

## Topic Page: [Wright, Richard, 1908-1960](#)

Definition: **Wright, Richard** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

US novelist. He is best known for the novel *Native Son* (1940), which describes the life of an African-American youth in white-dominated Chicago, and *Black Boy* (1945), an account of the author's boyhood in the South. He also wrote short stories and non-fiction.

### Summary Article: **Wright, Richard**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Richard Wright was the most famous African American novelist of his era, and remains today one of the most prominent black writers in the world. His work spans multiple genres, including the short story, autobiography, novel, poetry, travelogue, essay, and haiku. He was the first African American writer to be able to support himself (and his family) solely from his writing, which has been widely translated throughout the world. *Native Son* (1940c), Wright's most successful novel, was published to great acclaim by Harper and Brothers, a major American publisher. It was a landmark event since this was the first African American novel to be offered by the Book of the Month Club as one of its main selections. Wright's work is philosophically driven by the major ideas and movements that influenced his life and his reading, including social realism, communism, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. He was particularly interested in the ways an individual is shaped by his or her environment. Wright's upbringing in poverty in the Jim Crow American South, his migration to the urban North of Chicago, and his final expatriation in France all shaped his ideas and helped mold his global perspectives on literature, politics, and the human condition.

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on a Mississippi plantation, about 20 miles east of Natchez, on September 4, 1908. His father was an illiterate sharecropper, and his mother was for a time a schoolteacher. All four of Wright's grandparents were born in slavery. The first 19 years of Wright's life were spent in Mississippi and Tennessee, where his family struggled with the racist social structure and its concomitant conditions of poverty, illness, violence, and hunger. Wright's schooling was erratic, and he and his family moved often, seeking affordable housing, available employment, and assistance for his mother's ill health, as his father had early on deserted the family. Despite these circumstances, Wright was an avid reader, and graduated from Smith Robertson Junior High in 1925 as the school valedictorian. Asserting his independence as a writer, he insisted on presenting his own speech, resisting the principal's pressure to author it for him.

Wright often worked to support his family and to afford his own schoolbooks, and his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), details his experiences working in the American South under heavy racial oppression. Wright always found ways to get reading material, often using his various places of employment to facilitate his access to books otherwise forbidden to black people in the South. One of these formative experiences, which he describes in *Black Boy*, concerns his reading of H. L. Mencken, a long-time critic of the South. In reading Mencken, Wright discovered that words could be used as weapons, and this realization solidified in him a desire to fight injustice with his writing. The constriction of living in the South finally became untenable, and, like so many other Southern-born African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century, Wright migrated north to Chicago with his aunt in 1927.

While working at various jobs in Chicago, including the post office, Wright met members of the John

Reed Club, a literary organization sponsored by the Communist Party. He became involved in this group, reading its journals, submitting his own revolutionary poetry, and eventually joining the Communist Party in 1934. During this time he also read widely among such authors as Gertrude Stein (who would later become a friend), Henry James, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, William Faulkner, Theodore Dreiser, and many others. In 1935 he published a now widely anthologized poem about lynching, "Between the World and Me," in the *Partisan Review*. In 1935 he was also hired by the Federal Writers' Project, a part of the Works Progress Administration. He continued to support his family, to organize for the Communist Party, to meet with and organize various writing groups in Chicago and the Midwest, and to publish his work. His story "Big Boy Leaves Home" was published in the anthology *The New Caravan* (1936).

Wright's involvement with the Communist Party exemplifies his complex position and philosophy as an artist, since he was attracted by the party's promise of social and political equality, and yet frustrated as the party leadership demanded more and more control over its writers and artists. For Wright, as a poor person, a working person, and a black man in America, the ideals of equality and freedom espoused by the party had appeal. And yet throughout his life, Wright sought to define himself apart from various groups, believing ultimately in the importance of both individual and artistic freedom. In 1937, he moved to New York City to attempt to earn a living as a writer, soon publishing an important essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in which Wright took an authoritative position against earlier African American literature, which he accused of pandering to whites, "dressed in the knee-pants of servility." He argued for a more social-realist aesthetic – one offering direct political confrontation with social inequalities, and in a sense ushering in his own forthcoming protest fiction. Wright's positioning here demonstrates his human complexity and contradiction: he sought artistic freedom, and at the same time crafted a "blueprint" for future writing.

Another important essay published in 1937 was "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," in *American Stuff: WPA Writers' Anthology*. This essay would later become a part of his autobiography, *Black Boy*, and was also later included in the second edition of his well-received collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940d [1938]). In this essay, he details some of the specific and myriad injustices faced by African Americans in the South. The House Special Committee on Un-American Activities denounced the essay, which initiated a long history of US state surveillance of Wright. His work also drew the attention of the literary establishment, and he received several important awards for his short fiction, culminating in a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1939. During this time he was active in various Harlem literary circles, which included such writers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and others.

Wright's first novel, *Native Son* (1940c), sold 215,000 copies in the first three weeks. The effect of *Native Son* is hard to overstate. In this novel, mainstream American readers saw a compelling and dramatic portrayal of the effects of American racism on a set of Northern, urban characters, especially on Wright's difficult protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Wright uses Bigger, a poor, African American youth living in a segregated part of Chicago, to depict the ways that social exclusion damages one's consciousness. In the interaction between Bigger and the wealthy white Dalton family, readers also see the effects of residential segregation in the North. Bigger murders two women, the white Mary Dalton and his black girlfriend, Bessie, and ends the book facing the electric chair. Many have characterized the novel as a wake-up call (it opens with the ringing of Bigger's alarm clock) about the potentially violent outcome of racism in America.

Shortly after *Native Son* was published, Wright gave a lecture in New York entitled “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” and this text has been appended to later versions of *Native Son*. It provides an analysis of Wright's aims for his novel and for his social critique in general. Wright explains that he felt his earlier collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, was the kind of book “even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about,” and he determined to write a book no one could weep over, that would offer no salve for its hard and painful truths. Discussing the genesis of his protagonist, Wright cites several “Biggers” he had known growing up, African American males constrained by the racism of the South, and responding with violence of various kinds. He shows how the options for this character are limited to violent death, jail, or insanity. Influenced by the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, Wright created a social and literary experiment by placing his character in an urban Northern environment. The Chicago School sought to provide meaning to sociological statistics by way of individual life histories. In this sense the narrative of Bigger's life sheds light on the plight of many of the urban poor. In his essay, Wright explains that there are also white Biggers, and thus *Native Son* can be read as a critique of American consumerism, materialism, and greed, finding no remedy in any healing communal value system. Here again the theme of hunger is present, as Bigger hungers for access to the glittering things that the media show him, as well as for opportunity.

In writing of Bigger's interaction with Chicago's police force and the court system, Wright drew upon the actual case of Robert Nixon, an African American youth tried for murder in Chicago in 1938. Some of Wright's portrayals of Bigger in the press, the police force, and the courts come directly from the Nixon trial, and stand as a scathing expose of the ways African Americans are viewed by these dominant American institutions. As Wright further explains in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” it is this fact of social (and legal) exclusion from the “vital processes of the nation's life” that creates Bigger's anguish, his emotional and cultural hunger. He explains that Bigger “is a dispossessed and disinherited man ... who lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth.” *Native Son* was also staged as a Broadway play, directed by Orson Welles and starring Canada Lee, and eventually it was also made into a movie, starring Wright himself as Bigger Thomas. Later, African American writers James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison would address Wright's dominance by critiquing the portrayal of black culture in *Native Son*. Baldwin's essays “Everybody's Protest Novel” (1949) and “Many Thousands Gone” (1952) critiqued the one-dimensionality of Bigger Thomas and the efficacy of social protest fiction in general. Though Wright had earlier assisted Baldwin in his career in Paris, these essays led to a break between Wright and Baldwin.

Wright continued his interest in examining how the Northern urban environment in many ways continued the forms of social exclusion practiced in the South, and he collaborated with Edwin Rosskam on *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941). Influenced by the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, this photodocumentary essay visually depicts the crumbling kitchenette apartments and poor living conditions that faced many African American migrants to the cities of the North. In his essay, Wright forcefully argues that the former tenant bosses of the South were simply replaced by the “bosses of the buildings,” who enforce a new kind of segregation in the Northern city. After the publication of this book, the FBI began a formal investigation of Wright to determine if the book was prosecutable as sedition. FBI interest in Wright continued throughout his life, despite his formal break with the Communist Party in 1942. That same year, Wright was awarded the NAACP's Spingarn Medal for the highest achievement by an African American.

Wright published his autobiography, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, in 1945 with Harper

and Brothers. The book was very well reviewed, and maintained the number-one spot on the bestseller list for over a month. The publishing history of *Black Boy* sheds light on some of the various forces affecting African American literature more generally, and Wright's career specifically. Originally Wright's autobiography was titled *American Hunger*, and contained two parts: his early years in the South, followed by his migration to the North and his life in Chicago. The Book of the Month Club, however, told Wright's publisher they would only accept the first section, so Wright changed the title to *Black Boy*. The second section of Wright's autobiography, then titled *American Hunger*, was only published 32 years later, after Wright's death.

Though Wright's experience with the Communist Party perhaps spurred his thinking toward internationalism, he had also expressed Bigger's kinship with other oppressed people globally in his 1940 essay about his protagonist. In 1941 Wright married Ellen Poplar, a white woman of Jewish descent, and they had two daughters, Julia (b. 1942) and Rachel (b. 1949). Frustrated with the racism facing his young interracial family in New York, Wright moved them to Paris in 1947, where he associated with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Wright's novel, *The Outsider* (1953) reflects his interest in existentialist philosophy, especially in its portrayal of a black antihero, Cross Damon. Wright also became a kind of spokesman and father figure for the community of expatriate African American artists often gathered at the Café Tournon, including James Baldwin, Chester Himes, William Gardner Smith, and Ollie Harrington. Wright and his family continued to live in Europe (primarily Paris) until Wright's death in 1960.

Throughout his expatriation, Wright traveled widely in Europe, Asia, and Africa, associating with many international intellectuals, including George Padmore, Aime Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Eric Williams, and writing and recording his experiences. His trip to Africa in 1953 was centered in the Gold Coast, which was then a British colony with a growing independence movement that would eventually lead it to become the first independent African nation, Ghana. Wright traveled approximately 3,000 miles by car, meeting various African dignitaries, including Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah. He also visited several slave forts and confronted his own questions about the relationship between his African inheritance and his identity as a Western intellectual. His lengthy account of this journey was published in 1954 as *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*. Also in 1954, Wright published *Savage Holiday*, a Freudian experimental novel about a psychopathic murderer, featuring only white characters.

Wright pursued his interest in the genres of travel writing and cultural analysis, journeying to Spain in 1954, and eventually publishing *Pagan Spain* (1957). Wright's international political interests also led him to attend a conference of non-aligned nations in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. Wright's book about this conference, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), argued that these rising Third World nations were motivated by the forces of religion and race, not along lines of communism and democracy as had been depicted by Cold War superpowers.

Throughout the first half of the 1950s, Wright had also been lecturing across Europe in his role as one of the world's most famous African American authors. These lectures are collected in the book *White Man, Listen!* (1957). Here Wright continues his perspective as a world writer interested in the global kinship he had earlier implied between his most famous protagonist, Bigger Thomas, and other oppressed peoples of color around the world.

Wright also continued to work on fiction during the late 1950s, finishing a novel set in Mississippi, *The*

*Long Dream* (1958), and beginning work on “Island of Hallucinations,” which is still unpublished. A new genre for Wright in 1958 was haiku. He eventually completed approximately 4,000 haiku before his death in Paris of heart failure in 1960. Also before he died, Wright had completed proofreading another collection of stories, *Eight Men*, which was then published posthumously in 1961. Wright had also begun a new novel, *A Father's Law*, which was published in its unfinished state on the centenary of his birth in 2008.

**SEE ALSO:** Ellison, Ralph (AF); Ethnicity and Fiction (AF); Modernist Fiction (AF); Naturalist Fiction (AF); Social-Realist Fiction (AF); WPA and Popular Front Fiction (AF)

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