

Oppression and Suppression of Black People in The Novels of Richard Wright

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Abstract

Richard Wright is a major figure in Africana literature, philosophy, and politics in the twentieth century. Known as a novelist of ideas as well as a radical activist and world-renowned thinker, his works touched on a wide range of political issues and academic subjects. He was one of America's most prominent authors, having written both fiction and nonfiction. As a result of his efforts to eradicate the underlying causes of Western civilization's violent anti-Black racism, as well as the struggles of Black people for meaning and liberation in an absurd world, his ideas have influenced a number of subsequent generations of social and political activists and thinkers.

Oppression and Suppression of black people

A major impact of Wright's work is that it pushed white Americans to confront the utmost horrors of racism, economic exploitation, and cultural dominance. Wright's fiction, nonfiction, and personal works all play an important role in this. To reveal white people's "perpetual battle against the human dignity of Black people—a war of which most white people had kept them blithely oblivious," Wright put up concepts that were both provocative and thought-provoking (Delbanco, 1995, p. 193). It's fair to say that Wright had a hand in shaping the Black American literary canon in the 20th century.

Richard Wright was a radical and influential Black writer of his day who portrayed Black wrath, indignation, outrage, nihilism, and violence in response to the repressive nature of Western and Anglo-American society in some of the most compelling ways. However, before Wright, Black writers tended to paint heroes who were courteous and defiant in the face of white tyranny, especially in the case of Black men. Using the example of Frederick Douglass' book, *An American Slave*, he describes his struggle with the cruel slave-breaker, Covey. Douglass subdues this white man by grabbing him by the collar and holds him down. This shows that he is not the aggressor. Slave Douglass, following in the footsteps of his master Wright, displays self-control and discipline to defeat his white assailant. Black hero figures like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, who was too enraged and

bitter about the way anti-Black racism and economic exploitation had shaped their existential situation, were popularised by Richard Wright, who forcefully imprinted them on the literary stage.

It's important to note that Wright investigated intellectuals from the Black and Third World communities' sometimes lonely and tragic lives as he attempted to understand their psychological reactions to cultural dominance. To the greatest extent possible, Wright used a revisionist Marxist view of history, which included an understanding of anti-African racism. This made him one of the most significant radical Black intellectuals and authors of his day (see Robinson, 1983). In his book *White Man, Listen!* he claims:

Buttressed by their belief that their God had entrusted the earth into their keeping, drunk with power and possibility, waxing rich through trade in commodities, human and non-human, with awesome naval and merchant marines at their disposal, their countries filled with human debris anxious for any adventures, psychologically armed with new facts, white Western Christian civilization during the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, with a long, slow, and bloody explosion, hurled itself upon the sprawling masses of coloured humanity in Asia and Africa. (1964, p. 1)

Author Richard Wright's work is a major contributor to the traditional literary distortions of black life. As it turns out, Wright's portrayal of the Black experience only serves to solidify and sustain long-standing racist prejudices that have permeated

American literature since its creation. That stereotyping of the Black experience in Wright's literature leads to unrealistic action, flawed storylines, one-dimensional characters, and shallow reasoning in works that lack verisimilitude.

Many commentators have praised Wright's portrayal of the Black experience as being unique. To illustrate, below are two quotes from Wright's most well-known work: "Now the most powerful and acclaimed expression we have ever heard of what it means to be a Negro in America is without a doubt Richard Wright's **Native Son**." According to the second reviewer, "American society was irrevocably transformed the day **Native Son** appeared". The few dissenting voices, primarily from the African-American community, have concentrated on minor flaws. A large majority of reviewers have failed to note that Wright's portrayals of African-American life in the majority of his works follow a pattern that nearly exactly matches the conventional literary clichés of African-American life. Two real-world instances illustrate the point well. **Lawd Today**, on the other hand, is hailed as a masterpiece by a reviewer who blasts *Native Son* for distorting the Black experience.

The second critic is a huge fan of Wright's work in general, but hates **Lawd Today** so much that he won't admit it's his. He says this in his essay: "Unlike Wright's other work, it incorporates nearly every derogatory stereotype about African-Americans that has ever appeared in American literature. Wright, if this is his work, probably never meant for it to be seen by the public."

What does it mean to be a stereotypical person? There are several examples of racial and ethnic stereotypes in literature. However, since this piece is about a Black author who mostly wrote about Black people, it will stick to the stereotypical Black view. In the early '70s, a White reviewer wrote the following:

The main elements in the Negro stereotype are generally familiar to the American public. The Negro is pictured as simple, childlike, lazy, dependent, often clever but never ambitious, content with his life and with the innocent or amoral merrymaking in which he indulges ... He is often comical because he is often a buffoon. His common sense makes him wary of too much education but he has the wisdom of simple creatures...

When discussing the plantation tradition's representation of Black existence, a Black critic from

almost a quarter-century ago used virtually identical terms when he wrote: "But generally the Negro is depicted as a simple, happy and humorous character." Rather than conclude, Wright's stereotyped portrayal of Black life was meant to give some reasonable foundation for understanding what Wright did by speculating on his motivations. We must first try to match our reality with the dominant view in the composition of a literary work, say Scholes and Kellogg, "in order to grasp a literary work." It may also assist to explain Wright's usage of stereotypes if Sterling Brown is true about stereotypes having a basis in reality. Both the writer and the reader engage in selective perception and projection in harmony. In understanding that "they may be my people, but they are not my kind," even the victims, who look down on the stereotypes, may now take some pride. As a result of this reality, the stereotypes have a greater level of realism and intrigue, yet there is no literary explanation for them. Regardless of how closely it mimics real life, fiction is not the same as real life. "The only justification for the existence of novels is that they strive to depict life," Henry James once wrote.

In theory, Wright never wavered, but in practice, he frequently fell short of its demands. What a writer intends to express and what he actually says are not necessarily the same thing in a particular work. "Literature is a social institution utilizing language as its medium — a social invention," said Rene Wellek and Austin Warren. When it comes to meaning and coherence, fiction, according to Max Westbrook, "if there is none other than that supplied by the particular writer," then it has none. Final words: "Meaning is a result of the interaction between two worlds: the fictitious world produced by the author and the "actual" world, the apprehendable cosmos," as noted by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg. Unlike the "actual" world, Wright's world has little resemblance to the understandable universe, but it does have a strong resemblance to the world of stereotypes that is so common in American literature. Wright's works may differ somewhat from standard literary clichés in terms of details, inconsistencies, and even contradictions, but the essence stays the same. The literary convention has always included contradictions and inconsistencies.

A pretty accurate composite image of the African-American stereotype develops despite the book's ambiguities, inconsistencies, and call to "understand individuals and occurrences within context." Disinterested scholarship, i.e., experts who in

addressing stereotypes did not have Richard Wright's works explicitly in mind while discussing stereotypes has been regarded more representative than citing particular examples in literature that illustrate the stereotype.

He always had a pencil and piece of paper in his pocket for recording their witty one-liners. Richard Wright penned *Native Son* as a response to the rage of those young Negro men, as well as his feelings of rage.

We can tell the importance of a work of art by how widely it is known, according to one critic. **Native Son** is well-known around the world. According to the quotation's source, a psychiatrist named Dr Wertham, Wright's psychotherapy revealed an unconscious aspect in the novel *Native Son*. This will be explored further in the future, but for now, just know that Wright is still very well-liked even now.

This is arguably the finest work published on the race problem so far," writes Joseph Jenkins, Jr. in *Phylon* of Wright's sharp insight, solid judgment, and tremendous energy. "Richard Wright's terrible and fascinating account of a Negro child from the Black Belt of Chicago leaves one with the impression that nothing honest or meaningful has ever been written about an American Negro before," says Margaret Wallace in *The New York Sun* (March 5, 1940). This is by far the best book written by an American black author.

When it comes to writing "Bad Nigger," no black person has ever had the skill or courage to do so, according to an anonymous article in *Time* magazine (March 4, 1940). A Marxist newspaper, *New Masses* (March 5, 1940), quoted Samuel Sillen as saying, "There is no writer in America about whom one can declare more confidently: He is the creator of our better world and our art." When it came to **Native Son**, high-ranking Communist Party official Benjamin Davis had some misgivings. However, he decided in the *New York Sunday Worker* that Wright had done a "great and daring job with bold initiative." At the time of *Native Son*'s release, the Communist Party's highest-ranking commander, Earl Browder, is reported to have declared that he found nothing wrong with the book.

Few other novels have received as much advance critical acclaim or have lived up to the high expectations they sparked, according to Charles Poore in the *New York Times* (March 1, 1940). **Native Son** could only have been written by a black person of colour. Mr Wright is a spokesman for a

whole race, not for a single wrongdoer. So many people praised *Native* immediately after its release and continued to do so for decades after that. These instances from the late 1960s serve as excellent case studies. "No white man," repeats Dan McCall, "could have written **Native Son**. The extraordinary quality of the books is its 'niggeriness'"

A Chicago *Defender* scribe, James Reed, responded to a question about Wright's colleagues' views on blacks by saying, "The black man in the South, at least 90 per cent of them, belongs to a primitive race scarcely removed from barbarism." Chicago reporter Charles Leavell wrote a storey about Robert Nixon, a distant precursor of Bigger, in which he used the same language: Ferocity may be seen in Brick Slayer's characteristics, which have been compared to those of *Jungle Beast*. The following was written in 1930 by a scholar of worldwide repute, none other than Carl Jung:

Now what is more contagious than to live side by side with a rather primitive people? The Negro, generally speaking, would give anything to change his skin. . . .

It would be difficult not to see that the Negro, with his primitive mobility, his expressive emotionality, his child-like immediacy, his sense of music and rhythm, his funny picturesque language, has infected American behavior.

Because of this, it is necessary to analyze both *Native Son*'s writing and its reception in light of its historical context. This method has been used by a tiny number of critics of **Native Son**, but the impact has been limited or disregarded since the critique has typically been fragmented, without a unified direction. One reviewer, on the other hand, has essentially summarized the main points. He calls Wright's portrayal of the Black experience "distorted," and he attempts to explain why Wright chose to portray Black life in that way, as well as why he has received such high praise for his work.

The story opens with the clanging of an alarm clock. It is followed by the protagonist's mother's voice, which "sang out impatiently: 'Bigger shut that thing off!'" (p.7). Her next command to the protagonist is to "Turn on the lights," when she speaks to her younger son: "Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you all out of here" (p.7).

All of the Bigger So far, Thomas' family has only been able to afford a one-bedroom apartment with a

kitchenette. Until she can get dressed, Thomas has no other choice than to urge her sons to tilt their heads in their direction. Bigger kills the rat and then frightens his sister Vera with it till she passes out from fear. She tells him that he acts like the greatest fool she has ever seen and wonders why he was "birthed" from her. More sass is returned by Bigger, and it's apparent that his mother has no choice but to whine. It's fascinating how she complains since she uses phrases like these: Vera looks to Bigger and says, "Bigger is just plain dumb, black insane." She then tells Bigger: "If you had any manhood in you, we wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump" (p. 12).

She gets to the crux of the problem by turning her attention straight to Bigger. "Your only concern is for yourself! Until they threaten to cut off your food and starve you, even if the relief offers you a job, you will not accept it. Bigger, honest, you're the ugliest, ugliest man I've ever met in my whole life!!" On page 12, the author writes: Here, Mrs Thomas is fulfilling the stereotyped role of the Black mother who is usually assigned to castration in traditional literature. Even if later circumstances corroborate the mother's assessment, this function remains intact. The stereotype of the selfish, lazy, pleasure-seeker is nonetheless established. In Thomas Jefferson's words: "A Negro after hard work during the day will be tempted by the least entertainment to sit up to midnight, or late5though knowing he must go out with the first daybreak of the day." It does not contradict the mother's second accusation that Bigger will only work to keep from hunger since Jefferson was talking about slaves who were compelled to work. Hard work does not contradict the mother. According to legend, Benjamin Franklin once observed of Blacks who had a say in the issue, "The Negro is an animal that consumes as much as possible to labour as little as possible."

Bigger later admits to one of his buddies, "You know, I'd just as soon go to jail as accept that blasted relief job," after revisiting the subject of stealing Blum's department store with his three pals (p. 32). Life quickly wears down Mrs Thomas when she has a kid like Bigger. We don't get a super-strong Black matriarch, we get a woebegone, simple religious doormat type instead of the stereotype. Even Bigger, while watching his mother, made the following observation:

... how soft and shapeless she was. Her eyes were tired and sunken and darkly singed from a long lack of rest. She moved about slowly, touching objects with her fingers as she passed them, using them for

support. Her feet dragged over the wooden floor and her face held an expression of tense effort (p. 103).

When Mrs Thomas visits Bigger in Jail, she speaks as follows:

"I'm praying for you, son. That's all I can do now... The Lord knows I did all I could for you and your sister and brother. I scrubbed and washed and ironed from morning to night, day in and day out, as long as I had strength in my old body.... When I heard the news of what happened, I got on my knees and turned my eyes to God and asked Him if I had raised you wrong. I asked Him to let me bear your burden if I did wrong by you. Honey, your poor ma can't do anything Mrs now. I'm old and this is too much for me. I'm at the end of my rope" (p. 277).

Bigger's sister is simply a younger replica of his mother. One critic described her as "the tragic kid Vera, sensitive, gentle-hearted and doomed." As for Bessie, "What his mother has was Bessie's whiskey and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion" (p. 226). Stealing and sex were added ingredients but essentially a reflection of the same forces. Again, we view Bessie through Bigger's eyes:

He felt the narrow orbit of her life; from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours, seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led. . . . Most nights she was too tired to go out; she only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her ... He knew why she liked him; he gave her money for drinks" (pp. 131-32).

Both situations are in line with the facts of the tale and there are no other characters to contrast them with, even if it is all filtered through Bigger's consciousness, much as Bigger's picture was partly presented via the mother's eyes. Buddy appears to be "aimless, lost with no sharp or harsh edges, like a fat dog," while Bigger's three friends are all made from the same fabric (p. 101). Minor Black characters have no bearing on the discussion. Bigger's mother's minister, Reverend Hammond, is a folk preacher archetype, as is Doc the poolroom keeper. The merits of turning Bigger in if the opportunity arises are debated by two Black characters, with one vowing that he will die before Bigger does. The other would do it right away because he believes Bigger would not have fled if he were innocent. According to

Bigger's blind boss, Mrs. Dalton, a former Dalton employee named Mr Green "went to night school and acquired an education" (p. 62). The Daltons "starved him on Sunday," according to Peggy, the White House maid (p. 116). It would be fascinating to see a well-educated Black figure in Wright's work, but Mr Green is just mentioned; he is never seen.

Later in the storey, a "learned" Black makes an appearance, and he's a sight to behold. It takes up nearly three pages of his diary to describe his shenanigans in a prison cell. The following are the passages:

He went off his nut from studying too much at the university. He was writing a book on how colored people live and he says somebody stole all the facts he'd found. He says he's got to the bottom of why colored folks are treated badly and he's going to tell the president and have things changed. . . He swears that his university professor had him locked up. The cops picked him up this morning in his underwear; he was in the lobby of the Post Office building waiting to speak to the president (p. 318.)

This information was provided by a White character, but it can be confirmed by direct observation.

References

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