

UNIVERSITATEA „OVIDIU”  
FACULTATEA DE LITERE

**RECONFIGURATIONS OF RACIAL IDENTITY:  
RACISM IN RICHARD WRIGHT’S WORK**

**SUMMARY**

Coordonator științific:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Eduard Vlad

Doctorand:

Daniela Andronache

CONSTANTA, 2012

## CONTENTS

### Introduction

### Chapter 1: Reconfigurations of Black Identity in Richard Wright's Work

- 1.1. Black Identity – a Source of Social Damnation in Richard Wright's Fiction
- 1.2. Black and White Human Interaction in Richard Wright's Fiction
- 1.3. Richard Wright in the Cultural and Social Context of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- 1.4. Literary Representations of Identity in Richard Wright's Novels and Short Stories
- 1.5. Richard Wright's Rejection of White Supremacy and Racial Superiority
- 1.6. Racial Identity as it appears in Richard Wright's Novels and Short Stories

### Chapter 2: Racism in Richard Wright's Work

- 2.1 A Kaleidoscopic View on Racism
- 2.2. The Idea of Subhumanity in Richard Wright's Novels and Short Stories
- 2.3. Origins and Aspects of Scientific Racism
- 2.4. Richard Wright's View on Race and Racism in *White Man, Listen!*
- 2.5. Richard Wright's Fiction in the Context of American History
- 2.6. Richard Wright and Martin Luther King

### Chapter 3: African American Specificity in Richard Wright's Non-Fictional Work

- 3.1. The Afrocentric Critical Theory
- 3.2. African American Specificity in Richard Wright's *Black Power: a Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*
- 3.3. African American Specificity in *12 Million Black Voices*

### Chapter 4: The Problematic of Black Self Representation in Richard Wright's Fiction

- 4.1. Self Representation in Richard Wright's Fiction
- 4.2. Illustrations of the Self in Richard Wright's Literary Texts
- 4.3. Social Representations as part of the Black and White Racial Heritage in Richard Wright's Fiction
- 4.4. Bigger Thomas – the Archetype of the Black Self Representation in Richard Wright's Fiction
  - 4.4.1. The Samson Syndrome
  - 4.4.2. The Role of Religion in *Native Son*

### Chapter 5: Conclusions

### Bibliography

Key words: racial identity, racism, afrocentrism, self-representation, reconfiguration, identity crisis

Dealing with racism in Richard Wright's work involves a complex approach to a whole network of critical perspectives and fictional representations of institutionalized inequality, intolerance and violence at the crossroads of the various cultural discourses that marked important developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. More specifically, *Reconfigurations of Racial Identity: Racism in Richard Wright's Work* is aimed at examining the dynamics of change concerning ethnic identities affecting an important segment of the African American population for which the freedom and equality invoked by the Founding Fathers had made very little difference for a couple of centuries. America was based on a dramatic discrepancy between the laws of American society that combined love for freedom and an economic system, especially in the South, which was based on slavery. That is why what Richard Wright captures in his fiction is a response to three hundred years of slavery and oppression faithfully reflected on mentalities as well as on the social dynamics of 20<sup>th</sup> century American society. Each black individual contains the core of his or her ancestors' racial experience that is deeply embedded in the black soul and black consciousness. Moreover, blacks' destiny was indestructibly connected, although in a negative way, with the history of the whole of the American people in which the African Americans played a very special part, although this role was performed by people that saw themselves, and that were perceived by their oppressors, as invisible. This research work has started from the determination to investigate the problematic of racism and racial identity in Richard Wright's fictional and non-fictional work and to link it to a more comprehensive framework that includes both a theoretical base and a fairly extensive critical analysis of his texts. The aim was to assess the impact and relevance of Wright's writings, the elements of continuity and rupture in the ongoing processes of racial and national identity constructions, influences, controversies, negotiations having to do with a very sensitive aspect of American experience.

In the context of the current research work, racial identity and racism in Richard Wright's fiction have not constituted the exclusive object of a critical study, although certain literary critics that focused on Richard Wright's prose such as Kenneth Kinnaman, Andrew

Warnes, Harold Bloom or Michel Fabre have made notable contributions to which we shall make subsequent reference.

A multitude of critical texts catch glimpses of Richard Wright's most acclaimed and revolutionary work—*Native Son*. This literary work is considered to be revolutionary due to the fact that Richard Wright was the first African American writer who depicted violence in a black man and thus he managed to change the typology of the black character transforming his protagonists from mild and humble ones into murderers. In addition to it, all these critical texts make a general approach to Richard Wright's fiction, without focusing on the problematic of racial identity, racism and racial oppression in all of Richard Wright's work, be it fictional or non-fictional. Our approach to Richard Wright's fiction inevitably draws on resources from various fields such as literary and cultural studies, hermeneutics, history, sociology and psychology. Consequently, we have dealt with the works of notable critics, historians, psychologists and social scientists whose ideas shed light on important developments considered in this particular research work. Our critical examination has found that Richard Wright's fictional texts can be seen as memorable illustrations at a given time and place of the concepts of modern psychology and sociology such as, for instance, identity and racial identity. Starting from the principles outlined by William James in *Principles of Psychology* that deals with his theory of the empirical self and the pure Ego, we have found it useful to consider the contributions of some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century scientists that had an indisputably major role in outlining our critical analysis. Therefore, in order to illustrate the theory of adaptive changes in the case of Richard Wright's black characters we have made use of the book of Peter Burke and Jan Stets - *Identity Theory* whereas Carol Hren Hoares whose work - *Erikson on Development in Adulthood: New Insights from the Unpublished Papers* - draws on Erikson's theory of identity formation process helped us to investigate the cause of black protagonists' identity crisis. As regards the concept of racial identity, a precious guideline has been offered to us by Janet Helms whose work – *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research and Practice*, presents her theory on the development of racial identity process. With respect to the different social selves of the African American characters in the work of Richard Wright, the book of George Herbert Mead – *Mind, Self and Society* that is centered on his theory of the different social selves has proved to be extremely valuable. Our research work has also focused on the exploration of the concept of racism as

well as of the concept of blacks' subhumanity in Richard Wright's fiction. Furthermore, our literary concern here consisted in the presentation of the author's fictional texts in the context of American history. Subsequently, we have dealt with the concept of African American specificity as it is illustrated in Richard Wright's non-fictional works – *Black Power*, *A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* and *12 Million Black Voices* and we have started with the Afrocentric Critical Theory that aims at defending and promoting the elements of authentic African culture as well as at imposing the African individual on a central position within the dynamic context of interethnic relations. Thus, the works of Errol Anthony Anderson - *Afrocentrism and the World Politics: Towards a New Paradigm*, Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante - *African Culture: The Rhythm of Unity*, Clarence Walker - *We Can't Go Home Again: An Argument about Afrocentrism*, Antonia Darder: *Culture and Difference* proved most useful in the undertaking of finding a more complex framework within which the non fictional work of Richard Wright can be analysed from an original perspective.

Our critical discourse benefited from the presentation of the concepts of the self, self-representation and social representations in Richard Wright's fiction and in this respect we have dealt with the works of John Martis, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: *Representation and the Loss of the Subject*, Gina Philogène: *From Black to African American: A New Social Representation*, Cary Gregg - *Self Representation: Life Narratives Studies in Identity and Ideology*, Richard Jenkins - *Social Identity*. We should emphasize the idea that our critical analysis has striven to keep as close as possible to the author's texts from which we have quoted consistently.

A significant part of our research work has been dedicated to the presentation of Wright's personal views on race, racism and racial oppression in his non-fictional work *White Man, Listen!* Just like in his fiction work, in *White Man, Listen!* the author launches himself in a fierce attack against white racism and oppression. Simultaneously, Richard Wright condemns the process of de-Africanization to which blacks are submitted and he is keen on defending at any price the concepts of freedom, human dignity and humanity as well as blacks' right to an equal position in society.

In fact, Richard Wright's work, be it fictional or non-fictional consists in an unflinching and masterly attempt to break the silence that surrounded white racism in the

United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Quite significantly, through his work, he offers a compelling and incontestable proof of the terrible consequences that white racism had upon blacks' life for so many generations. He succeeds in rendering his intimate desire that such blamable and historical anomalies should not live on either in the USA or elsewhere.

Resuming the key concept of our thesis, racism, that can be found in the title as well, we can say that its essence might be reduced to a few words – those of Jake Jackson in *Lawd Today*, a black Chicago postal clerk during the Depression: “Yeah, sometimes I wish I was anything but a nigger.”<sup>1</sup>

Quite surprisingly, the essence of racial identity and racism in Richard Wright's work is concentrated in two simple sentences. The force of suggestion is so great in their case that they not only can compete with hundreds of pages of literary review on Richard Wright's work, but they can also successfully replace them.

As a general conclusion, we must say that our extensive critical analysis of Richard Wright's work has revealed the fact that the occurrence of black criminal behaviour is directly connected with white racism. This fact confirms the veracity of the hypothesis from which this study has started – white racism represents a primary source for violence and crimes and it is responsible for the occurrence of the black criminal behaviour. In addition to it, we should point out that, in the case of all black protagonists in Richard Wright's work, the process of identity formation cannot develop in a free and natural way, but it has to be reconfigured in accordance with the racial laws of American society. In fact, all their life has to be reconfigured from a troublesome perspective: that of white racism that turns blacks' existence into a nightmare. To put it in a nutshell, because of white racism, the simple gesture of helping a white girl climb up the stairs becomes a moral dilemma for a black man. It is the case of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* who becomes hesitant about helping Mary Dalton climb up the stairs after she returns from a party in an advanced state of inebriation. Once again, a single but extremely relevant scene from Richard Wright's work contains the essence of white racism in 20<sup>th</sup> century American society.

The result of our research is represented by the fact that black people's life is deeply affected by white racism in that it destroys their identity and personality and it represents a

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wright, *Lawd Today*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1993, p. 166

blatant violation of their individual freedom and dignity as well as a virulent negation of their human worth. At the same time, white racism gives birth to an unexpected paradox: although from the political and economic point of view, whites' situation is superior to that of blacks, a fact that actually justifies their racism, from the moral point of view, their situation is inferior and this seems to be a universally valid fact: irrespective of the society and the epoch in which they live, oppressors, although rich and powerful, are morally guilty for the suffering that their violence and oppression inflicted on the oppressed. Moreover, it may well be argued that racism affects not only blacks' life as we have demonstrated so far, but also whites' life. More concretely, a moral imperative of a multiethnic and multicultural society consists in the establishing of a climate of peace and social harmony. It is quite obvious that, in the context of the twentieth century American society that Richard Wright depicts in his work, this thing stands for an utopia, mainly because racism cancels white American's quality of being kind, generous and friendly and transforms him into a hostile and cruel individual. At this point of our analysis we should highlight the fact that there are two forms of white cruelty: the one that manifests itself through violence and the one that comes as a result of blacks' humiliation.

Apart from the devastating effects that white racism has upon the Negroes' life and that we have previously enumerated, we should add that it incessantly generates fear and constraints blacks to live in white subjection and dissemblance.

These conclusions are actually based on a fairly comprehensive literary analysis of Richard Wright's work in which we have used his texts as an illustration of some fundamental concepts of modern psychology and sociology. Therefore in Chapter 1, that is entitled *Reconfigurations of Black Identity in Richard Wright's Fiction*, we have initially dealt with the concept of social identity and, implicitly, with the complex range of objective criteria that define this concept such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, religion and physical and moral features. Furthermore, we have emphasized the fact that, from all the enumerated criteria, ethnicity seems to be the most salient and distinctive sign in outlining the individual's identity, the one that is given by birth, is inherited just like race and that gives substance, in its turn, to the mental and psychic structure of a human being. We have also mentioned that, unlike race, ethnicity is not characterized by biological markers, but by some abstract features. While applying this concept to Richard Wright's work, we have

drawn the conclusion that, in the case of his black characters, ethnicity and race represent the cause of the historical series of their traumatic racial experience. To put it briefly, they are discriminated against and they become victims of white oppression and violence because of the fact that they are blacks.

Subsequently, we have focused on the shared cultural identity of Wright's black characters that is the most pervasive form of collective identity and that constitutes the basis for racial segregation in American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. More concretely, the fact that whites believe in the racial and cultural inferiority of black people enable the former to keep the latter in subjection. As a matter of fact, the acutely racist character of American society places the two main ethnic groups - blacks and whites on antagonistic positions and this naturally results in the polarization of society into oppressors and the oppressed.

Under the circumstances, we have demonstrated that the concept of human interaction with which we have also dealt in Chapter 1 is not an operational one. Moreover, it may well be argued that the human interaction of Wright's black characters with their white opponents is a simulacrum, especially because there is no active involvement of blacks in their social interaction with whites as well as because of the fact that whites consider blacks to be objects of experience. The most confusing part of this social simulacrum relies on the fact that they have to dissemble all the time. This state of things proves to be a hugely disturbing factor also in the identity formation process of black people who run the risk of not knowing what their pure self really is.

Our investigation has continued with the presentation of Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation process based on commitments and community integration and we have concluded that, although his theory is, generally speaking, valid in all cultures, it is less valid in racist societies and, implicitly, in the case of the black characters in Wright's work. We have also insisted upon the three interrelated dimensions of the human self – the psychological dimension or *ego identity*, the personal and the social dimension that play an indisputably major role in the identity formation process in that they all need to come together during this process, otherwise an identity crisis occurs. The fact that blacks are treated as inanimate objects and are forbidden any possibility of human manifestations results

in the annulment of the personal and social dimension of their self and implicitly in a split self and an identity crisis.

Bigger Thomas, the main character of *Native Son*, represents the most convincing example of the split self in Richard Wright's fiction. His case is not an unusual one in terms of external perception, human interaction or social identity. It may well be argued that Bigger Thomas' humanity is not a matter of concern for white people. Just like all the black characters from Wright's prose, he is considered to be an inferior human being and therefore he is not allowed to socially interact with members of white society. This results in a total failure of the process of the identity formation, which eventually leads to a split self and implicitly, to an identity crisis. Quite significantly, the identity crises spans almost a life time, since he never actually succeeds in becoming a real human being.

The fear and hatred that constitute leitmotivs running through all Wright's fiction, replace rationality and equilibrium and turn him into a semi-wild creature capable of irrational acts. Henceforth, he kills Mary Dalton, the daughter of his employer, for fear he might not be discovered in her bedroom after he helped her climb the stairs while this one was in an advance state of inebriation as a result of a party. Shortly after, Bigger kills his black girlfriend, Bessie Mears for fear that she might inform on him.

As one can notice, fear represents the cause of Bigger Thomas' actions as well as of the majority of Wright's black protagonists. This negative feeling, experienced in various degrees of intensity in accordance with the circumstances of their daily life, destroys the African-Americans' personality and it constitutes the key of the domination-subordination relationship between whites and blacks and also the instrument with which the former manipulate the latter.

While applying Erik Erikson's theory to Richard Wright's fictional work, we have drawn the conclusion that all black protagonists are facing a demoralizing identity crisis that originated in the domination-subordination relationship existing in American society at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More concretely, life in white subjection reduces the collection of social selves of the individual to a single and insignificant variant – that of a humble and obedient employee meant to perform hard and menial work.

A most relevant example in this respect is offered by the short story entitled *The Man Who Lived Underground*. The black protagonist is running away from some "policemen who

had wrongly accused him”<sup>2</sup>. As the situation stands, the underground seems to be the safest place for him to hide. Quite obviously, the obstruction of the identity formation process is suggested from its very title. Living underground renders him invisible for white society. His existence, although objective and undeniable, does not have any social consequences or implications. If in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, white people used extreme violence as an immaterial element to definitely eliminate the rebellious blacks from the social scene, in this short story the underground stands for the concrete element that obstructs the natural development of the black protagonist’s ego identity. Mention should be made that there are some interesting facts regarding this location. The most interesting one is that, on the one hand, living underground does not definitely eliminate the black protagonist from the social scene, but it only deactivates him for the time being. On the other hand, although it is a safe place to live, it reduces all the three dimensions of his self – the psychological, the personal and the social one.

Perhaps *The Man Who Lived Underground* constitutes the most relevant case of identity instability in Richard Wright’s work. Considering Erikson’s theory according to which “the crux of identity stability in any culture lies in the interplay between the social and the physic”<sup>3</sup>, it goes without saying that the case of this black protagonist represents the negative illustration of this theory. His hovering between the two worlds equates with a loss of a well established reference frame and, at the same time, it demonstrates his incapacity to belong to a certain ontological space. But, above all, this case becomes highly relevant for his lack of emotional balance. Most significantly, rationality that seems to be the constant part of his ego and fear that is the leitmotiv of any Negro’s life urge him to stay away from the world aboveground that not only annihilates the natural process of identity formation, but also endangers his existence. With all this, the underground world cannot stand for his permanent home. Finally, he is forced to go out and Lawson, the white policeman, arbitrarily shoots him. When his colleague asked Lawson for the motivation of his murderous act, he gives an inconceivably absurd reply: “You’ve got to shoot his kind. They’d wreck things.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wright, *Eight Men*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2008, p. 27

<sup>3</sup> James E. Côté, *Identity Formation, Agency and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, 2002, p.16

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wright, op. cit., p. 84

Considering the principle of racial inferiority, we may generally argue that the marginalization of the black people excludes their active involvement in American society and cancels the social and personal dimensions of their ego, leading to an emotional instability and, implicitly, to an identity crisis. Another cause of African-Americans' identity crisis in Richard Wright's fictional work is represented by the lack of a fundamental factor in identity formation process - human interaction that, in blacks' case is a simulacrum. Thus, ordinary speech acts such as agreement-disagreement, communication-negotiations, approval-disapproval, acceptance-rejection are out of question in the African-Americans' case because of racial segregation. In other words, these ones are obliged to study in separate schools, to live and work in sordid and humiliating conditions. It goes without saying that blacks are forbidden to develop personal relationships with white Americans and this fact is so well embedded in blacks' memory that, even when whites behave in a friendly way, the African-Americans do not give them credit. However, they comply with whites' requests and this fact is due to the domination-subordination relationship that we have previously mentioned.

A relevant episode in this respect is offered by Bigger Thomas who, being interrogated by the jury about Mary Dalton's killing, is told to narrate the moments preceding the murderous act and to give his reasons for accepting Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone's invitation to dinner. When the members of the jury express their consternation, Bigger replies that he did not perceive their invitation as a proof of friendship but as an order.

Another important aspect we have focused on is represented by the concept of ego identity elaborated by James E. Côté și Charles G. Levine. In their view, ego identity represents the constant part of the human psyche and due to it the individual has a sense of "sameness and continuity in time and space".<sup>5</sup> It is like a red thread that binds up not only the past and the present, but also the future. Just like Erikson, the two authors believe that possessing a strong feeling of ego identity helps the individual integrate into community and protects him against inter-ethnic conflicts.

Unlike Erik Erikson, whose theory cannot be applied to all human societies, James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine elaborated a second theory taking into account the situation in which the person's sense of ego identity is weak or has weakened for various reasons. In this

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 200

case, the two scientists believe that it is possible that the individual may change his set of values and principles because they are no longer important or they are no longer applicable to the present reality. In this respect, we have analysed the criminal behaviour of Johnny Gibbs in *Rite of Passage*, Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Mann and Silas in *Uncle Tom's Children* and we have found out that this kind of behaviour is due to the terrible force of white racism that gives birth to fear that functions as a destabilizing factor that weakens their ego identity feeling.

The most impressive case of all is that of Johnny Gibbs, a fifteen year teenager whose sense of ego-identity has weakened as a result of whites' decision to sent him to live with another foster family. Quite predictably, the unexpected event takes the proportions of an emotional earthquake that shatters his life to pieces and makes him run away. This is the moment when he changes his set of values: he no longer believes in parental love or in the values and traditions of the family. His running away unleashes a wave of hatred and revolt against white society. Instead of integrating himself into it, Johnny Gibbs remains an outsider all his life, joining a group of teenagers who have also been removed from their foster homes and with whom he has a set of shared values: racial hatred and revenge. From this moment on, he spends his life on the streets committing acts of physical aggression on white Americans and even killing one of them. It almost goes without saying that the American racist society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shoulders the blame for the criminal behaviour of its black citizens. Paradoxically as it may seem, instead of gaining its black citizens for the benefit of the entire nation, American racist society turns them into murderers.

Analysing this case and taking into account the previously mentioned cases, it is obvious that the 20<sup>th</sup> century American society bears the blame for the criminal behaviour of the African Americans and the lack of a strong feeling of ego identity deprives them of the possibility of integrating themselves in white society. In addition, the subservience and dissemblance that the black protagonists in Wright's fiction are forced to manifest in their relationship with white Americans also excludes the possibility of developing a functional social identity.

With all this, there are situations in which dissemblance is replaced by a direct and violent confrontation with the white opponents as it is the case of Mann, Silas, Dan Taylor or Sue. These black characters manifest a militant resistance and they believe that dissemblance and

subservience should not be their characteristics anylonger. Actually, their bellicose attitude is the result of an atmosphere of racial tension caused by hatred, discrimination as well as by the fact that the African Americans are deprived of fundamental human rights such as the right to human dignity and the right to free will.

An interesting case in the panoply of Wright's black characters is represented by Sue in *Uncle Tom's Children*. She is the mother of two boys, Sug and Johnny Boy. Since Johnny Boy is the organizer of a secret meeting, the white police arrest him and torture him with a view to making him inform on his mates. The torture scene is unbearable for his mother who decides to lethally shoot his son in order to save him from torture. This short story – *Bright and Morning Star*, can be undoubtedly associated with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The novel contains the same kind of dramatic scene in which another black mother is forced to kill her little daughter in order to save her from slavery.

When racial tension reaches its climax, black protagonists defy whites' interdictions and they do have their free choice: that of committing murders. In the case of Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon, Big Boy, Mann, Silas, Saul Sanders the act of killing is in fact an act of freedom. Although they are either sentenced to death or simply shot by whites, they manage to feel free for the time being. Furthermore, it must be admitted that blacks' violence and murders, although they are totally uninspired and inappropriate methods of achieving their goals, they represent, in blacks' view, a modality through which they can draw whites' attention upon themselves. By killing, they make things happen and thus they manage to express their free will. At the same time, they compel whites to take them into consideration and to put them in the category of the human beings.

It may well be argued that blacks' violence functions as a mechanism of working off the frustration and humiliation that they experienced in their relationship with white Americans. Violence becomes the leitmotiv running through Wright's fiction as well as the fundamental cause of the drama that the African Americans experience. In their case, violence occurs as an almost involuntary response to the fear and hatred inspired by their white oppressors.

Chapter 1 ends with a critical analysis that is focused on the presentation of Janet Helms' racial identity theory. In this respect, the author identifies four stages in the development of her theory.

The first stage refers to individuals with a less developed sense of ego identity who have not gained a racial identity awareness, who are unaware of the negative consequences that racial manifestations have upon their life. From the psychological point of view, it is as if they live outside their racial group or it is as if the concept of race did not exist in their view. This stage is typical for the very young black protagonists in Wright's fiction such as the *black boy* in *Black Boy*, Johnny Gibbs in *Rite of Passage* or Fishbelly in *The Long Dream*.

With respect to the individuals that find themselves in the second stage of racial identity formation process – we hereby refer to black people who begin to develop race awareness and can no longer deny the destroying effects of whites' racism- mention should be made that, in their case, the process of identity formation is obstructed by the racial laws of dominant society. This is the case of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, Saul Sanders in *Eight Men* and Tyree Tucker in *The Long Dream*. All the enumerated characters are aware of the imperative of American society according to which they have to dissemble all the time so as not to become victims of white violence.

Therefore, unlike Johnny Gibbs, who lives happily in the bosom of his adoptive family and who initially does not have any idea about the implications of the concept of racial identity, Bigger Thomas is already aware of his racial identity. He is even afraid of the possible consequences that his racial identity can have upon him and upon his family. What can be inferred from Bigger's behaviour before committing the two murders is the fact that he is the keeper of a traumatic racial experience and that he was exposed to the hostile reality of American society for a long time.

The third stage refers to individuals that have gained psychological awareness of membership in their own racial group. Whites, for instance, may proclaim their belief in the moral and intellectual superiority of their race, whereas blacks may assert their support for black culture in the detriment of white culture.<sup>6</sup> The black reverend Dan Taylor in *Uncle Tom's Children* is a singular representative of the third stage of his racial identity formation process. His position of moral authority greatly helps him in his fight for blacks' civil rights as well as in his endeavours to promote the traditional values of the black culture.

---

<sup>6</sup> Chalmer Thompson, Robert Carter, *Racial Identity Theory: Application to Individual, Group and Organizational Interventions*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, 1997, p. 242

In the fourth stage both whites and blacks begin to develop a more balanced relationship with members of their own ethnic group and “look outward as well as inward from the perspective of individuals who are members of their own group”<sup>7</sup>. At this level whites and blacks are capable of having critical as well as favourable attitudes and opinions towards the members of their racial group.

Analysing all the characters in Richard Wright’s fiction we can draw the conclusion that, whereas white Americans belong to the third stage of the process of racial identity development, black protagonists, generally speaking, never leave the second stage. And yet there are some exception cases: on the one hand Fishbelly and Tyree Tucker are the only black characters that register an evolution from the first to the fourth stage of this process. On the other hand, Boris Max in *Native Son* and McWilliams in *The Long Dream* represent „white exceptions” in that they are the only white characters that reach the fourth stage and are therefore capable of expressing critical as well as favourable opinions about the members of their race.

In Chapter 2 entitled *Racism in Richard Wright’s Work* our critical discourse aims at presenting the concept of racism not only from a theoretical perspective that includes a series of discussions regarding the origins and aspects of scientific racism, but also from a historical one. We have analysed Richard Wright’s work in the context of American history and the result was that his novels and short stories reflect the reality of American society in the first half of the 20th century when the Jim Crow phenomenon was still at its height and when whites’ violence against blacks was in accordance with the racist laws of American society. Thus white Americans could express their racial hatred in a legal way. It may well be argued that the lack of any moral constraints and the rapidity with which these ones kill the African Americans come from the fact that they know that what they do is legal and that no punishment will be administered to them.

It comes as no surprise that the white characters in Richard Wright’s novels and short stories never admit the racist nature of their thinking and, implicitly, of American society, although their racial prejudices, the violence and discrimination they use against blacks fully reflect it. Nevertheless, among the white protagonists there is a virulent critic of racism – Boris Max, the lawyer, who is convinced that whites’ racist society inspire the African

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 241

Americans with racial hatred through all the actions taken against them which make the latter adopt a criminal behaviour. Quite obviously, in Boris Max's view, there is an incontestable connection between crimes and racism and worse than that, committing crimes becomes the reason of blacks' existence.

While analysing Wright's novels and short stories, our attention has also been centered upon the idea of blacks' subhumanity that becomes evident from the cruel and humiliating treatment that the members of white society constantly apply to black people. From whites' perspective, the African Americans are considered inferior not only because, by birth, they belong to an inferior race, but because of the fact that they are in no way related to the human species. This fact is a consequence of the terrible manifestations of white racism existing in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America and that is not the work of a few isolated individuals that commit acts of racial hatred. On the contrary, it consists in a structural and institutional system with an authoritative ideology, strict rules and specific means of exploitation and exclusion. Consequently, we can strongly assert that whites' prejudices and racial mentality that represent the cause of the discrimination and racial oppression that Richard Wright depicts in his fiction are in fact products of a racist society that has three hundred years of slavery behind it.

In *The Man Who Lived Underground* the idea of subhumanity is rendered by simply mentioning the environment in which the black protagonist lives. Moreover, the absence of his name and surname is indicative of the fact that the social importance and the human worth of the Negro character in this short story is null from the point of view of white Americans. Therefore, it may well be argued that Wright's black character is a literary correspondent of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a highly acclaimed novel which made visible the particular force of white racism as well as its devastating effects on the psyche of black individuals.

With respect to Wright's fiction, we may say that whites' racism is not based on ethno-cultural differences only or on the principle of racial superiority, but on a multitude of factors generated by the historical evolution. More concretely, white Americans are the descendants of the former slaves owners that founded a slavery based system that functioned in a legal and institutionalized form. We should also add that, although incipient forms of racism may have appeared in Europe prior to the late medieval epoch, it is during the modern

era that racism was transformed from a common prejudice into a structural and institutional system with an authoritative ideology.

As regards the concepts of *race* and *racism* in the ancient world, George Fredrickson argues that there is a “dominant view among scholars who have studied conceptions of difference in the ancient world that no concept truly equivalent to that of *race* can be detected in the thought of the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians”.<sup>8</sup>

Actually, racism and race theory represent relatively new fields in the world history. Ron Daniels, a contemporary American critic, states that what really existed in the ancient world was “cultural chauvinism”.<sup>9</sup> The Greeks as well as the Romans thought that their civilization was superior to any current forms of civilization. Therefore, they based their conceptions of difference not on biological markers such as the skin colour, but on cultural premises. Furthermore, in the ancient Greek society the predominant human race-free typology was that of the civilized and the barbarous. One was called civilized provided that he lived in a city-state and participated in the political life, whereas a barbarous led a primitive life in a rural area, deprived of the possibility of being politically involved in the public life of the city-state.<sup>10</sup>

In Richard Wright’s works of fiction Negroes represent the barbarous people of the modern epoch since they are forced to lead a primitive and precarious life at the periphery of American society without the possibility of expressing their political will or participating in any way in the public life.

Starting from the ethno-cultural differences existing in all cultures and ethnic communities, as well as from the current mentality regarding racist attitudes, contemporary British sociologists - John Solomos and Les Backargue have identified and analysed what they call ‘the new cultural racism’: «Race is now coded as culture; (...) the central feature of these processes is that the qualities of social groups are fixed, made natural, confined within a pseudobiologically defined culturalism. Culturalism describes an inability or unwillingness to tolerate cultural differences».<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002, p.17

<sup>9</sup> Ron Daniels, *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, published by Boyd Herb in *Race and Resistance*, South End Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1992, p. 3

<sup>10</sup> George Fredrickson, op. cit., p.17

<sup>11</sup> George Fredrickson, op. cit., p.8

By rejecting the cultural differences of the ethnic minorities, Ron Daniels, the contemporary American critic previously mentioned, the members of the dominant group commit a kind of “cultural aggression”<sup>12</sup>. In his opinion, the phenomenon of cultural aggression represented “another devastating aspect of the oppression of African people”<sup>13</sup> in America that he correlates with that of “cultural disruption”.<sup>14</sup> It refers to the fact that black people are asked to adopt the culture of their oppressors and, in this way, the American critic confirm the theory of the British sociologists with respect to the concept of “the new cultural racism” that contains in its essence whites’ belief in their cultural supremacy and, implicitly, in blacks’ racial inferiority.

In the context of the oppressive and exclusive society depicted by Wright in his novels and short stories, the Negroes are mainly concerned with their physical survival and not with acquiring cultural awareness or cultural identity. Actually, in Wright’s fiction there are no cultural references that are aimed at illustrating aspects of authentic African culture. As the situation stands, they are neither familiar with it, nor are they allowed to attend an institutionalized form of African culture that could promote their customs, traditions or past achievements. Besides this, they were denied the access to public cultural centres as libraries, theatres or cinemas, because of the segregation activating in all areas of life prior to the proclamation of the Civil Rights Law in 1964.

Chapter 2 continues with a brief presentation of the scientific theories of heterophobia, stereotyping and racism and it concludes with the idea that in Richard Wright’s fiction heterophobia is characteristic of black people that manifests itself as a natural consequence of white racism. It is already common knowledge that white Americans’ extreme violence directed against blacks – a topic that made the object of our analysis in Chapter 1, gives birth to a feeling of visceral fear in the heart of the African Americans. Another important fact that must be mentioned here is that fear, the leitmotiv of Wright’s fiction, constitutes a dominant factor in the life of the black protagonists in the sense that their criminal behaviour is determined, to a great extent, by fear.

As regards the racial stereotypes, it must be admitted that whites’ racism does not only represent a cause of racial hatred, violence and oppression, but also a source of

---

<sup>12</sup> Ron Daniels, *op. cit.*, p. 5

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

stereotypes that are damaging since they deform the reality in which whites and blacks live and are responsible for the way in which members of one ethnic group create social connections with members from another ethnic group. To be more specific, on the one hand whites' racial hatred and racist mentality give birth to racial stereotypes concerning African Americans and determine the way in which these ones are perceived and treated by white Americans. Consequently, the typical image of the black individual in the white mind is that of a humble, subservient and ignorant human being, meant to perform all kinds of menial jobs and worthy of their utter contempt.

Our literary investigation continues with the presentation of Richard Wright's personal views on race and racism in *White Man, Listen!* He indirectly accuses whites of permanently keeping the African Americans in a low social position, of depriving them of their own sense of cultural identity by developing a system of exploitation and cultural aggression. Consequently, black people were submitted to a process of de-Africanization that consists in the annulment of black people's cultural identity that occurs as a consequence of the phenomenon of "cultural aggression" created by white Americans. That is why the author is keen on defending at any price the concepts of freedom, human dignity and humanity as well as his right to an equal position in society. His rejection of any tradition or any religion that does not put human values at its centrality, comes out as a natural answer to whites' hostility and rejection of any aspects related to race or African culture.

It is worth mentioning the fact that being deeply involved and thoroughly concerned with his fight against whites' supremacist tendencies and ruling principles, Richard Wright launches himself in an arduous quest for ideological support among notable European personalities. Finally, the author discovers Martin Luther and John Calvin who, to a certain extent, seem to be his allies in defending the concepts of human dignity and freedom. But, according to Richard Wright, "the Protestantism of Calvin and Luther did not go far enough."<sup>15</sup> The author must have experienced a bitter sense of disappointment when he realized that the fight of the two religious reformers was limited and restricted only to matters of European concern.

In chapter 3 entitled *African American Specificity in Richard Wright's Non-Fictional Work* we have focused on the key components of African American identity and spirituality

---

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1995, p.55

as they appear in his non-fictional volumes *Black Power*, *Colour Curtain* and *12 Million Black Voices*. In this respect we have identified and used various theories of Afrocentrism and Afrocentricity elaborated by Cheik Anta Diop, a linguist, social scientist, physicist and founder of the Afrocentric modern school. Therefore, it may well be argued that the concept of Afrocentricity is defined by a special interest in the symbols, myths, rituals and traditions of African culture. The critical theory of Afrocentricity aims at defending and imposing the elements of African culture and, at the same time, it deals with the African individual who is conferred a central position within the dynamic context of interethnic relationships and who is connected with the political, social and economic phenomenon with beneficial effects upon African people in terms of economic prosperity and political eligibility. It must be mentioned that Molefi Asante, an outstanding personality of Afro-centric thinking, is animated by the same kind of attachment to African culture like Diop. We can say that Molefi Asante fights for promoting the values of authentic African culture as "historically valid in the context of art, music and literature."<sup>16</sup>

Afrocentrism represents the rationalization of the concept of primordiality – the primordiality of the African traditional values to the detriment of other cultural values. Afrocentrism is, at the same time, both a mechanism that filters reality through the African mind and a reference system adjusted to the level of the mental and emotional perception of the African individual. As a matter of fact, Afrocentrism derives its empirical basis from his analysis of the cultural unity of Africa. This fact is the result of the cultural dominance of the ancient Egypt that imposed its cultural paradigm and typologies all over the African continent. In perfect accordance with the Afrocentric Theory, it may well be argued that ancient Egypt represents the symbol of African civilization in the same way in which ancient Greece represents the classic system of reference for the European culture and civilization.<sup>17</sup> The tradition that establishes a cultural correspondence between ancient Egypt and ancient Greece is endorsed by Cheikh Anta Diop and Molefi Asante. Both of them make reference to a series of outstanding Egyptian achievements in the field of geometry, philosophy, astronomy, architecture, literature and religion.

---

<sup>16</sup> Manning Marable, *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience*, Columbia University Press, New York, p.2000, p.197

<sup>17</sup> Bayo Oyebade, apud. Antonia Darder, *Culture and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Bicultural Experience in the United States*, Bergin&Garvey, Westport, CT, 1995, p. 22

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright is animated by a powerful attachment to African cultural values just like the two scientists that we have previously mentioned. While he promotes the concept of African science, culture and civilization that refers to an incontestable reality of the ancient times, the author discusses about Africa in its integrality and about Africans as having a shared set of traditional values and a common lifestyle.

Quite obviously, Richard Wright lays great emphasis on the spiritual strength, uniqueness and specificity of the African people. In his view, their misery, weariness, rural poverty and oppression stand for specific elements that constitute the historical frame in which they distinguish themselves by “a consciousness and memory such as few people possess.” The consciousness the author specifies in his book, is an indisputably human consciousness that came into being after a long series of injustices and racial inhumanity. The memory he also mentions represents the sine qua non condition of African cultural and social identity. Moreover, it functions as a guarantor of African heritage, especially because African culture is predominantly oral, therefore it must be preserved through a powerful collective memory.

Richard Wright seems to be tempted to put the equal sign between African culture and the culture of the slave owners. In this way the author rejects the concept of the racial inferiority of African race, uttering a subtle charge against the Western people who, by their invasion, put an end to African civilization or, better said, they deviated the destiny of the African people from its natural course towards progress and prosperity.

Another important aspect that must be mentioned here is the fact that, in the author's view, black church represents a real promoter of African values and, at the same time, it lies at the centrality of the Africans' social life by providing numerous social activities for them. It also represents the place from which the first black newspapers and magazines were launched. Considering all this, we may say that this institution was emblematic of blacks' fight for social justice. Moreover, black church is a perpetual source of spiritual communion and regeneration that is highly beneficial to its members, especially because of their daily submission to racial hatred and racial tension.

As regards Richard Wright's relationship with the Afrocentric reference system, it must be admitted that the author is incapable of adopting it and this fact becomes obvious during his contact with African reality. More concretely, in his first book of travel writings,

*Black Power: a Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), Richard Wright sets out on an impressive journey of his self towards himself, having his African descent as a precious guideline in an ancestral land, unknown to him, that stirred his imagination and filled his heart with a subtle desire to meet his origins. As the subtitle of the book suggests, the author concentrates on the reactions and emotions produced by his journey to the Gold Coast (Ghana) during the summer of 1953, four years before the achievement of independence by that country.

The author's incapacity to adopt the Afrocentric reference system and to perceive the reality around him from the perspective of a native African, comes from the fact that he is an African-American born in Mississippi and educated within the limits of the cultural paradigm imposed by the oppressive and dominant American society. In other words, Richard Wright is not acquainted at all with the tribal culture or with the cultural meanings of the magic African rituals and practices. On the contrary, his racial identity was constructed on the cultural, social, political, environmental and historical dimensions of American society. Henceforth, the fact that all these things – the native Africans' belief in magic animals, in the power of human sacrifice or in the punitive origin of slavery- seem strange to him, has only one explanation: he does not share Africans' cultural values as he is not the descendant of a genuine African tradition, but the cultural product of American society. With all this, no matter how bizarre, absurd or irrational African practices or rituals may seem to the author, objectivity represents a constant of his cultural attitude, even if it is marked by slight accents of surprise or curiosity. Nevertheless, it may well be argued that between the author and the African continent there is an emotional bond created as a result of sharing a common heritage as well as common ideals which reintegrates him into African spirituality. The fact that his heart beats as the heart of any other African represents an incontestable proof of emotional unity, of shared reaction and response. We should also emphasize the idea that Richard Wright's *Black Power* had a great impact upon people of African descent all over the world in that the title of his travel book became a political slogan that gave birth to a social and political movement, prominent in the 1960s and early 1970s. It emphasized racial pride and it endorsed the creation of black political and cultural institutions in order to promote black collective interests as well as black values.

In Chapter 4 entitled *The Problematic of Black Self Representation in Richard Wright's Fiction*, we have made an approach to Richard Wright's fiction with a view to exploring the concept of the self as well as the concepts of self-representation and social representation analyzed and contextualized under various theoretical aspects elaborated by Phillippe Lacoue Labarthes or Lewin, Vigotsky and Allport.

Starting from the idea that gained general acceptance in the circle of the postmodernist critics according to which the theories of self representation are strictly related to the dominant criterion of subjectivity and from the idea that they are based on the presentation of the subject with a double function: the subject as the self and the subject as object of experience, we have outlined the fact that the process of blacks' self representation in the racist society depicted by Richard Wright in his fiction as well as in the autobiographical volume, *Black Boy*, is a false one.

To put it briefly, Richard Wright's black protagonists are officially deprived of the means of self representation: action, communication, human interaction. As we have explained in Chapter 1, there is no efficient communication between whites and blacks. The dialogue between them is established according to the domination-subordination relationship as well as to the segregation laws of 20<sup>th</sup> century American society. Consequently, it is restricted to a series of speech acts that consists in giving orders or asking questions to which the Negroes have to give their prompt reply while adopting an invariably subservient attitude.

Considering the theory of self-representation elaborated by Gary Gregg that makes use of "the generative surface structure/deep structure model"<sup>18</sup>, we can say that blacks are represented only at the level of the surface structure, especially because of the racial segregation and, generally speaking, of whites' racism.

In *The Long Dream* the main protagonist, Tyree Tucker, is a prominent black businessman who owes his wealth and power to his collaboration with the corrupt white police officers and politicians. Although it may seem that at the surface structure he has kept his business under control, at the deep structure it is white authorities that gave Tyree their consent and approval to run his own business. Therefore his wealth and power are rather illusory things that can come to an end when whites decide to. Mention should be made that a

---

<sup>18</sup> Gary S. Gregg, *Self-Representation: Life Narratives Studies in Identity and Ideology*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1991, p. 178

prosperous black businessman with aspiration towards social equality is something that whites cannot tolerate. Furthermore, Tyree is not the victim of his self-delusion as far as his relationship with whites are concerned. On the contrary, he is fully aware of the fact that white Americans would not acknowledge blacks' human worth: "White people lived with niggers, shared with them, worked with them, but owned them no human recognition."<sup>19</sup> As a result of this, he is deprived of the means of self representation, as it is the case of all black protagonists in Richard Wright's fictional work and he becomes a tool in the hands of white Americans who use him for their own benefit. This personal conviction is transmitted to his son, Fishbelly, with words full of bitterness and resignation: "A black man's a dream, son, a dream that can't come true."<sup>20</sup>

It is an obvious fact that, although Tyree Tucker's financial situation is superior to the situation of other black protagonists in Richard Wright's fiction, both his life and his business are subjected to the whites' control and domination. Henceforth, he knows that he can run his business as long as the American authorities allow him. An incontestable proof in this respect is represented by the fact that in the end whites assassinate him for fear that he might demonstrate that they are corrupt. His son would have been murdered by white racists too if he had not emigrated to France. In a way, the bitterness contained in Tyree's words "A black man's a dream, son, a dream that can't come true"<sup>21</sup> is also the author's bitterness caused by the fact that in the white men's country, a black man counts no more than "a blue vase or a red carpet."<sup>22</sup>

Our literary investigation continues with the analysis of blacks' self representation and the conclusion is that whites' racism prevents them from representing themselves at the social level. Furthermore, Wright's black protagonists have to dissemble all the time and to mime ignorance, humiliation and subservience as a sign of recognition of whites' power. This fact results in the occurrence of a false self and of an identity crises, a typical situation for oppressed people.

We have subsequently presented the theory of self representation elaborated by Lewin, Vygotsky and Allport according to which a phenotypic phenomenon appears as a

---

<sup>19</sup> Richard Wright, *The Long Dream*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 2000, p.253

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.79

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.79

<sup>22</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, Vintage Books, London, 2000, p. 204

result of the interaction between the human genotype and the cultural and social environment in which the individual lives. We have drawn the conclusion that in Wright's fiction white people represent themselves through their thoughts, mentality and behaviour in the social interaction both with the members of their ethnic group and with the members of the African American community. Therefore, they "produce multiple phenotypic phenomena from a genotypic one" <sup>23</sup> whereas blacks produce "a single phenotypic phenomenon from multiple genotypic ones" <sup>24</sup> since their social manifestations are limited to a single type of behaviour – the one required by life in subjection and oppression.

While analyzing Richard Wright's novels and short stories we have dealt with the concept of the self and, at this point of our analysis we feel obliged to resume the definition that William James and Erik Erikson gave to the concept of the human self and to show that in Richard Wright's fiction, it has gained some specific traits. To put it briefly, the two scientists define the human self as a blending of the pure ego - the constant part of the human psychic- with an empirical self whose consistency is ensured by the material self, the spiritual self and the social one.

The drama of the black individuals in Richard Wright's works of fiction consists in the fact that being permanently subjected to white hostility and racial hatred leads to the occurrence of a split self that becomes a characteristic of his black protagonists. This fact is in fact the predictable consequence of the permanent process of dissemblance to which they have to submit themselves while interacting with white people. Not being allowed to express their true self or, to put it in James' terms, their pure Ego, the black characters experience a painful process of alienation; therefore, they become alienated not only from themselves, since they finally do not know what their true self really is, but also from their own family.

Under the circumstances it is obvious that dissemblance acts against human nature and it functions as a real threat for the black character's authenticity. In fact, concepts such as self-esteem, self-authenticity or self-worth are not characteristic of Richard Wright's black characters. On the contrary, the members of the ruling class do their best in order to strengthen blacks' disbelief in their self-worth by discriminatory practices as well as by giving them menial jobs or by keeping them in peripheral social positions. At the same time,

---

<sup>23</sup> Gary S. Gregg, op. cit., p. 179

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

they are not fully aware of their own abilities and that is due to the fact that the principle of racial inferiority is embedded in their consciousness ever since they are born. This results in the vulnerability and the lack of autonomy of the black self.

Not being allowed to enjoy the freedom of a democratic society, this one cannot reconfigure his spiritual integrity and depends on other for social integration. While expressing these ideas, we have taken into consideration Erikson's theory with respect to the autonomy of the human self. It must be admitted that, whereas his theory is functional in a democratic society, in the racist society depicted by Richard Wright in his fiction, Erikson's theory proves its futility because of whites' racism and of the implicit fact that the African Americans are extremely limited in their social actions. It is common knowledge that blacks are subjected to the negative influence of American society but, contrary to Erikson's theory, the system of racial segregation imposed by law in America in the 19th century does not allow them exert their influence in any way upon the white Americans.

Resuming the dissemblance theme, it may well be argued that the African Americans are compelled to adopt an immutable behavioural code based on dissemblance, obedience and humiliation although, from the genetic point of view, they possess a multitude of moral and intellectual qualities in order to succeed in life. The observance of this code is essential for blacks' survival in the context of American society from the first half of the 20th century since it offers them protection against whites. But not all Wright's black protagonists obey it. There is a moment when frustration, social discontent and racial tension reach an unbearable level and this results in the infringement of the behavioural code. More concretely, they commit murders as it is the case of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, Mann and Silas in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Saul Sanders in *The Man Who Killed a Shadow* or Johnny Gibbs in *Rite of Passage*. As the situation stands, the problematic process of black self representation turns into a process of black self destruction in that all black murders are killed by white Americans.

In *Black Boy*, the child protagonist really believes in his human worth. Nonetheless, he knows that, in the society in which he was born, the only way to succeed in life is to commit anti-social acts. Whites' racism that manifests itself through violence, discrimination and segregation drives him to despair. Thus, no matter how intelligent and kind he is, in the

end white society makes him show a repelling side of his character. In this way he gives birth to a single phenotypic phenomenon from a multiple genotypic one.

Quite significantly, the African-American protagonists in Richard Wright's work of fiction cannot surpass the limitations of their own race, even though they are willing to make some changes in their life with a view to improving it as it is the case of Cross Damon in *The Outsider* who is declared dead by the authorities as a result of an underground accident and who changes his social identity taking the name of a dead person, or the case Johnny Gibbs in *Rite of Passage* who abandons his adoptive family and runs away as a sign of revolt against the racist laws of the white people.

As regards Cross Damon, we can say that he perceives his symbolic death as an opportunity to begin a new life, a life that he himself can control but soon he realizes that, although he changed his social identity, he is still the same black individual that has to cope with racial oppression every day. Dominated by the revolt caused by blacks' social condition existing in American society, Cross Damon commits a series of four murders because this is the only way in which he can feel free and he can express his free will. Committing murders becomes a typical action through which he can represent himself at the social level.

It may well be argued that Richard Wright's work of fiction constitutes an exploration of the concept of criminal behaviour that occurs as a consequence of white racism and that is illustrated by memorable characters such as Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, Saul Sanders in *The Man Who Killed a Shadow (Eight Men)*, Johnny Gibbs in *Rite of Passage*, Big Boy, Mann, Silas and Sue in *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Another fundamental concept on which we have focused our attention is that of the multiple self. Although in Richard Wright's fiction the African Americans' social interaction is strictly limited by the relationship of subordination towards whites, they are still capable of developing a wide range of multiple selves that compose the overall self.

In this respect it is really interesting the case of the black protagonists: two extreme selves can coexist within the borders of a general self. The most relevant example is that of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* who is not only a murderer but also the beloved son of his mother who is doing her best to save him from the capital offence. Another interesting case is that of Cross Damon in *The Outsider* whose self has got multiple sides in his relationship with persons from two different locations - Chicago and New York .

Social representations constitute another important concept of which we have made use and we have discovered that Richard Wright's fiction offers numerous illustrations of this concept. Dealing with people's principles, ideas and beliefs, social representations are immaterial instruments that manage to shape people's thinking. We can therefore assert that blacks and whites' thinking is reconfigured in accordance with the social representations that they have about themselves and about others. In addition to it, social representations are not only products of the mental activity of the protagonists, but also products of their racial experience that represent the core of their racial heritage and that are inherited from generation to generation, especially in the case of the Negroes.

In Richard Wright's fiction, the mind of the white American was programmed, to a great extent, not only to produce racial stereotypes, but it was also stimulated to produce a powerful racist mentality to which the majority of white people are tributary. This is the reason for which in Richard Wright's novels and short stories the African Americans are considered de facto authors of all the anti-social acts as well as the possessors of a typical criminal behaviour.

With respect to the African Americans, it must be admitted that, although their social representations cannot be publicly displayed, they have a major role in consolidating their cultural identity. Furthermore, they ensure a kind of social protection on the Negroes in that they help these ones to avoid being victims of white violence as it is the case of the child protagonist in *Black Boy* or *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*.

Another relevant example of the way in which Richard Wright's black characters use their social representations to have a good orientation in life and to get what they want can be found in *Black Boy*. Considering whites' contempt towards African race and taking into account the fact that blacks do not have access to public libraries, the black protagonist resorts to a stratagem so that he can read the book he wanted. Henceforth he adopts the social identity of his white employer and he uses the social representations of white people in his favour, although the majority of Wright's black characters socially interacts with whites from the perspective of their own social representations. Therefore the "black boy" writes a note to the librarian in the name of his boss in which he asks for a certain book using the term "nigger" in order to make his message credible. He knows, as we have already specified, that this is the typical pejorative word that whites use while talking about black people, therefore

the “black boy” puts it down so that there may be no doubt with respect to the authenticity of the note and thus he manages to get the book he so arduously wanted. Quite remarkably, by using a term whose meaning is widely and collectively shared among whites, he is able to turn an offensive word into a “profitable” one if we can say so and, at the same time, he succeeds in turning a disadvantageous situation – that of a poor black boy craving for books into an advantageous situation.

With respect to the African Americans, it must be admitted that all their social representations are deeply embedded in their collective memory and that the image of the white American is a negative one. Consequently, the black characters in Richard Wright’s fiction consider whites their enemies, oppressors and potential aggressors who inspire them with fear and hatred. Unlike the ”black boy” who gets his social representations about whites as a result of his direct and violent conflicts with these ones, the rest of the black protagonists in Wright’s fiction inherit a set of social representations from the elder members of their family. The most relevant example in this case is illustrated by Fishbelly who learns everything he knows about black people from his highly experienced father.

In connection with white Americans, there are a very few exceptions to the general rule and these exceptions regard the black and white pairs in Wright’s novels: Bigger Thomas and Boris Max in *Native Son*, Fishbelly and McWilliams in *The Long Dream* and Cross Damon and Ely Houston in *The Outsider*. The white characters in all these pairs are not considered oppressors, but people of a different race with whom they can discuss about the hard part of life, who have a profound understanding of the way in which things are going on in American society. None of these white characters treat the black protagonists with whom they interact with the generally accepted contempt and arrogance of white people. On the contrary, in the relationship with the black individuals who constitute objects of the police inquiry – Cross Damon and Fishbelly or an object of defence – Bigger Thomas, all of them show the human side in them, a reason for which Bigger confesses to Boris Max: “You knew I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike the rest of the white characters in Wright’s fictional work, these ones focus on the spiritual and intellectual elements that bring blacks and whites together and not on the elements of race and ethnicity that differentiate one ethnic group from another.

---

<sup>25</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, Vintage Books, London, 2000, p.448

Quite significantly, they are able to understand that “the pure Ego” – the constant part of the human psyche- is neither black nor white, but it is simply human. At the end of the novel, after a long period of investigation, interaction and discussions with Cross Damon, Ely Houston realizes that human suffering is colourless, that a white individual can be an outsider in the same way in which a black individual is. This fact makes Ely Houston say to Cross Damon: “I’m close enough to you, being a hunchback, being an outsider, to know how some of your feelings and thought processes must go. In a sense, I’m your brother.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, our critical discourse has been centered on the image of Bigger Thomas, an emblematic character in Richard Wright’s fiction. Since Bigger Thomas is the archetypal black character of Richard Wright’s prose with whom every black individual identifies himself, the author included, it may well be argued that he is the symbol of the racial experience of the black people as well as the embodiment of the idea of racial oppression. More than that, Bigger constitutes the perennial illustration of the devastating material and immaterial effects of white racism that will remain embedded in black memory.

Chapter 4 ends with the specification that *Native Son* had upon the African writers that published their work after 1940. In this respect, critics have identified *Native Son*’s legacy in the novels of African writers of English language such as Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, Camara Laye, Alan Paton and Amos Tutuola.<sup>27</sup> Each of them illustrated in his peculiar way the concept of blackness as well as the numerous racial aspects in the life of the oppressed black people in South Africa.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the fact that Wright’s *Native Son* was a most revolutionary book for the students of post-colonial literature in the African states, a reason for which it was banned by South Africa’s last apartheid governments.<sup>28</sup> This fact is also indicative of the great impact that the novel had upon the social and political life of the African states beginning with the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, Wright’s *Native Son* was also a highly influential novel for the novelist George Lamming of mixed African and English parentage who dedicated his historical novel of slavery- *Natives of my Person* (1972) to Wright’s memory.

---

<sup>26</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2008, p. 562

<sup>27</sup> Fritz H. Panker, *Laye, Lamming and Wright: Mother and Son*, Heinemann, London, 1984, p. 19-33

<sup>28</sup> Charles Larson, *The Ordeal of the African Writer*, Zed, London and New York, 2001, p.124

In Andrew Warnes' view, Richard Wright is "key to Black Atlantic culture" and the importance of his most acclaimed work, *Native Son*, exceeds the borders of the literary field having profound political implications in the anti-racist struggle at the global level.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, it may well be argued that, in a multicultural and multiethnic society in which democratic confrontations are part of the dynamics of the contemporary world, Richard Wright's work contributes, in its specific context, to the restauration of the human being as well as to the creation of a new world in which race and racial oppression should not constitute a matter of debate or civil war for anyone.

---

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Warnes, op. cit., p.69-70

## A. Primary Bibliography

Wright, Richard, *Native Son*, Vintage Books, London, 2000

Wright, Richard, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Vintage Books, London, 2000

Wright, Richard, *The Outsider*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2008

Wright, Richard, *The Long Dream*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 2000

Wright, Richard, *Uncle Tom's Children*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2008

Wright, Richard, *Rite of Passage*, Harper Trophy, New York, 1994

Wright, Richard, *White Man, Listen!*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1995

Wright, Richard, *Black Power – Three Books from Exile: Black Power, The Color Curtain and White Man, Listen!* Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1994

Wright, Richard, *12 Million Black Voices*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2002

Wright, Richard, *Eight Men*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2008

Wright, Richard, *Lawd Today*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1993

## B. General Bibliography

Allensworth, Ramsey E., *A Study of Social Change*. Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 1977

Andrews, William L. and Taylor, Douglas, *Richard Wright's Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003

Asante, Molefi Kete and Asante, Kariamu Welsh, *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985

Asante, Kariamu Welsh, *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 1994

Auerbach, John S., Kenneth N. Levy and Carrie E. Schaffer, eds. *Relatedness, Self-Definition, and Mental Representation: Essays in Honor of Sidney J. Blatt*. New York: Brunner Routledge, 2004

Babbitt, Susan E. and Campbell, Sue eds. *Racism and Philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999

Bell, Bernard W., *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA., 1989

Berghe, Pierre L. Van Den, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1967

Bhui, Kamaldeep, *Racism and Mental Health: Prejudice and Suffering*, Jessica Kinsly, London, 2002

Bloom, Harold, *Richard Wright's Native Son*, Chelsea House Publishers, 1988

Boyd, Herb, *Race and Resistance*, South End Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2002

Brignano, Carl Russel, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and his Works*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970

Brogan, Hugh, *The Penguin History of the United States of America*, Penguin, London, 1985

Brewer, Marilyn B., *Intergroup Relations*, Open University Press, Philadelphia, 2003

Eakin, Paul John, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Inventions*, Princeton University, Princeton , NJ, 1988

Elliot, Robert C., *The Literary Persona*, University of Chicago, Chicago and London, 1982

Estes, Steve, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood and the Civil Rights Movement*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2005

Eyerman, Ron, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 2001

Fabre, Geneviève and O'Meally, Robert, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994

Fabre, Michel, *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985

Fabre, Michel, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*, University Press of Mississippi, 1990

Favor, Martin J., *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC., 1992

Feagin, Joe R., *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*, Routledge, New York, 2001

Feagin, Joe R., Sikes, Melvin P. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994

Feagin, Joe R. and Vera, Hernán, *White Racism: the Basics*, Routledge, New York, 2001

Felgar, Robert, *A Student Companion to Richard Wright*, Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 2000

Ferrarotti, Franco, *The Temptation to Forget: Racism, Anti-Semitism, Neo-Nazism*, Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 1994

Freeman, Kassie, African American Culture and Heritage in Higher Education Research and Practice, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT., 1998

Foreman, Christopher H., ed. *The African-American Predicament*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999

Fredrickson, George, *Racism- A Short History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002

Freundlieb, Dieter, Hudson, Wayne, Rundell John, *The Critical Theory after Habermas: Encounters and Departures*, Leiden, Netherlands, 2004

Gaines, K. Kevin, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1996

Gates, Henry Louis Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989

Gayle, Addison, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son*, Anchor Press/ Doubleday Garden City, New York, 1980

Ghita, Catalin, *Revealer of the Fourfold Secret: William Blake's Theory and Practice of Vision*, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2008

Ginsberg, Elaine K., *Passing and the Fiction of Identity*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1996

Gordon, Dexter B., *Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL, 2003

Gordon, U. Jacob, *Black Leadership for Social Change*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 2000

Gosset, Thomas, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997

Gournardoo, Jean-François, *The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT., 1992

Gregg, Gary S., *Self-Representation: Life Narrative Studies in Identity and Ideology*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991

Grillo, R.D., *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference: State, Culture and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988

Hall, James C., *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001

Harry Ashmore S., *Civil Rights and Wrongs: A Memoir of Race and Politics, 1944-1994*. Pantheon, New York, 1994

Sue, Derald Wing, *Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2003

Taylor, Donald M., *The Quest for Identity: From Minority Group to Generation Xers*, Praeger, Westport CT, 2002

Taylor, Gary and Spencer, Steve. *Social Identities: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, Routledge, New York, 2004

Thomas, David Hurst, *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology and the Battle for Native American Identity*, Basic Books, New York, 2000

Thompson, Chalmer E. and Carter, Robert T, *Racial Identity Theory: Application to Individual, Group and Organizational Interventions*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, 1997

Toll, William, *The Resurgence of Race: Black Social Theory from Reconstruction to the Pan-African Conferences*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1979

Tuch, Steven A. and Martin, Jack K, *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT., 1997

Tushnet, V. Mark, *Making Civil Rights Law: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court, 1936-1961*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994

Tushnet, V. Mark, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1987

Vaughan, Alden T., *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience*, Oxford, University Press, New York, 1995

Verkuyten, Maykel, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, Psychology Press, Hove, England, 2005

Walker, Clarence, *We Can't Go Home Again: An Argument about Afrocentrism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001

Walker, Fred, *Ethnicity, Pluralism and Race: Race Relations Theory in America before Myrdal*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1983

Walker, Margaret, *Richard Wright: Demonic Genius: A Critical Look at his Work*, Warner Communication Company, USA, 1988

Warners, Andrew, *Richard Wright's Native Son*, Routledge Guide to Literature, USA and Canada, 2007

Webb, Constance, *The Biography of a Major Figure in American Literature*, G.P. Putnam's Son, New York, 1968

Weinberg, Meyer, *Racism in Contemporary America*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT., 1996

Weis, M. Lynn, *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: The Poetics and Politics of Modernism*, University Press of Mississippi, 1998

Weisbrot, Robert, *Freedom Bond: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*, W.W.W. Norton, New York, 1990

West, Cornel, *Race Matters*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993

Westra, Laura and Wenz, Peter S, *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, Rowman&Littlefield, 1995

Weyl, Nathaniel, *The Negro in American Civilization*, Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1960

Wilson, Kathryn Sondra, *In Search of Democracy: The NAACP Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and Roy Wilkins (1920-1977)*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999

Wintle, Michael, *Image into Identity: Constructing and Assigning Identity in a Culture of Modernity*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2006

Wintz, Cary D, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 1st ed. Houston, TX: Rice University Press, 1988

Woodward, Kath, *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, Routledge, London, 2004

Wright, W. D., *Black History and Black Identity: A Call for a New Historiography*, Praeger Publishers, Westport CT, 2002