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VIOLENCE, AN INEVITABLE THEME IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NOVELS
"NATIVE SON" AND "BLACK BOY"

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ABSTRACT

Violence is exertion of force so as to deal injury or abuse. It entails inflicting physical, material, emotional, sexual, and intellectual damage. It can be the exercise of force or constraint, perpetrated by individuals on their own behalf, or for a collective or state-sanctioned purpose. Richard, the true problem of racism is not simply that it exists, but that its roots in American culture are so deep it is doubtful whether these roots can be destroyed without destroying the culture itself. The theme of the novel, *Native Son* and its relation between the social and economic disenfranchisement of African-Americans and the sexual mores of the time, which both prohibited African-American men from coming near or touching white women, thus inciting them to do so.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence, the predominant theme in Afro – American Writers

Violence: Reflecting Society

Violence is exertion of force so as to deal injury or abuse. It entails inflicting physical, material, emotional, sexual, and intellectual damage. It can be the exercise of force or constraint, perpetrated by individuals on their own behalf, or for a collective or state-sanctioned purpose. In its most obvious form violence is physical which includes battering, assault, murder, and rape. Though violence is largely physical, it occurs in a Psychological context and invariably produces mental and spiritual anguish. Isolation, deprivation, imprisonment, and badgering are also factors that cause great agony. Mental cruelty, the wish to hurt another person's feelings, is at times more painful than physical hurt. Subtle and probably more enduring forms of violence like humiliation, ridicule, verbal abuse, and social and economic constraints tantamount to emotional imprisonment, are very effective means of control. Language can be as violent as physical force. Obscenity is a form of psychic violence that can be used with the utmost effect.

The history of blacks in America has invariably been one of victimization and oppression with the interracial violence manifested in whipping, lynching, branding and various other tortures, pogroms, race riots,

and the brutality of white police. White racism appears in the lives of blacks as “the stepchild of slavery, of colonialism, and as a Sentiment which emanated from European nationalism and capitalism”. Slavery, a culture held together by violence, had worked havoc with the black sensibility, not only alienating them from their native African culture but also rendering them chattel status.

Richard Wright’s Themes - : Inter – Intra personality reflections in Writing

The main theme in Richard Wright's novels is racial discrimination and segregation against African Americans. Wright's themes of poverty, the stigma of unequal education and the violence that poverty breeds are sadly still relevant today. This is also the main theme of his autobiographies and non-fiction writings. He is considered the founder of the genre of the "protest novel" in African American literature. Wright is dedicated to study of the production of personality and the arousal of a self-directive being. This, after all, is the substance of African-American history: how oppressed people create a world, a culture, and remake personalities the dominant group seeks to eradicate. In 1949, before any of his novels had been published, Baldwin turned on Wright and other writers of naturalistic fiction in an essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” appearing first in a now defunct magazine, *Zero*, and later that year in *Partisan Review*.

“Literature and sociology are not one and the same,” Baldwin argued. He said the problem with protest novels dealing with Negroes, beginning with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is that they define the Negro by the conditions under which he lives; they fail to present him as a human being. And readers, said Baldwin, get “a definite thrill of virtue from the fact that they are reading a book at all. This report from the pit reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our own salvation.” This was a frontal attack on Wright’s belief that literature should be an instrument for social progress, and it led to a rupture between the two. In his book, *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin recounted the difficult conversations they had had:

“All literature is protest,” said Wright. “You can’t name a single novel that isn’t protest.” To which Baldwin replied that “all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature,” which prompted this rejoinder from Wright: “Oh, here you come again with all that art-for-art’s sake crap.”

Wright was deeply pessimistic about race relations in the USA and he fictionalized the entrapment felt by many African Americans in the novels *Lawd Today*, the first to be written but published posthumously, and *Native Son* (1940) which gave him literary fame. Wright found himself in the apparent contradiction of being a Marxist writer with faith in the Communist Revolution, yet, at the same time, showing little hope for a better future of race relations in the US. The exploitation carried out by whites and the numerous injustices his black characters have to endure also lead the African Americans in his works to feel alienated and lonely not only in the larger society but also within that very black community. This portrayal of the black community as passive, uneducated and incapable of making progress has irritated several African American critics starting from Hurston to Baldwin, from Margaret Walker to Henry L. Gates.

Richard Wright’s Theme in Black Boy

Richard, the true problem of racism is not simply that it exists, but that its roots in American culture are so deep it is doubtful whether these roots can be destroyed without destroying the culture itself. Wright portrays characters such as Olin and Pease as evil people, but also—and more chillingly—as bit players in a vast drama of hatred, fear, and oppression. An autobiography, *Black Boy* represents the culmination of Wright’s passionate desire to observe and reflect upon the racist world around him. Throughout the work, we see Richard observe the deleterious effects of racism not only as it affects relations between whites and blacks, but also relations among blacks themselves. Wright entitles his work *Black Boy* primarily for the emphasis on the word “black”: this is a story of childhood, but at every moment we are acutely aware of the color of Wright’s skin. In America, he is not merely growing up; he is growing up black. Indeed, it is virtually impossible for Richard to grow up without the label of “black boy” constantly being applied to him.

Social clashes

Richard is fiercely individual and constantly expresses a desire to join society on his own terms rather than be forced into one of the categories that society wishes him to fill. In this regard, Richard struggles against

a dominant white culture—both in the South and in the North—and even against his own black culture. Neither white nor black culture knows how to handle a brilliant, strong-willed, self-respecting black man. Richard perceives that his options are either to conform or to wilt. Needless to say, neither option satisfies him, so he forges his own middle path.

Richard defies these two unsatisfactory options in different ways throughout the novel. He defies them in Granny's home, where he lives without embracing its barren, mandatory spirituality. He defies these options at school, where the principal asserts that Richard must read an official speech or not graduate. He defies them in Chicago, where the Communist Party asserts that he will either act as they tell him to act or be expelled. Richard negates this final choice by leaving the Party of his own accord. As we see, Richard always rejects the call to conform. This rejection creates strife and difficulty, however not because Richard thinks cynically about people and refuses to have anything more to do with them, but precisely because he does *not* take this approach. Though Richard wishes to remain an individual, he feels connected to the rest of humanity on a spiritual level. Therefore, as an artist, he must struggle to show compassion for communities that say they do not want him. It is a difficult task, but one that he learns to accept at the end of the novel.

Violence

Richard is cursed, beaten, or slapped every time he stands up to Granny, Addie, or other elders, regardless of how justified he may be in doing so. When whites believe Richard is behaving unacceptably in their presence, they berate, slap, or manipulate him; in one instance, they smash a whiskey bottle in his face. When Richard acts out of line with the Communist Party, they denounce him and attempt to sabotage his career. Clearly, then, violence—which here means all the abuse, physical or mental, that Richard suffers is a constant presence in *Black Boy*. Violence looms as an almost inevitable consequence when Richard asserts himself, both in the family and in society.

However, violence takes over Richard's mind as well. Richard learns that he must demonstrate his violent power in order to gain respect and acceptance at school. Additionally, he reacts to his family's violent, overbearing treatment with violence of his own, wielding a knife against Addie, burning down the house, and so on. More broadly, violence infects the black community in general, whether from within or from the white community's imposed violence.

Perhaps the most important violent sequence in the novel occurs when Olin makes Richard and Harrison suspect each other of murderous intentions. Even though they acknowledge to each other that they mean each other no harm, they cannot escape the reality that the racist culture demands they fight viciously. One root of this violence between Richard and Harrison is Olin's feigned friendship toward each of the men. Thus, we come to see that violence in a racist world often goes beyond physical attacks.

Violence, the major theme in Native Son:

The main theme of the novel is an argument that social conditions of deprivation motivate people to act in anti-social ways. Wright paints a clear picture of the impossible lives led by African-Americans in 1930s Chicago. They are forced into overcrowded, overpriced, and substandard housing, they are given such low-paying and transient employment that they cannot maintain a secure living, they are cut off from education, they are the victims of racist media misrepresentations that reduce their humanity and justify their further exploitation and deprivation, and they are blamed for all of their problems. When Bigger acts in an unfeeling way, killing and then disposing of the bodies of his victims, Wright argues that these are conditioned responses to overwhelming stimuli.

The theme of the novel and its relation between the social and economic disenfranchisement of African-Americans and the sexual mores of the time, which both prohibited African-American men from coming near or touching white women, thus inciting them to do so. Bigger is conditioned by the media images of white women as the most attractive and the most unattainable sexual objects. He is conditioned by the social taboo, which resulted in countless lynching of African-American men for supposedly coming into sexual contact with European-American women. When he sees Mary Dalton, he is for the first time, in close contact with the repository of this contradictory message and instead of acting her part, holding her distance, Mary

acts as his friend, and familiar. When he kills his girlfriend, Bessie, Bigger also acts out the logical extent of the conditioned relations between blacks and whites. Conditioned to regard her as less than precious, Bigger rapes, kills, and disposes of Bessie as if she were nothing to him.

Social segregation

Wright's exploration of Bigger's psychological corruption gives us a new perspective on the oppressive effect racism had on the black population in 1930s America. Bigger's psychological damage results from the constant barrage of racist propaganda and racial oppression he faces while growing up. The movies he sees depict whites as wealthy sophisticates and blacks as jungle savages. He and his family live in cramped and squalid conditions, enduring socially enforced poverty and having little opportunity for education. Bigger's resulting attitude toward whites is a volatile combination of powerful anger and powerful fear. He conceives of "whiteness" as an overpowering and hostile force that is set against him in life. Just as whites fail to conceive of Bigger as an individual, he does not really distinguish between individual whites—to him, they are all the same, frightening and untrustworthy. As a result of his hatred and fear, Bigger's accidental killing of Mary Dalton does not fill him with guilt. Instead, he feels an odd jubilation because, for the first time, he has asserted his own individuality against the white forces that have conspired to destroy it.

Throughout the novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which white racism forces blacks into a pressured—and therefore dangerous—state of mind. Blacks are beset with the hardship of economic oppression and forced to act subserviently before their oppressors, while the media consistently portrays them as animalistic brutes. Given such conditions, as Max argues, it becomes inevitable that blacks such as Bigger will react with violence and hatred. However, Wright emphasizes the vicious double-edged effect of racism: though Bigger's violence stems from racial hatred, it only increases the racism in American society, as it confirms racist whites' basic fears about blacks. In Wright's portrayal, whites effectively transform blacks into their own negative stereotypes of "blackness." Only when Bigger meets Max and begins to perceive whites as individuals does Wright offer any hope for a means of breaking this circle of racism. Only when sympathetic understanding exists between blacks and whites will they be able to perceive each other as individuals, not merely as stereotypes.

Injustice

An important idea that emerges from Wright's treatment of racism is the terrible inequity of the American criminal justice system of Wright's time. Drawing inspiration from actual court cases of the 1930s—especially the 1938–39 case of Robert Nixon, a young black man charged with murdering a white woman during a robbery—Wright portrays the American judiciary as an ineffectual pawn caught between the lurid interests of the media and the driving ambition of politicians. The outcome of Bigger's case is decided before it ever goes to court: in the vicious cycle of racism, a black man who kills a white woman is guilty regardless of the factual circumstances of the killing.

It is important, of course, that Bigger is indeed guilty of Mary's murder, as well as Bessie's. Nonetheless, the justice system still fails him, as he receives neither a fair trial nor an opportunity to defend himself. With the newspapers presenting him as a murderous animal and Buckley using the case to further his own political career, anything said in Bigger's defense falls on deaf ears. Even Max's impassioned defense is largely a wasted effort. The motto of the American justice system is "equal justice under law," but Wright depicts a judiciary so undermined by racial prejudice and corruption that the concept of equality holds little meaning.

Conclusion

"Whenever my environment had failed to support or nourish me,
I had clutched at Books" - Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

His voracious reading and social concern made him to think about social evils. Richard Wright was not an on-looker, not a passive observer but actively involved and looking for a change in a society. He suffered a lot. Like many, he was also denied social justice so his concerns were incorporated through writing because his social observance made him a prompt man and his readings forms his character. In fact, social injustice, racial discrimination, caste clashes and dominance on black and all other social evils made Richard Wright a good

human being. The subjectivism what he suffers and feels made him to protest against the existing society. He vehemently protested against the society through his literary works but not involving in any violent activities. He firmly believed that Literature reflects the society so the works of Richard Wright strongly reflect the society what exists. He took violence as a theme and his characters involving in socially evil activities which present everywhere in the society so his works made a great impact on society. He used violence as a tool in his novels to correct the correct less society. His social concerns and his theme violence form his character and made him a great philanthropist to think on the social evils and try to get rid of social injustice and evils from the society and hopefully looking forward a new social order.

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