

**Richard Wright:
Humanistic Novelist and a Sensitive Black Intellectual**

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Richard Wright (1908-1960)

Courtesy: <https://www.thriftbooks.com/a/richard-wright/196584/>

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to present highly literary qualities and dramatic achievement of Richard Wright, who used his 'Voice and Pen' as a weapon to fight for the freedom of Black people, those who suffered by racism and to show how he was actively associated with social and intellectual movements, which influenced his works that concerned with racial discrimination. It neatly explains how he is the ideal writer expressing the bleakness, barrenness, effect of the crime, which affect the personality and life of African Americans.

Keywords: Richard Wright, racism, oppression, self-identity, depression, rootlessness, 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 got focused upon these issues. The rise of science, the ramifications of industrialism, the effects of Marxism, 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 join hands in making remarks thus:

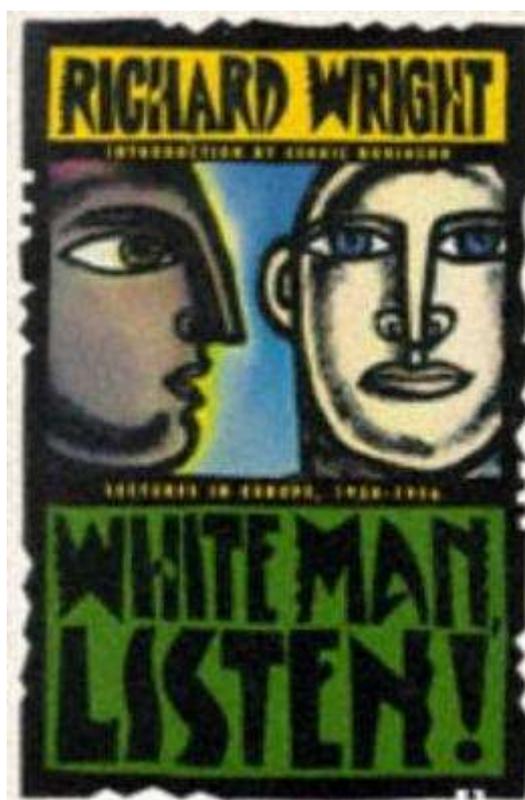
“Seen in perspective, then, both the life and the achievement of Richard Wright are rich sources of paradoxes. Despite his claim of being ‘rootless’, he carried his earliest experiences of the rural South close with him through the landscapes of the industrial cities that are the terrain of so much of his fiction. A ‘Loney’ O 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” (P XI).

When his works are concerned with American racial topics, their tone is of strong protest. Being the breakthrough man coming 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 flavour 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 4 September 1908 into the poverty of Sharecropper life on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, Richard Wright grew up in Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee and Arkansas. Even at an early age, Richard perceived the power of words. Without understanding of words, he responded to their evocative power. One evening as his grandmother was washing him, “words - words whose meaning I did not fully know – had slipped out of my mouth” (*Black Boy* 49). He had asked his mother to kiss him “back there” (P 49) and for this, he suffered the wrath of the entire family. Feeling no guilt, unable to understand why he should be chastised, Richard only recognized the effect of his words upon others, a power that fascinated him. He proudly narrates in *Black Boy*:

“The tremendous upheaval that my words
had caused, made me know that there
lay back of them (sic) much more than
I could figure out, and I resolved that
in the future, I would learn the meaning
of why they had beat and denounced me” (P 53).



Courtesy: https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/white-man-listen_richard-wright/520569/#isbn=0060925647&idiq=129036

According to him, the pen became the most effective weapon of warfare, the equivalent of physical violence. This is how Richard Wright got initiated into the weaponry of words which led him on to the reality of the world outside the south. Through the medium of words, Wright expressed his fear and hate for the Whiteman. He wanted the Whiteman to listen to him. *White Man, Listen!* is a title of one of his books.

Richard Wright did not write for the black people but for Whites who knew nothing of the problems confronting Blacks whereas Blacks knew it. 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. Thus, words were used as weapons by black writers. Commenting on the use of words as weapons by the black writers, Addison Gayle Jr. remarks:

“In the beginning was the word, and it was the word that proved the greatest obstacle for the black writer. Words, to be sure, may be used as weapons; they are, however, the property of protagonist and antagonist alike and, like an unfaithful woman, capable of serving two masters simultaneously” (P.1).

Men who wage warfare with words must be conscious of the meaning of their existence. To confront reality was to step outside the realm of hate and fear, to posit a world different from that vouchsafed by the Americans. From the vantage point of the migrants, America was desperately in need of revolution and the writer who sought to function as their redeemer would have to record this desire for violent change. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) shows the black writer's disregard of the dangers in accepting a new function for the black writer. Wright saw that his foe was more than mere whiteness – he came to feel contempt for the comfortable abstractions taught in schools and even more bitter contempt for the fundamentalist Christianity. Always lonely, shivering and isolated, he dreamed violent daydreams of retribution against the people who represented the forces that created the conditions of his life.

In their introduction to Richard Wright, Million R. Stern and Seymour L. Gross remarked:

“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” (P 179).

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

In an interview given to P.M. Magazine on April 14, 1945, Wright said:

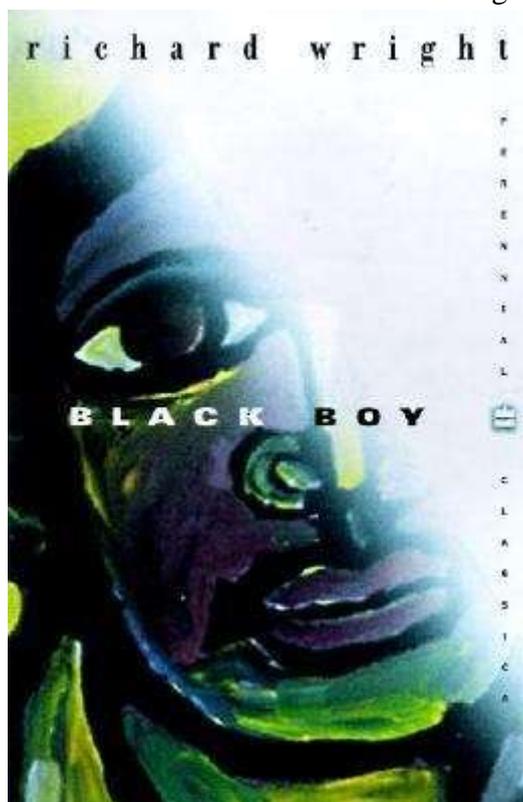
“I wanted to give, lend my tongue to the voiceless Negro boys. I feel that way about the deprived Negro children of the South. Not until the sun ceases to shine on you Shall I disown you” (Fabre 252).

Summing up the theme of Richard Wright, Arthur P. Davis remarks as follows:

“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).

Richard Wright 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 his words explode into living beings in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, his autobiographical works. In fact, all colonized people have in common is their fear and hatred of whites, be they European or American. This fear and hatred have created among the oppressed, tension, ambivalence concerning identity and pathological types, but these also created a revolutionary corps of men and women determined to bring freedom to their people.



Courtesy: <https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/black-boy-a-record-of-youth-and-childhood-by-richard-wright/249292/#isbn=0060929782&idq=4469112>

Richard Wright's *Black Boy* published in 1945 is nothing but emotion recollected in turmoil. It was a bitter fruit of an old injustice. William Faulkner praised the book. Quoting Faulkner in his book on Richard Wright, Addison Gayle said:

“It needed to be said. None has the courage, like him, to admit the all-pervasive fear of their American experience, and none were sufficiently militant to want to do something about it” (P 176).

The race question was openly discussed for the first time by Wright. He was the first man to tell the whole truth. Everybody in polite society was expected to wrap the problem up in myth, legend, morality, folklore, niceties and just plain lies.

In one of the lectures, Richard Wright gave at Fisk University in 1942, he said:

“I had accidentally blundered into the secret, black, hidden core of race relations in the United States. That core is this: nobody is ever expected to speak honestly about the problem” (American Hunger 137).

In an article which appeared in the New York Post on November 30, 1944, namely ‘The Birth of Black Boy’, Richard Wright said:

“I found that to tell the truth is the hardest thing on earth, harder than fighting in a war, harder than taking part in a revolution” (P 138).

Richard’s childhood was a terror-haunted one. Terror was his companion night and day, violence the norm of all experience. The hate, the rage and the anger were found to be the emotions with which Richard Wright impulsively faced the world. Wright has always believed that the greatest tragedy lies in the inability of the individual to find satisfactory fellowship in the group. The Negro could not relate himself to the White people. It is a theme, however, which Wright was not the first to discover or explore. In his novels, Hawthorne was gravely concerned with it more than a century ago, and in our own day, James Joyce and Thomas Wolfe gave it life.

Richard Wright tells us in *Black Boy* that his initial awareness of the existence of separate black and white worlds occurred in a colour vacuum. Though he knew as a child that there were people called whites, he felt no innate emotional response to them. He did sense something different, for he never associated with light-skinned people. Among the familiar specters of hunger and emotional insecurity, fear of whites and the hatred for them had found their place in the heart of young Richard Wright. The youthful Wright began to perceive Whites not as real persons but as parts of a general, abhorrent and potentially destructive force. The effects of such a seemingly senseless social structures were profound for Wright. His entire being was challenged by the hate and the threats stemming from what, by now, had become a group of almost unreal people. Although actually never physically abused by them, the young Wright was “as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynching” (Black Boy 3). Wright’s fertile imagination helped to create an environment both terrible and strangely remote – as he explains, “something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment” (P 151).

Wright's vision of a hostile Southern White Culture was strengthened even more in time. Support came from observations during various job experiences in Jackson, Mississippi and Memphis during the early and mid-1920's. He began to see the manner in which the Negro labour was exploited. Not only did he feel that ignorance was being forced upon Negro workers, but he discovered the ways in which a Negro must hide his sense of outrage behind a façade of cheerful subservience in order to remain employed even at menial tasks.

Black Boy reveals also Wright's ambivalence toward Negroes in general, perhaps partially because of their passivity. With obvious hatred, he condemns poor Negroes he happened to see in the Mississippi Delta country. He calls them "a bare, bleak pool of black life" (P 120) but he also recognizes such a life as his own:

"After I had learned other ways of life
I used to brood upon the unconscious
irony of those who felt that Negroes led
such a low existence! I saw that what
had been taken for our emotional strength
was our negative confusion, our flights,
our fears, our frenzy under pressure." (Black Boy 45)

The two negative emotions of fear and hate had banished all fine feelings from the hearts of Negroes. They were unable to feel the positive emotions like tenderness, love and honour and loyalty. With strong conviction, Richard Wright expresses his feelings thus:

"Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness
of black life in America, I knew that Negroes
had never been allowed to catch the full
spirit of Western civilization, that they lived
somehow in it but not of it. And when I
brooded upon the cultural barrenness of
black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness,
love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to
remember were native with man. I asked
myself if these human qualities were not
fostered, won, struggled and suffered for,
preserved in ritual from one generation
to another." (BB 45)

With great pain and hatred in his heart, Richard Wright realized that he had to stop being a human being if he had to live in the South. Though his mother and the other Negroes tried every now and then to impart to Wright gems of Jim Crow wisdom, he was a rebel. He wanted to establish his identity as a human being on several occasions. Quoting such an incident, he says that there was a

Southern custom of taking off the hat when people entered an elevator. It applied specially to the black people with rigid force. Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, which was once sensational, has now become a classic. It measures the brutality and rawness of the Jim Crow South against the sheer vicious will it took to survive as a 'Black Boy'. It is a poignant picture of Richard Wright's poverty, hunger, fear and hate. In the concluding pages of *Black Boy*, Richard Wright admits:

“Never being fully able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South could recognize but a part of a man, could accept but a fragment of his personality, and all the rest – the best and deepest things of heart and mind – were tossed away in blind ignorance and hate.” (BB 284)

With a heavy heart, Richard Wright realized that he had no hope of survival as a human being in the South. He continues:

“I no longer felt that the world about me was hostile, killing; I knew it. A million times I asked myself what I could do to save myself and there were no answers. I seemed forever condemned, ringed by walls.” (BB 274)

Finally, Wright decided to get away from the South; he could not stay there anymore. So, at the age of fifteen, he left home and struck out on his own. For nearly ten years, Richard Wright had been doing odd jobs right from dash dish washing to ditch digging. He was barely able to keep hunger at bay. When Wright landed in Chicago in the year 1934 at the age of twenty six, he was overwhelmed by his freedom, freedom to vote, freedom to apply for any job, to sit down where he wanted in buses and parks, to be waited on in shops and cafes, to go to museums and libraries. Most important of all he no longer had to conceal his real feelings, yet the promise of enlightenment and endless opportunity that the large city offered inspired an equivalent fear. He confessed:

“I caught an abiding sense of insecurity in the personalities of the people around me ... wherever my eyes turned, I saw stricken frightened black faces trying vainly to cope with a civilization that they did not understand. I felt lonely, I had fled one insecurity and embraced another.” (American Hunger 3).

The reality of Wright's experience after his flight North, proves those earlier dreams and hopes of acceptance and self-fulfillment in a social milieu to be merely pipe-dreams. No place in America is free for him. All America is the 'South' of the slave narrative, imprisoning the black American in a socially determined identity, disallowing any legitimate self-assertion. Total alienation becomes the only way of life that allows no illusion of visibility.

In his hatred for whites, Wright dreamed of organizing secrets of blacks to fight all whites. And if all the blacks would not agree to organize, then they would have to be fought. Wright would end up again with self-hate, but it was now a self-hate that was projected outward upon other blacks. He continues:

“Then I would hate myself for allowing
My mind to dwell upon the unattainable.
Thus, the circle would complete itself.” (P 9)

Being continuously lashed by the cold wave of American racism, Richard Wright wanted to escape the stereotypes of his projected social identity; he wanted to escape America altogether. So, Wright migrated to France. The black American, free of illusions of visibility within American society, could only continue his flight onward. Ultimately, the wanderer was a lonely man whose exile was ambiguous. On the one hand, it was potentially negative. With no geographical place of freedom, the exile may be forever plagued with a back of at-home-ness. Such total alienation was a devastating burden which the 'Black Boy' carried till the end.

To conclude, it may be said that Richard Wright was a sensitive black intellectual in a racist society. Being a different kind of fighter, he used his voice and his pen as his weapons to fight for the freedom of his brethren in meeting halls, in newspapers, in magazines and blocks attesting to the fact that the pen could be a mightier weapon than the sword by expressing his fear and hatred through his pen and fighting for life against the dark wings of oppression from his shoulders and from the shoulders of his brothers and sisters for generations to come. Therefore, each word uttered by Richard Wright was charged with an urgent and immediate quality.

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