

## THE CREATIVE JOURNEY FROM RAGE TO HOPE: AN APPRAISAL OF THE SELECT NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims at making an assessment of the journey that Richard Wright takes, moving from a state of restless anger over lies and illusions of the society to a state of optimism and strong hope in a bright future for the African – American society. The characters in the select novels ‘Native Son’, ‘Black Boy’ and ‘The Outsider’ have been thoroughly analyzed to explore the intrinsic nature of the artistic creations of Wright. The vehement nature of revolt in his characters is looked into deeply so that the strong emotional transformation is brought out to the surface. His characters do have courage in despair and believe in a ‘dream’ that looks forward to an unshakeable faith in the future.

**KEYWORDS:** Transformation, Revolt, Anger, Impulsive Reaction, Frustration, Isolation, Existential Situation, Freedom, Liberty, Hope

### INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright has had a prominent and enduring impact on American fiction. With his powerful stories of men and women who struggle towards and often come to self-realization, he formulated a very impressive personal value system by spurning the lies and illusions contrived by a racist society. This is the cross section of a society which fears to face the true nature of itself and its actions. Wright’s fiction gives a new and deepened outlook of the human conditions, its agency and the possibilities of mastering it through sheer toughness of spirit. This is an expression of hope, hoping against the hopeless situation. Though his vision is tragic, his fiction reveals a strongly emotional transformation of rage and agony, the artistic results of the sexual connotations of anger.

His characters are vehemently revolting against a hostile environment. Though leftist in his thinking, Wright as an artist trusts very strongly that no theory of life could take the place of life. Wright realizes that it was impossible to be a ‘black’ and ‘fully human’ in a white society because they were deprived of a ‘psychological space’ to grow as human beings. His was a quest for a ‘place’ for African-American and with him the invisible status assigned to them ceases to exist.

Wright’s anger is not the result of an immediate impulsive reaction to a world theoretically bent upon demolishing him forever, but a moral agent transforming a lawless inhuman world into a Heaven on Earth. The extreme rage of his fictional characters, which is the result of their existential situation, is indeed the result of despair and a sense of meaninglessness. Still they have courage in despair and believe in the “unattainable dream”, a plunge into faith.

In the novel Native Son (1940), Bigger, the protagonist is not a regular, conventional hero by any means. However, Wright forces us to enter into Bigger’s mind and to understand the shocking effect of the social conditions in

which he was raised. Bigger was not born to be a violent criminal. He is a “native son”: a product of American culture and the violence and racism that pervades it.

Baldwin in his essay *Alas! Poor Richard (1961)*, comments on *Native Son* as a work of “Murderous Bitterness” and violence.

‘Thus, when in Wright’s pages a Negro make is found hacking a white woman to death, the very gusto with which this is done, and the great attentions paid to the details of physical destruction reveal a terrible attempt to break out of the cage in which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long’ (1885, 273).

Bigger’s feeling of liberty and a sense of freedom after the character Mary’s death is delusive, for his flight actually draws him closer to his fate. The monstrousness of the second murder exhilarates Bigger all the more. Bigger considers the two murders the “most meaningful things”. Whether in escaping from the consequence of in fighting, he decides to face the outcome courageously.

Thus, “Fighting it out in the wind and sun-light, in front of those whose hate for him was so incomprehensibly deep that, after they has shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had that night in the car, and say: “I’d like to know how your people live” (NS, 239 – 40)

His anger is more an inner struggle to emerge with the rest of the world, “to lose himself in it, so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black” (NS, 240). All his life he has been trying for an ‘I - Thou’ relationship but he is angry at his confinement, which makes him incapable of relationships.

Bigger’s dilemma is a very violent psychic struggle, an act of imaginative escape from reality. Each of the three times he kills, he targets the head. He crushes the skull of the rat in the opening scene. He smothers Mary with a pillow over her head and when he kills Bessie in the deserted apartment, he pounds her head over and over again with a brick. Even the terror and hate of the head comes home to him in one of his nightmares. Thus he wants to get out of the mental prison. This is the painful reality of his revolt and anger towards what he cannot come to terms with. The only solution Bigger discovers in the tormented hours before his execution, is for each man to accept himself for what he is, transcending the world’s horrors and contradictions. All that is left for him is to ponder over his fate. The only choice he has left to make is whether he will die in hope or in hatred.

At the extensive trial, Max analyses Bigger’s reaction and his rage. Max’s basic argument to the judge is that, Bigger being an African-American is in a radically mitigating circumstance. Max’s emotional defense argument is a plea for “white mercy”. He points out to Bigger’s mental and emotional attitude and the culpability of the white in shaping those attitudes. Max argues,

“This Negro boy’s entire attitude toward life is a crime! The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence” (NS, 400).

To the extent that Existentialism views man as set free from the claims of a God, Wright also perceived man’s position similarly. When Bigger meets his death not in despair but with a freedom by shaping his own destiny through violence, he symbolizes an authorial belief that man’s freedom is within his grasp, if he is willing to accept the

responsibility and its consequences. The message is a reality that one struggles with; but it does mirror the same social, not metaphysical concerns and protests that powerfully emerge from the novel '*Black Boy*'. (Birignano, 146-147)

In *Black Boy* (1945) one experiences Richard's growing realization of what it means to be black in a white dominant world and how he creates his identity in order to survive in a world structured to oppress his growth. His great "sense of life" struggles through strife with forces and is re-created. Young Richard confronts massive contradictions in his search for meaning. He wonders why so many African-Americans wear strips and the white men have guns and the African-American do not have them.

Wright makes it clear that his cultural isolation began in his black home and black community, where he became aware of the inescapable existence of the white race. He would stand for hours at the door steps of neighbors listening to their talk, learning how the African-Americans were treated, and this made him go through many agonizing sleepless nights. Though he was never ill-treated by the whites, the hostility of the whites became so deeply implanted in his mind that he became conditioned to their existence as though he had been the victim of a thousand killings

The following lines from *Black Boy* (1945) sets out its theme, which is contradictory. "They use darkness in the daytime. And they grope at noonday as in the night". Wright uses darkness and daytime, black and white as images to strengthen the contradictory mode of the existential situation. Wright's mother like his grandmother is a mixture of black and white. Even though there is sunshine in the South, the atmosphere is bleak and dark for him. When Pease and Reynolds force Wright out of the optical shop where he tries to learn a trade he recounts, "I went into the sunshine and walked home like a blind man" (193). meaningless suffering, unending hunger, and raging brutality typify Richard's existence and temper. He "fostered won, struggles and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another" (BB, 37). The whole novel is a development in cognizance.

The poverty, hunger both physical and spiritual, frustration, meek submission and misdirected energy are all sources for his existential rage. At the Memphis bank, young Richard makes acquaintance with the elevator operator named Shorty. For Richard he is a terribly witty character since he plays the role of a clown in a degrading manner. One day, Shorty, an interesting character in the novel wants is kicked by a white man. This makes Richard furious as he experiences the dreadful conditions of the African-American for survival.

All along Richard is not to be furrowed under the weight of the unbearable burden of the white tyranny. The constant grief of the *Black Boy* is to fight against every compromise. As corresponding to the situation portrayed in *Native Son* (1940), young Richard in *Black Boy* sees many "Blacks" express their hatred by transferring it to their own race and fighting among themselves. *Black Boy* (1945) exposes the very roots of Existentialism. The narrator learns to distrust everything and everybody: to rely upon his own sense of how things are, to believe only what is acceptable to his sensibilities. Thus existence precedes essence. This reveals that Wright's Existentialism was "home-made" right out of the American South. No longer a Native Son barred behind a grill but a Richard Wright with a leap of faith.

Wright draws out Richard's journey north, as he believes vehemently in his potential to create a meaningful existence. With the southern landscape of beauty and social horror, Richard has grown to a peak of "Black rage" and feels a compulsion to hold his destiny within his grasp and design his future. "His self-conscious desire to determine the fundamental quality of his existence is characteristic of man's inherent and essential nature and, as such, is Wright's expression of a legitimate existential imperative" (Tate, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 118).

In *'The Outsider'* (1952), Wright resolves the earlier conflict between individual freedom and collectivism, stressing the former and criticizing the latter as an embodiment in the American communist party. The protagonist, Cross Damon, is not merely a black man – he is thinking, questioning man face to face with the complexities of the twentieth century life. Having a home, wife and children does not keep him alive because he is a man subjected to greediness. His personality is overcome by self-hatred and his fractured personality wars within himself. His mother's morally charged words make him rage at his situation. Though life in the beginning presents itself to him as meaningless, he does embark on a journey for self-identity with a more positive philosophy than negativistic Existentialism. The rage of disbelief in everything is an answer to all the irrational acts of the character Cross Damon. Damon has the freedom to exercise a most fundamental choice. He insists on action, for only in action does existence attain concreteness and fullness. Action is person and involves the whole man. For Sartre and for Kierkegaard, freedom and existence are distinguishable. Damon is free to act but he could not exchange his existence for the existence of another. The rare possibility that is gifted to Cross Damon has only paved the way for a "desultory fragmentary existence". Lynch considers Cross Damon as a more complete existential hero than Bigger, "facing not simply an unjust but a worthless universe and creating his identity and values out of that void" (1990, 108).

Holding the position of a clerk in the Chicago post office is a total disorder to Cross Damon. The pressure of the domestic situation builds up until he finds release only in violence. He masterminds a plan and terrifies Gladys, and then is compelled to leave them. But she also demands that he borrow eight hundred dollars as she can clear their debts. Damon's mistress, Dot, is pregnant by him, but is young enough to bring a charge of rape. This atmosphere strangles him and he is forced into existentialist freedom rather than beaten by environmental oppressions.

Cross Damon is suddenly liberated from all obligations through the subway accident. He has disconnected all connections with the past. Cross Damon considers himself fortunate to have survived after the accident, but his descent into the hell of agony begins. On the first day in Blount's apartment, Damon loses his grip on his decision and kills Blount and Herndon as they fight with each other. He makes the brutal murders appear as though the two have killed each other. Though he seems to be pleased for a while that he has destroyed 'two little gods' he soon realizes its burden.

Cross Damon's killing of Joe Thomas is for purely practical reasons but his killing of Herndon and Blount is a conscious choice. Like Bigger Thomas, he too must exercise his existentialist choices, must express himself through deadly violence. Cross Damon views himself as an innocent victim when he comes to the end of his career, because he killed to escape betrayal. Damon experiences no guilt over the murders, since he fails to evaluate the moral rights of his deeds. His existential fury at every situation and the irrationality and fear he encounters, make him blind to his needs.

Damon was fleeing from his identity, his old hateful consciousness, and his existential rage, to find a new ground. As he begins a transformed life from the "veils of illusion", he realizes that "men hate themselves and it makes them hate others" and only in their relationship with the 'Thou' can life become meaningful. Since he deserted his African-American reality, he reached an awful space. It was too late for him to learn the hard message of life that it is only commitment to life and to people that will bring ultimate fulfillment, in the face of the tragic consequence of his radical freedom. Thus, in the anxiety, dread, and 'boundary situation' of the African-American, Wright's reactions create an existential situation where he could fling a spark into this darkness and through courage make a new a "beloved community".

## CONCLUSIONS

The creative talent of Richard Wright is such that his writings have had a very powerful influence on American Literature. This is the result of his desire to depict poverty, hunger and misdirected energy as sources of frustration and anger of the black American society. Richard Wright is not to be crushed under the weight of the burden of white oppression. His novels do express the living experiences and sensations of being a Black American. Thus in the anxiety, dread and other frontier situations in the African -American society that Wright is able to create an existential situation. This in fact flings a spark of light in the darkness to bring about a ray of hope.

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