

The Hunger of the Soul

Richard Wright's autobiography of his childhood and youth, though titled Black Boy, is subtitled "American Hunger." The autobiography follows a poor southern boy whose daily companions are hunger and fear through his decisions to work and head north in order to escape fear and feed not only his body but his soul. Many blacks struggling in the south moved north in order to better feed themselves and their families and Wright was one of those African-Americans. During this journey from Mississippi to south Chicago, Wright's early relationships with his mother, grandmother, and aunt framed his behavior toward others and shaped how he viewed and understood the harsh and racial world around him.

The relationship between Richard and his mother provides the basis for how he understands the world, in spite of the fact that she explains very little to him. Richard's mother is introduced in the first scene as deeply caring for her son while simultaneously capable of disciplining him—in fact she is described as coming "close to killing him" (p. 7). Wright nearly burned down the family home at the age of four and after hiding from his punishment; his mother wailed and screamed not knowing whether or not he "perished in the blaze" (p. 7). Though she was relieved, Wright's mother peeled the limb of a tree to prepare for his thrashing as she muttered, "You almost scared us to death" (p. 7).

Curious as a child, Richard would often pepper his mother with questions. Her unwillingness to voice answers pointing to racism either resulted in his being slapped, told to shut up, or circular questioning to try and avoid the discussion at all (p. 47-48, 55). Richard witnessed his father's neglect, his mother's attempts to get help from their father, and finally seeing the toll single motherhood could have on a black woman in the south. Beginning with "a stroke", or some sort of "paralysis," Richard's

mother began a physical decline which eventually led him to harbor in him “a soberness of spirit” that “directed [his] loyalties to the side of men in rebellion” (p. 101). Living years with an ailing mother left Richard somewhat lost around his other family members and in the classroom. Wright could not remain with his Uncle and moved back with his mother. Going to school, having a steady life at home, and being fed could not keep Wright away from his mother. Being told a boy died in his room did not help, of course. At any rate, Richard stayed around his mother’s side and she encouraged him when she could. Amidst her struggle in health, Wright determined that “the meaning of life came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering” (p. 100).

As Richard went on to join and write for the Communist party, his “attitude toward life...to drive coldly to the heart of every question” eventually caused him trouble (p. 101). He persisted through his childhood despite being slapped and shushed in his struggle for answers about the world around him. That persistence, though buried during his years working in the south amidst white bosses, caused him to gain a reputation as “an intellectual” in the Chicago Communist party (p. 333). His endeavors to write about Negro Communists in a way in which even his mother could understand drove him to “make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words” in order to “tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them” (p. 320). The more he got involved with the Party, however, the more he found himself entangled with the Party’s internal “fighting” (p. 368). Toward the end of his time in the Party, Wright sees a relation between an occasion during which his mother slapped him as a child for asking “why [his] ‘uncle’ had run away from the white people, why he had not fought back” and the bickering that the Communists had amongst themselves. Both misplaced aggressions and quarreling, Wright realizes, were done out of fear. “Fear had made” his mother slap him while the Communists were “unconsciously compensating for their fear” (p. 368).

Before dealing with the tensions of the Party, Wright needed to deal with the tension between himself and his Aunt. As a youth, Wright's aunt did not like him and used her position as his teacher to ensure that she was an authority figure to be respected. In spite of his protests, she brought him to the front of the class and whipped him. Knowing he was being punished unjustly, he refused to give her the satisfaction of his tears and anger. As he experienced injustice as an older youth, however, he did not remain as silent out of pride. Amidst white bosses in an optometry office, he was scared off by their threats. Wright did not stand up to the bosses as he did with his aunt. Instead of pointing out the injustices of the white bosses to his boss, Wright "felt drenched in shame, naked to my soul" (p. 192). When given an opportunity to rectify the situation, address the injustice, Wright could only cry and remain silent. Wright's aunt did not confront Wright in a way that gave him confidence in his grounds for outburst being valid. In the real world, he was then incapable of overcoming his fear in disparaging situations.

Wright's grandmother also created an atmosphere of tension and strife to such a degree that Wright could not comprehend any other way of life. During his trip north, Mrs. Moss expressed hospitality and unconditional support which simply flabbergasted him. Whereas his grandmother, his own blood, refused eventually to support Wright with clothes and books for school Mrs. Moss gave Wright a home and nearly offered her daughter and a place in her will just off the street.

The women in Wright's life gave him the tools to figure out who he was as a man, but not how to survive as a black man. The hunger in his soul was not solved by the women who were supposed to feed him. A constant companion in his life, only brief and fleeting moments did he go to bed full as a child or as a grown man. He did not turn to alcohol or sex to drown out the struggles of his life. Instead books and writing fed what temporal food could not ever satiate: his soul.