

**Implanting Fear and
Terror in the Protagonist
Richard in Richard
Wright's *Black boy***

**Dr. Harouni Brahim
Department of English,
Mentouri-Constantine
University, Algeria.**

Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to attempt to show how and why in Richard Wright's **Black Boy**. Parents, relatives and society at large try **to** subdue Richard, the protagonist by the use violence. The aim behind the repeated castigation of the child by his parents, relatives and other people is to subdue him and suppress in him any impulse towards individuality, liberty and transgression of the prevailing white social order as it existed in the first half of 20th century segregated America. Indeed, any time the child Richard transgressed the prevailing order, in or outside the community, **he** was beaten severely and left alone to experience loneliness and terror of being abandoned. Total submission of the child by violent beatings, fear and terror was an unconscious and undeclared objective of parents, relatives and other members and the Black community. Indeed, the child had to internalise his inferior social status very early through repeated beatings so that he learns not **to** transgress the Jim Crow Laws and so survive in racist America.*

Résumé

*L'objectif de cet article est d'essayer de montrer comment **et** pourquoi - dans l'œuvre **Black Boy** de Richard Wright - les parents, les proches et de façon générale l'Amérique raciste du début du 20^{ème} siècle essaient de manière consciente **ou** inconsciente par l'utilisation de la violence de soumettre à l'ordre établi Richard, le protagoniste du roman.*

Le but recherché, par les punitions répétées administrées à l'enfant par les parents et les proches de la famille et du voisinage était sa soumission totale et la suppression en lui de toute individualité, liberté ou toute velléité de transgression de l'ordre établi alors aux Etats-Unis.

Toutes le fois que l'enfant Richard transgressait l'ordre blanc, il était battu sévèrement puis laissé seul face à la peur d'être abandonné même par les siens, lui fait, l'enfant Richard comme tous les autres enfants noirs de l'Amérique raciste devait être ainsi 'préparé', par la violence à l'internalisation très précoce de son statut d'être inférieur, à accepter sa place et à ne pas transgresser les lois racistes pour pouvoir survivre dans l'Amérique raciste du début du 20^{ème} siècle.

Introduction

Before getting to the study of how and why fear was implanted in the child Richard, in *Black Boy*, it is worth presenting briefly the southern setting and the historical context in which the writer, Richard Wright grew up.

This is approximately the period extending from his birth in 1908 to 1925, the date of his departure to Chicago, to escape racism and the terror imposed on Blacks by the southern racist states. For the Black community, the first quarter of the 20th c. was still dominated by the vivid images of the American Civil War, the Reconstruction and the "separate but equal" policies introduced by the 'Plessey-Ferguson' decision of 1896 meant to legalise the separation of races and to disfranchise Black Americans. As a matter of fact, separation and exclusion of the African Americans from the United States institutions "and out of the public, social and economic life of the South were accomplished by the terror of the Ku Klux Klan through arson, pillage and death."¹

According to Richard Wright himself, the exclusion of the Blacks from politics was motivated by white racists' suspicion that Blacks are a menace to the white social order and supremacy set during the slavery period in the southern states. The Reconstruction Period which had permitted the African American community to make some political gains, thanks to the support the latter received from anti-racist Northerners, ended abruptly with the withdrawal of the federal troops giving southern racists the opportunity to recapture power, exclude Blacks and start a policy of total segregation which they imposed through the terror of the Klan. The Klanners' mounted propaganda campaigns were based on pseudo threats to white womanhood and the US presidency symbolising and guaranteeing respectively the purity of the race and the American democracy. In 1925, the five million Klansmen were ready to act against Black Americans in order to annihilate any threat to the white order. I hen policy aimed at the complete submission of Blacks. Such a submission was to be attained by violence and terror and maintained through the use of mob lynching within a vast «dense ideology of racial superiority that would", as Wright himself put it "justify any act of violence taken against him [the Negro] to defend the while dominance, and further, to condition him to hope for little and lit receive that little without rebelling."²

The 'separate but equal policy' introduced by the Plessey-Ferguson decision made by the Supreme Court was the corner stone of the legalization

of segregation in the United States. However, Plessey-Ferguson was just the beginning of more and more discriminatory laws meant to maintain African Americans away from progress; and emancipation. In the mind of its initiators, this policy of systematic segregation in all fields of life would ghettoize African Americans in the extent that they would, in the long run, stop taking whites as thou reference for equality and emancipation. For the white racists who wanted to impose the separation of races and the supremacy as white order, segregation would act as a catalyst for Blacks to develop a black-sub-white social culture and 'racial' order in which equality would mean equality among Blacks and not with Whites. The black community thus formed - rather ghettoized- would develop its own and seemingly self-imposed cultural values and rules in white segregation and inequality are central. The black community would function within the social boundaries imposed on it by the force of racist laws- the Jim Crow Laws. Time and pressure would as well have their imprints and effects on the internalisation and reproduction of a segregated society thanks, partly, to the active role of 'Uncle Toms'. Long term practices of racism would give birth to a distinct black culture based on the unquestionable principle of segregation White supremacy, as white supremacists wanted, would In-established. Each of the two communities would develop distinctly and separately. Therefore, the black community having been ghettoised and confined to an inferior social status would reproduce itself by itself through inculcating to its members, especially children values of submission, segregation and boundaries not to transgressi The main means by which African American were to be maintained within the limits desired was the use of unlimited violence. In this perspective and with regard to the black child, parents and other family members act unconsciously as whites repressive agents against their own children. When the child grows older it is the role of the community as a whole to maintain him within the racially imposed limits.

How to make segregation perennial? Part of the guarantee of the perennality of segregation in racist America was the submission of the natural love for freedom and individuality in blacks, especially in black children, to prevent them from challenging family and social authority at large. This practice, as well guarantees the survival of the black community. One should not forget that many historians had put the question of slavery at the centre of the American Civil War. Castigation of black children to subdue them to accept their position of unequal people belonging to an inferior race was one way to do it. This is a prominent theme in Richard

Wright's *Black Boy* which I will attempt to examine in order to show how Wright experienced the policy of segregation and how fear and terror were implanted in him. Horror, suffering, segregation and confinement were the daily lot of the black community. These depressing circumstances were later worsened by the evils brought about by the Great Economic Depression. Richard Wright, a sensible and sensitive child, later a very articulate writer, was victim of a blind terror during all his childhood. He was however, able to see and understand the effect of terror meant to submit him into accepting to live within the limits of the social order imposed on his community.

As a matter of fact, in his early childhood, Richard, the protagonist, feared his father and tried hard to work out a way to escape his oppressive authority. Later when the father deserted the house, Richard suffered from hunger and henceforth associated his father's image "with my [Richard's] pangs of hunger, and whenever I was hungry, I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness."³ The bitterness Richard felt towards his father was the final step of his complete rejection of the authoritative but failing father. However, after the desertion of his father, hunger became his daily lot. The dinner of fried chicken to which a priest was invited and which he wolfed almost alone, despite Richard's protest, is an illustrative example of the latter's concern with vital need. And when his mother was cut of work, he could not calm his aching stomach and dizzy head.

However, hunger was not confining itself to the destruction of Richard's normal growing process only; it also brought about family dislocation. Richard and his brother Leon were put in an orphan where, in addition to hunger, they terribly lacked their mother's affection.

In Maggil's, his aunt home, there was plenty to eat; Richard could not believe it true. However, fear of being foodless which was strongly and cruelly implanted in him was more vivid than reality itself. During that period, Richard developed the habit of stealing food: "I stole bread and put in my pockets...I stopped hiding the bread in pockets and hid it about the house, in corners, behind dressers."⁴ Richard could not get rid of the spectre of hunger which now and then reappeared in frightening forms such as the form of a ghost and hunger staring at him gauntly. During his childhood, Richard's relationships with other people, especially next of kin, were based upon the latter capacity to secure him from hunger. Thus when Uncle Hoskins was killed Richard was terrorised first because: "white folks say they'll kill all Uncle's relatives," and second because he felt the spectre of hunger around the corner again. For as he put it: "We were Southern

Negroes and we were hungry and we wanted to live, but we were more willing to tighten our belts than risk conflicts."⁵ If fear of hunger had been a first important moulding of Richard's character, other forms of fear also contributed to the shaping of his growing personality. In this respect, one of the widest spread ways to transmit fear to deprived children of Blacks' ghettos was to beat them and leave them helpless for long hours to experience helplessness. As far as Richard could remember, it was his mother, who first lashed him to death after he had put his grandmother's house afire. And in many other similar situations and in situations where the child needed moral comfort the mother again resorted to beating with an approving attitude of other relatives as when he was wounded in the fight against white boys:

....She grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked and beat me till I had fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with a stave, while the skin was still smarting impart to me gems of the Jim Crow wisdom... .I was never to fight any more wars. I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me wild the **broken** milk bottle....When was I going to learn to be a good boy?⁶

The black child has to learn very early to repress in himself his very humanity. One classical example to do it was through the game called "playing the dozens" in New York called "snapping" it is a game where young blacks - and they still do it all over this country - will stand for hours insulting each other, hurting each other humiliating each other, attacking family members.... And the game is to "stay cool"- not to get upset or angry - or you would immediately lose the game."⁷This is conditioning the black child to internalise his future place in society without rebelling.

What is behind the mother's attitude?

The mother saw Richard's acts threatening and challenging and she had to annihilate them straight away to avoid that they grow and cause him to reject family authority and community values. From the beginning, the personality of Richard had to be subdued tamed and submitted to preserve the family and community order established on the discriminatory Jim Crow Laws.

Neither the father, before his desertion nor the grandmother intervened in favour of Richard when he was repeatedly beaten; to the contrary, they made him feel that there was some understanding, some tacit agreement between them all. After severe beatings, Richard was left alone

with his pain and fear 'shaking with terror.' Pressure on Richard, however, did not come only from his parents. As he was growing older his circle became wider and pressure on him increased. Everybody seemed to be concerned about his education; everybody was dictating something to him. The fanatic grandmother played major role in the implantation of fear in child Richard. As an elder of the black community congregation, she felt more responsible for Richard's 'lost soul' than anybody else. If Richard was to remain faithless, the group would be responsible before God. This responsibility was the chief motive of Richard's Grandmother long hours of hell evocation which brought an atmosphere of fear to the house. The whole church congregation worked hand in hand; they together sang hymns that suggested fear as "This may be the last time, I don't know...They song it, moaned it, implying in sweet, frightening tones that if we boys did not join the church then and there we might die in our sleep that very night and go straight to hell."⁸

Teaching the child the right conduct was also the responsibility of relatives and neighbours who felt concern for his safety and the safety of the black community. For instance, his aunt Auddie, right from her first contact with him tried to rule him by the use violence. Her open hostile attitude became a daily menace for the child. To defend himself, because nobody tried to help him, not even his mother, the child reacted instinctively with a knife against his aunt: "I ran into the kitchen and grabbed the long bread knife. She followed me and I confronted her. I was so hysterical that I was crying." Through her daily teaching and menace, Auddie as well wanted to tame the child. She was so perfect a reflector of the 'separate but equal' division of society that she could not bear the least attack on the family and the social order. And Uncle Tom - the man is not fortuitous - tried also violence against Richard to submit him. This general stance of adults against the black child was understood to be the best education black children were provided with. According to R. Ellison:

One of the Southern Negro family's method of protecting the child is the severe beating - a homeopathic dose of the violence generated by black and white relationships. Such beatings Wright's were administered for the child's own good, a good which the child resisted, thus giving the family relationships an undercurrent of fear and hostility.

Richard's relatives' concern for his good education and safety is on surface concern; the deep and real **concern is the** concern for the survival of the group. Jim Crow Laws had made hundreds of victims among Blacks.

In the period stretching from 1900 to 1914 more than 1100 Blacks were lynched by white mobs.

Such violence was in the first place directed against black adults to annihilate in them any attempt of emancipation. Black parents in their turn reflect this violence on their children by frequent beatings: "And people in deep pain are able to trash other people, victims other people."¹⁰ Richard's social milieu was very suspicious despite the shared suffering lot of its members. People did not speak their mind openly because of fear. This attitude is expressed in the altitude of **Richard's neighbours who feared to tell him to stop selling** the Klan's paper because they thought he might be working for *Ilk*-whites.

As his social involvement grew wider, Richard progressively could identify the origin of the fear in his community. The tale of the woman whose husband was seized and killed by a white mob is very significant for the child who identified himself to the widow who took revenge; however, this tale had rendered him sleepless for nights because what was a remote and formless fear was becoming a vivid image of death as he himself put it : "The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that I had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived."¹¹

When this evil game became too harmful to bear, Richard tried hardest to keep on edge and stifle his feelings when he was in presence of a resentful scene. He felt so oppressed that he "even pitched ... [his] voice plain, trying to rob it of any suggestion or overtone of aggressiveness."

At the optical shop where Richard was learning a craft, the two white employees, Pease and Reynolds, terrorised him through blind violence which brought to surface Richard's latent fear: "I looked at the white faces of Pease and Reynolds, I imagined their waylaying me, killing me....the whole of my being felt violated and I knew that my own fear had helped to violate it."¹³ Richard was fighting his own feelings and his emotions because he did not want to exteriorise his true self and his humanity which might not please white racists. Black mothers hurt and humiliate especially their male children to prepare them for life in slavery, to make sure that they would never rebel against the slave master because that could get them instantly killed or punished. In other words, beating children to submission was a survival measure mothers had learnt and accepted to do.

The fear generated by the killing of Tom, an acquaintance of Richard, paralysed the latter: "Fear of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worthwhile to make any move at all."¹⁴

Physical and mental paralyses were the expected consequences of this violence on the black child.

Notes and Works Cited

¹Wright Richard "How Bigger Was Born" in *Native Sou, a Perennial Classic Harner and Row, NY, 1970, p. XI.* ²Ibid, p, XII.

³Richard Wright, *Black Boy, Longman Imprint Books, Hong Kong, 1970,p.12*

⁴Ibid. p. 42

⁵Ibid. p., Wright, 'How Bigger Was Born,' p. VIII ⁶Wright R. "The Ethic of Living Jim Crow," *F.E. Kearns, Black Identity, p. 218*

Holdt Jacob, "From Becoming Racist." ⁸Wright, *Black Boy, op. cit, p. 117.*

⁹Ellison R., "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act, p.85*

¹⁰Hodt Jacob, *op.cit.*

¹¹ Wright, *Black Boy, p.64*

¹²Ibid. p. 163

¹³Ibid. p. 168-9. *Richard Wright's life experience in the South the oppressing and hostile environment in which he grew up, his rebellion against his own relatives and the black community at large and his later rejection of the social order became central themes in his fictional work.*

¹⁴Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁵Ellison, *op. cit. p. 90.*

¹⁶Ellison, *pp. 89-90.*

¹⁷Baldwin James, "The Fire Next Time," in *E.N. Obiechhina, Commentary on J. Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain, Modern Classic Longman, 1974, p. 276.*