

// The Tragic Form and The Race Question  
in Richard Wright's Native Son //

by


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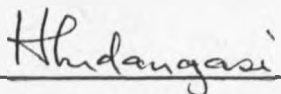
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## ABSTRACT

The conception of tragedy as the artistic representation of conflicts between free will and the compulsion of circumstances, under which the fate of the protagonist suffers an inevitable doom, has, until the modern times, remained stable and unquestioned. In this thesis "The Tragic Form and the Race Question in Richard Wright's Native Son" I undertake an evaluation in which Native Son is interpreted as one of the literary products of this century which alters radically the traditional conception of tragedy and especially as regards the element of inevitable doom.

Native Son, which depicts a tragic conflict based on the unequal relations between Black Americans and other races and nationalities in the United States of America, provides a conception of tragedy that gives the element of inevitable doom a historically transient character. The doom of the protagonist of this novel, Bigger Thomas, is certain but not absolute. The relative nature of his doom renders its inevitability unnecessary under different or changed historical circumstances.

The experiences of Bigger Thomas, a black boy who kills an innocent white girl as a means of bringing attention to himself, in order to express his protest against the oppressive conditions of his life, and the experiences of the characters Bigger interacts

with closely, are tragic from the point of view that the circumstances responsible for the undesirable conditions of Black Americans in the novel defeat the best attempts to change those circumstances.

At the same time, however, the fear generated by Bigger's frantic and frightening efforts to change his own conditions show more clearly the vulnerability of the circumstances which stand in opposition to the attainment of his freedom. In other words, Bigger's crude rebellion assists, with all its failures, in strengthening the position of the forces in society which, historically, have been best prepared to find a solution to the race question. Thus, at the end of the novel we see that the social groups with the greatest interest in the emancipation of American Negroes make progress in overcoming the racial barriers which initially is responsible for their tragic collision.

These considerations have significant implications on the tragic form since they contain a new dimension not found in the traditional conceptions of tragedy. The element of doom is not treated as an absolute; on the contrary the circumstance which creates it also anticipates a successful resolution of the conflict in the future. The outcome is, therefore, a tragedy which bears an optimistic vision. In this thesis I give prominence to this contention: that Native Son is an optimistic tragedy.

In the first chapter I highlight the circumstances in the life history of Richard Wright which predisposed him to a tragic vision of the race question in the U.S. I also examine how certain ideological influences, in particular the Marxist world-view, changed Wright's tragic vision to an optimistic point. This is followed by a brief analysis of some of Wright's works, both before and after Native Son, to show how different circumstances in his life shaped the manner in which his conception of tragedy found artistic execution.

In the second chapter I undertake a general evaluation of the concept of tragedy in which I try to show how certain socio-historical influences have, in a general manner,<sup>v</sup> determined the conceptualization of tragedy in different eras. In the third and final chapter a concrete textual analysis of Native Son is undertaken in which the concepts developed in the previous chapter are used. The conclusion ends this thesis by stating certain general formulations that optimistic tragedy expresses on the race question.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with the relationship between the tragic form and the race question in Richard Wright's novel Native Son. We start our analysis from the conception of tragedy as an artistic representation of the conflict between free will and circumstance, and the final, disastrous failure of free will in the face of the compulsion of circumstances. We use these conceptions in dealing with the relations between the black and white races of human beings in the United States of America as they are portrayed in the novel Native Son.

Using the characters and circumstances depicted in this novel, and in particular, the story of a black boy, Bigger Thomas, who kills a white girl, Mary Dalton, as an expression of his rebellion against the unequal and oppressive position of blacks in the U.S., we discuss the peculiar form tragedy takes in this novel. The development of the story in this novel shows that certain aspects of tragedy, for example, the inevitability of doom in any tragic conflict, changes in this novel.

Bigger Thomas is certainly doomed; the overwhelming force of circumstances fails to yield to his rebellion. But Bigger's failure exposes and reveals other weaknesses inherent in the circumstances which sustain the national oppression of Black Americans.



From this realization, the idea that weaknesses in the oppressive circumstance are bound to give way to changes for the better; a new conception of tragedy emerges which contains an optimistic message.

Bigger's individual and terroristic rebellion fails, but this opens the way for others to overcome the weaknesses exposed by Bigger's failure. What he found impossible, in this case a successful struggle for his own salvation and the national liberation of his people, is made possible, at least in the future, by the realization that the tragic experiences of Bigger and those who are close to him have, in a certain way, changed the circumstances which had hitherto prevented success.

The change in circumstances, particularly as it affects the relationship of those who are interested in the abolition of the national oppression of American Negroes, provide a source of hope for the future triumph in tackling the nationality or race question. Consequently, instead of the traditional conception of tragedy where doom is absolute, we now have a new tragedy which views doom as transient.

In the first chapter we provide an outline of the life history of Richard Wright and the experiences in his life which influenced the emergence of a tragic vision in his conception of the race question. We also trace the evolution of this tragic vision as it manifested

itself in the various works Wright published, before and after Native Son.

In the second chapter we discuss the concept of tragedy from a general theoretical standpoint and focus on how the development of tragedy has led to the emergence of certain new features that Richard Wright made use of in this novel. We refer, in particular, to the emergence of an optimistic tragic vision influenced by the Marxist world-view.

In the third and final chapter we undertake a concrete analysis of the novel using concepts developed from the second chapter. In particular, we analyse the concrete social and psychological circumstances of Bigger's life and his murder of Mary Dalton. We also relate this to the subsequent developments and how this affects the relation of Bigger to other characters in the novel and the social significance accruing from these relationships. We conclude with a brief outline of the findings our evaluation has yielded.

## C H A P T E R   O N E

### THE LIFE AND WORKS OF RICHARD WRIGHT

The traditional understanding of tragedy derives from a dramatic representation of certain historical and social conflicts in which man's free action creates suffering and the loss of some important values. In general terms the artistic means of depicting the tragic requires that the exercise of free action be placed in circumstances which produce the opposite of the expected results [and a failure to resolve the conflicts in a manner which <sup>NDY</sup> arouses the feelings of fear and pity]. More than this, tragedy gives prominence to the courage and nobility inherent in the protagonist's character as he suffers in situations which carry with them a sense of inevitable catastrophe or impending doom. An easy acquiescence is alien to the tragic character.

Inevitable doom or a sense of complete loss is usually regarded as a crucial element of tragedy in the sense that it provides tragic action with its limited and realistic human form. Without this inevitability the results may be mere bravado or fantasy but not tragic. Defeat assures the tragic hero of his limited human capacity in what is otherwise a summit encounter with destiny. Consequently the fate that befalls a tragic hero is traceable to a human weakness he possesses. \*  
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but more significantly, in terms of a flaw or an error he has which prevents the successful execution of his plans.

The above construction is responsible for arousing the emotions of terror and pity. Terror arises from the disturbance created by the 'tragic action' which objectively undermines certain accepted values. Since the limits of tragic action appear to be unknown a general sense of insecurity and fear is aroused but at the same time it also expresses strength and courage for which the hero is admired. Admiration is however compromised because the tragic hero also threatens to destroy the values which provide the society in question with a sense of order and strength. The feeling of pity is aroused by a failure to resolve the tragic conflict, a conflict that exposes a general weakness in the society. In his Poetics Aristotle says that tragedy also purges the same emotions of pity and fear which it had aroused.

This general understanding of tragedy<sup>1</sup> does not, of course, show the specific forms the art takes at any particular time. Tragedy is an old form and the specific forms it acquires under different circumstances can best be explained by reference to the specific and concrete factors responsible for its existence at any particular period.

The idea of tragedy as an irreparable loss or an unavoidable doom changes alongside social and historical changes. In classical Greek tragedy the idea of

inevitable doom preponderates because the tragic conflict was perceived to be predetermined by fate. Greek mythology assigned to supernatural forces the power to determine human progress and doom was thought to be inevitable for anybody who entertained the idea that he could be free of gods.

In contrast, Shakespearean tragedy, created during an epoch of enlightenment, allows supernatural forces insignificant roles in shaping human history. But Shakespearean tragedy, all the same, retains a sense of complete loss and waste. It is only in the modern epoch that tragedy discards the sense of the inevitability of doom which we notice in the past ages.

A significant change in the conception of tragedy in the modern era is connected to the emergence of the realistic novel, the most prominent literary form of the 19th and 20th centuries. The plasticity of the novel has made it adopt some of the old literary forms which had existed hitherto as genres of drama. The rise of the novel in the throes of the industrial, social and economic upheavals that accompanied bourgeois revolutions in Europe is associated with the development of an artistic creative method which takes, as its point of departure, the objective portrayal of society. This realist method has been responsible for the production of literary works which have given a faithful picture of the development of the modern society.

Richard Wright's novel, Native Son, falls within this category. The problem of the realist novel, such as those written by Balzac, Dickens, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, among many others, is the truthful and critical depiction of the contradictions in society. In the pages of the works of realist writers the gigantic advancements in the social, economic, scientific and technological spheres are contrasted to a grim reality, anachronistic relations of production which prevent the realization of the dream for universal happiness. The general conclusions of realist art tends to show the inability of bourgeois society to extend the fruits of modern civilization to millions of the working people in the world. The tragedy of the realist novel is, therefore, social by its very nature.

Our understanding of modern tragedy is crucial in our evaluation of the tragic form in Wright's Native Son. The tragedy portrayed in this novel is, needless to say, modern in every respect. It falls within the general school of realist writings but includes much more. Richard Wright was a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America and this influenced his conception of art and reality. Wright's artistic creative method falls within what has become known as the socialist realist method and his conception of tragedy has to be understood within this perspective.

In this chapter we shall not go into a detailed discussion of tragedy in the manner it is portrayed by the socialist realist methods; that shall be the task of our next chapter. At this stage we would only wish to point out the general traits of the tragedy created by the socialist realist method. Like all forms of tragedy it deals with suffering but it differs from the pre-existing tragedies by its revolutionary conception of suffering. Socialist realism emerged alongside the struggle for socialism and the suffering depicted here is related to the revolutionary remaking of society. This means that both suffering and defeat are encountered in a reality which is changing towards the accomplishment of socialism. Its vision of suffering and defeat carries a sense of hope, of optimism.

The theoretical foundations for this attitude to tragedy goes back to Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Marx and Engels perceived . . . tragedy as something whose significance went beyond the limits of the art itself. Tragedy, in their view, was a reflection of historical reality. Using a dialectical materialist approach to history, they explained the source of tragic conflicts in socio-economic terms. Tragic conflicts arose as a result of the clash between the creation of new productive forces of the society and the fetters of the old relations of production. The class conflicts which reflect the contradiction between the productive forces and relations



of production become tragic when a ruling class supported by a historically outworn relations insists on maintaining its political hegemony.

This is the view Wright took in his treatment of tragedy. He was, of course, not the first writer to do this. Maxim Gorky, considered to be the founder of socialist realism, in his novel Mother, portrays situations which must have influenced Wright's conception of tragedy. That this was indeed the case becomes clearer when analysis of the works which preceded Native Son is done. As we shall notice later in this chapter Wright made conscious efforts to create a tragedy which is ultimately optimistic. A look at "Bright and Morning Star" which appears in Uncle Tom's Children shows Wright's indebtedness to Gorky.

Although Wright's world-view played a significant role in shaping the optimism of the tragedy in Native Son the sources of tragedy in his works have their basis in the concrete reality of the life he led. The tragedy in Wright's life sprung from his position in America as a black man. Wright's early life gives a picture that is almost typical of the tragic position of Black Americans in the U.S. The extreme poverty and seclusion from the mainstream of American life that Wright's life show is also accompanied by a struggle to change this reality, to ensure the equal place of blacks in the general life of the American society.

Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908, at a plantation in Southern Mississippi where his father was a peasant share-cropper. His early life was cruel and harsh. Part of this was spent at an orphanage in Memphis where he was sent after his father had abandoned their family for another woman. From the accounts contained in his autobiographical works, Black Boy, American Hunger, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" in Uncle Tom's Children and "How Bigger Was Born", Wright's childhood and youth were characterised by extreme poverty, endless hunger and an acute sense of helplessness caused by the hostile position blacks were forced to occupy in American society.

Wright began shouldering adult responsibilities when he was still a child. At the age of eight, Wright experienced briefly the meaning of being the family's breadwinner after his mother was half-paralysed by a stroke. His mother's sickness left a deep psychological scar in his mind. The helpless condition of his mother symbolised to him their entire mode of existence and suffering. In Black Boy he recalls:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful; baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Childhood suffering inevitably affected his education. Wright's school life was sporadic and was

terminated at the elementary level. This was in spite of his brilliant performance in school where he distinguished himself in several ways. Most of the time he was ahead of the school curriculum and at the end of the ninth grade he was one of the best students. Because he had no means of furthering his education he was forced to look for odd jobs, an experience that sharpened his understanding of the harsh nature of race relations in the South. He discovered, for example, that as a black man he had no chance of ever becoming a semi or skilled worker even when the employer was benevolent.

Wright worked in several places as a porter, an errand boy and a gate-keeper at a cinema. In all these places, as he explains in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow", he was subjected to shameful humiliation and indignities that were typical of most blacks. He would not, however, feel compromised to this reality. Unlike other blacks who appeared to have accepted and resigned themselves to their disadvantaged place in society Wright did not despair.

He brooded on the nature of race relations in the U.S. and often wondered at the hostility and violence that characterised these relations. It seemed strange to him that though the black and white races shared one country nothing in their lives reflected this. The lives of the blacks in the South was regulated by a

systematic application of rigid discriminatory laws in all spheres of life. These laws, both written and unwritten and known as Jim Crow, assigned to black Americans an inferior and humiliating position in society. It is not surprising, therefore, that Wright developed a deep hatred and an angry revulsion for racism. He discovered that Jim Crow laws excluded him from virtually everything necessary for the development of his personality.

What was particularly annoying to Wright were a variety of stereotypes which rationalised the oppression of American Negroes by depicting them as a happy, contented and submissive people. Wright did not accept these Jim Crow images of his race which were aimed at depicting black people as incapable of great responsibilities and self-determination. Instead he was attracted to blacks who challenged these stereotypes. Wright developed a secret identification and admiration for "bad niggers" who were so considered, from the point of view of Jim Crow laws, because they defied some aspects of racial discrimination and segregation. Wright viewed their defiant acts as symbolic of the striving for the freedom American Negroes desired. Most of the time however Wright saw that the hostile racial environment in the South doomed most of the "bad niggers" to death.

Wright predicted that he, too, was doomed if he was to continue living in the South. He migrated north, first to Memphis and later Chicago, after acquiring some

money through criminal methods. Kenneth Kinnamon is correct in observing that Wright's flight was a defiance of a life which had condemned many black youths to a criminal career. "Everything in his background," writes Kinnamon, "the extreme poverty, a broken home, poor education and a hostile racial environment" would have pointed to "a criminal life, a Bigger Thomas"<sup>3</sup> But Wright defied this fate and became a writer.

The emergence of Wright as a writer in America was slow and torturous. When the story of Bluebird and His Seven Wives was read to him at the age of eight his grandmother, a devout Seventh Day Adventist, fiercely opposed this. But young Wright was greatly impressed. Writing then became an ambition. The first thing he wrote and read to a girl in the neighbourhood encouraged him because her dumb ignorance gave writing, in Wright's opinion, some magical importance. When he published a short story "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre" in a "black" magazine called the Southern Register the response varied from hostility at home to amazement and puzzlement at school.<sup>4</sup>

The literary barrenness of his immediate social and cultural environment was one of the many constraints Wright faced in his ambition to be a writer. The Jim Crow education of black Americans kept them ignorant and their poverty made access to literature and other aspects of modern culture almost impossible. Besides the folklore heritage of black Americans Wright had to contend with some mystery and detective stories he

read in the magazine pages of a Ku Klux Klan newspaper he had sold as a boy. The avidity and the thirst with which he read the cheap fiction clearly attest to the cultural backwardness of Wright's social milieu.

Events took a turn for the better when Wright moved to Memphis. At one time he read an editorial of a magazine that, in his opinion, was highly critical of an American critic known as H.L. Mencken. He later forged a note and was allowed to borrow books written by Mencken from a public library. Thus, what started as mere curiosity for somebody hated by people Wright had no liking for developed into an encounter with some of the best writers at the time. Wright read novels by Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Fyodor Dostoyevsky Maxim Gorky and Joseph Conrad, among many other writers. In Black Boy Wright confessed that what amazed him most from his reading was the sense of reality evoked in the novels and how this revealed to him a new interpretation of the world around him. "The plots and stories in the novels did not interest me so much" he explained. His interest was:

The point of view revealed. I gave myself to each novel without reserve, without criticising it; it was enough for me to see and feel something different. Reading was a drug, a dope. The novels created a mood in which I lived for days.

Reading changed his attitude to his own reality, although ironically, this was accompanied by a feeling of subversion. "I could not conquer my sense of guilt"

he wrote of his new awareness, "my feeling that the white men around me knew that I was changing, that I had began to regard them differently".<sup>6</sup>

The turning point in Wright's psychological evolution must, however, have occurred when he left Memphis for Chicago. Chicago was the big city of his dreams and the long sought-for fulfilment. But Chicago also became the nightmare which unravelled to him the deep-seated and irreconcilable contradictions of American civilisation. It shattered irreversibly Wright's dream of freedom in a capitalist society.

Wright arrived in Chicago two years before the Great Depression of 1929 to 1941. When he finally got a job as a postal clerk the dream of developing his personality appeared to have come true. He bought books and expanded his readings to areas in sociology, psychology and political science. He also read Stein, Crane and Dostoyevsky among others. Besides, he had the opportunity to discuss literary matters with some friends at the general post office. Thanks to some of these friends Wright joined the John Reed Club from where his literary career was launched.

The Great Depression was in full swing when Wright joined the John Reed Club. As millions of people were thrown into abject poverty; as more lost their jobs and were kicked out of houses by landlords, and swarmed the streets in search of food and work, Wright sought for an

answer to explain the meaning of this economic mess. Despair and hopelessness reigned in all corners where he sought for an answer. Soon, however, it became apparent to him that people's indignation at their worsening conditions found expression in political forms. Rallies, demonstrations and strikes became more pronounced as the voices of revolutionary parties, led by the Communist Party, increasingly became louder in articulating the suffering of the people.

At a personal level Wright felt the effects of the Depression in a variety of ways. It deprived him of his job with the post office and the new ones he got never lasted long enough for him to avoid the extreme hardships of the Depression. Like many others, his hopelessness was dawned on him when he was finally forced to beg for relief food. "The day I begged for bread from the city officials" he confessed, "was the day that showed me that I was not alone in my loneliness, society had cast millions of others with me"<sup>7</sup>

These experiences forced Wright to re-evaluate his understanding of the social and race relations in the U.S. At first, this happened almost unconsciously but increasingly it became clear to him that he was developing a different, and more critical approach to the life in his country. He says below:



I was slowly beginning to comprehend the meaning of my environment; a sense of direction was beginning to emerge from the conditions of my life. I began to feel something more powerful than I could express.<sup>8</sup>

When he joined the John Reed Club he became more conscious of what this "something" was, his conception of reality had changed to a revolutionary one.

Wright joined the John Reed Club in December, 1929. The Club, a cultural front for the revolutionary intelligentsia engaged in writing, painting, music, drama and other cultural activities, operated under the aegis of the Communist Party and published a magazine known as the, Left Front. Wright was introduced to this magazine as well as the Party's organs New Masses and International Literature. He began writing poetry which was published in all these publications.

The understanding Wright had on the race and social reality in America was radically altered after he joined this Club. One of the most significant influences in changing his attitude to the race question was the multi-racial composition of the Club. Wright had never believed that there were white people in America who would treat him on the basis of equality and friendship and it took him some days to accept this as a fait accompli. For the first time in his life Wright saw possibilities of altering America's race relations for the better.

But this, he came to discover, depended on other, more fundamental factors beyond skin-colour, that is, issues that touched on the economic heart of the society. Be that as it may, Wright was later appointed to the editorial board of the Left Front and, soon after, was elected the executive secretary of the Club. In expressing his satisfaction with his membership in the Club, Wright wrote that "it seemed to me that here at last in the realm of revolutionary expression was where a Negro could find a home".<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1930s Wright became a member of the Communist Party which, in his own words, provided him with an ideology that created "a meaningful picture of the world today" and moreover "it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro Writer"<sup>10</sup> Armed with the Marxist understanding of society Wright reassessed the meaning of his early life in the South and concluded that the South was "but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine"<sup>11</sup>. In short, it can be said that Wright had begun to perceive race relations as dependent upon social, specifically, capitalist relations of production.

The beginning of Wright's literary career was a product of this period in his life. He wrote poems which appeared in the Left Front and New Masses,

reflecting his new world-view. In one of the poems .

"I have Seen Black Hands", he proclaims:

I am black and I have seen black hands  
 Raised in fists of revolt, side by side  
                   with white fists of white workers  
 And some day - and it is only this which  
                   sustains me  
 Some day there shall be millions and  
                   millions of them  
 On some red day in burst of fists on a  
                   new horizon. 12

This and other similar poems can be regarded as Wright's literary manifesto.

In 1938 Wright published his award-winning collection of short stories Uncle Tom's Children. Native Son which extended his reputation beyond both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, was published two years later. Strong marks of Wright's life in the party are evident in these works. Wright explained this influence in this manner: "I owe my literary development to the Communist Party and its influence, which has shaped my thoughts and creative growth. It gave me my first full-bodied vision of Negro life in America"<sup>13</sup>.

Uncle Tom's Children contains stories that repudiate the image of American Negroes as people who are submissive to oppressive conditions. The children of Uncle Tom, that slave who loved his master, violently affirm their humanity and entitlement to dignity and honour. Big Boy, the hero of "Big Boy Leaves Home", snatches a gun from a white assailant and kills him with it before escaping to the north. Mann, in "Down by the Riverside"

kills a white owner of a stolen boat he is rowing in. Silas, a black farmer in "Long Black Song" is burnt to death for killing a white man who committed adultery with his wife. All these stories, including "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star" are set in the South and show a progressive development of Wright's conception of the tragic form.

Big Boy is the predecessor of Bigger Thomas, the hero of Native Son. His story emphasizes rebellion, strength and daring. The combined force of three friends fails to subdue him. With bare hands he kills a hunting dog and a snake. Above all, Big Boy dares to fight back against a white man and kills him. But Big Boy's strength is also his weakness. His family and the black community, afraid of the inevitable wrath of white racists, arrange for his escape to Chicago. Neither him nor the black community is capable of halting the terror unleashed by white supremacists. Big Boy's rebellion is, therefore, isolated. His friend Bobo is lynched as he watches from his hide-out, and, his flight is a loss for what his actions had earlier expressed. The circumstances which demanded his strength, daring and rebellion, after so much loss and suffering, also deny him final success in what makes him appear heroic to the reader.

There are, however, some errors inherent in his heroism. His passion for a free and natural life will not make him stay at school. He basks, sings and plays with his friends in the woods. A sign-post warning tres-

passers into Harvey's farm has no effect in restraining the boys' movement. Big Boy does not heed any restrictions which stand in the way of his desires. He is, as it were on the path of attaining the impossible but fails and flees to Chicago.

Like Big Boy, Mann of "Down by the Riverside" is also strong and courageous. He rows his wife to a hospital against strong currents of an over-flooded river. He kills a white man, Heartfield, who threatens to discontinue his journey to the hospital in order to repossess his (Heartfield's) stolen boat. After this Mann takes part in a rescue mission to evacuate people trapped by the floods at the hospital. But Mann, too, is blind to the fate he meets. When he is warned by Elder Murray of the problems brewing in the nearby town, Mann takes his pistol, as if to indicate that it will shield him against all the impending troubles. He is also unwilling to enlist the support of the members <sup>of</sup> his community.

Like Big Boy, Mann's mistakes do not cancel the admiration for his strength and courage. All that could be said of him is that his perception of reality is limited by the narrow conditions of his life and his individualism. While Mann and Big Boy express and assert the values for which they sacrifice their lives with strength, the manner in which they carry out those tasks show the narrow limits of their perception. It is of course true that this flaw is connected to the narrow social circumstances which have created them and which in turn is the product

of objective historical conditions arising from the very nature of their society. But this does not invalidate the fact that their level of awareness hardly permits them to go beyond the very confines imposed by the conditions against which they are in rebellion. Consequently, they fall victims to the very target of their rebellion.

This, too, is the story of Silas, the hero of "Long Black Song". Silas dares to stand up against the gigantic white world which has failed to recognise both his human rights and achievements as a black man. He kills three white men before his house is set on fire and his body burnt to death. He however dies like a hero, without submitting. Like Big Boy and Mann he is driven to an extreme point of decision where his actions carry with them a sense of inevitability, of an inescapable doom. His heroism echoes the sentiments expressed in Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die". If death is inevitable then let it be faced gloriously, fighting without submission.

Without a hope for the future, that is, denied the freedom of a life of their desire, the heroes of the above three stories show a particularly tragic vision of life. It is a tragic vision which affirms the worthiness of human life and desires but which, at the same time, negates this by denying the possibilities of success. This, in our consideration, falls under the general understanding of traditional tragedy. This is a tragedy which upholds the daring for boundless freedom, and

in our particular case, expresses the necessity for equality of all peoples; but which because of its narrow base, limits the existence of the self-same freedom. We indeed admire the individual who goes farthest in defending the necessity for unfettered existence but we are also conscious that beyond the admiration a void exists, that freedom is impossible.

Big Boy, Mann and Silas are caught in circumstances they hardly understand. Their response is largely impulsive and ignorant. They do not and cannot understand that different circumstances may offer greater possibilities of success. The finality of their actions, uncompromising and unapologetic as they are, would tend to give credence to the chauvinistic idea that there would be something heroic in killing a whiteman. They, of course, respond to a hostile reality but the racial jungle in which they find themselves in allows them little room to grasp the necessity for improved race relations based on equality, which in part, their actions express. It is however the position they occupy in society which has denied them the opportunity to view their society in any other way. Consequently, their error is not personal but springs from their position in social relations already outworn by historical necessity.

"Fire and Cloud" in Uncle Tom's Children marks a turning-point from the above stories. This change is noticed in the correspondence between consciousness and historical necessity, which shifts from emphasising

individual acts of daring to those based on the community of interests shared by the oppressed peoples. In the stories we have considered so far it has been pointed out that individuals through whom historical necessity is expressed are blind to the larger significance of their roles and consequently fail to formulate the necessary means of successfully accomplishing the tasks before them. Apart from this they do not know that their individual struggles express a general need in society which would allow for the fullest expression of the freedom and the development of the personality of each individual. They take the existing relations as immutable and their acts affirm this.

"Fire and Cloud" takes us a step further for it shows that the relations between blacks and the whites are indeed changeable on condition that the class interests of all oppressed people are given a common consideration. The changes in the evolution of Rev. Taylor's consciousness clearly express this. He had earlier objected to his name being included in leaflets circulated by two communists organising a protest demonstration against the withdrawal of relief food from poor blacks and whites in a southern township. At the same time Rev. Taylor had rejected a demand by the mayor of the town to call off the demonstration. To his parishers he had pleaded with them to await an answer from God who will see how to end their hunger.



But after white racists have flogged, tortured and humiliated him he changes his attitude to support the planned demonstration. His new consciousness is revealed in his criticism of his son's desire for revenge against the white racists. Taylor tells Jimmy:

We gotta git with the people, son.  
 Too long we done tried t' do things  
 our own way n when we failed we  
 wanted t turn n pay off the white  
 folks. Then they kill us like flies.  
 It is the people, son! Wes too much  
 erlone this way! Wes los when wes  
 erlone. Wes gonna be wid our folks.<sup>14</sup>

This change takes place with a corresponding change of his theology. He sees God in terms of His relationship with the people's suffering. God is on the side of the people who are hungry and to be on their side is to be on God's side.

Reverend Taylor's change of attitude is particularly poignant if examined against Jimmy's desire to hit back at the white supremacists. We may compare Jimmy's attitude to that of Big Boy, Mann and Silas who see revenge as the appropriate reaction to an injustice. This attitude arises because the particular injustice committed is perceived in isolation from its broader social context. The change in Taylor's consciousness is, in this respect, of very great significance since it exposes the weakness of an individual in seeking for a solution to a problem based on objective social relations. Viewing Taylor's earlier fears, in retrospect, it becomes clearer why he would not agree

to the inclusion of his name in the leaflets calling for a march to the town hall; he was reacting as an individual whose weakness was obvious before the mighty organs of state power. The very presence of the mayor and the police chief in Taylor's home brought fear to all who knew about it. Now, armed with his new awareness he leads the poor blacks and whites in their protest march to the town hall. At the end of the demonstration Reverend Taylor concludes, as the mayor prepares to address the marchers, that "freedom belongs to the strong"<sup>15</sup>.

The strength of "Fire and Cloud" is qualitatively different from the works we have evaluated above. This new strength is derived from unity of all the oppressed people struggling for a common goal. Taylor's humiliating experiences and his enlightened democratic Christian consciousness allows him to identify with the hungry people and rejects the selfish interests that the mayor entices him to prefer. He instead collaborates with two communists whose presence in the novel symbolizes the existence of internationalism and democratic race relations. And, at another level, the communists also symbolize organized mass action as opposed to spontaneous and anarchical rebellion. Wright's realistic method, however, makes Reverend Taylor the leader of the successful demonstration.

"Fire and Cloud", though more heroic than tragic, has important implications to Wright's treatment of the tragic form. The significance and meaning of the tragic conflicts in "Big Boy leaves Home", "Down by the Riverside" and "Long Black Song" alter radically in the light of the experiences portrayed in "Fire and Cloud". The sacrifices made by the heroes of the former stories, for example, appear sombre in comparison to the optimism of the latter. We can in fact say that the validity of the sacrifices in the earlier stories is sustainable only to the extent that a critical portrayal is given of America's tragic race question. However, in the light of what is observed in "Fire and Cloud" such sacrifices become unnecessary because they are blind. Blindness or ignorance creates unnecessary sacrifices which knowledge of the complexity of the nationalities question would have precluded.

Taylor's new consciousness, the existence of the two communists and the multi-racial composition of the demonstrators, including both the poor blacks and whites; all go to show that historical necessity has been recognised. The demonstration, does not, of course, abolish racial and national inequality between American Negroes and white Americans; all it does is to bring to the fore the question of the best method necessary for the abolition of national oppression of Negroes. And the story shows that the collective

efforts of all the oppressed peoples, including the masses of the working people among the white race precludes the inevitability of defeat. It shows, in other words, that doom can no longer be considered as a permanent and inevitable factor in the search for a better society where the rights of all are guaranteed. Equally, this implication affects Wright's conception of tragedy for inevitability of defeat ceases to be a necessary condition for the tragic.

This change is clearly observed in "Bright and Morning Star" and reaches its zenith in Native Son. "Bright and Morning Star" is the heroic story of a rural black woman who is killed in her attempt to save her son, who is a communist, from the treachery of a white police agent. Sue, for that is her name, already has another son, Sug, serving a prison sentence in connection with his role in the Party. Sue has never seen happiness in all her life since her husband died sometime in the past. She has, since then, raised her children in severe hardships and consoled herself with the belief of a better life in the hereafter. The image of Christ on the cross, she thought, had a meaning related to her suffering but it failed to answer or prevent the cruelty surrounding her existence. Then her sons joined the Communist Party and from her intercourse with them she began to perceive a vague possibility of happiness on earth. Although she could not conceptualise the full meaning of socialism, the images

that formed in her consciousness were strong enough to make her develop a kindred disposition to its vision. Just then her son, Johnny-Boy, is arrested and she takes a decision which she knows will result in the death of her son and herself and at the same time protect the Party. She forestalls and kills Booker, a police agent sent to infiltrate the Party and to whom she had unwittingly disclosed names of other Party members. It can be argued, therefore, that when she is killed, her death becomes a sacrifice to the Party which symbolises her faith in the ultimate triumph of oppressed peoples. Freedom belongs to the strong, so the maxim goes, and her death strengthens the Party.

"Bright and Morning Star" brings Wright's treatment of the tragic form to a fundamentally new stage. Wright's belief in the working people as active participants in the refashioning of society gives tragedy a new revolutionary content. Sue's death is not, in this context, a permanent loss even when her physical existence ceases. She lives in her triumph where she is "buried in the depth of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength; and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never die..."<sup>16</sup> The "doomed living"

are the police who have failed to get the names of communists they wanted in order to protect a "doomed" social system. Her death is infused with an abundant sense of optimism for she is among the "dead that never die".

"Bright and Morning Star" is, in our opinion, what comes closest to Native Son in Wright's conception of tragedy. Whether Wright developed this conception of tragedy with very clear intentions based on a theoretical knowledge of the development of the tragic form is difficult to say. What seems to be clear is that, as the earlier stories have indicated, Wright had developed a predisposition for tragic stories and when they are supplied with a revolutionary content as "Bright and Morning Star" this marks a departure from the traditional conception of tragedy. Here, it is the content of the tragic form which changes but the change in the content also affects the artistic form. In other words, the form itself changes as a result of the changes in its content which, as we have noted, is revolutionary and optimistic.

Richard Wright's works which appear subsequent to Native Son, however, show a drastic change from this view of tragedy. Wright's later conception of tragedy bases itself on the understanding of human life as an uncertain groping for a secret meaning of life characterised by nihilistic tendencies. This is a shift from the anger and rebellion of his critical realist

method and the optimism of the socialist realist method. The later works are influenced by the existentialist world-view which he embraced after he had quit the Communist Party. The prominent features of this conception of tragedy is the view that human existence is no longer governed by any moral values and that whatever values man derives from his existence they are secondary to the torments of an abnormally lonely existence where man has finally failed to establish links with others.

Wright joined the Communist Party in 1933 in Chicago<sup>17</sup> Later he moved to New York and became the Harlem editor of the Party's newspaper The Daily Worker. Most of the works we have referred to above were written during this period. He also wrote a folk history of black Americans in the U.S under the title Twelve Million Black Voices.<sup>18</sup> This, and an essay "Blueprint for Negro Writings" adhered in varying degrees to his Marxist world-view. In 1944, after more than ten years in the Party, Wright resigned and three years later migrated to Paris, France, where he died of heart attack in 1960.

In 1945, two years before he went to exile, Wright published his autobiography Black Boy. In Paris he came into close contact with existentialist philosophers, among them Jean-Paul Satre, who influenced his thinking to a considerable extent. His association with existentialism finds its clearest expression in The Outsider,

his first novel in exile published in 1953. In 1954 Wright travelled to the then Gold Coast, the first African country to attain self-rule, and recorded his impressions of this journey in Black Power.<sup>19</sup>

This book also contains an open letter to Kwame Nkrumah, the government leader then, in which Wright called for the militarisation of African life as a means of combating foreign imperialist domination and overcoming tribalism and economic backwardness. Later Wright travelled to Bandung, Indonesia, where the first Non-Aligned Countries' first conference was held. He wrote a report on this as well as a journey he made to Spain. A collection of short stories written over a period of twenty years appeared in 1961 under the title Eight Men. In 1977, another posthumous publication American Hunger appeared. This was an autobiographical continuation of Black Boy.

Wright's life in exile shows an uncertain search and some confused aspirations. His trip to Ghana, Indonesia and Spain gives the picture of an attempt to find and identify a home with other peoples of the world, away and different from his native America. He shows strong sympathies for the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements of Africa and Asia. He, however, discovers that he is distinct from them in a number of ways. Wright found repelling certain feudal, religious and tribal attachments among certain elements of the national liberation movements of Africa and Asia. In his efforts to identify with the people of the East, Wright called on them to



reject both Western capitalism and socialism as it existed in the Soviet Union, a standpoint which shows some similarities to Maoism.

But it can be said that, all in all, Wright never adhered consistently to any of these views during his life in exile. Perhaps they only made him feel more strongly about his Western, and indeed, American identity. America, his home, was however the land which reminded him, most of all, of the problems of racism. He expressed his bitterness at this sad reality by blaming the white race for the ills which befell black American and the "dark races" of the Third World. His publicist writings in exile clearly express the feelings of a man betrayed by his native land. The United States deprived Wright of a home he never found in his ceaseless search in exile.

Wright's creative works in exile are indeed a manifestation of the search we see in his life. We notice, for example, the replacement of the optimism of the socialist realist method by a shattering sense of the irrational and meaninglessness in man's tragic existence. Wright's hope in human life, in the Communist Party, was shattered when the Party compromised its ideals due to the activities of infiltrators who caused insecurity and uncertainty among party members.<sup>20</sup> The works published after Native Son have a peculiar sense of

gloom associated with an underworld where characters search in darkness for a secret meaning of life in a lonely world. Released from responsibility and immersed in darkness, non-recognition and invisibility, these characters of Wright's later works gaze fleetingly at the futility of human existence. They attempt to discover some meaning which is hidden behind the senseless surface of things, but even when they recognise some dim meaning, their loneliness renders impossible the communication of that meaning. Perhaps, the worlds of the Outsider and some short stories can best illustrate this.

Cross Damon, the protagonist of the Outsider and a postal worker, is mistaken dead when his personal documents are found next to the body of a man bashed in an underground train accident. Damon takes advantage of this confusion to free himself from the burdens of family responsibility and begins to search for a new life. He protects this new-found freedom by murdering a colleague who accidentally discovers him at his hide-out hotel. After this crime Damon leaves Chicago for New York.

In New York Damon encounters a Communist who wants to use him in a protest against the racism of a white American fascist known as Herdon. Strangely enough, Damon decides to kill both the fascist and the communist, Gilbert Blount, in a manner which hides his crime by

giving the impression that the two killed themselves after a savage fight. Damon kills another communist who has discovered his crime and also makes an attempt to win the love of Blount's wife, Eva. When Eva discovers Damon's crime, following his own confession to her, she commits suicide. After this the story rapidly develops to the end when Damon is killed by some communists.

Even though The Outsider is not as artistically compelling as Native Son it nevertheless contains features typical of Wright's writings. A man begins a frantic search for the meaning of his life only after he has committed some crimes. He remains undetected for a while and even when the crime is discovered the guilty character is not immediately identified with it. The non-recognition magnifies the character's threat to existing laws and apparent order. This psychological invisibility protects the guilty party and provides him with a unique opportunity to weigh the effects and meaning his actions have on society. The crime frees the character, so to speak, and in a certain sense provides a measure of value to his hitherto meaningless existence.

Damon, who was previously overwhelmed by the burdens of social responsibility, becomes free and incognito after the underground train disaster. His freedom of

action extends beyond known limits. He murders heartlessly, assuming the supreme role of either a god or the devil. It is as if he holds the destiny of all mankind in his hands. This position and his actions are justified by a philosophy which considers man to be "nothing in particular". At the time of his death, that is, at the end of his search Damon reaches the conclusion that "the search can't be done alone. Never alone...Alone a man is nothing"<sup>21</sup>.

In the short stories published after Native Son Wright's interest shifts again to characters in the "lower depths"<sup>22</sup> of the society. Curiously, however, the themes of anger and rebellion are not as forcefully expressed as we notice them in Uncle Tom's Children. A certain amount of anger may be detected in "Almos' A Man"<sup>23</sup> but Dave, its protagonist, is lacking in the strength we identify with Big Boy, Mann, Silas and more so, Rev. Taylor or Sue. Dave is weak and derives his sense of strength from external sources and objects - the possession of a gun. Even then he fails to defy Jim Crow authority represented by his landlord who humiliates him before his own parents. Overcome by shame he decides to flee to an unknown destination. What seems peculiar about him is the obsession to own a gun on which his manhood somehow depends. It may indeed be argued that his

warped rural environment debases any sense of nobility in his character and this may account for his obsession. His flight reminds us of Big Boy who left for a new home in Chicago.

"The Man Who Killed A Shadow"<sup>24</sup> himself lives in a shadowy world. He turns a blind eye to the harsh reality of racism around him and instead sees white people as shadows. He obliterates the harshness of his social environment by building a psychological shell around himself and crowns it by resorting to drinking. He lives on the fringes of the society except when he works to earn a living. Other human desires and aspirations are of the least concern to him, so that when he kills a white woman who is a librarian - the shadow - he hardly feels the whole import of his crime. He continues to drink as usual and completely "forgets" to hide his crime.

"The Man Who Killed A Shadow" evokes a Dostoyevskian psychology of the "injured and the insulted"<sup>25</sup> who have lost all their sense and purpose of living. His feelings and thoughts have been relegated from the civilised norms to the impulsive and bestial level. The civilization which has pushed him to the depth of his shadowy world is, of course, not blameless. However, his experiences indicate no signs of faith in human life. He is passive to his social reality and adopts an escapist life-style

to avoid rebellion. He occupies the position he does because he deserves no better place. Only, he will kill any shadow which intrudes into his psychological shell.

Perhaps, the most interesting piece of short story written after Native Son is "The Man Who Lived Underground"<sup>26</sup>. The man who lived underground escapes into a sewer to hide from policemen who have falsely accused him of the murder of a white woman. In the underground he makes interesting discoveries of the values men attach to things. He plays about with dollar bills of various denominations, worth several millions. He also sleeps on jewels, desecrating on their value. He finds them all meaningless and profane so that when he seeks to communicate the meaning of his secret discovery the police shoot him allegedly because men of his type are always dangerous to the society. The desire by the man who lived in the underground to share the meaning of his discoveries on the meaninglessness of human values may express his faith in human life and reason. However, when he is shot dead all of this is lost in his death. The world remains meaningless and irrational and the tragedy of the whole reality is that it cannot be otherwise.

From the preceding evaluation of Richard Wright's life and the works published before and after Native Son sufficient material has been highlighted which shows that Wright was predisposed to a tragic view of life. The experiences in his own life were largely of a tragic

nature. It does not, therefore, appear as accidental that his own writings should be appended to tragic events. We also see that his portrayal of tragedy changes according to the stages he undergoes as a writer. In this respect the changes in his world-view play no insignificant role in determining the creative method he employs in depicting tragic conflict. The tragedy of his earliest works falls within critical realism whereas those immediately preceeding Native Son, like the novel itself, use the socialist realist method. This change affects the tragic form in a very profound sense as tragedy acquires an optimistic vision. In the next chapter we shall examine from a theoretical stand-point the historical evolution of tragedy to the point it acquires an optimistic content which Wright employed in Native Son.

## Endnotes

1. This generalisation on the nature of tragedy is derived from a variety of sources including Aristotle's classical definition of tragedy in "On the Art of Poetry" Classical Literary Criticism (Harmondsworth: Penguin Book Ltd, 1965) Translator (T.S. Dorsch - see chapters 11, 13, 14, and 15; the respective entries of J.R. Dorius, and O.B. Hardison, on tragedy and the tragic flaw in Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, (London: MacMillan Press, 1956) pp 860-865; A.F. and A.V. Mikhailov, on the tragic and tragedy in The Great Soviet Encyclopedia Vol.26 (New York: MacMillan Inc., 1981) English translation pp.284-285 and 285-286; T.R. Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy, (London: Methuen & Co.,1956) pp 41-42 who subordinates free-will to fate or circumstances; J. Orr, Tragic Realism and Modern Society (London: MacMillan Press, 1977) pp 14-15 who sees the tragic as "an irreparable loss"; and J.C. Oates, The Edge of Impossibility (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.,1976) pp 3.4- who associates tragedy with an ultimate quest for perfection which is consumed in doom.
2. R. Wright, Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth (Essex: Longman Group Ltd, 1970) pp.86-87, unless otherwise indicated accounts of Richard Wright's life is derived from his autobiographical works.



3. K. Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright  
(Urbana: University of Illinois  
Press, 1972) p.3.
4. R. Wright, Black Boy, p.144
5. Ibid, p. 219
6. Ibid
7. R. Wright, American Hunger, (London:Victor Gollancz,  
1978) p.44.
8. Ibid, p. 44-45
9. Ibid, p. 63
10. R. Wright, "Blueprint For Negro Writing" in  
Richard Wright Reader, (New York:  
Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978)p.44.
11. R. Wright , "How Bigger Was Born" introduction to  
Native Son (Harmmondsworth:Penguin  
Books, 1972)p.17.
12. Richard Wright Reader, p. 246
13. Richard Wright: Critical Reception, ed.J.M.Reilly  
(New York:Burt Franklin & Co., 1978)p.7.
14. R. Wright, Uncle Tom's Children, (New York:  
Harper & Row, Publishers, 1938)p.171.
15. Ibid, p. 180.
16. Ibid, p. 215.
17. Richard Wright: Critical Reception p.ix also  
see M. Fabre, Unfinished Quest of Richard  
Wright, (New York: William Marrow & Co.,1973).
18. Richard Wright Reader, p.144.
19. Ibid, p.86

20. R. Wright, American Hunger see pp. 111 and 113  
where Wright gives accounts of what  
led to his resignation, i.e. poor  
party leadership and internal wrangles.
21. R. Wright, The Outsider (New York: Harper & Row,  
publishers, 1953) p. 439
22. Reference to a play by the same title written by  
the Soviet Writer, Maxim Gorky.
23. R. Wright, "Almos' A Man" in Best Short Stories by  
Negro Writers ed. Langstone Hughes  
(Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967)  
pp. 91-103
24. R. Wright, "The Man Who Killed A Shadow" in  
Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in  
America (New York: Free Press, 1968)  
pp.227-238
25. Reference to a novel by the Russian writer  
Dostoyevsky
26. Richard Wright Reader, pp. 516-576

## C H A P T E R T W O

### THE CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY AND "NATIVE SON"

The starting point of a general and theoretical view of tragedy and its specific expression in Richard Wright's Native Son seems, naturally, to be Aristotle's conception of the art form. Aristotle's views on tragedy have mutatis mutandis withstood the test of time, and for that reason, demand the first consideration on any discussion of the tragic form. In this chapter, therefore, we shall examine the concept of tragedy from a general historical standpoint which shall be necessary for the concrete analysis of Native Son which we shall undertake in the next chapter.

As we have already indicated, the contemporary conception of tragedy is to a considerable degree the product of a long time which began with Aristotle. In his Poetics Aristotle defined tragedy as "a representation of action that is worth serious attention" which "by means of pity and fear" brings "about the purgation of such emotions,"<sup>1</sup> As distinct from any form of narration Aristotle insisted that tragedy is a representation of action which "is brought about by agents who necessarily display certain distinctive qualities of both character and of thought."<sup>2</sup> The nature of the action identified with tragedy, Aristotle wrote, issues from the distinctive qualities of both character and thoughts associated

with the tragic hero. This, in his view, involves an error in either character or thought. In his elaboration of the nature of the error that goes with tragedy Aristotle contrasted tragedy to comedy pointing out that while comedy was built on the ridiculous, the latter arouses the feelings of pain.

The source of this pain is to be found in the unexpected "reversal of fortune from one state of affairs to its opposite"<sup>3</sup>. Aristotle connects the unexpected reversal of fortune to its discovery and a calamity which he defines as "an action of destructive or painful nature, such as death...excessive suffering, wounding and the like"<sup>4</sup>.

In his attempt to concretise Aristotle's meaning of the reversal of fortune T.R Henn likens the tragic hero to a fish entrapped within a seine or trammel net. He argues that like a trapped fish the tragic hero suddenly finds himself enmeshed in a net where "there is no escape above or below"<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, however, the tragic hero does not despair at the threat of his freedom; he possesses an illusion of freedom which makes him begin a terrifying attempt to secure his salvation. And yet whatever he does leads to its opposite until ultimately the hero plunges himself into his own destruction. But before he is finally defeated his actions at salvation are highly and intensely

dramatic which in a sense proves that the circumstances around the hero are irreversible and that inevitable doom is certain.

The decisive force in tragedy may not, however, merely reside on the compulsive nature of external pressure on the hero. For pity and fear to be aroused, Aristotle pointed out, the tragic hero has to face, on the one hand, "undeserved misfortune", and on the other hand the hero has to be "someone just like ourselves". "Pity for the undeserved sufferer and fear for the man like ourselves".<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle's meaning of "the man like ourselves" is rather complex since at one level it suggests a mean, that is, an average, and at another level the man is "better than ourselves". Perhaps it may be necessary to clarify Aristotle's conception of the mean before we consider those aspects that make the man who possesses the "mean" qualities to be "better than ourselves". By mean Aristotle wrote of "the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice or depravity, but rather to some error"<sup>7</sup>.

The average, in Aristotle's view, is not the ordinary. The mean or the average is considered only in relation to character, that is, that which is

neither extremely virtuous nor completely depraved. The mean character is possessed <sup>by</sup> man who "enjoys prosperity and a high reputation, like Oedipus and Thyestes and other famous members of families like theirs"<sup>8</sup>. Whether or not this prosperity and high reputation is derived from material and spiritual sources does not appear sufficiently distinguished. Consequently, it may be argued that since Aristotle's emphasis is on character and thought then the reputation of the tragic hero has more to do with moral considerations than material prosperity.

Besides outlining the defining characteristics of the tragic hero Aristotle also defined the nature of tragic action. In his view tragic action was that which brought terrible suffering to people "who are near and close to one another, when, for example brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother or if such deed is contemplated or something else of the kind is actually done"<sup>9</sup>. It may not, in this context, be necessary that when such an act is committed the hero is ignorant; he may do it in full knowledge of the facts or when he is ignorant he discovers it later as in Oedipus' case. In whatever form the action is carried it should create suffering.

The overall significance of Aristotle's conception of tragedy can be evaluated at both particular and general levels. Its particularity is derived from the specific historical situation from which the classical Greek tragedy emerged. Aristotle, a man of his time, conceived of the conflicts recreated in tragedy to be a fact of social life. He never questioned the existence of such conflicts but instead perceived tragedy as a means of reproducing, and for the same reason, purging the dangerous emotions of pity and fear. Unlike Plato who banished tragic poets from his ideal republic because he felt that they were socially dangerous, Aristotle understood tragic poets as artists who imitated or reproduced artistically what was a social fait accompli. And since the artistic reproduction of the dangerous emotions also served to purge them tragic poets, in Aristotle's view, served a socially necessary function.

Repeatedly Aristotle shows concern for things as they exist, that is, as they appear authentic to reality. In his discussion on plot construction he places great emphasis on this and enjoins the tragic poet to omit whatever appears ex machina. He demanded that tragedy should be created on the basis of the laws of necessity and probability. This allowed him to develop a broad conception of poetic imitation which admitted of possibilities inherent in the existing reality but which by themselves were

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not a reality. Aristotle accepted that tragedy could deal with a reality which appeared probable even though it did not exist in fact. The only condition he gave for such a portrayal was that this should conform or be governed by the laws of necessity and probability.

It was on this account that Aristotle made his famous distinction between history and poetry. Poetry, in his view, was more philosophical than history because the latter was confined to the particular whereas poetry had a sense of universality. In poetry the laws of necessity could be stretched to a point which yielded a picture of what may exist even though in reality it does not. Indeed, at one point Aristotle stressed that "probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities"<sup>10</sup>. The depiction of the "impossible has to be justified on the grounds of either poetic effects or of an attempt to improve on the reality or of accepted traditions"<sup>11</sup>, said Aristotle.

Although Aristotle, as seen above, recognised the sublime nature of tragedy he hardly concerned himself with the social implications of this. He never sought for the historical causes of tragedy in social relations. His method, akin to the empirical approach, allowed him to generalise on the essence of tragedy from the plays that were accessible to him. In order to explain the



specificity of classical Greek tragedy, from whence Aristotle's observations and postulates emerged, it becomes necessary to relate it to its social and historical origins which are inseparable from mythology. Mythology was the peculiar form among the ancient Greeks through which historical necessity was conceived and expressed.

Myths, considered in a general manner, find their origins in certain specific social conditions, namely, in low level of the development of the productive forces of the society which gives rise to a fantastic cognitive process whereby natural objects are bestowed with animate qualities. This, it is true, expresses the collective emotions and thought of the people in the struggle to overcome the forces of nature pitted against them. Since however the philosophical and realistic means of cognition have not developed to the extent of providing a rational view of the natural and social processes at work it is to mythology that the task of explaining reality is placed.

In the specific case of the ancient Greeks the conflicts depicted in tragedy were related to a process of social differentiation then taking place as a result of the break up of tribal societies and the emergence of a new class of merchants based in city states and ports. This latter class

sought to dethrone the ruling aristocracy and establish a democracy. In myth-making the Greeks expressed their desire to grasp the essence of these social changes and possibly to control their direction. This desire was, however, limited by realistic philosophical means of comprehending social reality and consequently the explanation that arose took a mythological form.

This form of cognition reflected man's relatively weak position in relation to nature, conceived as superior external forces or supernatural powers. Man's free activity was subordinated to the caprices of the supernatural powers. It is the whims of the supernatural order that were seen to determine the destiny of mankind. It is not accidental therefore, that in Greek tragedy fate is omnipotent.

Prometheus, imbued with a progressive vision of man's life, stole fire from Olympus and gave it to man. Because of this, he is condemned to immortal suffering. Men can do nothing against fate. Equally, Oedipus can never escape from his fate. He is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Every effort made to avoid this calamity actually leads to its realization. Oedipus' virtues are the errors which lead him to his inevitable doom. In Greek tragedy goodness does not pre-empt suffering nor does progress preclude destruction. It may indeed be inferred from this that the social

contradictions which were paralysing Greek society were seen as fated. The dethronement of the aristocracy was fated in as much as the rise and fall of tyranny, the emergence and collapse of democracy were equally predestined. They did not and could not understand it otherwise.

During the mediæval period a different conception of tragedy, influenced by Christian theology, gained currency. The life-asserting tendency of tragedy was discarded in favour of extolling Christian virtues. Tragedy was equated to the strive for worldly or materialistic ambitions which was seen to be contrary to the pious path to eternity and heavenly bliss. The misfortune of tragedy was due to man's hubris or pride since it made him fail to subject himself to the infinite wisdom of the heavenly father. Thus, one Jerome chastised the idea of human pride saying:

He who glories in dignities shall perish;  
 he who is puffed with pride will perish;  
 he who glorifies in the strength of the  
 body perishes. But he who shall arise  
 and be proud with a sacred pride, he  
 shall be with the apostles...<sup>12</sup>

In other words, worldly strings lead to damnation.

This general, theological conception of human desires may have influenced the English writer, Chaucer, in his definition of tragedy as the story "of hym that stood in greet prosperitee/And is yfalled out of heigh degree/Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly"<sup>13</sup>.

The emphasis on wretched ending from great prosperity appears in itself to be an oblique warning against the "limits" of worldly ambitions.

Needless to say, this conception of tragedy had everything to do with the feudal ideology. It sought to keep the stability of the feudal order and justify the existence of social estates as preordained. It warned the lower estates to be content with what they had for excessive ambition, pride or wealth inevitably led to wretchedness.

Against such a background the emergence of Shakespearean tragedy at the turn of the sixteenth century was significant in many respects. Accompanied, as it was, by the age of enlightenment Shakespearean tragedy pronounced doom to feudal stagnation. It laid a new and different basis for conceiving human suffering, and in particular, dispensed with the preponderance of supernatural elements over human desires and action. Shakespearean tragedy pointed to social relations as the source of human suffering and calamity. Even where supernatural powers were allowed a role, as for example in, Macbeth and Hamlet, they are not as compulsive as in Greek tragedy. Besides, they appear more like dramatic devices rather the essential force in tragedy.

In his book Shakespearean Tragedy Bradley argues convincingly that whenever supernatural elements play a role in Shakespeare's tragedies "it is always placed in the closest relation with character. It gives confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence...It forms no more than an element, however important in the problem the hero has to face". Bradley stresses that in Shakespearean tragedy "we are never allowed to feel that it (the supernatural element) has removed his (hero's) capacity of responsibility to deal with this problem"<sup>14</sup>. The witches in Macbeth, Bradley argues, only represent Macbeth's half-formed thoughts and the ghost his horrified memory of guilt. The ghost of Hamlet's father, on the other hand, only confirms his seething suspicion of his uncle, the king.

The power or force underlying Shakespeare's tragedies it must be admitted, is derived from sources other than the internal structures of his plays. In spite, therefore, of the very interesting ideas expressed by Bradley on the essence of the power behind Shakespearean tragedy his conclusion that a "moral order" is the ultimate driving force of the tragedies<sup>15</sup> appears to be unconvincing and generally too abstract. A pre-occupation with issues of a moral nature is, of course, undeniable in Shakespearean tragedy. It is however

difficult to accept that an abstract moral order is the cause responsible for the concretely expressed human energy in the tragedies.

Shakespeare was a product of certain specific social and historical conditions which have a relationship to his tragedies. The limitation of Bradley's conception of the Shakespearean tragedy lies in the failure to perceive this interconnection.

The robust heroes of Shakespearean tragedy, their high sense of individualism, their exuberance and bubbling human vitality express an attitude to life typical of the upheavals that shook England as the revolutionary bourgeoisie rose to prominence. The secularity of Shakespearean tragedy has its origins in the age of enlightenment that spelt doom to religious dogma. As an heir to this age that opened a new vision to human conditions Shakespeare was "the humanist representative of the progressive bourgeoisie"<sup>16</sup>. One of the great achievements of this class, when it felt the need for a progressive ideology, was the liberation of human consciousness from the fetters of the belief in supernatural forces and fatalism.

These new historical and social relations created a demand for a new basis for morality, and, the moral concerns expressed in Shakespearean tragedy such as the questions of conscience in Macbeth or trust in King Lear

depict this trend. Shakespearean tragedy, Smirnov argues, is only feudal in form, that is, in characterisation. In content, however, it is progressive, anti-feudal and democratic.

If, in spite of its progressive nature, Shakespearean tragedy nonetheless ends up in total waste and loss; this in no way implies the preservation of feudal order and its morality. The waste at the end of Shakespearean tragedy assumes a finality and universality beyond the narrow limitations of feudalism. And this is largely because the historical possibilities for governing social relations on the basis of the lofty and rational principles evident in the tragedies of Shakespeare still remained unknown to his age which had dispensed with fatalism and feudal bondage.

The above considerations on the historical evolution of the tragic form provides the basis for evaluating modern tragedy, the category in which Wright's Native Son belongs. Like all other forms of tragedy the modern one owes its distinctiveness to the social and historical circumstances which in the last instance determine the form of its existence. An important factor in this regard is a process of levelization and standardization which has developed not only in the sphere of social production of material requirements but also in artistic and spiritual production as well. The direct effect of

this on the tragic form is the abandonment of poetic grandeur and style. Modern tragedy, be it drama or fiction, is by and large prose in form. The mythological, feudal and aristocratic embellishments of previous forms of tragedy have given way to a "naked" depiction of reality. The method and form of modern tragedy is realistic in the sense that it portrays reality in the form most approximate to the reality itself.

There are, unfortunately, some critics in the West who, deliberately or otherwise, ignore this essential characteristic of modern tragedy. Probably as a result of a nostalgia for the charm of classical tragedy some critics have failed to see the dynamism of the tragic form. George Steiner in his The Death of Tragedy is perhaps the most vocal of these critics. He considers mythology as the defining characteristic of tragedy. In his view, the absence of mythology similar to those of the ancient Greeks in modern society pronounces the death sentence on tragedy. Interestingly, Steiner's conception of mythology is so broad that it defies any scientific classification of the category "myths". He lumps together Christianity and Marxism as modern forms of mythology but dismisses them as "naively optimistic" for the tragic view of life.<sup>18</sup>



The mere existence of mythology in tragedy is however not a sufficient consideration for a tragic vision. Moreover, to insist on mythology as a necessary condition for modern tragedy cannot be interpreted in any way other than a sterile preservation of stagnant and meaningless exotism. Indeed it can be argued that the insistence on the absolutisation of mythology as the only necessary condition for tragedy serves other purposes, that is, it is intended as a means to deprive modern tragedy of its realistic basis.

Apparently aware of this danger the critic, Murat Auezov, has warned against the absolutisation of mythology as a substitute for realism in modern art. He says:

A myth is a specific notion of the world which is characteristic of a situation where reason is striving to embrace the whole experience but is unable to achieve its aims in the forms of realistic, philosophical thought. But a myth, with its claims to give an exhaustive explanation of all levels of experience, contradicts the dialectical path of cognition, which in the arts lies within the grasp of realist art alone. 19

Thus, the shedding away of mythological and other fantastic forms does not in any way suggest the death of tragedy; it simply means that tragedy has taken a more realistic form in the modern society.

Apart from critics who absolutise mythology there are others who, even when they recognise the realism of modern tragedy, uphold certain conclusions which are inadequate for our understanding of the tragedy in Richard Wright's Native Son. It is true indeed that on the surface the personal and social traits of Bigger Thomas, the hero of Native Son as we shall see in the next chapter would tend to confirm this conception of tragedy. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, understands tragedy as a product of the isolation of the individual from society. "The art of tragedy" she says, "grows out of a break between self and community, a sense of isolation"<sup>20</sup>. The isolated hero goes to the edge of impossibility in the quest for true human values, an absolute freedom, an absolute dream with an inexplicable beauty.

Boundless passion, which according to Oates, is the driving force for the tragic hero's quest, has at its basis an irrational character, namely fear. Ironically, the fear is brought about by a realization of the truthfulness of human passions and their overriding meaning in human experience. Tragic conflicts, according to Oates, issue from the contradiction between the truth of moral values, which possesses an illusory character, and a world no longer governed by the same truth, the same morals. Thus, in

reference to Shakespeare's Hamlet she says that "the hero's delusion is certainly not that he cannot locate truth, but rather he cannot reject it powerfully enough; though appearance argue that all values are false, Hamlet's tragedy is that he cannot accept appearances. Out of this faith comes the tragedy."<sup>21</sup>

Oates' discussion of Dostoyevsky's novel The Brothers Karamazov is interesting not only from the standpoint of interpretation but also because Dostoyevsky and Wright share a certain concern in tragic psychological conditions of criminal characters. Oates views Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakov as the tragic characters in Brothers Karamazov. She goes on to argue that Smerdyakov is the double of Ivan because he kills Fyodor knowing that Ivan intended to do the same.

If Ivan could be seen as the hero of this novel, Oates argues, then Smerdyakov is the shadow-hero and his gradual development "is explicable in such terms if we consider that for Dostoyevsky the criminal is the saint, the one who sacrifices himself for the wishes of his community"<sup>22</sup>. The criminal, Smerdyakov, is the isolated character whose end is both a sacrifice and a promise for happiness. He "is the most important person because he alone of all people acts; he alone, by causing others to suffer and by suffering himself,

makes happiness possible".<sup>23</sup> As for Ivan, the sensitive intellectual, Oates says that "we see that only those without conscience will survive and only the sensitive will suffer".<sup>24</sup>

John Orr, whose conception of tragedy veers towards historicism, shares views which are fundamentally similar to those of Oates. Tragedy, in his view, is an irreparable loss which "lies in the destruction of certain relationships....It obliterates the past actions and prevents future ones, destroying both what is actual and what is possible".<sup>25</sup> Orr, who considers the novel form as the most important form for modern tragedy, for which he gives a generic term "tragic realism", argues that the tragic hero in the modern society is the alienated problematic type.

He however, rejects the notion of typicality in preference for what he terms the 'figura'. He justifies this substitution by the argument that the tragic hero is a marginal character although "the very marginality of the tragic hero to bourgeois society can make him appear eccentric when his "eccentricity" is in fact a profound sociological comment on the normality it disturbs"<sup>26</sup>. The figura is a messianic derivation whose mission is, unlike that of Christ, the fulfilment of worldly desires. His tragedy, Orr contends, arises in the failure to accomplish this mission.

In tragic realism, Orr claims, "the loss or death which awaits its hero is the ship-wreck of the figural prophecy...For tragedy signifies a fulfilment attained only through the destruction of its ripest promise. The tragic fate is the denial of the promise which the novel has already revealed to us"<sup>27</sup>. The significance of such a tragic ending, in Orr's opinion, is that it tends to exhaust all previously known experience and denies anything subsequent to it. Using Conrad's Nostromo to justify his contentions, Orr says that the novel "pushes itself beyond a number of possible endings" to a finality which lingers on "in an after life of disillusion and futile obsession"<sup>28</sup>.

The views expressed by Oates and Orr on modern tragedy do not, of course, exhaust the forms of tragedy in modern society. But they are significant because they are representative of pre-Marxian conceptions of tragedy in modern society. They share one element which is absent in the Marxist conception of tragedy, mainly, that the failure of the tragic hero is absolute. This in turn explains something else, they believe that it is impossible to change society in order to create universal happiness. The theoretical premises behind the creation of Richard Wright's Native Son runs counter to this. In "How Bigger Was Born" Wright admits that the Marxist world-view influenced his

artistic vision when he wrote this novel. Thus, in order to understand Wright's conception of the tragic form it would only be reasonable to pay some attention to the more general views of Marxists on art and literature and how this affects our understanding of tragedy.

The Marxist conception of tragedy begins from certain general considerations on the interconnections and movements of artistic forms and content, of art and social life. This view is based on certain propositions on the relationship between artistic expression and social processes. The logic of this trend of thought is that artistic forms are determined by the requirements of the artistic content which in turn is the expression of certain changes in the social sphere of life.

The significance of this is that it leads us to the view that artistic works and their forms never come into existence by arbitrary methods. Indeed, even the creative freedom of the artist or the writer is never completely "free" of these requirements: creative freedom is conditioned by factors independent of the writers' wishes. Marxists believe that the employment of a particular artistic form is conditioned by the socially necessary intentions requiring artistic execution. New forms, from this point of view, emerge

only when the possibilities of their existence have been created by the necessity of the pre-existing social, cultural and artistic developments.

A new content in social relations produces, in the Marxist view, a corresponding form of consciousness which shapes the aesthetic attitude of art to reality. The presumptions and concerns that govern the tasks art is meant to accomplish at any given time give rise to new artistic forms. Thus, the Bulgarian critic and writer, Todor Pavlov, says that:

We must not confuse the concept "artistic work" with the concept "artistic form" as is done by the majority of modernists. Without a new content there cannot be a new artistic form...And when form is simply "invented" and has no new, progressive content, it is absolutely barren and void of meaning. 29

Historical and social changes bestow on art the tasks it performs at any given time, and this usually demands the shedding away of old forms.

Secondly, the concept of social classes and struggles play a significant part in the Marxist conception of tragedy. In a class society art has a definite class character and is therefore partisan; although Georgi Plekhanov, the founder of Marxist criticism, demonstrates that in the more

advanced societies "the technique of production exercises a direct influence on art far more rarely"<sup>30</sup>. Instead he says that this influence is exerted by a "multitude of secondary and lesser causes which are not directly related to the social economy"<sup>31</sup>.

The capitalist society, for example, provides a good example of this contention. In his time, Marx had noted that despite the gigantic development of the productive forces of the society under capitalism, it was at the same time "hostile to certain branches of spiritual production, for example art and poetry."<sup>32</sup> The bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels said, subordinates all forms of production (including artistic and literary productions) to the service of its self-interest. It has resolved all values to "naked self-interest...callous cash payment"<sup>33</sup>. The decline of art in bourgeois society is achieved by its conversion to a commodity, subjected to the capitalist laws of commodity exchange, of market forces.

Marxists, however, see this process of the profanation of art in bourgeois society as historically transient. It provides the prerequisite for the dialectical development of art itself. "Paradoxical as it may seem" says Mikhail Lifshitz, "the decline of art in capitalist society is progressive even from the standpoint of art itself"<sup>34</sup>. This is because capitalism is perceived as the last class society.



The victory of socialism ushers in an epoch where the fullest development of man's human capacities is the law of social life. This in turn provides a new basis for the regeneration and flowering of art and literature.

These considerations are crucial in our evaluation of tragedy from the Marxist standpoint. Tragic action is a form of human activity which, from a Marxist perspective, is always purposive in the sense that it is consciously directed towards the attainment of certain specific and historically concrete aims. If, therefore, an action brings results contrary to the spelt out aims Marxists will find it illogical to draw general conclusions regarding the desired result from the failure. They will not, for example, deduce that the needs for which action was aimed are always impossible to attain. Instead they will consider the failure to be the product of an error which was made in estimating the aims for which a specific set of action was formulated.

From this point of view the harmony of desire and reality and action is not always impossible. It all depends on the level of the development of the productive forces of the society and corresponding relations of production which create the favourable conditions for the satisfaction of human desires. The human desires in turn are understood as

the necessity to bring the objective reality within the grasp and control of human will, that is, to master natural and social forces which influence human destiny. The lower the level of the development of the productive forces the more impossible the harmony of action and desire and vice versa.

Necessity, from a Marxist standpoint, has the force of inevitability and the error of an agent, too, assumes the same inevitability even when the action was interpreted to represent something other than the outcome it produces. It can therefore be said that to the extent that the fate of a tragic hero is doomed this also expresses another law: the inevitable doom of certain social relations. This indeed was the manner Karl Marx and Frederick Engels conceptualized tragedy.

Tragic conflicts, Marx wrote, represent certain socio-historical collisions in which necessity finally triumphs.

On this score Marx wrote:

Tragic indeed was the history of the ancien regime so long as it was the pre-existing power of the world, and freedom, on the other hand was a personal notion, i.e. as long as the regime believed and had to believe in its own justification. As long as the ancient regime, as an existing world order, struggles against a world that was only coming into being, there was on its side a historical error, not a personal one. That was why its downfall was tragic.<sup>35</sup>

Inevitable doom, in Marx's view, comes to a class which resists the necessary course of historical

development. The inevitability is the result of the emergence of a new social order which cannot exist without replacing the old. An error of tragic proportion is committed by the decaying social order because it "believed and had to believe in its own justification" thereby placing its claim for personal freedom in contradiction to the historical imperative.

Furthermore, Marx contrasts a tragic downfall to a comical one. In positing the tragic against the comical he characterises the latter as empty of essence, "an anachronism, a flagrant contradiction of generally recognised axioms, the nothingness of the ancien regime exhibited to the world, only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world should do the same"<sup>36</sup>.

When such a regime falls, Marx says, the response is cheerful because it had by far outlived the reasons for its existence. Referring to the ruling despotic regime in the Germany of his time Marx wrote that "the modern ancien regime is only the comedian of a world order whose true heroes are dead"<sup>37</sup>.

Marx opposes the "tragic" to the "comic" and in a similar manner "believed and had to believe in its own justification" to "only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world should imagine the

same". The former categories are the true heroes of the latter. Tragic downfall, if we extend the inference, deals with the essence, the "true heroes", while comedy represents a nothingness of essence.

The essence of a tragic downfall, in Marx's opinion, is represented by a belief and a cause to believe in a historical mission which is being negated by the very course of historical necessity itself. Thus, when an old social order, which has not lost all its essence, plunges down to its historically inevitable extinction its representatives unleash a very forceful resistance and arouse terror and pity.

At the same time that Marx and Engels dealt with the tragic in history they made a distinction between a tragedy caused by the resistance of a dying social order and a new one whose primary concern is the revolutionary remaking of the world. In setting out the specific character of the revolutionary tragedy Engels pointed out that this was to be found in "the tragic collision between the historically necessary postulate and the practical impossibility of putting it into effect"<sup>38</sup>. The impossibility here is restricted to the practical realization of what history has made necessary and possible. Engels was, of course, referring to the moments when progressive classes have failed to achieve victory even though the possibilities of such a triumph had been created by historical necessity.

From this point of view the impossibility of translating the necessary historical postulate into a practical reality is, in its content, substantially distinct from the impossibility of the old order to stem the tide of history. The difference lies in the transient character of the revolutionary tragedy and the irrevocability of the doom of the old tragedy. The new, revolutionary tragedy represents the coming into being of a new world order whose existence makes the collapse of the old world order inevitable.

It is in this sense that the inevitable doom which characterises the traditional conception of tragedy gives way to a more optimistic vision of human conditions. Tragedy, in this context, becomes terrible suffering at a time when suffering itself is no longer inevitable. The necessity for suffering disappears with the disappearance of the old world order which was built on the existence of the misfortunes of the majority of the people.

This view is propounded by Anatoli Lunarcharsky in his essay on Chernyshevsky. In a controversy with Georgi Plekhanov over Chernyshevsky's interpretation of tragedy Lunacharsky argues that Plekhanov erred when he insisted on viewing tragedy as a conflict in which "prophets and forerunners of a new world and new convictions clash with the old world and inevitably

perish"<sup>39</sup>. Further, he adds that "Plekhanov confused a very important but still specific and partial tragedy with a huge general tragedy..."<sup>40</sup> (emphasis added)

Thirty one years earlier Plekhanov had written an article on Chernyshevsky's theory of aesthetics where he had disagreed with the definition of tragedy as "that which is terrible in human life". Plekhanov's conception of tragedy was derived from the German philosopher, Hegel, whose position he explains thus:

According to Hegel, Socrates was the representative of a new principle in the social and intellectual life of Athens; herein lies his fame and his historical merit. But in acting as the representative of this new principle Socrates clashed with the laws that existed at the time in Athens. He violated them and perished as a victim of this violation. And such is the fate of historical heroes in general: bold innovators, they violate the established legal order; and in this sense they are criminals. The established order of things punishes them with death. But their death atones for that which was criminal in their activity, and the principle which they represent triumphs after their death.<sup>41</sup>

Plekhanov, of course, disagreed with Hegel that it must be a very strange moral feeling that which "demands the death of all those who struggle more energetically and successfully than the rest against social stagnation"<sup>42</sup>. Plekhanov also agreed with Chernyshevsky that this was "a far-fetched and cruel idea"<sup>43</sup>. He, however, agreed with Hegel on the

insistence of viewing tragedy as an expression of necessity, of a law.

While disagreeing with Plekhanov on this issue, Lunacharsky makes a distinction between what he terms as the "huge general human tragedy" and the specific, literary tragedy of Shakespeare which Plekhanov had used in demonstrating what expressed the necessity in tragedy. In Lunacharsky's opinion the "huge general human tragedy" is understood as man's weakness in the face of nature which manifests itself in several ways, including chance and accidents. In the modern society this is exacerbated by the "bourgeois social order... Thanks to its disorder, its scatteredness and its disjointedness, we are weak in the face of Nature."<sup>44</sup>

In outlining the theoretical basis of the new, optimistic tragedy Lunacharsky says that "capitalism is the final enslavement. When socialism has transformed the machine into a genuine servant of organised society, whose will becomes law, then the transition to history, to real rational history of mankind will have taken place."<sup>45</sup> The leap to the kingdom of freedom, that is "the real rational history of mankind" would, in Lunacharsky's words, mean that one "can mould one's life according to one's desires, that is, first and foremost, according to the laws of one's existence, and this marks the end of human tragedy."<sup>46</sup>

Optimistic tragedy, therefore, takes a very radical view of human suffering, which is also its substance. Imbued by a socialist vision of human life optimistic tragedy depicts suffering from a position which strengthens faith in man's ability to overcome suffering. Thus, if inevitability of doom was the conditio sine qua non for the existence of the old tragedy then optimistic tragedy, on the other hand, signals the inevitable end of human suffering.

The best known example of optimistic tragedy must certainly be Mikhail Sholokhov's And Quiet Flows the Don, for which he was awarded a Nobel literature prize. This epic novel depicts the tragic fate of a Cossack peasant, Gregory Melekhov, in the course of the First World War, the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the subsequent Civil War. The novel captures in depth the two-sided humanist and conservative traditions of the Don Cossacks which in their interaction contribute to the sad and painful ending of Melekhov. It may also be said that in a certain sense the works of the German writer, Bertolt Brecht, when taken as a whole, give us the idea of optimistic tragedy because he depicts suffering from the vantage point of ending it. In the United States of America Richard Wright's Native Son stands out as the most glaring example of optimistic tragedy.



Native Son's claims of belonging to this category of literature traces its roots to the revolutionary upheavals that shook the early decades of the twentieth century as well as to certain specific American conditions which affected the lives of Black Americans in many profound ways. Among these are, of course, the capture of black people from the African coast, their shipment, under the most horrible and inhuman conditions, to work in slave plantations in the Americas where they were denied the most basic human rights and dignity.

The American Civil War of 1860 to 1865, undoubtedly the most significant event to Black Americans before the twentieth century, paradoxically confirmed the unequal position of the American Negroes in the U.S. The Civil War, amongst whose stated aims was the complete emancipation of Black Americans, only succeeded half-way by ending direct forms of slavery. The abolition of oppression and discrimination remained a distant dream for many blacks. The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the constitution of the U.S., which enfranchised Negroes as well as granting them certain legal and political liberties, remained a dead letter in a large part of the South for almost a century.

The dawn of the twentieth century found American Negroes in the United States as,

in Will Herberg's words, "a well defined subject caste, with distinct inferior economic, social and political status."<sup>47</sup> The first two decades of the same century saw the migration of hundreds and thousands of blacks to the industrial centres of the North. Here the black Americans were introduced to modern large-scale industry, albeit limited by racism, but whose impact on the enlightenment of the Negroes was very great as witnessed by the Harlem Renaissance.

This cultural regeneration among Black Americans produced such important writers as Langstone Hughes, Countee Cullen and the Jamaican - born writer, Claude McKay, among many others who affirmed the vitality of the cultural heritage of the black peoples and protested against racial and national inequality. Wright, who hit the literary scene soon after the Harlem Renaissance, was a natural heir to this tradition, although he also had a more intimate connection with other developments, namely, the development of realism in American literature and the emergence and growth of an American Negro working class.

The radicalisation of Richard Wright in the 1930s was itself a manifestation of a process affecting an increasing number of black workers, youth and the intelligentsia.

Discrimination in industry, schools and other social and cultural spheres increased the militancy of these groups of Black Americans. Besides, the Programme of the U.S. Communist Party attracted many amongst them who believed that it was the only party which addressed itself realistically to the "Negro Question". These, together with the Great Depression and the experiences of the Soviet Union in dealing with the national question, which Wright admired so much, led to the conviction that "the racial emancipation of American Negroes, in the present historical situation, is possible only as an integral aspect and inevitable consequence of the overthrow of the capitalist system, of the victory of the proletariat"<sup>48</sup>.

At the basis of the novel Native Son this conviction is upheld as the historically necessary postulate on which the solution of the "Negro Question" depends. At the same time, however, the novel concerns itself with the failure to translate this necessity to practical reality. It is on these premises that we wish to evaluate Native Son as a novel within the category of optimistic tragedy. In the next chapter, therefore, we shall undertake a concrete or textual analysis of this novel using the theoretical concepts that have been developed in this chapter.

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## C H A P T E R T H R E E

### NATIVE SON: AN OPTIMISTIC TRAGEDY

The tragedy in Richard Wright's Native Son is closely interwoven with the nationalities or race question in the United States of America, and particularly with the problem of establishing relations of equality and friendship between American peoples of black and white races. Unlike Wright's earlier and later works this novel pays a closer attention to this question in relations to the abolition of the national oppression of black Americans, and, as a means of improving race relations in the U.S.

The specific character of the tragedy in Native Son is, therefore, closely linked to this desire for establishing relations inspired by the principles of friendship and equality in the sad reality of America's nationality question. We may indeed consider this as the historically necessary postulate we referred to in the previous chapter. As it shall be made clearer in the proceeding analysis, the reality from which this novel was conceived had, in Wright's view, made necessary the question of equality and friendship between the white and black races in the U.S. This, of course, meant the abolition of all forms of discrimination and oppression of black Americans as the first step in that direction.

When the story of this novel begins certain developments are depicted to highlight what should be considered as unquestionable facts. Among these includes the fact that the main character, Bigger Thomas, belongs to an oppressed people in the American society and his reaction and behaviour stem from circumstances typical of most American Negroes. Secondly, his behaviour and action are in some ways an expression of his resentment to his oppressive conditions of life. The third significant factor in this respect is that there is a changing mood or movement towards the liberation of black Americans, and, communists play a significant role in it.

The above scenario explains the encounter between Bigger and Mary and the subsequent events that lead to her murder and the death sentence imposed on Bigger. The white characters who come into close contact with Bigger are distinguished from others by the efforts they make in wanting to regulate their relationship with Bigger on the basis of equality and friendship. As we have already noted, this is done in the belief that Bigger's contribution and co-operation are necessary in, first and foremost, ending the oppression of American Negroes and following from that, improving race relations in the U.S.



Mary Dalton, Jan Erlone and Max are the white characters who, because they recognise the liberation of Black American as a necessary condition for equality and progress of all Americans, show no apparent stake in the preservation of the oppression of other peoples. This is especially so in their relations with Bigger. The success and failure derived from realising the need for equality, friendship and co-operation is what determines the specific form of tragedy in Native Son.

Mary Dalton may be idealistic and romantic in her approach to the race question; she imagines that by scolding her father for being "Mr. Capitalist" this may endear her to Bigger. Her romantic view of the oppressed peoples leads her to believe that Bigger should or ought to have joined a trade union on his first day of employment. She therefore incurs the hatred of Bigger who in his individualism believes that her utterances are a threat to the chances of his employment as the Daltons' chauffeur. When, later on, Bigger kills her by accident he will never feel guilt for this nor even sympathise with her friendly intentions. The irony of the situation is that she is killed when it is so clear that in her encounter with Bigger she had meant well.

This sharply contrasts with the scenes in Uncle Tom's Children where white characters are killed by

black ones. We, for example, have little sympathies for Harvey in "Big Boy Leaves Home" because he kills unarmed blacks without any compunction. His contempt for other people denies him our sympathy when Big Boy kills him in self-defence. The same is true of Heartfield who is killed by Mann in "Down By The Riverside". We have little sympathy for him because, like Harvey, he has no sympathy for others.

The fate of Silas in "Long Black Song" demands a similar appraisal. Silas kills a white man because of an obvious wrong against him and he attains a heroic stature because his actions symbolise an open revolt against Jim Crowism. "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star" serve as transitions to Native Son because in them a progressive distinction of white characters in their relation to black Americans is introduced. In both stories white characters, mainly Communists, appear struggling alongside blacks to abolish the oppression of American Negroes. Their presence, however, is rather shadowy even when they are significant in providing a new, socialist perception on the race question.

Green and Hadley, the black and white Communists in "Fire and Cloud" respectively, are kept in the background of a story which gives prominence to the evolution of Reverend Taylor; a significant evolution because Taylor accepts the necessity of certain revolutionary

precepts in the struggle for the national and social liberation of American Negroes. The relationship between Johnny-Boy and his white comrade and lover, Reva, in "Bright and Morning Star" is significant in terms of interracial love among communists, but it is also treated from the "outside" rather than "inside". In the foreground is the story of a heroic woman, Sue, whose militant passion for her sons, make her to sacrifice herself to prevent the infiltration into the Communist Party.

The background position of the healthy and normal relations between black and white communists tends to be clouded by a general atmosphere dominated by open racial hostility and tensions. Indeed, the presence of negative white characters appears to over-shadow the roles of white characters interested in the improvement of race relations. At the same time, however, the latter characters have a symbolic role in Wright's works: they are pointers to a necessity which has not acquired the prominence it requires. The symbol is, however, a recognition of this necessity.

Native Son develops from this recognition. It foregrounds the question of the national liberation of Black Americans closely linking it to the question of the emancipation of all working people. That is why the most important white characters are communists

who are interested in developing relations of solidarity with Black Americans. Even Mary Dalton, a sympathiser, tries her best to win the friendship of Bigger. But her efforts to treat Bigger on equal terms produce the opposite impression on the latter, leading to tragedy.

Mary's behaviour on her first encounter with Bigger may have been naive, but at the same time, that was her only means of seeking solidarity with Bigger. Her intentions were sincere, and whatever else can be said of her failures, one thing however is certain; her failures were committed innocently. She lacks the hypocrisy that characterises her father's relations with the black people.

In her simple ways Mary rebels against the hypocrisy of liberalism that her father seems to typify. According to Peggy, the Irish cook at the Daltons' home, Mary "feels sorry for people and she thinks the reds'll do something for 'em"<sup>1</sup>. She gives money to her boy-friend, Jan Erlone, in support of the Communist Party's activities. She even has intentions of joining the Party. But this does not seem sufficient to stop her from developing romantic notions about the oppressed people.

Her admiration for Negro spirituals leads her to a fantastic belief that every black American is a good

singer, or could easily summon the mood to sing irrespective of circumstances. So, when she asks Bigger to join them in singing some spirituals she hardly realizes the impact this causes on Bigger. Together with Jan she believes that sitting in the front seat of the car with Bigger, eating together at a place of Bigger's choice and sharing drinks from the same bottle are adequate friendly gestures to ease the accumulated tension in Bigger.\*

Her efforts at friendliness nevertheless end in a disaster, but this cannot in any way be construed as a condemnation of her intentions. At one point, when she senses some uneasiness in Bigger's reaction to her and Jan, she reassures Bigger that "you know, Bigger, we'd like to be friends of yours" (p.115). Her dissatisfaction with the prevailing relations between blacks and whites is revealed when she confesses to Bigger in this manner:

"You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses" she said pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming on either side of them "and just see how your people live. You know what I mean? I've been to England, France and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know the people. Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human... They are twelve million of them... They live in our country...In the same city with us..."(p.109) ✎

And yet she fails; Bigger kills her accidentally. What follows after her death overshadows the accidental element and even Bigger himself is only too willing to see a necessity in his killing of Mary, an inevitability.

In a sense the death of Mary is indeed inevitable. Her own contribution to her death is certainly not malice but an unintended misconception. She earns her death in the pursuit of friendship, and she dies only because she does not, and probably cannot know how to be friendly with Bigger. And this is the tragedy of her death.

Jan narrowly escapes a similar fate. He had supposed that it was enough to make friendly overtures to Bigger in order to overcome the latter's hatred and suspicion of all white people. This nearly costs him his life. He later realizes his mistakes and agrees to suffer alongside Bigger.

His earlier approach to Bigger was in many respects similar to Mary's. He offers his hand to Bigger declaring that "don't say sir to me. I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's the way it will be between us". (p.106). Further, when Bigger unwittingly insists on referring to him as "sir" Jan is infuriated and passionately appeals: "Bigger, please! Don't say sir to me...I don't like it. You're a man just like I am; I'm no better than you. Maybe other white men like it but I don't". (p.110).

Without suspecting the deeply rooted fear and hatred that Bigger has for all white people Jan continues to treat Bigger on friendly and equal terms. As they drive past the tall Chicago buildings, Jan tells Bigger, "we'll own all that some day. After the revolution it will be ours. But we'll have to fight for it. What a world to win Bigger! And when that day comes things will be different. There'll be no white and no black; there'll be no rich and no poor" (p.108). He, of course, includes Bigger in the "we" and "ours".

When Jan learns of Bigger's life background he says, referring to the death of Bigger's father in a race riot:

Listen, Bigger, that's what we want to stop. That's what we communists are fighting. We want to stop people from treating others that way. I am a member of the Party. Mary sympathises. Don't you think if we worked together we could stop things like that?(pp.114-115)

Jan, still unaware of the influences of anti-communist propoganda and prejudices on Bigger, gives him pamphlets with such revealing titles as "Race Prejudice on Trial", "The Negro Question in the United States" and "Black and White Unite and Fight". At no point in the novel does Bigger ever read them; instead he uses them to incriminate Jan on the "disappearance" of Mary when in fact he has already killed her. Jan realizes, to his great horror, that Bigger was never touched by his

pleas of friendliness only when Bigger threatens his life, when Bigger threatens to kill him as well.

The relationship between Bigger on the one hand and Mary and Jan on the other hand dramatises the sources of tragedy in Native Son. The need for a society without racial fetters is, for different reasons, felt by both sides as a desirable necessity. Bigger, because he is a victim of racial oppression and the others because it is a necessary demand for a free, socialist society. We can, therefore, formulate the historically necessary postulate from this in the following manner: the alliance of the two sides is a necessary condition for, and the most effective means of abolishing national and social oppression in the U.S. The tragedy that arises from this postulate, as far as Native Son is concerned, at least in the initial stages, is the impossibility of effecting this alliance.

It is not merely subjective errors that are the reasons for this impossibility: racial segregation has had a more corroding effect on the relationship between blacks and whites than was otherwise thought. As Mary acknowledges, blacks and white know very little about each other. Consequently, Jan is also caught up with the very limitations he is fighting against. He therefore fails to perceive the most



significant failure in Bigger, namely his fear which renders any meaningful friendship impossible.

There is indeed every reason for asserting that to a large degree friendship with Bigger is impossible. To explain the impossible it is necessary to be familiar with the entire life of Bigger in both its concrete social setting and the peculiar psychology it breeds. Friendship cannot be built on the basis of fear which is the dominant, albeit negative emotion controlling Bigger's life. The hostility of his social environment and Bigger's own individualism have shaped his life in such a way that he can only trust his fear.

Bigger, above all, fears to suffer and he is terrified by the idea that he is helpless against it. He lives in extreme poverty with his hard-working mother but feels it necessary not to sympathise with her or the rest of the family:

He hated his family because he knew they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain... He knew that the moment he allowed himself to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (p.48)

Bigger's feelings overwhelm him and he denies them. He denies his own desires because the dominant society has denied him their fulfilment.

Bigger revolts individually against the society. He indiscriminately rebels against the values of his society. He rejects every social value except his own survival and creates his own of values founded on this rejection of society.

But Bigger is held hostage by his own values, his own fears, and he cannot control himself. Most of all Bigger cannot control his overpowering desire to be like other Americans in the gratification they derive from the seeming sense of abundant wealth. Ironically, this is the source of his fear. Bigger wants an equal share of what makes other Americans happy. So much does he want it that, for this reason, he is subversive to those who deny him his desires. Nay, Bigger is a threat to his entire world and a criminal to civilization. Like the story of Samson in the Bible Bigger can destroy himself only by destroying everything else around him.

The inner contradictions of Bigger stem from the enormous difference between his real conditions of life and his impossible desire and dreams. He is impatient with his own conditions of existence and for that reason he does not want to be a mere chauffeur,

which in his opinion will condemn him to the same perpetual suffering similar to his mother's or Bessie's, his girl-friend. When his mother reminds him of the relief job Bigger feels angry and grudgingly thinks "that they had tricked him to a cheap surrender" (p.50).

Bigger feels the abundance and prosperity of American civilization everywhere around him, and he, too, wants to share it. He is very sensitive to the glossier signs of opulence to which his senses respond involuntarily. He is particularly attracted by the sounds and movements of cars. As they whirr and whiz past him, Bigger follows their movements with secret longing. We are told thus: "automatically, his eyes followed each car as it whirred over the black asphalt". (p.53)

Later, he is disappointed that Dalton's car is not as expensive as he had imagined it would be. All the same driving it provides him with the only sense of confidence before he kills Mary:

He felt a keen sense of power when driving; the feel of the car added something to him. He loved to press his foot against a pedal and sail along, watching others stand still, seeing the asphalt road unwind under him. (p.102)

Bigger's sense of adventure with machines is not, however, limited to cars. He had once dreamt of flying higher into the skies in an aeroplane

Big money also attracts Bigger's imagination.. He is mesmerised by the life of millionaires when he goes to watch The Gay Woman. Until then he had thought that a chauffuer was a small-time job. "Yes" he thought, "he could take the job at the Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action". (p.50). What is more, Bigger knows and hates the impossible limits imposed on his desires. For this reason he hates all white people who, in his opinion, are synonymous with the self-same restrictions.

This hatred, however, worries him; it reminds him of and also expresses his sense of powerlessness which boils his emotions to terrifying degrees. He feels defeated even before he rebels and is angered by his inability to control his rebellious thoughts. As he tells Gus, he

Can't get used to it...I swear to God I can't. I know I oughn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red hot iron down my throat. Goddamit, look! We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm living on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence. (p.58)

Besides, he also suspects that some day he may be forced to smash the "knot-hole" and break through "the fence". The idea terrifies him and he says: "Every time I get to think about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (p.58). Bigger, it should be remembered, says this with "a tinge of bitter pride in his voice". (p.58)

And yet, interestingly, when Jan asks him if they could work together to end this bitterness Bigger answers "I don't know" but then adds, "there is a lot of white people in the world" (p.115). Bigger feels defeated before the white world which he conceives in terms of natural images: mountains, skies and oceans. At the same time, the intensity of his desires and hatred forces him to a head-on collision with this world, if only to express his total dislike for the life he has been forced to lead.

It is clear, then, that even from the point of view of Bigger Thomas there is need to do away with all forms of restrictions based on race or nationality. His individualism, however, separates him from those who are keenly interested in his co-operation. He then resorts to terroristic methods which further excludes him from the collective aspirations. His acts

of individual terror are used by the state to unleash, in Max's words, indiscriminate terror against the entire black community and working class organisations. Moreover, it raises louder the voices of those interested in further inflaming and exacerbating racial tensions and hatred, thus further dividing the people.

The negative element in Bigger's character, as Wright himself referred to Bigger's peculiar form of rebellion, is interesting in so far as Bigger demands pity and a certain sense of heroism from the reader. This is the most perplexing aspect of this novel and, naturally, has aroused the most extreme responses. Bigger kills because of fear and accepts his responsibility in these terms:

Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in the room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her.... And in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim of circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all his life he had been leading to something like this...The hidden meaning of his life - a meaning others

did not see and which he had always tried to hide - had spilled out. No; it was not an accident, and he would never say it was. There was in him a terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. (p.144)

This sense of pride and emotional catharsis that Bigger derives from killing Mary is the most difficult thing to explain in this novel.

Bigger does not kill in circumstances similar to those in which Big Boy, Mann and Silas find themselves in. He kills, as Orlova says, the first hand of friendship extended to him. Strangely enough he becomes freer to do what was previously unthinkable. He remains, all along, undetected while within the Dalton's household. Indeed, up to the time he is arrested Dalton finds it impossible to believe that Bigger had acted on his own.

This aspect of Bigger has been the cause of the most varied interpretations. Houston Baker Jnr, in his introduction to Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Native Son", is inclined to view Bigger's killing of Mary as an act of revenge for the many years of the oppression of Black Americans. It would appear from his view that Bigger is heroic because he hit at the very "flowers' of American civilization"<sup>2</sup>.

He, in other words, hit where it most hurts. Baker Jnr feels that this is justified because the black people have been hit for so long so that Bigger's heroism consists in offering the retaliatory blow.

Oluoch Obura tends to share the same views. He argues that "by their very nature, Bigger and Mary were bound to clash because the very basis of Mary's life negates the existence of Bigger. That is why Bigger responds in the only manner he has known - violently both at an emotional and physical level."<sup>3</sup> This, inspite of Mary's own negation of the "very basis" of her life symbolised by her friendship with Jan.

Obura's unsympathetic attitude towards Mary is based on the understanding that "Bigger has undergone and symbolizes four hundred years of capitalist exploitation which to him is symbolized by (the) white (race)"<sup>4</sup>. The killing of Mary is, therefore, liberating, at least at the psychological level, because it negates the feeling of racial inferiority and hence proves Fanon's thesis "that at the level of the individual violence is a cleansing force"<sup>5</sup>.

Houston Baker and Oluoch Obura obviously sympathise with Bigger's plight and defend him



against charges by white supremacists who equate him to a monster, that is, a threat to civilization. David Littlejohn, for example, accuses Native Son of being a "black racist lash"<sup>6</sup>. He further characterises Wright's fictional heroes as "pure engine of hate, brutalized, behavioristic, driven by unrelieved suffering..."<sup>7</sup>. Even when he concedes that "there is, back of it all, back of the sadistic, racist-moralist bullying, a mountainous justice in Wright's fictional claims" he concludes that "Native Son remains, in all senses, an awful book"<sup>8</sup>.

In an interesting article on the nature of perception in Native Son Lloyd Brown argues convincingly that the liberation Bigger derives from the killing of Mary is very transient, if not illusory altogether, since his confession to Buckley and the overwhelming sense of despair and defeat that accompanies his arrest attest to the unreality of this freedom. "The real answer....to the crucial issue of Bigger's humanity" he argues, "does not lie with the illusory status he gains through murder....It is no longer a question of what he gains from violence, but what was the nature of the feelings that led to murder. He killed because he was human, not vice versa"<sup>9</sup>.

Bigger's feelings after killing Mary is a tragic and ironic symbol which dramatizes his quest for freedom and equality. Whereas his innerself thirsts for a wholesome human existence, and therefore bestows him with a nobility of intention, his social circumstances have so distorted and disfigured this quest that it can only express itself in dramatic but obnoxious forms. Bigger's flaw may not be the lack of any claim to heroism or nobility, but rather, the inversion and expression of that quest in terms that they traditionally negate.

It would therefore be misleading to look at Bigger's violence purely in terms of itself, that is, as the source of either his heroism or vice versa. In its own blind ways Bigger's violence dramatizes his protest against dehumanization, and the horrid form it takes is explicable only in reference to the stunted social basis from which it is derived. \* It does not, in other words, deny him his humanity. His quest for a complete, equal and full human existence is symbolically expressed in such terms that, in the final analysis, condemn the social conditions which give rise to the negative form it acquires. The case of Bigger Thomas is, indeed, a profound protest against unbelievable suffering in conditions which promise plenty but which at the same time deny this promise

to people it has restricted to rigid racial and social castes. #

Perhaps, a more satisfactory picture of the place Bigger Thomas occupies in this novel may be achieved if we consider the polyphonic nature of Native Son. This novel brings together an array of different and independent voices which make up for its polyphony. A number of critics have recognised the existence of different voices in this novel and especially in the relationship between Max and Bigger. Some critics have, however, seen this as a weakness for which they blame Wright.

The polyphony of Native Son, or the dual perspective in Margolies' view, is the basic weakness of the novel. According to Margolies, Wright is completely undecided on how to resolve his intellectual understanding of Bigger's life, as represented by Max, on the one hand, and his emotional attachment to the life of Bigger on the other. He says:

The chief philosophical weakness of Native Son is not that Bigger does not surrender his freedom to Max's determinism, or that Bigger's Zarathustrian principles do jibe with Max's socialist vision; it is that Wright does not seem to be able to make up his mind. The reader feels that Wright, although intellectually committed

to Max's views, is more emotionally akin to Bigger's. And somehow Bigger's impassioned hatred comes across more vividly than Max's eloquent reasoning.<sup>10</sup>

Donald Gibson agrees with Margolies when he writes that "Max represents one side of a dialogue whose totality is expressed through the dual perspective contained in the novel"<sup>11</sup>. Kinnamon, too, shares a similar view and contends that Wright fails "to resolve fully his intellectual (Max) and his emotional (Bigger) understanding of black life"<sup>12</sup>.

The polyphony of Wright's novel may not necessarily be a weakness, any more than the existence of independent voices exclude interpenetration. In explaining the polyphonic nature of Native Son Orlova argues that:

It is true that in the polyphony of Native Son one voice clearly predominates - predominates but does not suppress the other voices. And when Bigger speaks about himself and the surrounding world, when he expresses thoughts and feelings completely inaccessible to his primitive consciousness, his language is most easily understood and evaluated from the definition of literary polyphony.

Orlova uses Bakhtin's definition of polyphony which stipulates that in a polyphonic novel "what the hero says about himself and about the world is just as weighty as the author's usual commentary; the hero's voice is not subordinated to his objective image, functioning merely as one of his characteristics, but at the same time, it does not serve as the author's

mouth-piece...It has an exclusive independence in the structure of the work, it exists, as it were, side by side with and is combined in a special way with that (author's) voice and with the voices of other heroes"<sup>4</sup>.

The point here is that the hero's voice is independent and yet interrelated to the voices of other characters in the novel as well as the author's voice. None of the characters' voices serve as the author's mouth-piece although in their totality and in combination with the author's, they represent the latter's concerns. Lunacharsky, again drawing from Bakhtin, emphasizes that all the voices in a polyphonous novel:

Represent distinct "convictions" or "ways of looking at the world at large". These, of course, are more than theories; they are theories which are as much part of their exponents as his particular "blood type", inseparable from him, his own nature. Over and above all...these theories are active ideas, they drive the characters to commit definite action and provide the motive forces of distinct patterns of behaviours, individual and social.<sup>15</sup>

The ring of truth in these statements, as they relate to Wright's Native Son, is difficult to doubt. The voices of Mary, Jan and Max, of Bigger, of Buckley and the press and of Dalton and his blind wife are not only individual and independent but also represent distinct convictions from which definite patterns of action are inevitable.

In "How Bigger Was Born" Wright explains how he approached Bigger's consciousness as another, distinctly independent consciousness. He writes:

I tried to approach Bigger's snarled and confused nationalist feelings with conscious and informed ones of my own.... What made Bigger's social consciousness most complex was the fact that he was hovering unwanted between two worlds - between powerful America and his own stunted life - and I took upon myself the task of trying to make the reader feel this No Man's Land. The most I could say of Bigger was that he felt the need for a whole life and acted out of that need; that was all. (p.28)

Wright, therefore allows Bigger to act in the manner that accords with his (Bigger's own) desire and understanding of life. In his realism he does not seek to interfere with Bigger even when it is so obvious that Bigger clashes with some of the author's own convictions. In Bigger's clashes with other characters Wright remains an outside but keen spectator. Where his sympathies for different characters may conflict he does not enter the stage to reorder them to conform to his pre-conceived thoughts. One may indeed suspect that Wright leaves the characters to resolve their own differences, if it is within their means to do so.

Without such an approach it would be difficult to understand many things in Native Son. Wright, who was himself a communist and had seen the International Labour Defence play active roles in the defence of Black Americans<sup>16</sup>, chose in this novel a conflict

among people or groups which were edging closer and closer. And unlike the cases he knew, in his Native Son, Max of the Labour Defence, pleads guilty for Bigger. Again, the narrative strategy used in this novel, which is the limited omniscient point of view, so closely follows Bigger's action, thoughts and feelings that we hardly see his external physical features. It is then left to the hostile Chicago press to give an impression of this, although it is distorted by acrimony and hatred. Certain truths about Bigger, although completely hostile, like his relationship with his family, are left to Buckley to utter.

Polyphony is not, of course, tantamount to formalism nor does it exclude the author from the work. The position of the author, the influences upon him and his moral concerns are nevertheless present in the work of art. In the case of Wright this is abundantly clear in relation to his concerns for the predicament of Black Americans in the U.S. and his socialist vision of society. As an artist Wright took a keen interest in the peculiar conditions of American Negroes in the U.S. and what he conceived as their unique social psychology: distorted, mutilated and deformed by many years of oppression. He was particularly interested in the impact of urbanization on this psychological condition.

Parallels for Bigger's consciousness are found in Wright's other, mainly non-fictional, works. In Twelve Million Black Voices, published a year after Native Son, Wright attempts in an essay form to give a more elaborate picture of the social conditions of the blacks and the consciousness that emerge from these. At the time he was writing this book Wright conceived of the historical phase the majority of American Negroes were undergoing as "a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth century urbanization"<sup>17</sup>. In the same book as well as in American Hunger Wright details the reactions of black immigrants to the great industrial centres of the North and remarks: "Yes, coming North for a Negro Sharecropper involves more strangeness than going to another country. It is the beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness"<sup>18</sup>.

From feudal and semi-feudal conditions and the rural isolation of the South, migrant black Americans found themselves in the fast-moving and whirling life of the Northern cities. Here, promises of freedom and fulfilment appeared to be so close but racism cruelly stifled any such expectations. "The noisy, crowded... the sense of fulfilment" which blacks found in the North, Wright writes "did so much more to dazzle the mind with the daunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South" (p.18).



Wright sought to make his work as historically authentic as it would have been possible. In his conception of the history of American Negroes he saw that the phase they were going through, at least the majority of them, was one of transition from feudal conditions of the South to capitalism in the North. This period of transition, in the view of Lunacharsky and Bakhtin, offers a fertile ground for literary polyphony. Referring to the works of Dostoyevsky, Lunacharsky quotes Bakhtin as saying:

The diverse worlds and spheres-social, cultural and ideological - which are brought into head-on collision in the works of Dostoyevsky, were formerly self-contained, isolated from one another, stabilised and justified from within as distinct and separate units. There was no real material area in which they could, to any applicable degree meet and interpenetrate. Capitalism broke down these worlds, destroyed their exclusiveness and the inner, ideological self-sufficiency of these social spheres... The period of blind co-existence, of calm, untroubled ignorance, was at an end, and their mutual contrariety and, at the same time, their interdependence, became increasingly perceptible.<sup>19</sup>

What Lunacharsky says here in respect to Dostoyevsky is equally true of the historical period depicted in Native Son. It should also be remembered that Wright, in his treatment of criminal psychology, was greatly indebted to Dostoyevsky. It is indeed possible to detect this in Native Son where the conception of

Bigger appears to have been influenced by Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment. This is true despite the enormous ideological differences between the two writers.

Again, the circumstances depicted in Native Son are, to a large measure, similar to what Lunacharsky says was typical of Dostoyevsky's era, where "various individual philosophies of life were coming into collision; various individual moral codes, sometimes consciously worked out as full-fledged theories, at others manifesting their almost entirely subconscious nature through action and discordant talk, were being brought face to face"<sup>20</sup>.

These considerations of polyphony and historical authenticity are significant in our analysis of the tragic form and the race question in Wright's Native Son. Wright depicted reality in this novel from a certain historical perspective in which the successive replacement of old and dying modes of social production by new ones determines the character of each historical epoch. In the case of American Negroes he perceived the majority of them as being ushered to a new, more developed form of capitalism from the feudalism of the South. Wright considered this historical process as necessary and unavoidable but which, at the same time, would prove the inability of capitalism to solve the crucial question of the national oppression of American Negroes.

And yet, and this was perhaps the dilemma Wright faced; the possibilities of solving the "Negro Question" outside the realms of capitalism had its own inherent dangers which would not exclude tragic events.

Wright, of course, believed that Communists were the only people who offered the best prospects for a realistic and lasting solution of the Negro question, and this is quite evident in Native Son. He saw this as a historical imperative. He, however, viewed the long years of the oppression of black Americans and their exclusion from the centres of the social, economic, political and cultural life of the United States as an inherent danger to their rapid coalescence with the forces history had prepared to reorganise society along the lines of equality, friendship and progress of all the peoples. The unpreparedness of a vast number of black Americans to work with these forces would have certain tragic consequences if they revolted against oppression which Wright foresaw would, in any case, occur.

Secondly, what appeared to make tragedy inevitable was, in Wright's view, the inaccessibility of the depth of the suffering of American Negroes, and their deformed forms of consciousness, to the democratic and progressive forces leading the movement for social and national equality of all peoples. The long separation of the

peoples had inevitably affected their consciousness. When, however, the racial barriers were being broken by capitalism, when capitalism offered favourable circumstances for the integration of the peoples but which it failed to complete by ~~fostering~~ relations based on exploitation and hatred for other peoples, the communists, whose policy was the international unity of the working peoples of all nations, were not adequately organised among the black Americans to effect the necessary liberation.

Wright did believe that the conditions of American Negroes had changed and were bound to change further. The change, in his opinion, would be complete only under conditions established by socialism. In American Hunger, for example, he expresses lavish admiration for the achievements of the Soviet Union in tackling the national question particularly among the formerly backward peoples of the Soviet Central Asia. It is true that Wright later changed his views on socialism and the Soviet Union but there appears to be no later evidence to suggest that he had also changed his attitude to the freedom and equality granted to oppressed nations under the Soviet state.

As regards the American Communists, Wright felt that they had to be prepared to make enormous sacrifices to bring the black Americans on a path to their own liberation which would avoid tragic results, that is, in the struggle

for socialism. Outside the ranks of the Communists Wright foresaw a huge tragedy looming as most white Americans were unprepared or reluctant to accept the equality of black Americans.

In Native Son the above conceptions become more perceptible when the changing relations between Max and Jan on the one hand are considered vis-a-vis Bigger's relations with the Daltons, the court and the press on the other. Jan accepts his earlier errors and sides with Bigger who has killed his girl-friend. The Daltons on the other hand join the mob in seeking for vengeance.

No sooner is Bigger arrested than Jan pays him a visit. He offers Bigger legal assistance through Max of the Labour Defence. He confesses to Bigger:

"I'm here because I'm trying to live with this thing as I see it. And it isn't easy Bigger. I- I loved that girl you killed. I - I loved..." His voice broke and Bigger saw his lip tremble. "I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery, and since slavery. I thought that if they could stand it, then I ought to" (p.326)

Jan, therefore, learns to understand Bigger only when he has lost a person he loved deeply. "Though this thing hurt me" he tells Bigger, "I got something out of it...It made me see deeper into men. It made me see things I knew but I had forgotten" (p.325).

The death of Mary "reminds" Jan that he had earlier taken certain issues for granted when he sought the friendship of Bigger. He can now "remember" that Bigger was incapable of friendship with white people, that Bigger had the "right to hate me" (p.325).

Many things, according to Jan, make Bigger's hatred justifiable. Black Americans had been oppressed for so long that their hatred for oppression is transformed into the hatred for all white people. Besides, there had been very little from the behaviour of white people to encourage the opposite emotions. Having understood this Jan makes a concession to Bigger's hatred as the basis for solidarity and friendship. He says, "Bigger, I've never done anything against you and your people in my life...But I'm a white man and it would be asking too much to ask you not to hate me, when every white man you see hates you." (p.324)

This does not mean that Jan condones hatred; all he seems to be saying is that there is something understandable in Bigger's hatred because it is largely a reaction against oppression. It is therefore different from the hatred of the dominant white society which is used as a means for further subjugating other Americans. Bigger's hatred has a progressive potential if it is allied to forces committed to the revolutionary remaking of society.

The idea that Bigger's hatred is a product of oppression is neatly summarised by Max when he tells Dalton that "this boy comes from an oppressed people. Even if he's done wrong, we must take that into consideration." (p.332).

The encounter between Bigger and Jan in jail and the understanding that emerges from it lays grounds for the optimism of Native Son. After Jan's confessions to Bigger the latter begins to perceive him differently: "suddenly this white man had come up to him, flung aside the curtain and walked into the room of his life. Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him...For the first time in his life a white man had become a human being to him" (326) (Added emphasis).

After his private talk with Max, the lawyer, Bigger's shifting consciousness is disturbed by dim possibilities of recognising his humanity in other people's action. Thus, speaks the narrator:

He (Bigger) stood up in the middle of his floor and tried to see himself in relation to other men, a thing he had always feared to try to do, so deeply stained was his own mind with the hatred of others for him...He tried to feel that if Max had been able to see the man in him beneath those wild and cruel acts of his, acts of fear and hate and murder and flight and despair, then he too would hate, if he were they, just as now he was hating them

and they were hating him. For the first time in his life he felt ground beneath his feet, and he wanted to stay there. (pp.398-)

The last sentence of the quoted passage may mislead, as it has misled many, to believe that Bigger triumphs in the cause of his hatred. Far from it. Bigger realizes his humanity but again in his special way: negatively. All along he had hated blindly and now, after his talk with Max, he begins to understand that in a sense hatred is human. His conception of humanity, however, lacks the negativity of the process by which he arrives at it. In his understanding of humanity Bigger makes an effort to move away from the prison of his individualism. He begins to understand that he hated because he was a man but he still has to understand that a specific form of oppression engendered in him that hatred. The biggest change in Bigger's consciousness is that he begins to perceive white men not as a natural force but as human beings.

After this recognition Bigger perceives images expressing the isolation that many people have been forced to live in. At first "he saw a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells in which people lived" and in each cell "there were screams and curses and yells of suffering and nobody heard them for the walls were thick and darkness was everywhere" (p.399). This later changes to "an image of a strong blinding sun sending hot rays down and he (Bigger) was standing in the midst



of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the many differences, the colours, the clothes and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun...(p.400).

The dim recognition of Bigger's humanity, his harmony of feelings and longing with that of other men, however, requires a corresponding response from others so that it should be completed. Bigger's tortured consciousness needs to trust itself only if it is allowed a life of its own, that is, if others recognise the validity of his feelings before he killed Mary and Bessie. Bigger gropes for a meaning of his existence, some higher truths that his acts, in all their brutality, expressed a quest or desire for. Yet as it seems rather obvious, Bigger's No Man's Land consciousness cannot express this need in any coherent way. The task is then left to Max.

The thrust of Max's defence for Bigger's life rests on two fundamental premises: first, that it is the self-interest of America which demands the sparing of Bigger's life, and secondly, reason can be a basis upon which to make Americans understand the meaning of Bigger's life and spare it. For this reason Max changes his plea from not guilty to guilty. He argues that if America, in the interest of preserving its civilization, is willing to understand Bigger and

spare his life, that will be a first step in his integration into American life, an act of granting him equal citizenship. Failure, however, spells doom. Max asks: "who knows when another 'accident' involving millions of men will happen, an 'accident' that will be the dreadful day of our doom?" (p.436)

The tragedy of Bigger's life is that the promise of a new life, a harmony with others from the lowest depth of hatred, is never given the chance to mature; it is killed in its infancy. As a result Bigger insists on a meaning of his own which puzzles even Max. He insists on being Bigger. He tells Max that "they wouldn't let me live and I killed. May be it ain't fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn't want to kill. But when I think why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am...I didn't want to kill!.... But what I killed for, I am." (p.461)

It is significant to note that Bigger only "begins" to "feel what I wanted", and that he "did not want to kill" because killing "ain't fair," but he killed for something. That something, not the killing itself, was good. "What I killed for must've been good. When a man kills, it's for something....I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt hard enough to kill". (p.461).

When Bigger insists on bestowing a sense of nobility to his acts of murder, this should not be seen in isolation, that is, as a glorification in murder and hatred. It is true that in facing death Bigger seeks for a meaning equal to him; he has to justify his own action in terms which are accessible to his consciousness. He does not and probably cannot conceive his reality in terms of Max's socialist viewpoint. Margolies' attempt to view Bigger in terms of "an existentialist satanic rebel for whom violence is the answer,"<sup>21</sup> in this respect, misses the crucial point. So, too is Gibson's contention that Bigger comes "to terms with the most pressing problem, his impending doom. In so doing he achieves the only meaningful salvation possible."<sup>22</sup>

Bigger had killed in an effort to assert his own humanity; the victims of his murder were however the only people interested in his humanity. But Bigger rejected their friendship in the belief that his humanity could nevertheless be expressed in spite of it. However, at great pains, the pain of death, Bigger comes close to recognising, with the help of Jan and Max, the possibilities of friendly and equal relations among all peoples, the real basis of his humanity. At the end of the novel he is capable of asking Max to convey to Jan his comradely feelings. He says "tell...Tell Mister... Tell Jan Hello..." (p.462). The dropping of "Mister" in reference to Jan is significant in showing the extent

Bigger has gone to accept the friendship of Jan. As Paul Siegel correctly remarks, "this comradeship he will extend only to those who have earned it in action."<sup>23</sup>

But the positive elements in Bigger's change, his recognition of friends who accept to suffer and struggle with him for the sake of a better future, are the ones which suffer most from the death sentence imposed on him, so that the gradual and progressive growth they would have undergone are crippled in such a manner that they co-exist with his individualism and brutal assertion of his humanity. But, as we have seen from the preceding analysis, this is largely a product of the hostile social and political circumstances of his life. It is this, the resistance these circumstances put on the path of Bigger's development, that makes Bigger's case a tragic one.

However, the impossibility of Bigger's genuine fulfilment is not unalterable. The negative element in Bigger's character will accompany his rebellion only to the extent that his material and spiritual conditions will not change. But as we have seen in the preceding analysis Bigger's experiences have allowed him to undergo some changes. Jan, too, changes after learning his initial errors. Thereafter, Jan and Max, and particularly the latter, are allowed a significant role in Bigger's

relations with his family and his former gang.

What was impossible to realize, the historically necessary postulate, may be possible later. If it was impossible for Bigger to co-operate with friendly and unprejudiced white people, Bigger's tragedy allows for the possibilities of Gus, G.H., Jack and his mother to relate more freely with Jan and Max. The basis for co-operation with other Biggers is therefore established and the future revolt will not be blind and individualistic. This is the optimism of the tragedy in Richard Wright's Native Son.

Endnotes

1. Richard Wright Native Son  
 rpt 1984 (Hammondsworth : Penguin Books,  
 1940) p.97  
 All subsequent references are to this  
 edition.
2. Houston Baker Jnr ed. Twentieth Century Inter-  
 pretations of "Native Son"  
 (Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall,1972)p.11
3. Oluoch Obura, "The Concept of the Mask in Afro-  
 American Poetry of the 1960s" An  
 unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of  
 Nairobi, 1979, p.95
4. Ibid. p. 96
5. Ibid p. 100
6. David Littlejohn Black on White  
 (New York: Grossmann Publishers,1966)p.107
7. Ibid p. 109
8. Ibid
9. Lloyd W. Brown "Stereotypes in Black and White:  
 The Nature of Perception in Wright's  
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 1970 p.43
10. Edward Margolies, Native Sons  
 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company,  
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11. D.B. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son" in  
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 and F.E.Moore (Englewood Cliffs: Printice-  
 Hall Inc., 1984)p.102

12. Kenneth Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright  
(Urbana; University of Illinois  
Press, 1973) p.143
13. R. Orlova, "Richard Wright: Writer and Prophet"  
in American Literature: A Soviet  
View, (Moscow: Progress Publishers,  
1976) p. 387
14. Ibid pp. 387-388
15. Lunachavsky, On Literature and Art  
(Moscow: Progress Publishers,  
1957) p.104
16. See, for example, Mary Cunard's article on the  
Scottboro Case in Negro (New York: Frederick Ungar  
Publishing Co., 1970) pp.155-177 for a report on  
the role of the International Labour Defence.
17. Richard Wright 12 Million Black Voices  
(New York: Arno Press, 1969)p.5
18. Ibid, p.99
19. Lunacharsky op.cit p. 106
20. Ibid, p. 107
21. Margolies, op.cit. p.83
22. Gibson, op.cit p.103
23. Paul N. Siegel "The Conclusion of Richard Wright's  
Native Son" in Richard Wright  
Eds. R. Macksey et al  
(Englewood Cliffs: Printice-Hall,  
Inc., 1984)p.115

CONCLUSION

In our evaluation of Native Son we have sought to establish that this novel makes an interesting contribution to the development of the tragic form. We have tried to show that Wright's conception of the tragic form grew from the traditional understanding of the art to a new, optimistic level.

In the first chapter we adduced evidence from the writer's biography and the reality which predisposed him to a tragic form. Of particular significance in this regard we showed how the Marxist world-view crystallized the development of Wright's conception of tragedy to the optimistic level.

X The second chapter gave a theoretical account of the historical development of the concept of tragedy up to the stage Wright was able to make use of it. In the last chapter we focused on the tragic elements depicted in the novel, and in particular, in its relation to the race question in the U.S. which, we said, gives Native Son a unique tragic character.

It is then possible, from all the accounts and analysis contained above, to draw out certain general conclusions about the tragic form, and specifically, the manner it treats relations between different nationalities and races.



The crucial questions of tragedy are those of free will and necessity. Tragic circumstances test the extent to which free will accords to necessity. Free will, independently of real necessity, is bound to be tragic. But, free will can only be really free when it is conscious of necessity and is exercised in accordance with the recognition of this necessity. When free will is exercised blindly, and moreover, when it has not developed the capacity to overcome the limitations of the existing reality, the consequence is inevitably tragic.

Men must do what they must, says Max in reference to the enslavement of black Americans by Americans of European descent. The inspiration which led to the enslavement of American Negroes was, however, a simple and necessary desire for greater freedom and happiness. The New World was a home of new promises: a new happiness. But the attainment of this happiness was carried out in tragic contradiction to the happiness of other peoples, the enslaved and oppressed peoples.

In view of the events depicted in Native Son, the tragic reality of race relations in the U.S. owes its contradictory origins to a certain social mode of production, that is, capitalism. What Bigger Thomas does, and which he must do, is to explode this contradiction and show, in the starkest and boldest forms,

the insecurity inherent in this contradiction. Bigger smothers Americans' sense of safety and happiness which is maintained at the cost of the suffering and oppression of black Americans. He does this to assert and remind all his countrymen of his claim to equal security and happiness.

Furthermore, Bigger accepts the meaning of his killing of Mary without any external compulsion. The acceptance is a free choice which shows more clearly the extent his real conditions limits his choice. Bigger is still a slave of his circumstances in spite of his dramatic actions. His actions, which express his free choice, cruelly contradicts his innermost desires which, in the first instance, they were meant to express. This goes to prove that for Bigger to make a completely free choice he must, first of all, completely free himself from the fetters of his conditions.

In the context of Native Son the complete freedom necessary for Bigger to make a completely free choice is possible only in the collective struggle for a better, freer society, that is, a socialist society. The best hope for the solution of the nationalities and race question in America, according to the novel, lies within the context of the victory of socialism which alone will guarantee Black Americans their complete national freedom and social equality.

The tragedy in this novel is related to the "impossibility" of achieving this goal. At the same time, however, this impossibility is only transient, the reality depicted in Native son changes and creates greater possibilities for achieving the impossible. But as long as this has not been achieved, in other words, as long as capitalism still regulates the relations between nationalities and races then tragedy will be inevitable.

It is in this connection that this thesis tries to make a contribution. This is because we have tried to evaluate the novel, first and foremost, within the very framework the novel creates for itself. There is no doubt, however, that this novel and other works by Richard Wright may continue to attract the interest of critics, that is, as long as the reality that Wright concerned himself with has not changed in any fundamental sense. We, therefore, believe that a promising area in the study of Richard Wright's works should treat the themes we discuss here in relation to the writer's other creative works.

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