

“Lens” Quotes from the resources on Harlem Renaissance and Black Identity

From Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in *The Nation* June 23, 1926

And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all the virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds. This young poet's home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

From “The Enduring Importance of Richard Wright” from *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*

After the success of *Native Son*, Wright wrote an essay explaining “How Bigger Was Born.” He recalled reading the reviews of his first book, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, and he said he then realized that “I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”

“All literature is protest,” said Wright. “You can’t name a single novel that isn’t protest.” To which Baldwin replied that “all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature,” which prompted this rejoinder from Wright: “Oh, here you come again with all that art-for-art’s sake crap.”

Richard Wright’s contributions to American literature were perhaps best summed up by Dan McCall, professor of American studies at Cornell University, in his 1969 book, *The Example of Richard Wright*:

Wright is the father of the contemporary black writer because when we come to Wright's best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America. Richard Wright was the first man to put it to us with all its naked power...the farther we get from Richard Wright and his modes of thought, the better we can see the extent of the debt we owe him...However outmoded some of his weapons may seem now, Richard Wright was the man who first conquered the big ground...The achievement of Richard Wright came from his determined ability to explore his own individual suffering and create from it crucial examples of what "all the long centuries" mean.

From Richard Wright's essay "How Bigger was Born"

It was not until I went to live in Chicago that I first thought seriously of writing of Bigger Thomas. Two items of my experience combined to make me aware of Bigger as a meaningful and prophetic symbol. First, being free of the daily pressure of the Dixie environment, I was able to come into possession of my own feelings. Second, my contact with the labor movement and its ideology made me see Bigger clearly and feel what he meant.

I made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere. The extension of my sense of the personality of Bigger was the pivot of my life; it altered the complexion of my existence. I became conscious, at first dimly, and then later on with increasing clarity and conviction, of a vast, muddied pool of human life in America. It was as though I had put on a pair of spectacles whose power was that of an x-ray enabling me to see deeper into the lives of men. Whenever I picked up a newspaper, I'd no longer feel that I was reading of the doings of whites alone (Negroes are rarely mentioned in the press unless they've committed some crime!), but of a complex struggle for life going on in my country, a struggle in which I was involved. I sensed, too, that the Southern scheme of oppression was but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine.

Let me give examples of how I began to develop the dim negative of Bigger. I met white writers who talked of their responses, who told me how whites reacted to this lurid American scene. And, as they talked, I'd translate what they said in terms of Bigger's life. But what was more important still, I read their novels. Here, for the first time, I found ways and techniques of gauging meaningfully the effects of American civilization upon the personalities of people. I took these techniques, these ways of seeing and feeling, and twisted them, bent them, adapted them, until they became *my* ways of apprehending the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas. This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction, for my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life.

From Richard Wright's Life (Modern American Poetry – American National Biography)

While Wright made blacks proud of his success, he also made them uncomfortable with the protagonist, Bigger, who is a stereotype of the "brute Negro" they had been trying to overcome with novels of uplift by the "talented tenth" since the Gilded Age. Wright's argument is that

racist America created Bigger; therefore, America had better change or more Biggers would be out there. At the end, when Max fails to understand Bigger, who cannot be saved from the electric chair, Wright is faulting the Communist party for not comprehending the black people it relied on for support. (Personally disillusioned with the party, Wright left it in 1942 and wrote an essay published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944 called "I Tried to Be a Communist," which was later reprinted in *The God That Failed* (1949), a collection of essays by disillusioned ex-Communists.) *Native Son* continues to be regarded as Wright's greatest novel and most influential book. As a result, he has been called the father of black American literature, a figure with whom writers such as James Baldwin had to contend.

To divest himself of Wright's influence, Baldwin wrote a series of three essays criticizing Wright's use of naturalism and protest fiction. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," published in *Partisan Review* in 1949, Baldwin concludes, "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended." On the other hand, Wright has been credited with presaging the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, particularly in his protest poetry, much of which was published in Chicago in the 1930s. As Irving Howe said in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons," "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies . . . [and] brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture."

From the NPR story Ralph Ellison: No Longer an Invisible Man 100 Years After His Birth

Invisible Man was hailed as a landmark. But in 1983, Ellison said he wasn't writing only about the black experience in the novel.

"When I was a kid, I read the English novels. I read Russian translations and so on. And always, I was the hero. I identified with the hero," Ellison said. "Literature is integrated. And I'm not just talking about color, race. I'm talking about the power of literature to make us recognize again and again the wholeness of the human experience."

The novel ends this way:

"Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

From The Paris Review interview with Ralph Ellison

"The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American history. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States. Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It

announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere. We can view it narrowly as something exotic, folksy, or "low-down," or we may identify ourselves with it and recognize it as an important segment of the larger American experience—not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, diffused in its very texture. I can't take this lightly or be impressed by those who cannot see its importance; it is important to *me*. One ironic witness to the beauty and the universality of this art is the fact that the descendants of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spirituals and find in the singing an exaltation of their own humanity. Just take a look at some of the slave songs, blues, folk ballads; their possibilities for the writer are infinitely suggestive. Some of them have named human situations so well that a whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality."

"Well, there are certain themes, symbols, and images which are based on folk material. For example, there is the old saying among Negroes: If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can't be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on. In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment, invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folk tales, is always the road to freedom—the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open."

"The symbols and their connections were known to me. I began it with a chart of the three-part division. It was a conceptual frame with most of the ideas and some incidents indicated. The three parts represent the narrator's movement from, using Kenneth Burke's terms, purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action and which depend for their development upon what I hoped was a consistent and developing motivation. However, you'll note that the maximum insight on the hero's part isn't reached until the final section. After all, it's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing: "Keep this nigger boy running." Before he could have some voice in his own destiny, he had to discard these old identities and illusions; his enlightenment couldn't come until then. Once he recognizes the hole of darkness into which these papers put him, he has to burn them. That's the plan and the intention; whether I achieved this is something else."

From The Paris Review's Interview with James Baldwin

"I remember standing on a street corner with the black painter Beauford Delaney down in the Village, waiting for the light to change, and he pointed down and said, "Look." I looked and all I

saw was water. And he said, “Look again,” which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in the puddle. It was a great revelation to me. I can’t explain it. He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw. Painters have often taught writers how to see. And once you’ve had that experience, you see differently.”

“Richard’s (Wright) *Native Son* was the only contemporary representation there was of a black person in America. One of the reasons I wrote what I did about the book is a technical objection, which I uphold today. I could not accept the performance of the lawyer at the end of the book. I was very explicit about that. I think it was simply absurd to talk about this monster created by the American public, and then expect the public to save it! Altogether, I found it too simpleminded. Insofar as the American public creates a monster, they are not about to recognize it. You create a monster and destroy it. It is part of the American way of life, if you like. I reserve, in any case, the utmost respect for Richard...”