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CHAPTER 1

Literary Representations of Black Identity in Richard Wright's Fiction

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The current article focuses on the investigation of the theme of social and racial identity of the African American characters in the fictional work of Richard Wright, an outstanding writer of American literature. He drew on the problematic aspects of the social life in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, and especially on the tensed and controversial interracial relationships, as well as on the generalized and institutionalized racism with which the African Americans were forced to cope for decades. In the social climate characterized by racial conflicts and psychic tension specific to the previously mentioned period, the identity formation process of the Negroes is a highly debatable and a never ending one. Therefore numerous literary exemplifications from Richard Wright's novels and short stories will be offered, including Wright's self-referential account that also illustrates the tragedy of an author held captive in a hostile world.

Whereas in the first part of the current article I made an approach to the works of Erik Erikson, James Côté and Charles Levine, in the second half of this article I dealt with the racial identity theory elaborated by Janet Helms. More concretely, I endeavoured to cast light on the racial typology of the African American characters, providing relevant literary illustrations for each racial category.

Keywords: alienation, identity crisis, split self, racial inferiority.

1. Introduction

Dealing with the concept of "black identity" in Richard Wright's fiction 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 20th century America. More specifically, *Literary Representations of Black Identity in Richard Wright's Fiction* 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. Quite obviously, the 20th century American society that Richard Wright depicts in his work of fiction characterized by a powerful racist mentality and a well-established system of exploitation and racial segregation is the result of the long historical period in which the economic American system was based on slavery, especially in the South. In this context, I shall demonstrate that black identity represents a source of social damnation for the numerous black characters in Richard Wright's novels and short stories – Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, Big Boy, Mann, Silas and Sarah in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Saul Sanders in *Eight Men*, Johnny Gibbs in *Rite of Passage*, the “black boy” in *Black Boy – A Record of Childhood and Youth*, Fishbelly and Tucker in *The Long Dream* or *The Man Who Lived Underground*.

In the investigation of a major American author, an attempt will be made to analyse the intricacies of the problematic concepts of social identity. Identity is a matter of knowing who is who and this thing is hugely facilitated by the social dimension of the human nature as well as by the fact that individuals usually live in society and not in seclusion. Thus, by comparison, people can easily relate to each other in a consistent and meaningful manner and “all human identities are social identities” (Jenkins 2004: 4) or “without social identity there is no human world” (Ibidem). Burke and Stets (2009) are other important 21st century social scientists who deal in their work, *Identity Theory*, with the concept of identity that is indisputably connected with that of society¹:

In other order of ideas, one of my main concerns have to do with a series of related subjects regarding the elements that compose the human self, the psychology of the self, social identity, psychological identification, group interaction and last, but not least, race and ethnicity. It may well be argued that black identity represents a source of social damnation in Richard Wright's fiction, especially because ethnicity and race stand for the historical series of the blacks' traumatic racial experience. According to Maykel Verkuyten (2005: 45), the African Americans are the bearers of “visible characteristics” and this fact enables white Americans to easily identify them and keep them at the periphery of their society.

Furthermore, I shall demonstrate that the human interaction of Wright's black characters with their white opponents is a simulacrum, there is no active

¹ “Identity characterizes individuals that according to their many positions in society and it is important to note that [...] both individual and society are linked in the concept of identity.” (Burke, Stets 2009: 3).

involvement of the African Americans in their social interaction with the white Americans, therefore blacks are considered mere objects of experience.

2. Black social identity

A cogent analysis of identity formation process cannot overlook Erik Erikson's theory that makes a fundamental reference to the three interrelated dimensions of the human self – the psychological dimension or ego identity, the personal dimension or a behavioral register that differentiates individuals and the social dimension that deals with “recognized roles within a community”. In his opinion, all these dimensions need to come together during the identity formation process otherwise an identity crisis occurs. (Erikson 1980).

In Richard Wright's fiction the African Americans are treated as inanimate objects and are forbidden any possibility of human manifestations. Quite obviously, this fact 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 leitmotifs 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 20th 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” (Wright 2008: 27). 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” (Ibidem: 16), 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” (Wright 2008: 84).

In *Rite of Passage*, published more than thirty years after the author’s death, Richard Wright illustrates the most dramatic case of identity crisis. This time the protagonist of the novel is a fifteen year old black boy, Johnny Gibbs who, without

knowing it, is brought up by a foster family. Unaware of his origin, he prospers in almost every way, but at the age of fifteen the authorities order that the boy should be transferred to a new foster family. The climax of the whole story is represented by the moment in which Johnny is given the great piece of news by his foster mother. It is an extremely intense moment from the emotional point of view and, at the same time, it becomes a turning point in Johnny's life. From that moment on, the black boy does away with his happy childhood for ever. It is also the moment when the symbolical title of the novel – *Rite of Passage*– gains the full relevance of its meaning. More concretely, this is the moment that tragically depicts the protagonist's passage from a world of normality to the bleak and doomed realm of delinquency. Johnny Gibbs runs off the streets of Harlem where he meets a gang whose members also used to live in foster homes. His running off the streets represents in fact a brutal interruption of his identity formation process and it is also a moment of great spiritual loss. The outcome of all these is that he not only turns himself into a character with no consistency that loses the control over his life, but he also becomes completely alienated from the traditional values of the family as well as from society.

3. Black and white human interaction – a social simulacrum

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.

In *The Outsider*, Wright presents the unique case of “multiple identities” (Woodward 2004: 7) in his fiction. Cross Damon, the black protagonist of the novel, goes through an underground accident in Chicago which leaves him with a choice: he either sets himself free from an existence dictated by others – his mother, his wife, Gladys, his job at the Post Office, his under age pregnant girlfriend, Dot, by adopting a new identity, or turns himself into a survivor of the wreck and resumes his life under the same alienating circumstances. Finally he decides “to bury” his initial identity and to take on the identity of Lionel Lane, whose name he chooses from a graveyard. It is in this unexpected accident that Cross sees a chance that the destiny offers him in order to avoid the danger of being put in prison for raping a girl under the age of sixteen. This is a crucial moment that implacably changes the trajectory of his life and triggers a series of interrelated events. With respect to the concept of “multiple identities” that I have previously mentioned, Garry S. Gregg asserts that “probably most of us present

different sides of ourselves in different contexts, depending on the demands of the situation, our personal goals and intentions” (Gregg 1991: 181).

Nevertheless, by changing his initial identity he was not able to liberate himself from a dominant racist society. The only advantage conferred on him by his new identity is the fact that he does away with his family problems as well as with the potential problems with the white police. Through his symbolic death, he ceases to display some of the social selves that composed his initial social identity: that of a son, husband, father and lover. What he cannot change, not even through death, be it real or symbolic, is his ethnicity. Gender and ethnicity stand for other aspects of human identity that can never be changed. Even if he has a different name now, Lionel Lane, his ego identity remains unaltered - he is still the same black man living in the same white racist society in which he cannot have the control of the things, but which compels him to be subjected to the dominations of others.

In *Black Boy, A Record of Childhood and Youth*, the author depicts the climax of white violence against black people. The “black boy” is compelled to learn facts about life in a climate of terror, fear, hunger, hatred and violence that turns his life into a nightmare: “My sustained expectation of violence had exhausted me. My preoccupation with curbing my impulses, my speech, my movements, my manner, my expressions had increased my anxiety.” (Wright 2000a: 197).

A salient factor that triggers blacks’ identity crisis is the fact that it has its roots in the perpetual dissimulating attitude that the black boy has to adopt in his relationship with white people. Subservience and dissimulation are damaging attitudes that act against human nature and, at the same time, they pervert the identity formation process of the young person. The most confusing part of the social simulacrum in which the “black boy” has to participate relies on the fact that he has to dissimulate all the time in his relationship with white Americans. Thus he runs the risk of not knowing what his pure self really is. Furthermore, the fact that he has to behave in an unnatural, different way than the one in which he would have liked to, absorbs all his energy and places him on a humiliating and painful condition: “While standing before a white man I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word. I could not help it. I could not grin. (...) I could not react as the world in which I lived expected me to; that world was too baffling, too uncertain.” (Ibidem: 198).

In other words, he is compelled to lead his life according to the racist laws of white society which proves to be a rather tough learning and humiliating experience. The manifestation of the psychological dimension as well as of the personal dimension of his self is prevented by the racist law system that functions as an equalizing factor for all the members of black community. Bernard Bell (1989: 155) makes a synthesis of what *Black Boy* represents in his view: “In *Black Boy* Wright sums up life in the South for a black man as a choice between

militancy, submissiveness, projection of self-hatred, or escape through sex and alcohol.”

It seems that racial tolerance stands for an utopian dream that finds its most refined artistic expression in Richard Wright's *The Long Dream*. The novel owes its title to the statement of Tyree Tucker, a black mortician and owner of a brothel who, using a tone of bitter conviction, tells his son, Fishbelly: “A black man's dream, son, a dream that can't come true” (Wright 2000b: 79). The bitterness of his voice comes from the protagonist's racial awareness and strong belief in the never ending oppression of black people. He attains his wealth and power by bribing and forging business arrangements with the corrupt white authorities. Thus, Tyree makes regular payment to Cantley, the chief of police until one day when a fire breaks out in the club owned by a black physician called Bruce, with Tyree Tucker as his silent partner. The former is to be held responsible for breaking the fire code, but he threatens to involve Tyree as well. Chief Cantley, in turn, is worried about the incriminating evidence that Tyree has against him and kills him in order to eliminate him from the equation. The extremely complicated plot triggers the entire action of the novel that reveals, on the one hand, the complex and fairly fascinating image of the father in contrast with the deceptively naïve and rather inexperienced image of the son and, on the other hand, the illusory collaboration between Tyree and the corrupted white police officer. The term “illusory” is the most appropriate one to describe the relationship between the black mortician and the corrupted white officer. No black man can run his own business or company without the approval and consent of white authorities. Furthermore, black prosperity does not represent the dream of the 20th century racist American society whose permanent tendency is to repress any black aspiration towards social equality and social justice. In other words, the so called collaboration between Tyree and Cantley for a temporary mutual benefit is nothing else than another form of blacks' exploitation by the white local authorities, that derives from the only accepted relationship in a racist society – that of domination-subordination. The communication between Tyree, his son, Fishbelly and whites is in fact a simulacrum, as long as the two of them are not allowed to negotiate or to express their agreement or disagreement with respect to the topics under discussion. In a racist society it is the oppressors that make the rules and the communication process is unilateral.

Quite predictably, social commitments represent a mere utopian black dream and the integration in the social milieu of the white people is a matter out of question since they are not treated as equal partners. Consequently, neither Tucker nor his son can develop a functional social identity or a psychological sense of ego-identity. What is worse than that is the fact that they cannot achieve an identity stability especially because the psychological and the personal dimension of their human self are continually canceled by white racism. What is valid in the case of the “black boy” – the fact that he is compelled to lead his life according to

the racist laws of white society – is perfectly valid in the case of all Wright’s black characters. More concretely, blackness is considered more like “a normative and behavioral system, a way of looking at the world reflecting, deciding on how one ought to behave, and then acting accordingly.” (Hutchinson 1997: 50).

4. *Uncle Tom’s Children* – the new typology of the African American character

Uncle Tom’s Children represents a collection of five outstanding short stories that in 1938 launched him on his career in fiction. The black world that Richard Wright depicts in his collection of short stories is one of fight, self-sacrifice and even martyrdom. Consequently, the author decides to do away with the literary tradition launched by Harriet Beecher Stowe, by conferring some reactionary aspects to his prose. Therefore, with the exception of *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, the rest of his short stories portray the black protagonists in a way that no other American writer has done it before. The author actually modifies the typology of the black character imposed by his predecessors, especially by Harriet Beecher Stowe whose black character – the mild and humble Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was emblematic not only for the black race in America but also for African American literary tradition.

Richard Wright is the first writer who describes violence in a black man (High 1999: 215). In other words, no trace of uncle Tom’s mildness, piety and subservience can be detected in his *children*. On the contrary, Wright prefers to construct his characters from a belligerent, activist perspective. This is the case of the black reverend Dan Taylor who keeps on fighting for the civil rights of black people, even though he is severely whipped by the white police and submitted to a great racial tension meant to intimidate him and to make him stop fighting. History demonstrated that ethnic and racial pluralism was the cause of numerous bloody wars or conflicts. These conflicts must be seen as attempts of the oppressed people to claim and defend their identity and “to have this identity respected with full legitimacy” (Scheibe 1995: 10).

In *Big Boy Leaves Home*, black violence triggers a wave of violent acts from the part of white people as well. The main black character, Big Boy, kills a white man and he manages to escape North with the help of black community.

In *Down by the Riverside*, the author presents the drama of a black individual called Mann who, against his wish, shoots a white person because this one wants to confiscate the boat he urgently needs to take his pregnant wife to the hospital. When he finally arrives at the hospital, his wife is already dead. After a violent confrontation, Mann is arrested and killed by the white soldiers.

Long Black Song illustrates another case of black drama: Sarah is raped by a white man and her husband, Silas wants to retaliate by shooting whites, but he is finally killed by them.

Saul Sanders in *Eight Men* is another black individual who is compelled to take his environment for granted and to accept the rules of his black world. Just like the rest of Wright's black protagonists, he leads his life under a permanent state of fear. He manages to dissipate this overwhelming fear by taking action. To be more precise, he kills his white female employer, Maybelle Eva Houseman because the woman was always shouting at him. It may well be argued that committing a murder represents in Saul's view a modality through which he re-establishes the social dimension that the racist society has annulled in him. Paradoxical as it may seem, by committing a murder, the black protagonist draws whites' attention upon their human identity – it is their unconscious way of saying that they do not stand for objects, but for human beings. Therefore, they can do a lot of things, they can even commit murders. And this is also the case of Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon, Mann, Big Boy or Silas. As regards the black protagonists' attempt for the recognition of their human identity, Michael Pickering wrote: "Your struggle for identity is confined to recognition by those who have denied your identity. The desire to be properly recognized is itself a product of the stereotypical regime in which you have been constructed as inferior." (Taylor, Spencer 2004: 102-103).

5. Black racial identity

While trying to provide illustrations of the concept of racial identity theory in Richard Wright's fiction, we have focused on the book of Chalmer E. Thompson and Robert T. Carter, entitled *Racial Identity Theory: Applications to Individual, Group and Organizational Interventions*. Their attempt to identify and explain the stages of racial identity development has its roots in Janet Helms' racial identity theory who "drew upon and built upon the work of a variety of other scholars, including Cross (1987) and Hardiman (1979)" (Thompson, Carter 1997: 240). In Helms' view, "racial identity theory in general refers to a Black or White person's identifying or not identifying with the racial group with which he or she is generally assumed to share *racial* heritage" (Helms 1990: 5). According to these social scientists, there are four stages in the development of the process of racial identity of individuals living in a multi-ethnic society.

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 assert their belief in the moral and intellectual superiority of their own group", (Thompson, Carter 1997: 242) whereas blacks may assert their support for black culture in the detriment of white culture (Ibidem). It may well be argued that the individual that has gained psychological awareness of membership into his own racial group belongs to the third stage of his or her racial identity formation process and strives to extensively promote the values, customs and traditions rooted in the racial heritage of the respective ethnic group. For the black protagonists in Wright's novels and short stories, the third stage of the racial identity formation process represents an impossible dream – "a long dream" (*The Long Dream*) that not many of them are able to fulfil because of the fierce manifestations of white racism.

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. In the fourth stage both whites and blacks begin to develop a more balanced relationship with members of their own ethnic group. 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.

In Richard Wright's work of fiction we can identify the unique case of Tyree Tucker in *The Long Dream* who registers an evolution from the first stage to the fourth one. Therefore he is able to see both the natural inborn qualities of the