



American Hunger

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The Work

American Hunger, the second part of Richard Wright's autobiography, focuses on his life in Chicago, Illinois, from 1927 to 1937. The book was written in 1944. The Northern experience recurs as a new slave narrative. It demonstrates how modern African Americans were deceived. Wright opens the text in 1927, when nineteen-year-old Richard, his alter ego, arrives in Chicago with his Aunt Maggie. Wright juxtaposes the terms "strange" and "familiar" to express Richard's dismay at seeing African Americans openly consort with whites in public facilities. He learns quickly that appearances are deceptive.

Wright employs literary naturalism to illustrate racial and environmental barriers erected by whites to imprison African Americans in modern slavery. Richard discovers that migrants have traded Southern plantations for urban ghettos. They live in the black belt of Chicago and remain racially and economically disfranchised. Richard's economic status soon imitates that of his impoverished Southern experience. Richard earns low wages at menial jobs during the following six years. The intermittent checks from his postal service job or the relief agency barely sustain Richard's family.

Consistent with *Black Boy*, Richard becomes the outsider, in conflict with his family, community, and professional affiliations. A major source of conflict is his independent thinking. His attempts at writing cause alarm to his Aunt Maggie, who believes that fiction writing and book reading serve no value unless Richard is studying law. Richard's white employer cannot understand why an African American dishwasher would read newspapers. Once Richard joins professional writing groups, between 1933 and 1935, he discovers that his intelligence poses a threat to members of the John Reed Club of the Communist Party, the Southside Writers' Group, and the Federal Theatre Project. They attack him for being an "intellectual" just as Southerners attacked the "smart Negro." The Communists even label Richard a Trotskyite or traitor, and physically assault him at the May Day parade of 1936.

His freedom from slavery culminates with Richard's resignation from the Communist Party. He takes physical flight to New York in 1937. In his ongoing quest for freedom, his psychological emancipation is the real moral to his narrative. It coincides with the successful publication of fiction, which frees Richard to write "art for art's sake," not propaganda, and to accelerate his "war with words."

Suggested Readings

Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. New York: William Morrow, 1973.

Hakutani, Yoshinobu. *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982.

Rampersad, Arnold. *Richard Wright: A Collection of Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995.

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