

# The South Towards North: A Functionalist Approach to Setting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel characteristically the role that setting plays in capturing the society and the divergent uniqueness there always is to a time and place in any society. Literature in a broader perspective does reflect the society not however uniformed in the actions and inactions that take place there. Virginia Wolf's often quoted lines is relevant here since it proposes that life cannot be a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semi transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. The functionalist approach is one interpretive tool that sues that every device in literature plays distinct role. The error of underestimation is what this approach negates. Even though all the elements of literature are active agents for appreciating all forms of literature, setting is nevertheless of strategic importance. It is saddled with the task of unifying the theme, plot, and developing the character or it becomes a character itself. This paper is set to examine Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. It argues that places and times are subject to change either for the better or otherwise. The implication of movements "Northward" in Wright's *Black Boy* and its impacts on the polarized society is discoursed here. Setting is discussed therefore from the compages of functionalists approach.

**Key words:** setting, north, south, functionalist, discourse, rural

## Introduction

It has become quite imperative to emphasize that setting as an element of literature is one very vital component that lends essence to the plot and even characters in any work of art. Even though, it is immensely determined by the thematic preoccupation the writer sets out to explore, it serves an enormous role for both the writer in conveying his message and the reader comprehending the text. For example, Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies have the setting of palaces, castles whereas modern and post modern dramas have setting of houses of common people. There were supernatural elements in earlier literature but these days absurdity rules the literature so that setting can take place in a house, school, castle. The varying properties of each cannot achieve unity without the setting. If literature reflects the society, then setting paints in in-depth details the society. The paper examines setting with specificity to the novel genre. Therefore, setting denotatively refers to the time and place in which the story takes place and initiates the main backdrop and mood for any story. It has been referred to as a story world or milieu to include context beyond the immediate surroundings of the story.

It provides the historical and cultural content for characters. It often can symbolize the emotional state of characters. This can be captured in Poe's *The Fall Of The House Of Usher* as the crumbling of the old mansion reflect the decaying state of both family and the narrator's mind and this emphasis on setting is reiterated in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Setting in itself has elements which may include culture, historical period, geography and hour along with other elements of literature; it has come to be considered as fundamental component of fiction.

It thus occupies a key role in plot, as in man vs. nature or men vs. society stories. In certain stories, the setting metamorphosis into a character itself hence it is viewed as a plot device or literary device. In this light, the novelist and novel writing instructor Donna Levi has opined that the social milieu shapes enormously the character's values. A close attention to setting may offer an overview of the characters' surrounding and the Plot. Jack Hodgkin, in his book wrote that, "Perhaps the first job of the fiction writer is to convince the reader to believe in the world of story at least temporarily". Hodgkin used Joseph Conrad's *Nostrome* as an example when Conrad spent a few pages establishing the setting of Sulaco and the republic of Costaguana to convince his readers that the place exist.

Approaching setting from a functionalist perspective demands that the paper enumerates the roles setting plays in a work of fiction, perhaps on some other works, which will consequently convey us to the text under study. Setting which is often referred to as the background of a story is also a platform where story develops and an environment in which the characters grow. Most settings are introduced early in a story, thus enabling the reader draw connection between the plot, character and setting. In Anne of Green Gables, for instance, readers are introduce to Avonlea, a small town in the Canadian Province of prince Edward Island in the beginning of the story, while the town's busy, Rachel Lynd, stares out of her Kitchen window, watching for the comings and goings on the town. Here on, Avonlea becomes the magical place where Anne grows up into womanhood (IV).

The role of setting in any work of literature is tangible and crucial. Setting affects the mood, the character and the plot of a story and in many cases; writers embed it in the theme or it becomes the theme

(character) itself. A cursory examination of Joseph Conrad's short story "Heart of Darkness" will illustrate this further. The story begins on a boat, Nellie (the crushing yawl), and the reader gets a glimpse of the Thames river in England in the beginning, from the narrator's point of view. When Charlie Marlowe starts talking, readers get a view of another river, a different one but not unlike the Thames-the Congo in Africa. The Thames is compared to the Congo and the surrounding darkness is metaphorical, referring to the universal theme of darkness. Conrad does wander in showing the connection between humanity and darkness by showing the connection between the Thames and Congo. Setting plays a bigger role than as a backbone in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness".

In some stories, the setting is the vital emotional description of a story. Readers feel characters' emotions through the vivid description of a setting. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, Charlotte Bronte has employed five distinct settings to show Jane's development, from childhood to womanhood. Each of these setting reflects Jane's state of mind, her emotional state, her passion, and her superstition. Bronte describes Jane's childhood in Gateshead Hall, in the home of the Reeds, from where she is sent to Lowood and falls in love with Rochester, then runs away to the Moor House and finally unites with Rochester in his dilapidated lodge, Ferdean Manor. Jane experiences pain, despair, joy, and love in these different settings. Bronte dexterously manipulated setting of atmosphere to reflect Jane's mood changes. The wind often echoes her excitement and the mild night reflects her despair. *Jane Eyre* without the settings would be empty, void of emotion.

Since every work of literature needs a time and place, it forms thereby the basis of some stories. The era or century in which a story takes place is crucial in capturing the essence of the story so that a story taking place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century England or anywhere else must have every aspect of the atmosphere to reflect the era, the culture, the society, the buildings, the vehicles, the environment and so on. A typical example to portray the different times is Chinua Achebe's work *Things Fall Apart* which traversed the two distinct eras in Africa (especially Nigerian) political society- pre-colonial, colonial eras to deliver his message. Being a response-text to the stereotype popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Achebe was duty-bound to counter the preconceived notion against Africa by deploying artistically settings. In regards to time, to clearly assert that Africa in particular had never been savaged, bestial but had had a culture, government, history/traditional patterns before the advent of colonialism. He would rather see the colonial era as a distortion of the serene Africa community. And the post-colonial era in his other novels (*Anthills...*) is an abuse of the independence that was strived for after all.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it is glaring that the Igbo community of Umuofia is portrayed skillfully as (an entity) character. The early description in the novel buttresses thus:

Umuofia was feared by its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old... in fact, the medicine itself was called *agadinwanyi*, or old (8).

These and many other areas in Achebe's text gracefully present to the reader Umuofias not merely as a geographical locale but also an independent character. These suffice the delicate relationship that is existent between characters in a work of art and the setting. The setting largely exerts influences on the character. The character's lifestyle or attitude in a palace would apparently differ from one who lives in a slum. However, the setting is not marshaled as to affect the character in the text only but also, like the aforementioned, constitute one of the characters the novel examines.

Having x-rayed the roles of setting with handful illustrations from other texts, it is paramount to reiterate that the analysis of Wright's *Black Boy* would be examined in the light of functionalist approach.

### **Background of the text**

Richard Wright's novel-*Black Boy* is a classic of America's autobiographical novel, Bildungsroman (coming-of-age-Novel); modernist novel, existential novel first published in 1945. It is set in the perspective of time at roughly 1912-1937, and for place, it is primarily Jackson, Mississippi, West Helena and Elaine, Arkansas, Memphis, Tennessee, and Chicago, Illinois with detours to rural areas in Deep south and to New York City. It is subtly crafted narrative that recounts the journey from innocence to experiences in the Jim Crow South. An enduring story of one young man's coming of age during a particular time and in a place. It remains a masterpiece in history as it relates what it means to be a man, black, and in Southern America.

### **Analysis**

The assertion by William James that "The Spectator can know nothing of the truth" is only genuine if the reader does not get into the novel and is down to earth in grasping the various places which the narrator journeys to acquaint the reader with. The narrator introduces at the beginning of the novel, a time -frame which situates the particular environment also. It thus indicates the events and atmosphere. There was "a mound of glowing coals..." meant to give warmth to the entire household because it was early hours of the morning in Natchez Mississippi; Wright's description in the first chapter gives as an impression of quite a natural or remote community just as it is obtainable in contemporary rural society. One can clearly distinguish a rural set up from

an urban area in the attitudes of the residents in such environment. Here in the rural areas are fewer opportunities for jobs, good schools, some vital social amenities that should make life better. On a larger scale the absence of 'government presence' becomes a ground for anyone to move out of the rural base given the prospective viability of urban areas. For Wright, it sounds good news moving to the city, the following lines portrays thus:

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 endless. Each night I went to bed hoping that the next morning would be the day of departure... for days I dreamed about a huge boat floating on a vast body of water... (6-7).

The movement to Memphis offers better options for the family however its difference from the previous environment is very clear as the narrator asserts "the absence of green, growing things made the city seem dead". They lodge in a storey building that is distinct from what is obtainable in the remote environs in Mississippi. The attitude of the characters depicted in this place is not far-fetched from what is found today in several civilized societies. Many persons today feel and take their decisions to move town-ward hence the rural-urban migration for greener pastures. In the first instance, the narrator being a kid yet observes accurately the accompanying turn out in the change of environment. The father could now get a job making it possible for them to rent an accommodation in a storey building.

This environment, Memphis which is in the south, contributes tremendously in affecting or rather forming an attitude in the black boy. In Mississippi, he had been a gentle, fearful soul but for Memphis, he has to be wild and toughened to survive even as a child growing up there. He is enjoined to stand and fight because he had been molested severally by street boys and money stolen from him. The mother says thus:

I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself. She went into the house and I waited, terrified, wondering what she was about... take this money, this note, and this stick, she said, go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, then fight... (14).

This relates the typical social environment there are in the society where young men or women are required to dress, talk and behave in a distinct form to fit into certain groups. For one to win a fight into the "big boys" cadre today, one would be expected to carry on some [life style] hairstyle-"ginger the swagger" and do the "low waist or sagging" thing. The similitude of Wright's community delineates the present as most environments exert influence on how the residents should behave so that for a country like Nigeria it is easy to tell from attitudes a 'Lagosian' from someone who hails from other parts of the country, the north.

The character of the Black Boy as envisaged is consequently being formed by the various movements irrespective of the primordial essence. The boy's father could not stand the horrible advances of the city; he is drowned and finds his way back to Mississippi plantation. For the black boy and his abandoned mother, they have nothing to resort to for living and pay rent; they too would have to move back to Jackson Mississippi to live with their granny. The distinction made about Memphis and Jackson as earlier noted is very clear. In the latter, you could find green fields or playgrounds. The little-travelled boys at this point have privileged-experience they had garnered and would brag about it among their peers.

Movement to Elaine, Arkansas but with a stopover at Granny (Jackson Mississippi) also gives the black boy an occasion for self appraisal as the black had nothing good about them and were not in any way involved in the civilization booming up in America. This is displayed in his thought:

Whenever I thought of the essential blackness of my life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western Civilization that they lived somewhere in but not of it. And when I brooded over the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honour, loyalty, and capacity to remember were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual... (31).

The environment did not only compel him to thinking but also spur him into making an investigation of what the remote society stands for and her reasons for upholding the ideas that she did. This proffers that, it is just rigorously necessitated by the laws/polity of the state induced by Jim Crow senators who represented the south. It is entrenched in the south that the black must not be allowed into the mainstream economy of the South. This brings to fore John Gunther's remark:

The United States must either terminate education among Negroes, an impossibility, or prepare to accept the eventual consequence of full Negro equality under democracy and participation in its procedures... (771).

His investigations into the rationale behind certain names and white's disposition toward the black generally give cause for certain decisions in his life which however eschew reality in the South. In the South, the black apparently does odd jobs for the whites- ranging from cleaning, cooking, laundry, sharecropping, potters for a living etc. Here in Elaine, Uncle Hoskin owns a saloon but is always in danger of death because he being

black disqualifies him to own such a drinking firm. This is laid bare when the precocious black boy enquires why Uncle Hoskin must sleep with a gun beside or near his head. The narrator here says;

Each day Uncle Hoskin went to his saloon in the evening and did not return home until the early hours of the morning. Like my father, he slept in the day time, but noise... often I would creep into his bedroom while he slept and stare at the big shining revolver that lay near his head, within quick reach of his hand. I asked Aunt Magie... that men had threatened to kill him, white men... (45).

Consequently, the threat is carried out and Aunt Magie widowed. For Wright, the racial hostility had bred vengeful hatred and reactions towards the activities of whites. For the first time, Wright confronts racism where the answer for liberty somewhat points toward the distant North in the journey of Aunt Magie and Professor Matthews (56). North America in Wright's novel even though a setting stands for a theme and character in itself. Every hope for the black life is tended towards the North. The policies of Jim Crow's south are all repudiated there, the racial equality is a favoured order and discourse there. For ambitious persons like Matthew, a few blacks who seek to be liberated from the shackles of racial hostilities, Chicago (North) is a site in all optimism. Whereas the blacks had no access to well-paid jobs, the white had much to spare in the south. The woe that these environs emit is not divorced from insatiable hunger evidenced in the black boy all through the novel. The black life is strenuously synonymous with the slum whereas the white had their homes contrastingly neater and everything decent.

The boy comes into another social environment or locale of peer groups. Here, the criterion for being accepted is purely ones subscription to racial sentiments. The various places he has settled or travelled eventually nurture something hideous in the boy. The novel being a Bildungroman, the deposit grows as the Black boy detours the Jim Crow south. In his association with this company of black boys, the vision Northward is seen undergoing mental construction. Here is an excerpt of the conversation among the boys;

Shucks, man. I am going north when I get grown. Rebelling against flight. A coloured man is all right up north, justifying flight. They say a white man hit a coloured man up north and the coloured man hit that white man, knocked him cold, and nobody did a damn thing.

Man for man up there. Begging to believe justice... (69).

The desire to relocated to the north is rather firm now so that everything tends that direction. The environment caused the Black boy, who must leave for the north and also survive here in the south, to pick some of the odd jobs reserved for the coloured to begin his savings and also support the household since his mother lies now ill.

Living with Granny (in Jackson, Mississippi) develops a fair religion in the black boy even though he never is ever convinced of the genuineness of all that Granny, Aunty Addie seem to propagate about and the rules in the house carries all religious underpinnings such that nobody does anything on Saturdays which the Adventist hold sacred. He had got approval from Granny to sell papers since it is going to fetch him some money. He also encounters in this publication the doctrine of the Ku Klux Klans who are radically against the coloured man in every detail. The discovery of unconsciously working as an agent of Pro-Ku Klux Klan literature necessitated his drop off the sales (115). Similarly, there are certain towns or homes irrespective of the religion in our society that tends to transfer into her members some values even though we may not be comfortable with and also certain jobs people are compelled to do even when they are not the best(they need to eat)-child trafficking, prostitution, drug trafficking etc.

In as much as the stay with Granny introduces a catalogue of values, he also learns resilience in the face of hostilities, hates, misconceptions, and misgivings from family members. Since they all had consented to the norms of the south, they saw no essence for Wrights recalcitrance. These treatments, his "ill-desire" to becoming a writer and a couple of other factors daily push him away from the south, northward. The North is symbolic of liberty and south stifles liberty to for the Negro, the excerpt below demonstrates this ideals:

I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me... I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the south had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the State of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and addressed to keep out of my consciousness-I was acting on impulses that Southern Senators... to keep out of Negro Life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the State had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo (139).

The racial divide in the South was so intense in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which Wright's text is (in time) situated. It is wrong to think nobly of the future, once you are coloured. The entire south does not have a wholesome agenda for the coloured. Black boy in the Saw Mill of Mr. Bibbs, in the Optical Shop of Mr. Crane at Jackson, Mississippi (encounter with Pease and Reynolds), another Optical Shop at Memphis (195) among others are credible instances where the boy is affected negatively but positively northward. In the last optical shop, you could find the white's trick (Mr. Olin) to trigger war/fight amongst the blacks-Richard against Harrison; it is fun for blacks to fight to kill one another, who cares if a Negro drop dead?

This attitude is not far-fetched in our society today. One finds today that certain groups of people believe they should be in the leadership perhaps in-charge of the affairs of a nation. In certain societies, it is not racial but tribal and religious divides today are making intrusion into our polity or assertive nascent democracy. Even though, for instance the Nigerian community is divergently multi-cultural, it is yet opinioned that the affairs of the country be runned by the acclaimed larger blocks-West (Yoruba), North (Hausa) and South East (Igbo) so that every other tribe is a minority and should be only good for the subject's status. Certain offices today, once you do not come from a particular axis of the country or come from a certain people, you would not be fit irrespective of your educational and experiential attainments. Every place in Wright's text couches an impact upon the boy's resolve toward the North.

From the above excerpt, it is quite agreeable how the North becomes a desire (a character) for the entire black life and a threat to the Southern whites. In the later parts of Wright's autobiographical novel, the southern whites are not too excited about the black boys leaving for Chicago in the North. Their Library made no provision for the Negro yet they would rather have him remain for servitude

### **Conclusion**

The paper has been able to establish without gainsaying the salient roles of setting in the novel or any work of art. It is no longer contestable now that setting where ever found in literature serves to tie together the loosed elements of literature, gives essence to the character, and the thematic preoccupations. This however is understudied with a bias to Wright's autobiographical text *Black Boy*.

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