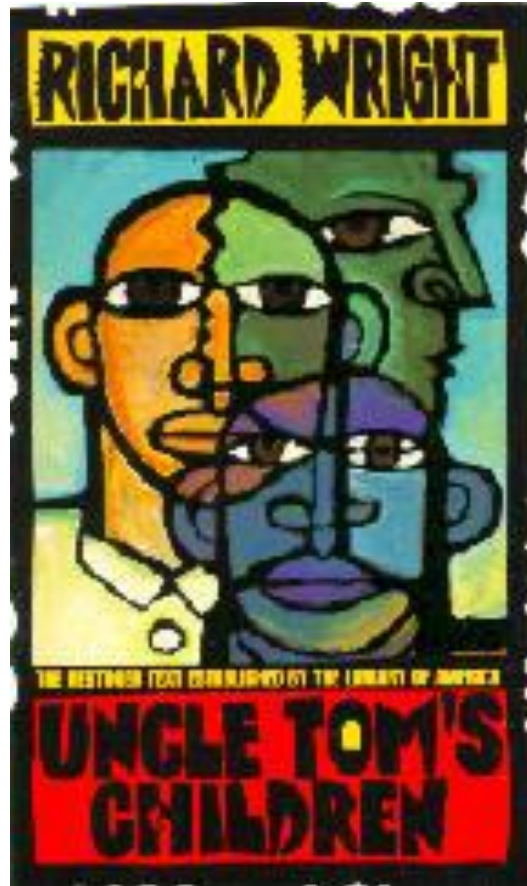


Social and Racial Concerns in the Select Works of Richard Wright

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Abstract

Richard Wright was an influential Afro-American writer. His remarkable works serve as compelling socio-political documents on the lives and experiences of the black people in America. They bring out the inexplicable horrors of existing as black race in an environment of racism and segregation. His works vehemently attacked the white oppression and brought out its important impact on the psyche of the black people. They depicted the phase of suffering in the lives of black men and women in America before they earned their freedom and equality. The

present article attempts to bring out the novelist's social and racial concerns for the black men and women by studying his works - *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Native Son* (1940)

Keywords

Richard Wright, Black people, black literature, African American literature, *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*

Introduction

Richard Wright was a highly talented short story writer, novelist, dramatist, and poet. He was born in Mississippi in 1908. He could not complete his education due to his father's desertion, family poverty and the oppressive climate of America. Wright developed his writing skills by reading the works of writers like Dostoyevsky, Mencken, Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Fed up with the life in the South, he moved to Chicago in 1927. It was the time of Great Depression. Wright struggled to live with his mother and brother by working in small jobs. He joined the Communist party and published articles, fictional works, and many poems in the newspapers managed by the party. His works earned him publicity as well as his political hostility.

In 1946, Wright moved to France with his white wife and became an American expatriate. In France, he came into contact with famous existentialist writers like Camus and Sartre. He developed a good relationship with fellow expatriate writers like Himes and Baldwin. He was profoundly influenced by the works of Mencken, Gertrude Stein, Sinclair Lewis, Proust, and Dostoevsky. As Alan Wald says, "Much of his (Richard Wright's) literature concerns racial themes, especially those involving the plight of African Americans during the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Literary critics believe his work helped change race relations in the United States in the mid 20th century."

Uncle Tom's Children

Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) is a collection of six short stories. It deals with issues related to racism and violence in the South America, where the author grew up as a young man.

The Ethics of Jim Crow is autobiographical, and it relates Wright's first experience of racism. He was playing a warring game with some white children. Unexpectedly, the game becomes his first experience of racism. At the workplace, he suffers racial bias and violence at the hands of his co-workers. He witnesses the sufferings and humiliations of black men and women due to subjugation and oppression everywhere.

The next story **Big Boy Leaves Home** narrates the shocking tale of violence of Big Boy, a black teenager and his friends Buck, Lester, and Bobo. When the friends are playing in a swimming pool of the whites, a white woman screams for help upon which his fiancée, an officer opens fire on the four black boys. Buck and Lester are killed in the firing. Big Boy snatches the Whiteman's gun and kills him. He hides in a kiln the whole night and flees to Chicago the next morning with the help of a black truck driver. When hiding in the hills, he witnesses his friend Bobo tarred and burnt alive by the white mob.

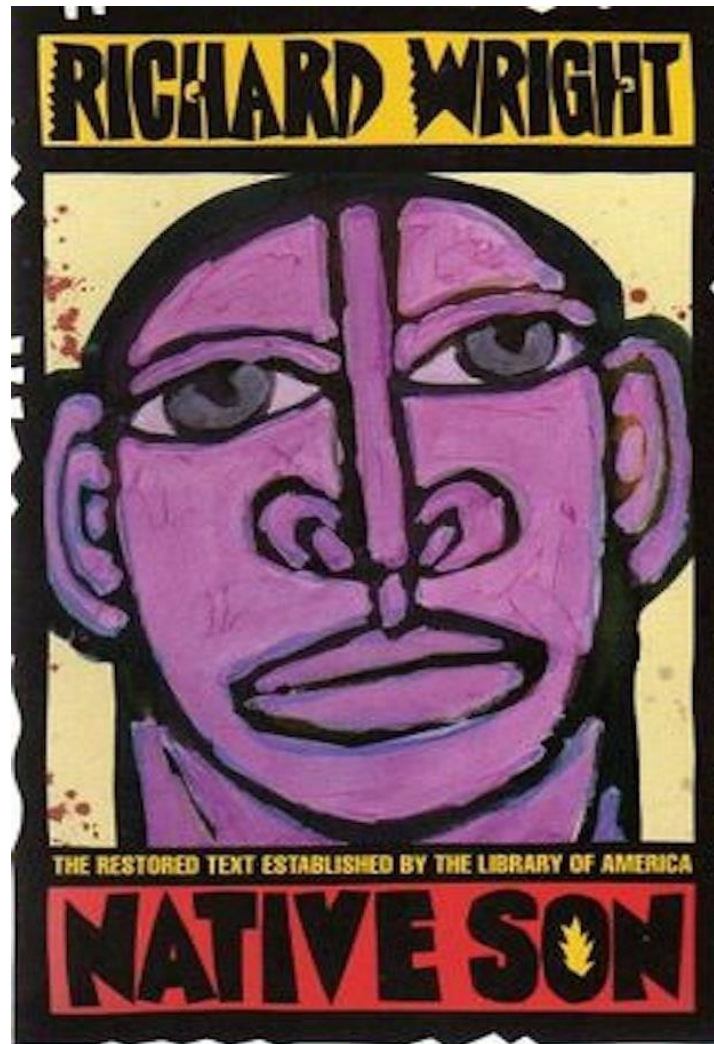
Down by the Riverside is set against a flood which threatens to kill Mann and his family. Mann manages to save his family members. He takes his heavily pregnant wife, his son and mother-in-law to the hospital in a stolen boat. The owner of the vessel, Mr. Heartfield, a Whiteman, sees Mann rowing his boat and fires Mann. Mann retaliates and kills Heartfield. The white man's son watches the incident from the window. The same day, Mann saves many lives in the hospital. He also saves the Heartfield's. When Mann searches for his family, Heartfield's son tells the soldiers that Mann killed his father. When soldiers try to arrest Mann, he attempts to flee from the place. The soldiers fire at him and he falls dead.

Long Black Song, the next tale happens in a remote farmhouse, where Sarah, a black woman, lives with her husband Silas and her child Ruth. She has an affair with a White salesperson who gives her a tape recorder to be sold to her husband next morning. When Silas returns from his work, he sees the tape recorder and begins to suspect Sarah's faithfulness. He whips Sarah and drives her away from the house. When the white sales person comes back the next day to convince him to buy the tape recorder, Silas shoots him down. The news of the killing of the white salesperson spreads like fire. Sarah takes her child and hides herself in the hills. The white mob kills Silas and burns down his hard-earned house and farm.

Fire and Cloud is a tale about Taylor, a black preacher who tries to save his community from starvation. The white officers refuse him food and supplies. He has an affiliation with Communists and the mayor of the town. The communists persuade him to march against the white people. The white mayor and sheriff of the town ask him not to do so. Taylor has to tackle both sides and gain their support. He has to save the black people who rely on him. He has a meeting with his deacons to discuss the situation. Among his deacons, Smith had been conspiring against Taylor to usurp his place. Just then, a white mob pulls Taylor and his men out of the church and begins to beat them. The mob threatens Taylor not to march and then drives him away. After having experienced violence and oppression first-hand, Taylor decides to join hands with the communists and march against the whites. He symbolizes the whipping as fire and the crowd of black people as the cloud used by God to lead the Hebrews to the promised land of happiness.

Bright and Morning Star tells about Sue, a senior woman. Her sons Sug and Johnny work as organisers of the Communist party. At the beginning of the story, Sue waits for Johnny. Reva and Lem, Johnny's communist comrades, come to her house to inform Sue about the sheriff's warning of not to conduct secret meetings if they do not want to be caught. Johnny suspects foul play by some white communist members. He thinks they are informing the sheriff about the party meetings in Lem's house. Johnny goes to warn his black friends not to attend meetings in Lem's house to avoid being arrested. The sheriff comes to Sue's house, demands her to produce Johnny on inquiry. When Sue argues with him, he beats her down. Sue knows that Booker, a white member is a traitor. She hides a gun in a white sheet of paper and goes to woods to save Johnny. She sees the Sheriff torturing his son. When Booker appears on the spot, Sue shoots him. The sheriff and the other police officers kill both Johnny and Sue in turn. Before dying, Sue feels she has fulfilled her purpose. Maryemma Graham aptly remarks, "...Uncle Tom's Children (1938), short stories were powerful depictions of the racial climate in the American South..." (Maryemma Graham, P. 176)

Native Son



Richard Wright's first novel, *Native Son* has for its protagonist Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old youth who lives in the South Chicago. He is poor and illiterate. He is also courageous and defiant to white oppression. He lives in a small rat-infested hut in a cramped area designated for the black people. He is brought up in the harsh and oppressive climate of racism and violence. His psyche is imprinted with an indelible thought that he can never live a life that he wants. He believes he cannot control his life. He regrets as he has no option but to work in menial and low paying jobs under the white people. His mother urges him to work under Mr. Dalton, a wealthy and famous Whiteman who patronizes many black men. Bigger Thomas does not want to work under him. He resorts to robbing others with his black friends. Once they plan to rob a white man, but out of fear, they give up the attempt. As poverty begins to choke Thomas family, he joins Mr. Dalton, the landlord to work as his car driver.

Mr. Dalton

Mr. Dalton patronizes the poor black people and helps them in all possible ways to calm his guilty conscience of exploiting the poor black people. This gesture of kindness had earned him the title of a generous philanthropist of the black community. On the first day of his duty as a car driver, Thomas is asked to take his daughter to a speech held at a university. Instead of going to the speech event, Mary, and her boyfriend Jan, order Thomas to take them to a restaurant in the South. Mary behaves arrogantly and violates the social norms which govern the segregation of white and black people. Mary and her white boyfriend Jan force Bigger Thomas to join them. Jan and Mary try to show their racial forbearance but things soon go out of control.

The Trio

The trio comprising a white couple and a black car driver reaches a restaurant. Jan and Mary order drinks and make Bigger a drink. Soon all the three are heavily drunk. Bigger takes the white couple around the town while they are having sex in the back seat. When Bigger reaches Mary's house, she could not even walk. So Thomas helps Mary up the stairs. But on seeing a white woman so close and under the influence of liquor, he loses control and begins to kiss Mary. Just then, Mrs. Dalton, the blind woman comes to check Mary's bedroom. When Bigger uses a pillow to press Mary's face down the bed to keep her silent, he kills her inadvertently. When Mrs. Dalton leaves, Bigger realizes his mistake. He does not know what to do for some time. He burns Mary's corpse in the furnace to remove the evidence of his crime. For some time, he evades capture using Mr. Dalton's hatred for the communists. Mr. Dalton believes the communists might have abducted his daughter. Jan, the communist supporter is suspected for Mary's sudden disappearance. Bigger continues to work under the Daltons as a real and innocent black worker.

Bigger

After Mary's death, Bigger feels superior and more defiant to the whites. At the suggestion of his girlfriend Bessie, he writes a ransom letter to the Daltons with the hope of making money. He signs his name as Red to arouse the Daltons' hatred for communists. When Mary's bones are found in the furnace, Thomas' ransom game fails. Bigger is suspected of raping and murdering Mary. Bigger and Bessie hide in an empty building to avoid capture. Bigger

thinks Bessie is weak-willed and will expose his crimes, so he rapes and kills her. After some days, Bigger is caught after a gunfight. The irate white community is mad at him. They want to be killed even before his trial. Bigger is imprisoned and waits for his fate. In the interim, the White mob devastates and levels the black community and kills many innocent black men and women.

In prison, Jan, Mary's boyfriend visits Bigger. He tells Bigger that he confesses that he violated the social norms and pushed Thomas into the unwanted suffering and imprisonment. He offers Thomas free legal support through his Max. For the first time, Bigger feels he is equal in status to the White men, Jan and Max. Max argues in the court of law to save Bigger's life. He says Bigger alone cannot be held responsible for his crimes and the racist and violent American society instigated Bigger to do the offence. Max remarks it is the virulent racism in the American culture that created Bigger and his crime. He suggests the racism in the society has to be eradicated to prevent Black people from committing such crimes. Though useful, Max's arguments fail to save Bigger from the death sentence.

Realism and Appeal

Thus, Wright presents the character of Bigger with astounding realism and appeal. He dissects Bigger's psyche which is torn between personal aspirations and oppressive racism. Through Bigger's portraiture, he attempts to bring out the devastating effects of racism on both white and black people. He shows Thomas as becoming a monster due to the racial segregation and the oppressive tendency of the white people. Bigger appears as a native son of the soil whose life is wrecked by the violent and racist American culture. Even "today, Native Son remains among the most important cultural and literary documents in America." (Wilfred D Samuels, P. 386) Thus, Richard Wright's novel, Native Son brings out the novelist's deep concern for his community and people.

Conclusion

Richard Wright is considered the most influential Afro-American writer of the 20th century. His work Uncle Tom's children speak about the horrors of black men being shot, tarred and burnt alive by the white mob. The stories in the book express the anguish and oppression

suffered by black men and women under the Jim Crow Laws, which segregated the black people from the whites and prohibited them from participating in any activities involving the white people. No other African-American writer has brought out the sufferings of the Black population like Richard Wright.

Richard Wright's influence on American literature was far-reaching. His works present the themes of racism and the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor in America. His novel *Native Son* was a huge success because of its genuine socio-racial for the black populace. As a critic, Irving Howe rightly points out, "The day *Native Son* appeared American culture was changed forever...it brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture."

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