CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Until almost the 1920s the Negro in American literature was depicted more as a stereotype, a formula, than as a human being. Both creative and critical writers felt that the Negro "falls into a very special, well-understood category." As Sterling A. Brown points out, "The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life." He felt that the vast bulk of American literature had incarcerated the literary Negro in such a tightly restrictive categories as The Contented Slave, The Brute Nigger, The Comic Negro, The Tragic Mulatto, and the Exotic Primitive. Many critics felt that even a black novelist should present the Negro in his novel as he was presented in the works of White Americans. Seymour L. Gross says,

Because he can tell us nothing about himself that has not already been told in the writings


of White men, the Negro author should avoid the "didactic and polemical" and work what has been established as his own side of the street.

But by the mid-twenties, the resistance movement which began in the second decade swelled to a revolution, and White as well as Negro critics started objecting to stereotyped characterization. Clement Wood in his Nigger (1922) and DuBose Heyward in his Porgy (1925) destroyed the minstrel stereotype. In 1925, Alain Locke announced the emergence of the new Negro, and predicted the end of the old "unjust stereotype":
"The days of 'aunties', 'uncles' and 'mammies' is gone.... Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on," 4
"The black rebel, driven to assert himself, often violently, has replaced the acquiescent victim." 3

Though some critics argue that one stereotype has replaced another, they accept the fact that the image of the Negro has changed. As R. Orlova points out, "The works of Richard Wright signified a turning

point, a transition from the peaceful ‘Negro Renaissance’ to a period of rebellion and revolution.”

Orlova quotes the poem “Dark Symphonie” by Melvin Tolson, which, according to him, heralded the birth of this new epoch:

The New Negro
Breaks the icons of his detractors,
Wipes out the conspiracy of silence,
Speaks to his America;

My history-moulding ancestors
Planted the first crops of Wheat on these shores,
Built ships to conquer the seven seas,
Erected the Cotton Empire,
Flung railroads across a hemisphere,
Disemboweled the earth's iron and coal,
Tunneled the mountains and bridged rivers,
Harvested the grain and hewed forests ....
Fought a hundred battles for the Republic.

The New Negro:
His giant hands fling murals upon high chambers,
His drama teaches a world to laugh and weep,
His voice thunders the Brotherhood at Labor,
His Science creates seven wonders,
His Republic of Letters challenges the Negro-baiters.

Richard Wright is credited with making the Negro a human being. Saunders Redding says that there is “no Negro


writer now at work, who has not felt the tremendous influence of Dick Wright. As Dan McCall says,

Wright is (recognized) as the father of the contemporary Black writer because when we come to (his) best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America.

We often see the influence of the events and people in his life on the characters and incidents in his novels. Therefore, it is not inappropriate to present in brief the experiences he underwent which had an impact on his writings. Richard Wright was born in 1908 on a cotton plantation in Mississippi. His father deserted his wife and family when Wright was only five. Most of the protagonists of Richard Wright experience the absence of an affectionate father. It was left to Wright's mother to struggle as cook or housemaid to raise Richard Wright and his brother.


As Robert Bone points out,

"Her chronic illness set the emotional tone of his life and imbued his writing with a sober cast. Anguish is Wright's characteristic note."

We see in his Native Son, The Outsider, and, at least to some extent, The Long Dream, the mother of the protagonist worrying about his future. In The Long Dream, Fish's mother is unhappy at the way Tyree Tucker trains Fish in the art of pretention. In Native Son, Bigger's mother always has the fear that her son would do something terrible. Though she is unhappy with him on a number of occasions, she has, at the same time, utmost sympathy and affection for him. In The Outsider, Cross Damon's old mother, though sent out of the house by her daughter-in-law, Gladys, is very unhappy about the condition of his family. Her only wish is to see her son lead a happy life. But it is interesting to note that all the three women quietly accept, without any trace of protest, the treatment meted out to them by the whites, probably because they were brought up in a society that strictly followed Jim Crowism. Hunger and violence were part of

Wright's childhood. He was beaten by members of his own family because they were afraid of the dangerous assertiveness and rebellious tendencies in him. This may be the reason for the images of violence that crowd the pages of his fiction. His grandmother, with whom Wright spent part of his childhood, was a religious woman. He was not allowed even to play baseball. Books on nonreligious subjects were considered the Devil's work. This regimentation had a negative effect on Wright. In his mature years, he embraced a humanist philosophy, militantly secular and implacably hostile to any brand of other worldliness. It is perhaps not just a coincidence that Richard Wright was seldom able to complete a year of unbroken study and the protagonists of his novels fail to complete their formal education. Just as Wright published a story in the local Negro press at the age of fifteen, his protagonists take up jobs—business in the case of Fish—in their teens or early twenties. Wright lived in an age when the white were determined to restore
their traditional prerogatives and the blacks clung for protection to their ancient servile ways.

Wright did not like this accommodation. As Robert Bone points out:

His insistence on behaving like a man, his stubborn refusal to know his place, and above all his expanding sensibility brought him into deadly conflict with the closed society.

It was in his seventeenth year that Wright fled to Memphis, Tennessee, the first stop of his northern journey. In Memphis, he got the opportunity of reading Mencken's essays. Mencken's irreverence, his open mockery of human and divine authority appealed to Wright. They helped him understand the fictions of Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane. In 1927, Wright along with his family migrated to Chicago and lived there for ten years. It was here that he suffered the humiliations of unemployment and relief. When he was placed by a relief agency in South Side Boys' Club, he met young Negroes on whom he modelled the character

II. Robert A. Bone, Richard Wright, pp. 6-7.
of Bigger Thomas. It is not out of place here to mention that generally his protagonists have their origin in the South. Wright joined the Communist Party in 1932 and was its member for twelve years. Inclined to individualism, he did not like the party discipline and hated its interference with his writings. He was expelled from the party in 1944. His association with and his views on the Communist Party are reflected in *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. He moved from Chicago to New York in 1937 and from there to Paris and lived there till his death in 1960. An interesting point that comes to our mind is that Fishbelly in *The Long Dream* is the only protagonist among all the protagonists of Wright who succeeds in getting out of the clutches of racism because he manages to escape to France.

An assessment of contemporary creative writing ought to be a fusion of the claims of art and the claims of relevance. A study of the individual and society in the novels of Richard Wright seems to be a pragmatic critical approach, because it helps
us explore the themes of his novels. This approach is based on Robert Nisbet's view, "At the center of any given style lies what can only be called a theme, or a cluster of themes. Theme carries with it a more active, positive, and dynamic character than does the word style. Implicit in any theme is at once a question being answered, more or less, and also an ordering of experience and observation in a special focus."  

The focus of this study is on three of Wright's novels — The Long Dream (1958), Native Son (1940), and The Outsider (1938). The discussion of the novels is not based on the chronological order of their publication. These three novels are chosen and discussed in the order mentioned above because The Long Dream is the story of a Negro from his childhood to his teens, Native Son is the story of a twenty-year old bachelor, and The Outsider is about the life of a young married Negro.


