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Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

Concept of Racism in the Novel *Black Boy* by Richard Wright

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the novel *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. The main stress is put on the concept of racism in this unique piece of work. There is also an analysis of the features of naturalism. Naturalism is a major writing style used in this autobiography. Through the depiction of his own childhood, Wright universalizes childhood of many African-American children growing up in the old South in the first half of the twentieth century. The analysis focuses on issues such as violence which swarms in the novel, hunger for food as well as hunger for knowledge. The final part of the thesis summarizes and draws conclusions about the importance of Richard Wright's work.

Keywords

Black Boy, Richard Wright, racism, naturalism, violence, language, segregation

Souhrn

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje román *Black Boy* od Richarda Wrighta. Hlavní důraz je kladen na pojetí rasismu v tomto unikátním díle. Obsahuje rovněž analýzu prvků naturalismu. Naturalismus je hlavním stylem použitým v této autobiografii. Prostřednictvím vykreslení svého vlastního dětství, Wright zobecňuje dětství mnoha afroamerických dětí, které vyrůstaly na starém jihu v první polovině dvacátého století. Analýza se zaměřuje na otázky jako je násilí, kterého je román plný; hlad po potravě a hlad po vědění. Závěrečná část bakalářské práce shrnuje a vyvozuje závěry o významu díla Richarda Wrighta.

Klíčová slova

Černý chlapec, Richard Wright, rasismus, naturalismus, násilí, jazyk, segregace

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1. Introduction

The novel *Black Boy* is an autobiography which is based on motifs which include defiance of authority, physical and emotional violence, the author's curiosity, and also hunger for food, knowledge, life, and affection. There is also a depiction of religious aspects serving as a means of social control, race and literacy.

Richard Wright comes up with the idea that authority should not be built on truth, not on traditions, or power. The violence in *Black Boy* whether physical or of any other kind, is extremely important because it is the basic thing which authority keeps relying on instead of argument.

The main part of the thesis is going to be an analysis of social-cultural background and racism in the novel *Black Boy*. Racism reached its heights thanks to the "Jim Crow laws" that institutionalized racism in the United States. The book describes racism as a strange opinion held by some people. Another level of this novel speaks about racism as about a crucial problem which sunk in society as a whole. *Black Boy* does not only speak about the fact that racism causes problems between "whites" and "blacks," but it speaks about the fact that racism negatively affects relationships among African-American people themselves.

Richard Wright describes himself in the novel as a boy growing up poor in the South and portrays other tensions that growing up as an African-American brings. As an African-American child he was oppressed and had to deal with things that "white" children did not have to deal. Written in Wright's typical style, that of a realist and a naturalist, *Black Boy* needs little explanation. Wright states the problem of living in the South a problem of need to learn how to claim and consider his own feelings.

2. Naturalism in Wright's Work

Before starting the analysis of the novel, it is in place to elaborate one crucial term that will be included in this paper. This analysis is to deal with the concept of racism in the novel *Black Boy* by the author Richard Wright and naturalist features that can be found in the novel. That is why it is feasible to define the term "naturalism."

The term *naturalism* describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase, 'human beasts,' characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings. (Campbell, 1997, p. 10)

In other words naturalism is a literary approach that proceeds from an analysis of reality in terms of natural forces. The main literary theorist who dealt with naturalism was Émile Zola. He says in his essay *Le Roman expérimental* (1880) that "the novelist should be like the scientist, examining dispassionately various phenomena in life and drawing indisputable conclusions." The naturalists describe reality, but as a contrast to realists, they do it in a harsh way (Campbell, 1997, p. 11). This is applicable to Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, too. Wright's aim is to show the picture of his growing up in the South in the first half of the twentieth century and he puts stress on racial problems of this place and era, however, he describes this reality in style of naturalism.

This autobiography contains two pairs of tensions. One pair of tension is Wright's growing up in the South being poor and the other tension in this pair is that he is growing up as an African-American, which is very different kind of growing up because as an African-American child he was oppressed and had to deal with things with which "white" children did not have to deal. The other contradiction is the fact that racism caused problems between "whites" and "blacks", but it also caused problems in relationships among African-Americans themselves. These two pairs of tensions comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. It is possible to say that they build up the theme and form of this naturalistic novel. The first tension is the one between the subject matter and the concept of man.

The naturalist usually uses characters from the middle class or the lower class and it is what Wright does too. His characters are living in the lower class and they are even discriminated. Naturalists often try to discover the qualities of their heroes and it is something that Richard Wright tries to discover too. He describes himself as a boy having a constant hunger for knowing and the hunger means a motor for him which takes him further on his journey. Typical naturalistic novels are thus an extension of realism and they deal with the local and the contemporary. They often include violence and violent deaths, which is something that *Black Boy* includes too. The second tension is practically the theme of the novel.

The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. (Campbell, 1997, p. 11)

In *Black Boy* Richard Wright is controlled by the place where he lived and by the time as well. He was born into an era that was a nightmare for African-American people. However, he believed in his powers and he did not want to give it up. That was the reason why he was longing for education, reading and writing. He wanted to prove that he is talented and he did not want to make peace with his ordeal. He wanted to fight against the conditions in which he was growing up and he wanted to reach something valuable in his life.

3. African-American Literature and Wright's Style of Writing

3.1 Tradition of African-American Literature

Richard Wright belongs to African-American authors writing in the first half of the twentieth century. He takes up the legacy of writers of African descent. The origin of African-American literature dates back to slave narratives - African-American authors who usually could not read and write, but they dictated their stories about their misery which they experienced to Euro-Americans who put the stories down. This

period is the first half of 19th century. However, the oldest piece of African-American literature is the poem "Bars Fight" written by Lucy Terry in 1746. It was not published until 1855. In the early 20th century, there were authors writing about African-American issues too. The most known are Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Richard Wright also continues the tradition of Harlem Renaissance (1920 - 1940). Harlem Renaissance finds its origin in Harlem communities in New York City. Harlem Renaissance is known for the literature it produced, but it is also known for numerous musicians and others who produced their works in this field. The main writers of Harlem Renaissance are Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurson, Dorothy West and Claude McKay. They are sometimes called the New Negro Movement (Graham, 1998, p. 146).

Richard Wright belongs to so called the Civil Right Movement era. World War II was a time when the largest number of African-American people migrated throughout the United States. These people moved from the racist South to a more propitious North. They usually managed to find a good job in factories. Many African-American people found their new home in Chicago (Lemann, 1992, p. 46). Richard Wright was one of them. This migration caused that African-American people felt more independent and the migration was a contribution to American Civil Rights movement. It is not necessary to say that what was happening meant a great influence on African-American writers. The main themes of African-American authors were segregation and racism. Among the most outstanding writers of this era belongs James Baldwin who dealt with the issues of race and also the issues of sexuality. Ralph Ellison is another popular author of this period and Richard Wright falls in this place, too. Urban Realism is another label for this stream of literature.

From a different point of view, Richard Wright could be placed among so called "Chicago writers" together with the poet Margaret Walker, playwright Theodore Ward and novelist Arna Bontemps. A well known newspaper *Chicago Defender* would depict Chicago as the right place for African-American people to go and Chicago really became the centre of African-American migration during the Great Depression (Lemann, 1992, p. 47).

American literature in the middle of the 20th century is particularly influenced by the relationship between the author and the reader, between what one can imagine and what one can experience in his life, between what is fictitious and what is real, between the reader and the text he-she reads. These are very contested interfaces in this time period.

One could also make so bold as to suggest that at this moment literary art is fighting with what to do with legacy of modernism in the early century. However, there is another strain from the early century that is of great importance – naturalism. In American literature represented by writers like Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Stephen Crane and John Steinbeck.

3.2 Richard Wright's Style of Writing

Richard Wright is writing very much in style of those writers. So even though Richard Wright is very closely connected to the legacy of avant-garde modernism, Wright is also connected to a social realist style, the naturalist style. His novel *Black Boy* comes with some things one must think about. Whether the novel is his real autobiography, what is the novel trying to say to its readers and what kind of reader will want to read this novel.

One could suggest that there is a critical response to those issues that was rather negative. It was W. E. B. Du Bois's review of *Black Boy* just after the novel came out. He says:

This book tells a harsh and forbidding story and makes one wonder just exactly what its relation to truth is. The subtitle, "A Record of Childhood and Youth" makes one first think that the story is autobiographical. It probably is at least in part, but mainly it is probably intended to be fiction or fictionalized biography. At any rate, the reader must regard it as creative writing rather than simply a record of life. (Lauter, 2005)

3.3 Social-Cultural Background Influencing Wright's Writing

Richard Wright's outlook on the world was badly influenced by the social-cultural conditions of the period in which he was born. One has to take into consideration that Wright was born in the USA at the very beginning of the 20th century (1908), the century that was preceded by 60 years of neverending disputes leading to the Civil War between the North and the South. The war had two main results. It put an end to slavery and it also decided that America was a single nation. However, the old landed aristocracy started to gain more and more political and economic control over the South. In 1896 the Plessy-Ferguson Act came into effect. It were so called „separate but equal laws“ (Frederickson, 2002, p. 53 - 54).

Richard Wright was born in the state of Mississippi into a family which had four members - Richard Wright, his younger brother, his father Nathan Wright, mother Ella Wilson Wright. Ella Wilson Wright was a teacher. Richard's family was strongly influenced by the fact that when Richard was about five years old, his father left the family to live with another woman. This situation was really extremely difficult. During this era, it was very hard for adult African-American men to find a vital job which would be well paid. A more difficult situation was for female African-American. It was almost impossible for them to find any job. And now, Ella became the only breadwinner in the family. She really tried very hard, as described in the novel, to support herself and her two children. However, the constant psychological stress caused that she suffered a stroke which caused that she was physically disabled for the rest of her life. The whole family was influenced by this. There were days when Ella Wright could not work, she felt sick and that was the reason why little Richard had to start working in his young days. He would find a few occasional jobs which did not provide the family much money, but they made it possible for Ella to buy basic groceries. One must also put stress on the fact that the family moved very often.

They moved from one town to another, time and time again. They lived in Memphis, Jackson and other cities. Luckily, their relatives were on hand to help them. This situation was unbearable not only for Richard's mother, however, for little Richard himself. Due to the fact that they moved so often, he had to change schools. It was not easy for him to make friends with new children and it was even more difficult to get

used to new teachers time after time, if one takes into consideration the fact that African-American children were not offered the same school education as Euro-American children. Not only did he neglect school education because the family moved so often, but he did not go to school when his mother felt bad and he had to work instead of her. Despite the fact that Wright did not go to school regularly, he fell in love with reading and became an enthusiastic reader. Not only did he like reading, but he also liked writing. When he was a teenager, he published a short essay in a newspaper and started to dream of becoming a professional writer.

He had to struggle with many obstacles on his way. One would presume that it was mainly the hostile environment that badly influenced Richard's desire to become a writer. Yes, the environment caused that Richard was not educated enough, however, the main obstacle was Richard's own family. For a long time, Richard, his brother and mother were living in their grandmother's house. Grandmother's household was intensely religious and grandmother hated when she caught little Richard when he read a book. She claimed that books were devilish. It is not necessary to emphasize that she discouraged any Richard's creativity that started to appear.

When the family moved to Chicago, the circumstances were not much better. One must take into consideration that it was a time of the Great Depression and it was still difficult to find a job. Of course, African-American men could find some jobs, but the jobs were usually very hard and exhausting. Wright himself experienced this. He had to work a variety of difficult jobs if he had wanted to support his family. During this time, he was still a teenager. He used to return home very tired, but it did not discourage him. He started to write in private. His first writings, this time it were poems, appeared in a few communist magazines. Later he joined the communist Party and he met many other African-American writers who were in a similar situation. Wright's short essays would appear in many communist publications. It was the year 1937 when Richard Wright moved to New York and he started to work as a Harlem editor of *The Daily Worker*, another publication of the communist Party. During this time, Richard Wright published a lot of very important essays and two novels which became very popular - *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) (Launter, 2005).

One would be very wrong if he-she thought that Wright's success caused that he stopped being interested in political issues and that the only thing on which he focused

his energy was writing. Richard Wright was still socially engaged and still felt that he had his say in a lot of political issues. A big change came in 1942 when he left the Communist party. One of the reasons why he left the Communist Party was that he felt some kind of disillusionment. On one hand, he was a cell member of the party, on the other hand, he found himself isolated and maybe even abused as he was before his entry. Later, Wright left the United States and he started to live in Paris with his wife and his daughter. In Paris, Wright started to be interested in existentialism. Existentialism could be explained as a 20th century philosophical thinking interesting in human existence, finding self, and finding the meaning of life. One is supposed to find the meaning through personal responsibility and making free choices. One's judgement is the determining factor. T.Z. Lavine defines existentialism as follows:

Existentialism is the philosophic standpoint which gives priority to existence over essence. What is meant by this is that existentialism gives priority in significance to existence, in the sense of my existence as a conscious subject, rather than to any essence which may be assigned to me, any definition of me, any explanation of me by science or philosophy or religion or politics. (T.Z. Lavine, 1985 p. 328)

Richard Wright made friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. These two men were thinkers and authors of the existential movement. During this time, Richard Wright did not published much. When he died, it was the year 1960, it was obvious that *Native Son* and *Black Boy* will stay the main works of his life forever (Launter, 2005).

3.4 Wright's Work

Richard Wright as a writer is said to be a naturalist and a realist. One can also see him as a symbolist and an existentialist. Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, his autobiography *Black Boy*, the novel *The Outsider* and his books of short stories titled „Uncle Tom's Children“ and „Eight Men“ distinguish Wright as one of the most significant writers in the history of American literature.

His short story „The Island of Illusion“ is a depiction of apartheid America and the depiction was so „terribly punctual“ and profoundly written that American publishers are said to have shied away from it, the literary press was afraid to praise it, and the public didn't want to know about the „other America“.

One of Wright's most famous quotes „I am a very average Afro-American that is why I am not exceptional“ was published by the press and today most American readers of Wright would laugh at this statement. However, even today all too often the term Afro-American brands one as being exceptional. The term „Afro-American“ is exceptional because it shows a universal problem of western society and western culture (Lauter, 2005).

Richard Wright as a writer is not a creator of an original style or technique. Among the writers he borrowed from was Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Wright's absence of original novelistic techniques and his use of melodrama in the autobiography *Black Boy* makes this a more classical form of biography and a style that one usually does not find in contemporary biographies. The fact that Wright was being self-educated causes that he perceives the world he lived in with an originality and a freshness in a manner that highly educated writers are not able.

Richard Wright is known as a first African-American novelist to achieve fame and fortune from his writings. More importantly, Wright should be known as the first African-American to have thrown the truth into the faces of the Euro-American.

Wright is said to have known that his success was possible only because his generation of Afro-Americans and those came before him were able to survive seemingly impossible hardships. In presenting *Black Boy*, Wright generalized his own life.

In *Native Son*, he foretold the uprising of the American inner-city ghettos that erupted in every large American city in the 1960s. Wright tried to be a militant writer in a manner that one is able to make a difference between class and race, between white and non-white, between nationalism and racism and between the individual and society. His favourite quote taken from Walt Whitman was „Not till the sun excludes you, do I exclude you“. (Lauter, 2005)

4. *Black Boy*

4.1 Racism As It Is Portrayed in the Book

Wright stated one of the reasons for writing this book was that he understood that he was „a very average Afro-American.“ That is what makes this autobiography such an extraordinary piece of work (Wright, 1998).

It is suitable to start this chapter with the definition of the term „racism.“ The whole book *Racism: A Short History* by Fredrickson deals with the problem of racism and brings new opinions and views on this topic. He describes racism as follows:

The term 'racism' is often used in a loose unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or 'people' toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes. But sometimes the antipathy of one group toward another is expressed and acted upon with a single-mindedness and brutality that go far beyond the group-centered prejudice and snobbery that seem to constitute an almost universal human feeling. (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 1)

In *Black Boy* Richard Wright describes negative feelings of Euro-Americans toward African-Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. The actions resulting from this situation swarm in the book. Given the circumstances, it seems quite logical that Wright had problems with „whites“, however, the uneasy times caused that even relationships between African-American people themselves were tough. The situation in Wright's family was really extreme as it will be described further in this paper.

The influential power of Wright's novel *Black Boy* and other Wright's works caused that Wright would be remembered as a powerful writer, not only as an influential intellectual. His novel *Black Boy* describes Wright's growing up in the hostile Jim Crow South. To have a good understanding while reading this autobiography depends on an understanding of its social and cultural background and on an understanding of historical contexts. One of the contexts mentioned above are laws which are called the "Jim Crow laws." These laws continued the infamous "separate but equal" ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson. The Jim Crow laws institutionalized

segregation of African-American people from Euro-American people. The segregation was connected with places such as public swimming pools, public restaurants, public means of transport, hospitals, theatres, but they were also connected with marriage or the court of law, where any African-American could not testify against any Euro-American. The "Jim Crow Laws" were very effective. They managed to create two separate worlds. The one world was the world of "blacks," the other one was the world of "whites." It is not necessary to say that there were unequal distributions of wealth between these two worlds. Originally agricultural populations of African-American people were put into poverty. It were Euro-American people who took control of African-American people's land and who kept exploiting African-American people. African-American people kept working on farms owned by Euro-Americans (Wormser, 2003. p. 201). Richard Wright learned that these laws were not exclusive to the South, however, they had the biggest power in the South and they were most harsh there. It might be also difficult to understand *Black Boy* without knowing some basic facts about Communism in the US in the 1930s and 1940s. The collapse of the stock market, rising unemployment, downturn in industry production and other negative issues took place in these years. The Communist Party claimed that their political ideas were built on a scientific model and that they were those who put stress on justice, equality and solidarity. However, many American politics and intellectuals were convinced that the Communist Party was responsible for the capitalist production which brought big problems mentioned above. As an African-American, Wright believed that it would be possible to destroy racism through Communism. However, after many years that he was a member of the Communist Party, Wright started to see that he had been wrong (Foner, 1987, p. 125 – 126).

By narrating *Black Boy* in the first person, Wright places emphases on his own childhood and in the process universalizes the childhood of many African-American children who were raised during the height of the American segregation era. The whole book is written in a naturalistic way. The situations that Richard Wright described in his typical naturalistic way are the result of the „separate but equal“ laws. These laws would be upheld by the American Supreme court and would not be overturned until 1952.

As described in the autobiography, these laws institutionalized apartheid in the United States. 1920s – 1960s was a period when racism reached its heights. Racism was represented by worse educational, working conditions and not the same rights for African-American people. African-Americans were not allowed to enter public restaurants and swimming pools. In the old south segregation would reach such heights as could be not found no where in the western world until the rise of Nazi Germany.

At his young age Richard Wright was not able to understand what was happening and he could not see there were any differences between African-American people and Euro-American people. In the course of time, he started to see first differences that he did not understand at first. It was the time in which segregation and racism were institutionalized in the United States. A bit later Richard Wright was already old enough to see the bogeyman called 'segregation' roaming the United States. Racism reared its ugly head again.

As described in the book, it was illegal for Euro-American men to shake hands with African-American men. African-American men over the age of twelve were forbidden to make eye contact with any Euro-American lady. When walking in the opposite direction and when approached by any Euro-American woman, that African-American would have to lower the head and step off the sidewalk until the Euro-American had passed by. When African-American people wanted to try on some clothes before buying it, they had to pay first. An African-American could not testify in a court of law against any Euro-American, no matter what the offence including that of murder.

The institution that personified the old south was the Ku Klux Klan, a fascist organization that roamed the south and illegally persecuted African-Americans. It is interestingly described in the book how little Richard did not understand what was going on at all when he saw these hooded men in the street for the first time.

In Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*, racism is described as a problem among individual people. Moreover, *Black Boy* depicts this serious problem as a strange opinion which is held by some people. Another level of this novel speaks about racism as about a crucial problem which sunk in society as a whole. Some characters in the novel are depicted as very bad and full of evil, but these characters are also shown as lead actors in one big play which is full of dread and oppression. Many a reader will ask a question whether the roots of racism can be destroyed because it is obvious that they

have set so deep in American culture. Euro-American people are not very kind to Richard in this novel and they are not kind because he is different. The problem which they have is that Richard Wright is an African-American. This causes that Richard Wright is quite unable to get on well even with those Euro-Americans who are kind to him and who respect him and do not feel any hate towards Richard.

A wholly different problem is that Richard Wright is growing up among African-American people who seem to be unwilling to respect Wright's character, personality and his talent. It is obvious that through this novel Wright criticises "white" people and their sick beliefs held against African-American people, but one must certainly notice that Wright also criticises the community of black people, too. What he dislikes and what he picks up in the novel is the fact that the black community did not want to educate him, moreover, the black community was trying to take little Richard away from reading the books that he liked so much. Wright realizes the fact that he is not well educated at the moment when he falls in love with reading and falls in love with writing his own stories. *Black Boy* is not only a piece of autobiography, it tells the reader that Wright noticed and wanted to comment on the racist people that were around him. The reader will notice that *Black Boy* does not only speak about the fact that racism causes problems between "whites" and "blacks," but it speaks about the fact that racism negatively affects relationships among African-American people themselves.

The major term in this book is the word "black." Of course, this book is a story of childhood, but the reader is constantly aware that the colour of Wright's skin is black. The difference is that he is not only growing up in America, but he is growing up there black. One could suggest that the truth is that Richard Wright did not have any other chance, he had to be growing up and having a label on his head and the label was saying "black." Richard Wright appears to be very individualistic and he would like to be a part of society under his own conditions. He does not like when he is made to fall within a category that society wants him to fill. This must be the reason why Richard Wright seems to be fighting against the white culture and also against his own black culture. As if he is saying that neither of these two cultures knows how to treat a person or what to do with a person who is determinate, outstanding and unique. As if he is saying that he hates that the only chances he has are to obey or to waste away. There is no point in saying that he does not like either and that is why he is looking for another option. In all

chapters the reader finds the examples of Richard Wright's opposing. He opposes these two options at school, where the headmaster insists that Wright read a particular speech if he wants to pass his school-leaving exam, he stands against these options in his grandmother's house, where he lives, and he stands against them in many other important situations. It is clear that Wright always refuses the chance to obey. His attitude causes difficulties throughout the novel, but it is not because of the fact that Richard Wright would be thinking callously about life, but precisely because the truth is that he dislikes this attitude. Richard Wright wants to be an individual and he finally hits the mark.

One very important moment comes when Ella, she is a teacher, tells little Richard the plot of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*. Richard Wright stays sitting hamstrung and he claims that this has been the first time when he has felt some very strong emotions. This is not the only situation in the book that opens Richard Wright's eyes and evokes some feelings in him whether positive or negative. However, one could say that this is a strongest moment when Wright feels that he is really spiritually excited and he feels that his life has been rather empty until this moment. Richard Wright went through other emotional moments as he was reading horror stories and science-fiction and he discovered that there is some kind of power in words and that through words it is possible to influence people around. This is depicted when he uses his writing to advance the cause of the Communist Party. These all moments include reading and writing and Richard Wrights comes up with the idea that this is a means to make life meaningful, through creative attempts. This is the crucial idea held by existentialists and that is why some critics say that Wright can be seen as an existentialist. After all, when Richard Wright was writing this novel, it was a trial to sort his life experience, which certainly takes a lot of creative power.

4. 2 *Black Boy* and its Motifs

4.2.1 Hunger and Poverty

Throughout the novel, the reader constantly realizes that the situation in Richard Wright's family is not easy. Hunger was one of the biggest problems. As one can read

on page 26, Richard's mother would take Richard to her cooking job. Richard could smell the food that she was preparing and from time to time he and his brother would get some scraps.

Standing hungrily and silently in a corner of the kitchen, we would watch her go from the stove to the sink, from the cabinet to the table. I always loved to stand in the white folks' kitchen when my mother cooked, for it meant that I got occasional scraps of bread and meat; but many times I regretted having come, for my nostrils would be assailed with the scent of food that did not belong to me and which I was forbidden to eat. (Wright, 1998, p. 26)

Only a few people can imagine today what it must have been like to suffer from hunger. However, there are numerous situations in the book when Richard himself suggests that physical hunger is of lesser importance, there are other problems which are more crucial and essential. Moreover, physical hunger is not the only hunger in the novel. There are many Richard's desires that could be understood as some kind of hunger as well. It is hunger for reading, hunger for writing, hunger for literature generally, artistic expressions and he also desires to be involved in social issues, too. Richard Wright suggests that what the world needs more than a cure to hunger is love, tolerance and unity. People should try to understand to each other and not fight among themselves. Richard Wright is willing to reach a better, happier existence. He would like to reach it by connecting with other people around him - with society. Richard Wright's emotional hunger works as a motor for him. It drives him on and on and it helps him to go higher on the social level ladder.

Reading is another strong motif that one can see in this autobiography. In the whole autobiography, Richard Wright looks for reading and his looking is really similar to physical hunger. His longing for reading and his longing for food are somehow interconnected in a couple of parts of the text.

A very dramatic situation is described on page 36. Richard Wright's mother who must lead the family now, the father has left the family, does not have enough money to pay for rent. She had some money from her mother, but the money is gone now and that is why she cannot buy food and she cannot take a proper care of little Richard and his brother. Richard's mother has been thinking over this situation for a long time and she

has been looking for possible solutions. She finally found a job – she washed up in a kitchen for white people but even the money she earned here was not enough to feed her and her two children. She was finally made to make a very uneasy decision. Her life situation made her put her children into an orphan house for some time.

The orphan home was a two-story frame building set amid trees in a wide, green field. My mother ushered me and my one morning into the building and into the presence of a tall, gaunt, mulatto woman who called herself Miss Simon. At once she took a fancy to me and I was frightened speechless; I was afraid of her the moment I saw her and my fear lasted during my entire stay in the home.

The house was crowded with children and there was always a storm of noise. The daily routine was blurred to me and I never quite grasped it. The most abiding feeling I had each day was hunger and fear. The meals were skimpy and there were only two of them. Just before we went to bed each night we were given a slice of bread smeared with molasses. The children were silent, hostile, vindictive, continuously complaining of hunger. (Wright, 1998, p. 36)

Richard Wright describes here the fears he had in the orphan house. He was afraid of Miss Simon, he was constantly hungry, he did not understand the rules he was supposed to obey. It was very difficult for him to adapt himself. He finally lost the contact with his mother because Miss Simon told Ella that her visits were inappropriate. Miss Simon claimed that Richard always felt homesick after Ella had left. The fact that Richard could not see his mother any more caused that he started to be depressed.

4.2.2 Violence

A very strong motif in this novel is violence. Very often it happens that Richard is chidden, cursed, he gets a beating, he is slapped across his face. It is surprising that this happens within the family, he was never beaten by a "white" man. Many conflicts which he has are conflicts with his grandmother who is a very religious person. When "whites" have a problem with Richard, when they think that his behaviour is unbearable, they only chide him or smash a glass of some alcohol in his face in one case. One way or another, violence which could be seen as abusing whether physical or

mental, plays an important role in this autobiography. The reader meets violence in every chapter of this book. Sometimes Richard deserves to be punished, as he set the house on fire, but the degree of violence used against him is surprising. In other cases the reader must think that he-she would never punish his-her child for such a little thing as Richard was punished. It is good to say that there are situations where it is not Richard who is abused, but Richard is the one who uses violence. The scene, where he hangs a cat speaks quite clearly. This is an example in which Richard uses violence without having to. He just wants to win over his father and he uses father's words literally because he knows that his father will not punish him if Richard makes him believe that he only did what father had wanted him to do. An absolutely different situation is when Richard Wright goes shopping and he is beaten by a group of older boys. His mother makes him go shopping again and Richard uses violence to protect himself. This is an example where he really has to use violence in order to win the rights into the streets of Memphis. Quite simply, he learns that there are situations where he has to use power in order to be respected. In a few cases he reacts to the family's violence by using his power. This happens when he takes a knife against Addie, burning the house down.

It is a good idea to look at a couple of violent situations closely. In the first scene of this book the child Richard burns down his family's house playing with matches underneath the curtains. He runs away and he hides himself under the house afraid of the beating his mother would give him. And in fact when his mother finally finds him, he is beaten unconscious, and he feels bad and sick for a long time from this moment on.

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called - I was afterwards told - and he ordered that I be kept abed, that I be kept quiet, that my very life depended upon it. My body seemed on fire and I could not sleep. Packs of ice were put on my forehead to keep down the fever. Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, when I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and

drench me with some horrible liquid. Day and night I begged my mother and father to take the bags away, pointing to them, shaking with terror because no one saw them but me. Exhaustion would make me drift toward sleep and then I would scream until I was awake again; I was afraid to sleep. Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me. (Wright, 1998, p. 13)

One must be thinking over the fact why Richard Wright started the novel with this brutal scene. One should take into consideration that one part of every autobiography is choosing, what one chooses out of his-her life - where one starts, where one finishes, and what one puts next to what. Richard Wright chooses this scene because it is very dramatic, so it has the aim to attract and shock the reader. It is possible to say that it is a hook, no doubt.

This passage that was mentioned above tells one, in part, the reason why. It is a moment when a child realizes that the person who gave him life can take that life away from him. Wright's mother, who gave him life, can take that life away from him if she wants to do so. It is a profound sense of endangering - physical, mortal endangering. It is good to point to those "huge, wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows."

However, the revision is also away from a sense that this endangering is represented by a racial face, the very symbolic face of black oppression, the white face which is always cruelly set against the black boy of this account. Richard Wright revises this away from that to the more generalized, fundamental but also very personal figure of the mother and the maternal. So the white bags can be explained as an image of his mother's breast. One has this fear of the horrible white liquid as if milk was going to drown little Richard. So the threat which is represented by the mother who will beat her own son unconscious is shown in that fevered vision of the bags like the full udders of cows.

So this novel, this autobiography, starts with the sense that this boy is in danger from practically the moment he comes into the world, from the moment he starts to live, the moment he comes into consciousness.

Then it is interesting to note the transition that happens only after little Richard says, "I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to

killing me." After that one comes into something that could be called a catalog. There are three catalogs in the first half. It is a list of sensations or perceptions which do not have a particular narrative structure. They are only a compilation of experience.

Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings. There was the wonder I felt when I first saw a brace of mountainlike, spotted, black-and-white horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay. There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon. There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning. There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez. There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burned upon a mysterious journey. There was the disdain that filled me as I tortured a delicate, blue-pink crawfish that huddled fearfully in the mudsill of a rusty tin can. There was the aching glory in masses of clouds burning gold and purple from an invisible sun. (Wright, 1998, p. 14)

These catalogs allow several possible interpretations. For example, when little Richard Wright talks about the "dreaming waters" of the Mississippi River. The thing that is shown there is a moment when the perception of the child becomes the perception of the world filled with imagination. So the river is not dreaming, it is Richard who is dreaming. This is in part a catalog that embodies the awakening of sensuality, the awakening of the body to its environment, to his environment. However, there is also the sense of imagination and one gets to know this in the dreaming waters, one finds that in the sense of travel or the image of the road that one can see in the "green and red vegetables stretching away in their rows to the bright horizon." There is the sense of huge space, of expansiveness, the possibility of travelling.

Richard Wright put this next to, or right after, that very dramatic scene because it is embodying a variation which will come back in this text. Between radical endangering and deprivation and the compensation of sensuality, emotion and imagination. These two variate back and forth so the moment of deprivation is often

balanced by a moment which is full of imagination.

It is interesting to go through some other scenes to see why the scenes are set to each other. Another interesting scene features Richard's mother telling little Richard that they are going to Memphis on the boat called *Kate Adams*.

One day my mother told me that we were going to Memphis on a boat, the Kate Adams, and my eagerness thereafter made the days seem endless. Each night I went to bed hoping that the next morning would be the day of departure.

'How big is the boat?' I asked my mother.

'As big as a mountain,' she said.

'Has it got a whistle?'

'Yes.'

'Does the whistle blow?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'When the captain wants it to blow.'

'Why do they call it the Kate Adams?'

'Because that's the boat's name.'

'What color is the boat?'

'White.'

'How long will we be on the boat?'

'All day and all night.'

'Will we sleep on the boat?'

'Yes, when we get sleepy, we'll sleep. Now, hush.' (Wright, 1998, p. 15)

If in the catalog imagination is really awakened, this is what it can then do for Richard. It can endow his daily experience which is rather uninteresting, boring and depressive with a kind of romance that everyone needs to go through in his-her life. But of course this is a poor, black child who is growing up in the South, and his expectations, what his mind can imagine is always going to be greater than what the world can give to him in reality. So if the landscape invites him to grow as an imaginative person, the social world out there he lives in, this episode signals to the reader immediately, will never live up to that imagination.

There is a thing connected to powerlessness that arises from the repeated variation which one starts to see even set up in these first three little vignettes, and the

problem of powerlessness is first located not centrally in that social world. The reader is not meant to understand that the young Richard Wright when he discovers that the *Kate Adams* is a dirty, little boat and that it is not the romantic vision of a ship he had dreamt of, that the young Richard thinks to himself, "This is because I am a poor black boy growing up in the South." It is simply an experience of disappointment. A moment when a small boy is let down. The sense of powerlessness, the most profound sense of powerlessness, suggested already by the first episode where his mother almost takes back the life she gave him, is rooted in the family. And the reader gets such a dramatic vision of that in another scene which follows, the scene talking about the kitten.

Richard's father works during nights and he sleeps during the day. During the day the children therefore have to be very silent. There is a cat outside the apartment building which begins to meow and the boys are interested in it. The father yells at them, says, "Make that cat shut up," and the boys cannot. He says, "Make it shut up. I don't care. Kill it if you have to. Kill that cat." Richard at this point already hates his father for many reasons. His father will leave the family quite soon after this scene because he has fallen in love with another woman. For Richard, he is mostly this kind of person: a rude, upset, abusive person. His resentment over his powerlessness within the family bursts out during this moment and Richard thinks of a way to play a revenge on his father. "I will take his words literally; I will kill the cat," he thinks and so he does. He hangs the cat. Richard's mother finds out when his brother peaches upon him, and the father cannot punish Richard. Richard has taken the father's words literally even though they were not meant that way, however, in doing so, in relying on his father's words in a sense, to protect him, even as he subverts them, he escapes the punishment that would otherwise so surely and automatically follow. Richard's first exertion of agency in this book is through the agency of words, in this case in asserting an interpretation of the words at odds with their intended meaning. It's as if Richard takes those words and he makes them his own words, takes them from his father's mouth and gains a different kind of strength from those words, a strength that he can then use to play a revenge on his father - the father he hates so much. This is the first instance which Richard will do, what he later describes Mencken doing, using words as weapons. When Richard Wright discovers that Mencken is using words as weapons in a political sense is a very powerful moment for him in his intellectual development. In

this case it is a much more bodily kind of development. It is the understanding that he can make things happen in the world, he can defend himself against his father's punishment through the use of father's words. It is important to note that his mother takes a different approach. If his father resigns himself to Richard's subterfuge, his mother does not.

I had had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at last found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. I had made him feel that, if he whipped me for killing the kitten, I would never give serious weight to his words again. I had made him know that I felt he was cruel and I had done it without his punishing me.

But my mother, being more imaginative, retaliated with an assault upon my sensibilities that crushed me with the moral horror involved in taking a life. All that afternoon she directed toward me calculated words that apawned in my mind a horde of invisible demons bent upon exacting vengeance for what I had done. As evening drew near, anxiety filled me and I was afraid to go into an empty room alone.

'You owe a debt you can never pay,' my mother said.

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled.

'Being sorry can't make that kitten live again,' she said. (Wright, 1998, p. 18 – 20)

His mother has her own way in which she uses words as a means of power, and she does it by making the kitten live again in Richard's imagination. It is as if she is writing fiction there in that episode. She is representing this kitten that he has killed so that it comes back to haunt him.

This means that once again, there is that immediate oscillation and a feedback. The moment when Richard gains some power from the use of his father's words, his mother takes it back by exerting that power by herself.

There is a kind of drum beat of thematic material as these scenes continue. The drum beat is all about language. Yes, this is a novel talking about the privations of growing up in the South being poor and black, but it is also very much, very consciously, a novel about the development of someone who attends to language. In these first scenes it is all about power. However, it is actually not even quite so easy or

simple as these early scenes. Every language has its powers that are absolutely unpredictable, that cannot be harnessed in precisely that deliberate way: by making a decision to take someone's words in the wrong way, or by telling a story to make a moral point, as the mother does.

Another scene presenting violence is the one featuring little Richard and his grandmother in the bathroom. Richard's grandmother uses a towel to dry Richard and he says, "When you get through, kiss back there," and his grandmother chases him around the house and wants to beat him. Finally it is Richard's mother who comes and beats little Richard. This time Richard knows that he has done something bad and that he deserves to be punished, but he does not fully understand the meaning of what he had said.

I listened, vaguely knowing now that I had committed some awful wrong that I could not undo, that I had uttered words I could not recall even though I ached to nullify them, kill them, turn back time to the moment before I had talked so that I could have another chance to save myself. My mother picked up the wet towel and came toward me. I ran into the kitchen, naked, yelling. She came hard upon my heels and I scuttled into the back yard, running blindly in the dark, butting my head against the fence, the tree, bruising my toes on sticks of wood, still screaming. I had no way of measuring the gravity of my wrong and I assumed that I had done something for what I would never be forgiven. Had I known just how my words had struck them, I would have remained still and taken my punishment, but it was the feeling that anything could or would happen to me that made me wild with fear. 'Come here, you little filthy fool!' my mother called.

I dodged her and ran back into the house, then again into the hallway, my naked body flashing through the air. I crouched in a dark corner. My mother rushed upon me, breathing haard. I ducked, crawled, stood, and ran again. (Wright, 1998, p. 51)

Another scene that includes violence is the one featuring little Richard who is going shopping. The situation is described in a very naturalistic way. In the first chapter of the book, Richard Wright speaks about an event that happened when he was a six-year-old boy. He draws a portrait of the situation that he was not able to understand those days. He was ordered to go shopping. On his way to the shop, he met a gang of older boys. When the boys saw him, they came running to him, beat him up and stole his money. Little Richard burst into tears and returned home crying.

'Go on and don't pay any attention to them,' she said.

I went out of the door and walked briskly down the sidewalk, praying that the gang would not molest me. But when I came abreast of them someone shouted.

'There he is!'

They came toward me and I broke into a wild run toward home. They overtook me and flung me to the pavement. I yelled, pleaded, kicked, but they wrenched the money out of my hand. They yanked me to my feet, gave me a few slaps, and sent me home sobbing. My mother met me at the door.

'They b-beat m-me,' I gasped. 'They t-t-took the m-money.'

I started up the steps, seeking the shelter of the house.

'Don't you come in here,' my mother warned me.

I froze in my tracks and stared at her.

'But they're coming after me,' I said.

'You just stay right where you are,' she said in a deadly tone. 'I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself'.

(Wright, 1998, p. 23 – 24)

She gave him money again, she gave him a pole so that he could defend himself and little Richard was sent to the shop one more time. Richard begged not to have to go there because he was very afraid of getting beaten again. His mother was uncompromising. Richard, having tears in his eyes, left. As soon as the boys saw him, they made a beeline towards him to beat him again. Richard had two choices. Either to defend himself or to go home and get a beating at home. He decided for the first possibility.

In blind fear I let the stick fly, feeling it crack against a boy's skull. I swung again, lamming another skull, then another. Realizing that they would retaliate if I let up for but a second, I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold, to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth, clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I hit again and again, dropping the money and the grocery list. The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in utter disbelief. They had never seen such frenzy, I stood panting, egging them on, taunting them to come on and fight. When they refused, I ran after them and they tore out for their homes, screaming. The parents of the boys rushed into the streets and threatened me, and for the first time in my life I shouted at

grownups, telling them that I would give them the same if they bothered me. I finally found my grocery list and the money and went to the store. On my way back I kept my stick poised for instant use, but there was not a single boys in sight. That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis. (Wright, 1998, p. 25)

When one reads this part of the book for the first time, he-she must think how Wright's mother could be so rigid, uncompromising and insensitive. It seems that she did not fear for her son. Would not she have cared if her son had come home hurt?

If something similar happened these days, many people would very hardly find a sensible explanation why the mother reacted this way. It is necessary to take into consideration that the plot of the book is set in 1920s, at the time in which segregation was very strong. The purpose of Wright's mother behaviour was to teach little Richard how to defend himself and how to survive in those trouble times. Her fight was not in vain that evening. Richard Wright won the right to the streets of Memphis. He gained more courage and the mother made sure that her son was able to take care of himself. No wonder that many people were using hard precautions at those hard times similarly to Richar Wright's mother who was trying to show her son that it was necessary to fight for life. With a bit of exaggeration: „Kill or you will be killed.“

4.2.3 Alcohol Replaced by Hunger for Knowing

One could also think about the scene where Richard gets drinks in a bar as a child. Patrons pay him and give him drinks to go up and repeat their words to other people in the bar. Usually this happens between men and women, so a man will give Richard a drink and pay him a few pennies and Richard goes to a woman in the bar and repeats certain things that the man has trained Richard to say. In doing this, the men laugh; everybody has fun with this young boy repeating words. Richard does not understand what he is saying. He is simply repeating the sounds of the words which the man gives to him.

Through this process Richard becomes addicted to alcohol at a very young age,

however, at the same time Richard learns certain things about language. Language has mysterious powers. It has abilities to make things happen in the world which Richard does not know how to control. When he finally recovers from this time of being a little drunkard - his mother locks him up in the house and makes sure he cannot get out and then she takes him to work with her, so that he loses that taste for alcohol - in the text which is right next to that is the beginning of his lickerish questions. He starts to just torture his mother with a thousand questions about everything in the world.

'Granny looks white,' I said, hoping to establish one fact, at least. 'Then why is she living with us colored folks?'

'Don't you want Granny to live with us?' she asked, blunting my question.

'Yes.'

'Then why are you asking?' - 'I want to know?'

'Doesn't Granny live with us?' 'Yes.'

'Isn't that enough?'

'But does she want to live with us?'

'Why didn't you ask Granny that?' my mother evaded me again in a taunting voice.

'Did Granny become colored when she married Grandpa?'

'Will you stop asking silly questions?'

'But did she?'

'Granny didn't become colored,' my mother said angrily. 'She was born the color she is now.'

Again I was being shut out of the secret, the thing, the reality I felt somewhere beneath all the words and silence.

'Why didn't Granny marry a white man?' I asked.

She slapped me and I cried. Later, grudgingly, she told me that Granny came of Irish, Scotch, and French stock in which Negro blood had somewhere and somehow been infused.

She explained it all in a matter-of-fact, offhand, neutral way; her emotions were not involved at all. (Wright, 1998, p. 55 – 56)

The fact that Richard Wright is addicted to alcohol is in part replaced by an addiction to knowledge. The experience of having language speak through him and do things that he does not understand makes him want to acquire again that agency that he experienced when he took his father's words literally. This thing comes in the scene where his grandmother is washing him and his brother in the tub, and she is washing his butt, and he tells her, "When you're finished, kiss back there." And she gets really angry and she is chasing him around the house trying to whip him with a wet towel.

My mother hurried from her bed.
'What's the matter, mama?' she asked Granny.
I lingered in the hallway, trembling, looking at Granny, trying to speak but only moving my lips. Granny seemed to have gone out of her mind, for she stood like stone, her eyes dead upon me, not saying a word.
'Richard, what have you done?' my mother asked.
Poised to run again, I shook my head.
'What's the matter, for God's sake?' my mother asked of me, of Granny, of my brother, turning her face from one to another.
Granny wilted, half turned, flung the towel to the floor, then burst into tears.
'He... I was trying to wash him,' Granny whimpered, 'here,' she continued, pointing, 'and... that black little devil... Her body was shaking with insult and rage. 'He told me to kiss him there when I was through.' Now my mother stared without speaking.'
'No!' my mother exclaimed.
'He did,' Granny whimpered.
'He didn't say that,' my mother protested.
'He did,' Granny sighed. (Wright, 1998, p. 50)

This is a very interesting and also dramatic scene again of powerlessness within the family, of being the victim of violence within the family. However, in this case it is a response produced in the negative register similar to the responses produced in the bar. He says something, and he does not really know where those words come from. He does not really understand what made his granny so upset about these words he used. He does not understand the words that he has used.

So there is the sense in which the story of a developing writer is the story of someone learning - even before he learns how to control language fully - that language has these abilities.

However, there is another element though, to the kind of language that Richard is describing learning, and that is the racial element. He is learning a racialized language. Thus a conversation among Richard and his friends is annotated with interpretative asides.

'Hey.' Timidly.
'You eat yet?' Uneasily trying to make conversation.
'Yeah, man. I done really fed my face.' Casually.
'I had cabbage and potatoes.' Confidently.

'I had buttermilk and black-eyed peas.' Meekly informational.
 'Hell, I ain't gonna stand near you, nigger!' Pronouncement.
 'How come?' Feigned innocence.
 'Cause you gonna smell up this air in a minute!' A shouted accusation.
 Laughter runs trough the crowd.
 'Nigger, your mind's in a ditch.' Amusingly moralistic.
 'Ditch, nothing! Nigger, you going to greak wind any minute now!'
 Triumphant pronouncement creating suspense.
 'Yeah, when them black-eyed peas tell that buttermilk to move over, that
 buttermilk ain't gonna wanna move and there's gonna be war in your
 guts and your stomach's gonna swell up and burst!' Climax.
 The crowd laughs loud and long.
 'Man, them white folks oughta catch you and send you to the zoo and
 keep you for the next war!' Throwing the subject into a wider field.
 'Then when that fighting starts, they oughta feed you on buttermilk and
 black-eyed peas and let you break wind!' The subject is accepted and
 extended. (Wright, 1998, p. 88)

What the reader can see in this is a doubled voice. This is a moment when the narrative voice starts splitting in a very conscious manner. So what one sees here is the account of Richard and his friends talking in the past, and the reader has the present narrator's parsing of how this language relates to topics that intervene upon their very context, the racial realities of the South. So what one reads here is a narrator who has learned to do that parsing. Some of these terms which Richard Wright uses are literary - climax, the creation of suspense - so he is tracking this as if it was the development of a narrative. However, he is also suggesting how humour is used to broach themes which are impossible to talk about in more direct ways, or that feel dangerous to these boys to approach in more direct ways. So there is a kind of grammar of race that this boy is learning while he experiences language in all these other more profound, family-oriented ways. There is also the social context of race relations whose grammar Richard is also learning. One should be also reminded of the passage where Richard Wright starts to ask his mother about whether his grandmother is white or not. There is a long dialogue, and Richard's mother gets very frustrated with Richard. Richard's mother does not really want to answer that question. The grandmother is a woman who looks really white but she is of course categorized as black in that system of the South. And so Richard is learning a grammar of race even while he tries to work out how to use language as a source of power in his family. The split voice, the development of what

one could say is that racial double consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois talks about, that double consciousness of the racial reality, is manifested in that split in the narrative.

At first Richard Wright used to hear how a Euro-American woman slapped an African-American woman across her face, or how an Euro-American man shot an African-American man. Later he experienced it on his own when his uncle was shot, or when his mother could not find a job because of the colour of her skin. All these matters influenced him very much. He started to take a violent dislike to Euro-American people when seeing that there were worse educational and working conditions as well as a lack of civil rights for African-American people. Wright's grandmother was very religious and she used to say that books are works of the devil. The fact that she was very religious affected Richard Wright's life as well. His life was similar to the life in prison as described in the novel *Black Boy*. Due to the lack of money, he was looking for a job again and again. He had to work for people he did not like – for „the white.“

Richard Wright was shunned by his native community, which caused that he felt he did not belong anywhere. When he became an adult, he profoundly condemned racism and he lost sympathy for southern values, because of the fact that the social illness included the amorality of slavery and the hideousness of the segregation system found in the USA. All these facts were a strong influence on Wright and also on his writing.

4.3 Types of Characters

In the autobiography there are many symbols. Wright could be seen as a symbolist. He uses real characters and objects to represent abstract ideas. Ella, Richard's mother, and her bad health is a symbol, for instance. In typical literature of Renaissance, physical illnesses and various deformities were seen as a sign of evil soul. This is also applicable to Gothic novels. For example *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley or *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. In the autobiography *Black Boy* this is not true and this symbol is used in a different way. It is possible to say that Ella is one of the few people in this book and probably the only member of the family who takes care of Richard's well-being. Ella tries hard to give her sons what they need. Even though it is

not possible to see this in the novel immediately because she often punishes little Richard, often beats and chides him, she has a good soul and she is not indifferent to Richard's destiny.

Richard's Granny is a symbol representing qualities that little Richard dislikes or even hates. Granny is a very strong woman, she is always uncompromising, rigorous and rigid. She is always persuaded that it is her who is in charge of the family and she fully believes that she is really unerring. She takes in her daughter, little Richard and his younger brother under one very strict condition - in her house they must respect her rules and if they do not want to respect them and act in accordance with them, they will be banished. Granny is a very hot-tempered woman with white complexion and black hair. Granny and Richard fight throughout the novel. He is really scared of her. What Richard dislikes is that she is rigid, oppressive and puritanical. She is the person who does not want to let Richard read books and who stands against Richard's curiosity and talent. She is strongly religious and her faith in God stands above all. Everything that can give pleasures even food is sinful. She constantly tries to change Richard's character as though she wants to create a new person. The fact that she is not successful drives her insane. It seems that she believes that Richard is doomed and she must show him the right way. Her character „prepares“ Richard for life in white America.

The truth is that Nathaniel Wright, Richard's father, does not belong to the leading characters in the novel. However, the smaller the character is, the bigger impression it leaves on the reader's mind. It is sad that the impression is strongly negative. The relationship between Richard and his father is not close at all. Richard's father is a hardline man and Richard is afraid of him. This is shown in the scene where Nathaniel sleeps in his flat in Memphis and his frame of mind is rather insensate when he is awoken by his sons who play games in the room. This is followed by the scene with hanged kitten where little Richards kills the kitten only for one reason - he wants to win over his father. Father leaves the family because he loves another woman and he seems to be very reckless when he is reminded by Ella that he has some responsibilities. He has no intention of taking care of his children and he does not support the family any more. Many years later, Richard meets his father in Mississippi. His father is an old man who works as a sharecropper. At this moment, Nathaniel symbolizes a whole generation of African-American people who changed the land for

the life in cities where they were not able to take care of themselves, to find a good job and to live a vital life. More or less, Richard believes that his father is an unfree man. He associates him with slaves. Richard sees his father's manhood only in terms of visceral features, otherwise he perceives him as a product of the then society.

Another character used as a symbol is Olin who works in the optical shop in Memphis. He is a typical Southern racist who is fond of harming African-American people. It is surprising when the reader finds out that Olin does not have any reason to terrorize African-American people. What is worse, he terrorizes them because he simply finds it amusing and entertaining. Another character in this autobiography is Falk and he is the opposite to Olin. He is a Southerner who likes African-American people and he tries to support them and help them. A few Ku Klux Klan members and also people of Jewish origin work in the shop too. It is possible to say that the shop is a symbol of racial stratification in Memphis.

5. Conclusion

This autobiography is a piece of work that draws a picture of the „other America“ during segregation. Although one reads a story about particular people in a particular place, at a particular time period, it is possible to say that the autobiography is a universal work. The nightmare called segregation frightened African-American people almost in all the south of the United States of America for many years. The American segregation era meant real disappointment, disillusionment, fear and terror for African-American inhabitants.

Written in Wright's typical style, that of a realist and a naturalist, *Black Boy* needs little explanation. Written in clear short declarative sentences and with all the aspects of Wright's childhood, Wright allows the reader to easily conceive and judge what was going on.

If one looks in certain passages, the commentary he-she gets within the episodes, not in the parenthetical, it is as if the voice of Richard remembering the early parts of his childhood, the voice that can parse a dialogue, is then part of what gets remembered as part of the scene. In certain situations he is reflecting these things as he experiences

them. However, there is another important sort of development, and this gets to the second childhood he invokes that happens to him when he goes to Chicago. There is a social analysis that he begins to be able to advance partly due to his reading in Marxism, in sociology.

Wright wants the reader to feel. It is the feeling that he credits. He states the problem of living in the south a problem of feeling, that he needed to claim and consider his own feelings. Wright's reading of criticism had created in him vague glimpses of life's possibilities. Reading for him is a way of accessing feeling, and that is the kind of feeling that he wants from the reader.

He gives an analysis of industrial capitalism. That is the kind of work he uses to get the reader to understand what it would mean to be a Negro in the South, how isolated he was as far as the culture is concerned, how impossible it is to see something like an idol America of freedom and justice from that standpoint.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce je analýzou románu od Richarda Wrighta *Black Boy*. S využitím relevantní sekundární literatury bylo dílo Richarda Wrighta zasazeno do tradice literatury a byly objasněny pojmy „rasismus“ a „naturalismus“. Tato bakalářská práce dále analyzuje Wrightovo dílo a zmiňuje pojem literární realismus vzhledem k Wrightovu dílu.

Jádrem práce je analýza románu *Black Boy*, analýza se cíleně zaměřuje na Wrightův styl – pojednává o něm v souvislostech s literárním realismem a naturalismem, případně je zde zmíněn symbolismus, existencialismus a jiné prvky s ohledem na zpracování problematiky rasismu a jeho dopadů na Wrightův život, jeho rodinu a obecněji na životy jiných afroamerických dětí vyrůstajících na jihu Spojených Států Amerických v první polovině dvacátého století.

Richard Wright ve svém díle popisuje rasismus jako „divný postoj“, který zaujímají určití lidé. Z jiného úhlu pohledu Richard Wright zkoumá důsledky rasismu na vztahy mezi „bílou“ rasou a „černou“ rasou. Říká, že rasismus neznamena pouze útisk Afroameričanů „bílou“ většinou; rasismus způsoboval problémy a konfliktní situace mezi Afroameričany samotnými. Wright popisuje rasismus jako něco, co již hluboce zakořenilo v americké společnosti a v americké kultuře a přichází s názorem, že vymýtit rasismus je proto téměř nemožné.

V této práci je rovněž analyzován pojem autorita sloužící jako prostředek společenské kontroly. Je zde rozpracována myšlenka Richarda Wrighta, že autorita by neměla být založena na tradici a síle, ale na pravdě.

Dalším velice důležitým motivem, který je analyzován v této bakalářské práci, je motiv hladu. Je zde zmiňován jak motiv hladu v pravém slova smyslu, Richardova matka dlouhou dobu nemohla sehnat práci, a tak neměla dostatek financí na nákup nutných potravin, tak je zde analyzován motiv hladu po vědění. Richard Wright, již jako malý chlapec, se snažil proniknout do tajů jazyka, snažil se naučit, jak jazyk správně používat jako zbraň a rovněž je zde analyzována Wrightova touha po čtení knih.

Avšak Richard Wright vyrůstal v prostředí, které nijak jeho nadání a talent nepodporovalo. Někteří členové jeho rodiny byli silně proti tomu, aby Richard četl

knihy a dále se vzdělával. Čtenář si nemůže nevšimnout, že Wright kritizuje rasistickou společnost, ale také kritizuje postoje v jeho rodné komunitě, ve které vyrůstal. Pochopitelně, že tato kniha analyzuje Wrightovo dospívání, ale čtenář si je neustále vědom jednoho slova, slova „černý“. Richard Wright neměl jinou šanci. Vyrůstal na jihu Spojených Států, byl chudý a na čele si nesl nálepku „černoch“. Čtenář vnímá, že Richard Wright je silná osobnost, která by ráda žila ve společnosti na základě svých vlastních podmínek. Nehodlá se smířit s tím, že ho společnost zařadila do určité kategorie. Chce se z oné kategorie vymanit a najít si místo ve svém životě. Cítí, že ani „bílá“, ani „černá“ kultura neví, jak zácházet z Afroameričanem, který je talentovaný.

Tato jednotlivá témata jsou umocněna neustálým napětím, které v knize převládá. Napětím způsobené rasistickou nenávistí a útlakem afroamerických obyvatel. Bakalářská práce zmiňuje moment, kdy malý Richard nevěděl, co se děje, když na ulici prvně spatřil členy Ku Klux Klanu.

Richard Wright chtěl po čtenáři, aby u čtení jeho díla zažíval nejrůznější pocity. Pocity jsou to, čeho si Wright cenil u čtení nejvíce.

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