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A Spatial Analysis of the Empowerment in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground"

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Abstract: *Published in 1942, Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" is one of the outstanding northern urban naturalist novels written by African American writers in the first half of the 20th century. The protagonist Fred Daniels, a black young man who fell victim at the police's misjudgement and maltreatment, seeks safety and protest in the underground sewer system of Chicago. The city sewer then becomes a symbolic space for power and empowerment, which lead to Daniels' private observation and action in order to complete his empowerment as a neglected African American citizen in Chicago in the 1930s. In the lens of British scholar Mike Crang's theory of cultural geography, the sewer in "The Man Who Lived Underground" can be interpreted as a symbol for personal, social, and universal power. This special underground space empowers Daniels in his knowledge and judgements, as well as exerts influence on his behaviour and goals, where it becomes an analogy of the complex relations between rationality and irrationality as opposed to the arbitrary ones established by the thinking of modern world.*

Keywords: *Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground", African American literature, cultural geography, space and power*

1. Introduction

Richard Wright (1908-1960), one of the founding fathers of African American protest novels, exerts much influence on the history of African American literature in the late 1930s and 1940s. His short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942), acquiring inspiration from the tradition of urban naturalist novels and the structure of detective stories, revolves around a fugitive experience in the sewer underground Chicago City. The protagonist Fred Daniels was falsely charged with murder by the police; unwilling to bear the mistreatment silently he started an escaping adventure into the underground sewer both as a refuge from and as a protest against the unjust authority. The sewer of Chicago in the 1930s then becomes a symbolic central image for Daniels' protesting powers and possibilities.

Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" pioneers in designing an underground man's struggles for empowerment in African American literary tradition [1]. Ralph Ellison, about a decade later, drew his inspiration directly from his senior friend and mentor Wright, and created the famous character of the nameless young African American intellectual "hibernating" in the basement in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). The great success of Ellison's novel makes the image of the underground a recognisable symbol for black power in African American literary tradition. To analyse the special meaning of this underground space in literature, we can draw upon the interdisciplinary theory of cultural geography. British scholar Mike Crang points out that in a literary text, one's personal identity has a strong attachment to the spatial experience, where the city landscape functions as the setting of the story, as well as expresses opinions towards the city and the life in it [2]. In the case of Wright's writing, the sewer acquires the distinct significance in meaning since it is deliberately designed to be the new standard for all other elements in the text. To Daniels, the sewer offers a comparatively unrestrained freedom for him, which turns out to be both constructive and destructive. Metaphorically, on a larger scale, the underground opens the possibility of self-empowerment for the African American individuals represented by Daniels as a convert protest against the aboveground ruled by the Jim Crow Laws in the 1930s.

2. The Power Accorded to the City Sewer

It is necessary to probe into how the sewer as a space acquires power in this short story before the

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in-depth analysis of its functions and symbolic meanings. Cultural geography attaches notion of power to the notion of relational spatial position where "the binaries of inside and outside and present and absent operating [operates] at a range of scales and historical-geographical configurations" [3]. The sewer in the text, as the natural counterpart of the aboveground, gains its symbolic power for being the only stable and reliable standard for other elements, and provides a consistent and undisturbed place for the development of the plot.

As a physically static existence, the sewer is both part of the city and at the same time is below the aboveground grandiose appearance of the city. At Daniels' entrance to the sewer, "the cover clanged into place, muffling the sights and sounds of the upper world" [4]. "The upper world" in the text stands for the social system controlled by the white authorities, which claim themselves to be the standard for civilization, but seldom accord attention or justice to the less privileged people like the African Americans. When the economy in northern cities was recovering during the New Deal after the Great Depression of 1929, more public facilities, entertainment houses, and dazzling edifices were built, revealing the glamorous appearance of the cities. The sewer underground, though important as an unalienable part of the city, has always been unseen, unheard, neglected, and distained because of its position and the unpleasant association with the waste. Symbolically, the base and oppressed position of the sewer is somehow similar to that of the common African Americans in the established system of racism imposed by the white authorities. In Wrights' text, the underground experience in face of persecution is not negative; instead, it embodies Daniels' will power to accumulate possibilities to protest and rebel. "Either he had to find a place to hide, or he had to surrender" [4]. It is the sewer that offers Daniels an option not to surrender, recognising his individual ability and according possibilities to him.

The space of sewer exists as a more powerful symbol of power compared with time. Time and space, a conventionally inseparable pair, are disconnected when time fails to function as a reliable measurement. The function of time is deliberately eliminated in this work—"in this darkness the only notion he had of time was when a match flared and measured time by its fleeting light" [4]. When the match distinguishes, time does not exist anymore, so the space takes its place to be the measure for events in the situation where the sun is blocked, Daniels' memories are blurred, and each watch he has indicates a different time. Deliberate elimination of time in this novel can also regard to a rebel against the white people's modern industrial civilization where time regulates people's life in the way of operating the machines. Therefore, the space confined within the walls of the sewer constructs the unique structure of the underground power system, setting the range of Daniels' actions, and recording events and objects by their location, making space the only reliable and concrete standard for all Daniels' behaviours.

Offering the setting and the standard for the underground narrative, the sewer gains and exerts power mainly thorough the interactions with Daniels, the only underground inhabitant in the novel. The sewer and Daniels mutually depend on each other since the former needs the latter's experience to reveal a more complex symbolic meaning, and the latter needs the former to protect, justify, and rationalise his escape, observation, theft, and fatal return to the aboveground according to the conventions in of the "white society". The sewer empowers Daniels, and in return, Daniels' underground experience adds to the emblematic significance of the sewer.

3. Daniels' Empowerment by the City Sewer

Daniels' empowerment is initiated by the power of knowledge that the sewer offers him. Ralph Ellison's nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man* ends up in his underground "hole" preparing for the future—"a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" [5]. Wright portrays the complete period of Daniels' staying in the sewer, where Daniels becomes a "spatialized selfhood". In the view of cultural geography, "[spatial selfhood is] the unification and fragmentation of that self through new transport, communications and media and technologies, into the bricoleur of urban experience" [3]. The unfamiliar environment of the sewer accords Daniels with free access to modern technologies, recovers his once deprived experiences of joy, but also directs him into an illusionary misconception of the "white world" aboveground neglecting its lurking dangers.

The sewer offers an undisturbed place for Daniels' rapid self-development in advanced knowledge and skills of his time, which are otherwise deprived when he stays aboveground. Not only did he soon master the tricks of digging passages through the walls to observe and learn the manners of the white people aboveground, he also takes the liberty to get food, tools, typewriter, light bulb, radio, jewels,

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cash and any other materials from the aboveground without being noticed. All these material objects are acquired from aboveground and used in the underground, symbolising that Daniels' protest against the white authorities, in fact, rises from plausible reasons created by the white themselves. Food and tools, basic for Daniels' life as well as his spiritual existence—the idea of democracy and equality originates in the white world is his guidance in the protest. In Daniels' attempt to train himself in typing on the typewriter he has stolen, the text reveals his name for the first time before his total oblivion of it— it was "freddaniels", lowercase without space in between. "It is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world [6]." The space in Daniels' name becomes a pun, both showing that there is a typo in his first attempt of typing his name, and indicating that his living space is neglected just as what all African Americans living on the margin of a northern city have experienced in the 1930s. Daniels' name mingles him with any other person in his racial group, often ignored by the white and without distinctive characteristics. The light bulb Daniels installed and the radio that brought Jazz music also stand for the hope, knowledge, information, and pride in African Americans' culture and creation, however, they are all confined to the underground, having little effect on whatever beyond it. It is a paradox that the white authorities under Jim Crow denied the African Americans' capability in education and creation in the ludicrous reason of "racial inferiority", since the authorities actually created a vicious cycle for the less educated and economically disadvantageous situations of the coloured people by depriving their opportunities of learning and self-improvement. Once having the access to learning, the African Americans can do the same as Daniels did, fitting in the modern world of technology and knowledge as well as the white people do.

Apart from the chances of learning skills of the modern society, the sewer also justifies Daniels' attempt to recover his once deprived personal joy. In the underground space, Daniels was self-centred, focusing only on his experience, regardless the methods of fulfilling his satisfaction—"He did not feel that he was stealing, for the cleaver, the radio, the money, and the typewriter were all on the same level of value, all meant the same thing to him" [4]. With the single goal of pleasure, Daniels rebels the aboveground rules by erasing the social and economic values of the materials—he pasted the damp walls with cash, piled up the diamonds as if they were pebbles, and hang the expensive watches on the wall letting them indicate different times. Daniel defies the symbolic value of these things commonly acknowledged by his contemporaries. Self-confidence without restriction is easy to turn into self-indulgence, which causes harm, though unintentionally, to others and to himself. In Daniels' case, his stealing in the jewellery shop caused the suicide of the shop guard Thompson, perhaps a Hispanic, who cannot stands the police's torture. However, the reason for Daniels' reporting himself to the police is not the hideous consequences of his behaviour, but his beautiful reveries towards the aboveground. Ignoring the lurking threats or previous oppression, "he imagined he was a rich man living aboveground in the obscene sunshine…a glorious victory locked in his heart" [4]. The overly beautified imagination finally leads Daniels to be credulous to the white authorities, thinking he should be responsible for his behaviours according to the white rules so as to be a man. Ironically and sadly, as an ordinary African American man Daniels is never even given a chance to take on his responsibilities in the aboveground. Daniels' great expectations of living with dignity and respect, as well as his growing sense of responsibility, are his shining qualities in the dark sewer system. However, the immense gap between his farfetched prospects and the harsh reality destines his tragic fate—being shot by the police and remaining in the sewer ever after, which points out the lurking crisis for the entire modern society on a more general level.

4. Modern Parable in the Demolished City Sewer

The sewer in the novel contains a larger symbolic meaning beyond personal and racial range; it can be read as a parable for the human thinking in the modern society. "Space is not… outside of the realm of social practice. Equally, the ecology of thought is no longer seen as somehow standing outside of the spatial" [3]. If the conventional thinking of the Enlightenment or Reason defines the underground and the aboveground as binary oppositions, then Wright's work is definitely a challenge to it. In view of Daniels' carefully designed and purposeful attempts of modifying and enlarging the sewer, its changing topology gradually links the underground passages together and blurs the divisions between the underground and the aboveground. The blurring boundaries thus lead to explanations against the more general background of the modern society and the modern thinking of the humankinds.

Metaphorically, Daniels' remodifying the shape of the sewer is a redefinition of the power that the neglected, the marginal, and the oppressed are able to possess. "He began digging again, soundlessly, slowly; he enlarged the hole and crawled through into a dark room…" [4] The covert action of digging becomes a metaphor for the protesting collaboration of the oppressed people—usually secretive,

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unnoticed by the authorities, slow but steadily rising. "The identity that Daniels was seeking was neither personal nor racial but rather a definition of man as a member of the human family" [7]. Daniels' careful organisation of the rebelling power links the passages together, and to enter another room; on the more general level, such power can also allow all oppressed people in the society to unite their strength and improve their situations eventually. In both actual history and the writings concerning history, these people are silent, but they are not unimportant; they are deprived, but they are not weak; they are currently lurking in a disadvantageous situation, but they will soon rise and gain their rights. Wright's short story in the environment of the racial society of the 1930s functioned an open warning to the white authorities who had inflicted oppressions in various forms upon the coloured and economically unprivileged people. While the institutionalised racism legalised by the Jim Crow Laws became a tyranny, there were rebelling powers secretly gathering and plotting against it with careful and intelligent design, such as the third wave of Chicago Renaissance (1930s-1950s) reflected in the rise of African American literature, music, performing arts and various social movements.

Beyond the social realities, demolishing the walls of the sewer is also an allegory of the deconstruction of modernity, especially the established ideas of binary oppositions, in modern men's thinking. Through the holes in the walls, Daniels not only links the unground world as a whole, but also builds up the connections with the aboveground—the holes offer him the methods to observe and reflect upon the events happening aboveground; and also the means to reach the aboveground. Daniels' digging sabotaged the strict separation between the underground and the aboveground, as well as the arbitrariness of irrationality/rationality, the guilty/the innocent, and the wrong/the right prescribed by the modern society. In this short story, the supposedly unbiased agents of justice (the police and the law) in fact are practicing the "justice" of racism and corruption; in contrast, the supposed criminal Daniels has a good heart of bright hopes and beliefs in the beautiful nature of human beings. The cause of these incongruent matches is the "crazy walls" [4] to Daniels, which is the established imperfect but authoritative rationality of the modern society. It is most ironic and sad when Daniels confessed to the police officer sincerely before being shot at the entrance of the sewer, "Mister, when I looked through all of those holes and saw how people were living, I loved 'em…" [4]. However good-hearted, Daniels still has to die—not because of the theft he actually committed, but because his honesty about the crime is a threat to the corrupted and unjust white authority in the novel. Everyone in the text is guilty in his own way, Daniels for his crime and credulity, Thompson for his negligence and meekness, the police officers for racism and irresponsibility—a parable for the complex and often conflicting modern world thus is drawn. "This guilt is not within the province of the police or the law; on the contrary, it is such a basic psychological fact that it represents (in the Kantian sense) one of the forms of the human mind, the mark of our condition" [7]. The wrongdoers, therefore, are everyone in the novel, representing all humans in all walks of the modern world, conceding to the established system of modernity and falsely taking its drawbacks as infallible rationality and justice.

5. Conclusion

The sewer of Chicago in the 1930s is a concentrated symbol of both concrete and metaphysical power in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground". In the view of cultural geography, the spatial position and interactions within the environment designates the sewer as the sole measurement in the underground since time fails to function. On personal level, the sewer provides Daniels with the opportunities of self-development, which generate his self-empowerment; on social level, the destruction of the integrity of the walls by Daniels is a warning both to the unjust, corrupt and conceited white authorities of the 1930s and to the flawed system of binary oppositions established by the convention of modernity. This analysis of the empowerment in the sewer image is an attempt to explore the possible ways to see both physical and spiritual, personal and social, specific and universal values in this pioneering short story depicting the life of an African American intellectual who lives underground.

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