith. His writing from first to last affirmed the dignity and humanity of society's outcasts without romantizing them and indicated those who had cast them out.

As Ralph Ellison expressed in Wright's example " converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and going underground into a will to confront the world and to " throw " his findings unashamedly into the guilt conscience of America " ( The Norton Anthology of American Literature pp: 1761-1762 ).

Richard Wright is an apostle of his race. In novelists like these the classic interests and the equally classic hardness of naturalism were instinctive, for they all saw life as an experience in oppression; and the hard, loud vocabulary of naturalism, its energy and passion, its mechanical technique and methodical simplicity, were all taken for granted. ( Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds p: 372 ).

From page 386 On Native Grounds we can note :  
The vogue of such a novel as Richard Wright's Native Son may suggest that the novel of "social significance" had at last entered into the thinking of the middle class, that the people who read it with bated breath or applauded it on the stage felt a deep compassion for, and even some solidarity with, the oppressed Negro masses; but that is an illusion.

It is precisely because Wright himself was so passionately honest and desired to represent the sufferings of his race as forcefully as possible that the unconscious slickness of Native Son, its manipulation of terror in a period fascinated by terror seems so sinister.

For Wright was only the child of his generation, and his resources no different in kind from the resources of naturalism and the left - wing conception of life and literature to which, like many Negro writers, he surrendered his thinking because of the general indifference or hostility to Negroes and Negro writing.

If he chose to write the story of Bigger Thomas as a grotesque crime story, it is because his own indignation and the sickness of the age combined to make him dependent on violence and shocks, to astonish the reader by torrential scenes of cruelty, hunger, rape,

murder, and flight, and then enlightened him by crude Stalinist homilies.

Bigger Thomas "found" himself in jail as Wright "found" himself after much personal suffering and confusion, in the Communist party; what did it matter that Bigger's self discovery was mechanical and unconvincing, or that Wright - from the highest possible motives - had written one of those books in which everything is undertaken with seriousness except the writing ?.

From The American Autobiography by Albert E. Stone in page 124, we note For Richard Wright, an awareness of white oppression seems to begin in his subconscious when he is a child; his early fears and guilt become embodied in a dream - image of " huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me " ( Black Boy, p:13 ). Of his adolescence, he says,

" Nothing challenged the totality of my personality so much as this pressure of hate and threat that stemmed from the invisible whites...Tension would set in at the mere mentioned of whites and a vast complex of emotions, involving the whole of my personality, would be aroused. It was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted. I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings. ( Black Boy pp:83-84 ).

In page 425 we can see there a special page talking about Richard Wright with the title of How "Bigger" Was Born.

" Let me give examples of how I begun to develop the dim negative of Bigger. I met white writers who talked of their responses, who told me how white reacted to this lurid American scene. And, as they talked, I'd translate what they said in terms of Bigger's life. But what was more important still, I read their novels. Here for the first time, I found ways and techniques of gauging meaningfully the effects of American civilization upon the personalities of people. I took these techniques, this ways of seeing and feeling, and twisted them, bent them, adapted them, until they became my ways of apprehending the locked - in life of the Black Belt areas. This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction, for my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life ".

He sees the problem of race discrimination through his point of view consciously. Meaning that he didn't try to hide or run away from that reality that he is black and he is one of the race which is segregated . He sees it with a clear mind.

" I am not now speaking of the popular idea of regimenting people's thought; I am speaking of the implicit, almost unconscious, or preconscious, assumption and ideals upon which whole nations and races act and live. And while reading these Nazi pages I'd be reminded of the Negro preacher in the South telling of life beyond this world, a life in which the

color of men's skin would not matter, a life in which each man would know what was deep down in the heart of his fellow man. And I'd know that I was still on the track of learning about Bigger still in the midst of the modern struggle for solidarity among men..."

His work was so readable and understandable, for he likes simplicity. He is concentrating on how the reader will understand his works easily, so that they will catch the essence of the story clearly. They know what the writer wants to tell, to explain, to show, to describe.

In writing his story, he tried to make it as lively and vivid as possible. He used common language and wrote it vividly. So the reader is able to feel what he feels which is shown in the passage in the story.

Richard Wright has a very good imagination because he likes reading and writing. His talent can be seen from the paragraph :

" ... It had been through books - at best, no more than vicarious cultural transfusion - that I had managed to keep myself alive in a negatively vital way. I had clutched at books; consequently my belief in books had risen more out of sense of desperation than from any abiding conviction of their ultimate value. " ( p : 282 )

Richard Wright, indeed, is undoubtedly, is one of the American famous modern writers, who has successfully presents some literary works which has a pure humanism



value about men, especially the blacks, mostly in the form of autobiography.

#### IV.2. THE HISTORY OF BLACK AMERICAN.

From History : Leif Ericson To 1865 by Jonathan Rose : The Jacksonian era of optimism was clouded by the existence in the United States of a social contradiction - increasingly recognized as social contradiction - increasingly recognized as a social evil - that would eventually tear the nation apart : slavery. The words of the Declaration of Independence - " that all men are created equal " - were meaningless for the 1,5 million black people who were slaves.

The Northern states gradually abolished slavery and the important of slave was outlawed in 1808. But the Southern economy was based on large plantation, which used slave workers to grow cotton, rice, tobacco and sugar. In several Southern states, small populations of free blacks also worked as artisans or traders.

In 1820, Southern and Northern politicians disputed the question of whether slavery would be legal in western territories. While Northern humanitarians organized themselves into abolitionist societies, Southern whites defended slavery with increasing

vehemence. The nation was also split over the issue of high tariff, which protected Northern industries but raised prices for Southern consumers.

In 1846, by settling a long standing border dispute with British Canada, the United States had acquired clear title to the southern half of the Oregon Country - the present states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Thus America became a truly continental power, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The acquisition of these new territories revived a troubling question : Would newly acquired territories be open to slavery ?.

Harriet Beecher Stowe of Massachusetts wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin, a sentimental but powerful antislavery novel which converted many readers to the abolitionist cause. The issue of slavery became, in American politics, economics, and cultural life, the central point of contention.

As President of the U.S.A Lincoln's first priority was to keep the United States one country, freedom for black people was a secondary objective. But Lincoln realized that by making the war a battle against slavery he could win support for the Union at home and abroad. Accordingly, on January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which granted freedom to all slaves in areas still controlled by the Confederacy.

The war resolved two fundamental questions that had divided the United States since 1776. It put an end to slavery, which was completely abolished by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865.

From 1945 until 1970, the United States enjoyed a long period of economic growth, interrupted only by brief and fairly mild recessions. For the first time, the great majority of Americans could enjoy a comfortable standard of living.

At the same time, the United States was moving slowly in the direction of racial justice.

In 1941, the threat of black protests persuaded President Roosevelt to ban discrimination in war industries, though his order had only a limited impact on hiring practices. In 1948, President Truman ended racial segregation in the armed forces and in all federal agencies. In 1954, in the decision *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregation in the public schools was unconstitutional; nevertheless southern states continued to resist integration for several years after the decision.

In 1955, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led a boycott of segregated public transportation that eventually ended segregation on city buses in

Montgomery, Alabama. In 1957, the governor of Arkansas tried to prevent blacks students from enrolling in an all - white high school in the state capital of Little Rock.

To enforce obedience to the law requiring integration, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in federal troops. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. led a nonviolent campaign to desegregate southern restaurants, interstate buses, theaters, and hotels. His followers were met by hostile police, violent mobs, tear gas, fire hoses and electric cattle prods.

The Kennedy administration tried to protect civil rights workers and secure voting rights for southern blacks. In June 1963, Governor George Wallace of Alabama symbolically stood at the doors of the all white state university to prevent the admission of two blacks students but the federal government forced him to give away. Speaking that evening, President Kennedy demanded the enactment of tough federal civil rights law. On November 22, before Kennedy could achieve that goal, he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

The new President, Lyndon Johnson, the vice president under Kennedy who succeeded to the office on the death of the president, passed the Civil Rights Act 1965 finally enabled all black Americans to vote.

In October 1967, 200.000 demonstrators demanding peace marched on the Pentagon in Washington regarding the Vietnam War. At the same time, unrest in the cities also erupted, as younger and more militant black leaders were denouncing as ineffectual the nonviolent tactics of Martin Luther King.

By 1973, President Nixon had signed a peace treaty with North Vietnam, brought American soldiers home, and ended conscription. Many blacks were still living in poverty, but many others were finally moving into well - paid professions.

The fact that many big cities : Cliveland, Newark, Los Angeles, Washington, Detroit, Atlanta - had elected black mayors contributed to the ending of urban riots.

The region least affected by the boom and bust mentality of the Twenties was the South. Its growth had been more regular, its prosperity more limited, both in money and in distribution, and its conservative outlook unshaken.

Furthermore, the area continued to be plagued by far too many chronic problems - problems of race relations, of industrial and agrarian poverty, of malnutrition and disease - to participate whole - heartedly in the whoope spirit of the more prosperous and carefree North.

Ineluctable matters as racial bias as lingering agrarian idealism, the dislike or distrust of outsiders, the ascendancy of conservative evangelical Protestantism, the tendency to take a parochial view on political and social issues. A few prosperous families, with well established holdings of a thousand acres or more, for a short time held a position of leadership and began to set standards of a gentle behavior for all to admire and a host of pretenders to imitate.

These patricians, whatever the history of their origins, endeavored to live the life of English country gentlemen, with the standard traditions of hospitality, polite entertainments and ritualized fox hunting carefully observed and even improved upon. They set standards of courtesy which became an ineradicable part of Southern behavior, giving rise to the oft-repeated maxim : "Better not born than ill-bred".

From Backgrounds of American Literary Thought by Rod W.Horton p: 376 we will see : After the advent of the cotton boom of the early nineteenth century, it was this class ( middle class yeoman farmer who recultivate areas of hundred to four hundred acres ) with its fortunate still to be made, which produced the new-wealth, furnished the new leaders, and developed the

vast cotton empires of the Black Belt. It was this group also which took the lead in defending the institution of slavery and in shaping an economy which made the continuance of that institution a life-and-death necessity.

This fact is also became the second reason for the humiliation of the blacks. At that time the blacks are mostly work as slaves in the farmer or fields, because the growing areas of farms and fields ( of cotton especially ), are moving rapidly. The bigger the farms are, the more workers the land owners needed. So, slavery is legalized, for it supports the maintenance of the corps.

Slavery at first was more a convenience than a necessity in the Thirteen Colonies. Negroes were limited as house servants in all of the coastal cities. It was only in the tobacco regions and rice islands of the South that the Negro filled any real need as adjustment to the already numerous white laborers both free and indentured.

South was merely following the course of history, the 5th century Athenian civilization, perhaps the highest point of cultural attainment the world has known was based upon slave labor.

The Jews, the Roman, the Medieval Europeans had continually practiced slavery - the church itself had given its approval -, the sociologist says that slavery was beneficial to both races. In terms of : for the white , released from mental labor, to pursue the higher aims of culture and social leadership.

Able to develop moral character and a spirit of human kindness through being made responsible for the welfare of their inferiors. For the Negroes, his life is preferable than in his former state in Africa. His place in society securely determined his spiritual welfare directed by the enlightened precepts of Christianity.

In July, 2, 1964 about 27 pages was made with its 11 titles about Discrimination which is named Civil Right Act, representing a clear turning point in history of America. A point at which America made a genuine attempt to resolve its contradictions. All Americans both black and white benefited.

The basic paradox underlying the black American experience is that the black man is both an outsider and an early settler of America. Brought to the Colonies as slave, cut off from his former culture, forbidden to live in a family unit, denied the right to literacy and education, the black man could only refract,



in inevitably deserted ways, the values, mores, and attitudes of the civilization of which he gradually became a part.

Unlike the American Indian, who was segregated on the reservation, the black man could not dissociate himself from American civilization. Even though he might risk his life to reach the free states of the North, his color, his illiteracy, and his lack of even a semiskilled trade usually condemned him to a lifetime of menial labor and bare subsistence.

In spite of the recent real advances in civil rights and other ameliorative legislation, the black American feels relatively little alteration in his ambiguous relationship with the culture of which he is so inextricably a part. The changes have been too recent, too tentative, and too grudgingly conceded to soften the memory of the hundred years of discrimination, exploitation, and physical assault since Emancipation.

There are still the ghettos of the inner cities deserted by their white populations; there are still the segregated "neighborhood" schools, there are still the painful discrepancies between the numbers of unemployed blacks and whites (discrepancies even wider for youth) there are still the exacerbating "color line" tensions

that periodically flare out in pitched battles between blacks and whites in our "integrated schools".

Compounding the paradox and sharpening the irony is the contrast between the situation of black Americans and the idealism proclaimed by the Christian belief in universal brotherhood and in the affirmation of the equality of all men set forth in the Declaration of Independence.

Colonial Americans could reconcile such blatant inconsistency only by convincing themselves that blacks were something less than human. In addition, white masters habitually practiced concubinage with the more comely house slave, while fanatically protecting the purity of their own women, thus demonstrating that only the white male had the privilege of crossing the color line. ( American Literary Thought by Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards pp: 579-580 ).

Those are the chronology of the history of the black American, either from the sequence of time, or from the sequence of event in the American history. Now i would like to talk about the Jim Crow law which was so famous in the Southern America. It's begun with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist organization which quickly declared illegal but revived sporadically in one form or another throughout the next century and continued to dramatize and encourage racial hatreds.

It is one thing to attempt to cripple the Republican opposition by keeping the Negro from the polls ; it is quite another to destroy his spirit by attempting to segregate him from the white man in all the commonplace activities to everyday life. Many persons, are under the impression that this enforced segregation - in public transportation, theaters, auditoriums, restaurants, recreation areas, washrooms, and the like - has been part of the Southern pattern since Emancipation and they are thus quite willing to accept at face value, whether they agree with the principle or not, the White Supremacy attitude that in upholding segregation they are merely attempting to preserve the traditional Southern way of life.

Except for some early abortive attempts on the part of Southern railroads to keep Negroes and mulattos from riding in first-class passengers cars, desegregation practices did not begin to appear until after the withdrawal of federal troops in 1877. Up to 1900 most of these Jim Crow laws applied only to trains, and it is to be noted that most states adopted reluctantly.

Still as early as 1892 a conservative supreme court decided that segregation was not wrong in legal principle so long as equal facilities were maintain.

This famous "seperate but equal" doctrine was subsequently apply to many aspects of life other than the education issue which had occasioned it.

Races were kept apart in waiting rooms and street cars beginning about the turn of the century and in streets cars beginning about the turn of the century and in streets cars beginning about the turn of the century abd in streets cars beginning about the turn of the century and in bussiness ofices and factories approximately a decade later.

Public parks and hospitals also began to segregate after 1900, and residential areas in some cities fell into line about 1910. Many of the most irritating segregationist practices, such as separation of washrooms, tickets windows, entrances and exists, drinking section and only much later were in some localities enacted into law.

Since the integration of the Armed Services shortly after the end of World War II and the Supreme Court decision of 1954 requiring the integration of public educational facilities "with all deliberate speed" the decline of Jim Crowism has been steady and dramatic.

Anti discrimination laws have been enacted, Jim Crow laws have been repealed; at least some of these changes have been effectively enforced. It is likely

that the present collegiate generation will in its lifetime witness the final burial of Jim Crow. And it is even possible that when that interment takes place, Americans of both races, in all parts of the country, will join in a ritual of profound release and sober celebration. ( The American Literary Thought pp: 408-411 ).

**CHAPTER IV**  
**THE ELEMENTS OF**  
**FICTION IN BLACK BOY**