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THE THEME OF EXILE  
IN  
THE NOVELS OF AUSTIN CLARKE

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By

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## ABSTRACT

The theme of exile is a prominent one in Caribbean literature and has its roots in the history of the area. Exile, whether forced (i. e. as a result of the slave trade) or self-imposed, causes problems of rootlessness and alienation, and this has given rise to the strong identity motif in West Indian writing. Austin Clarke, a native Barbadian, has been living in North America since 1955. His novels express the problems faced by blacks in Barbados and in Toronto, and focus on the individual's quest for self-identity. While Clarke offers no solution to the problems, his novels raise fundamental questions that are a part of, but not exclusive to, the West Indian/ North American experience.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER I .....	21
<u>The Survivors of the Crossing and Amongst     Thistles and Thorns</u>	
CHAPTER II .....	36
<u>The Meeting Point, Storm of Fortune and     The Bigger Light</u>	
CONCLUSION .....	72
<u>The Prime Minister</u>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	85

## INTRODUCTION

It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to discuss the work of any West Indian writer without first giving a brief history of the area, for it is out of its history that this unique genre--the West Indian novel--has emerged. As a whole the history of the West Indies may be described in two words--colonization and slavery. And, in general, the writers (who see themselves as spokesmen for their people) express the indignities and injustices their people have suffered at the hands of the white man. Yet, while there are common themes and a common purpose in Caribbean literature each island has a history peculiar unto itself. The particular character of each island and its political, economic and social problems are vastly different from each other because the islands were colonized by different foreign powers (primarily Spain, France and England). It is for this reason that a brief history of Barbados, Austin Clarke's native island, is essential to an understanding of his novels.

When the British arrived in Barbados in 1627 the island was totally uninhabited. There is evidence that native Indians had been living there since the ninth century but they had gradually been taken away by the Spanish to work, and die, in the mines of Hispaniola.<sup>1</sup>

Since the landing of the first ship colonization proceeded rapidly and within three years there were between 1,500 and 1,600 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> The colonizers were made up of three groups: men with money who could pay for their passage and subsequently buy land, indentured workers, and negro slaves. Originally, the island consisted of small estates and small holdings--the main crops being cotton and tobacco. With the introduction of sugar cane by the Dutch in the 1630's however, all this changed and a great many of the smallholders were forced to sell.<sup>3</sup> They did not possess the necessary capital to set up a sugar estate and so the character of the island changed and property fell more and more into the hands of the few possessing capital. At the same time there was an increasing demand for agricultural labour--negroes were brought from Africa by the thousands. In 1645 the negro population was estimated at 5,680. By 1667 it had risen to over 40,000.<sup>4</sup> For the next 200 years Barbados, like all other West Indian colonial possessions, was to be run on the barbarous system of slavery.

The characteristics of slave societies should be well known. Life on the plantations for the negro slaves was demoralizing and dehumanizing. They were regarded as and treated like animals,<sup>5</sup> and were subjected to the most inhuman acts.

The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, transport them in pens, work them alongside an ass or a horse and beat both with the same stick, stable them and starve them, they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair,

quite invincibly human beings. To cow them into the necessary docility and acceptance necessitated a regime of calculated brutality and terrorism, and it is this that explains the unusual spectacle of property-owners apparently careless of preserving their property: they had first to ensure their own safety.<sup>6</sup>

As the slave population grew, stricter measures had to be enforced to curb the possible danger of uprisings. Families were mercilessly split up, all religious instruction was denied the slaves on the grounds that, being black, they had no souls,<sup>7</sup> and although the negroes brought with them interesting folklore from Africa, slavery stripped African culture of its tribal ritual, leaving the negroes only the more immediate concerns of living. As Fanon states in The Wretched of the Earth:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, colonizers in general had a "perverted" view of the blacks, and planters in Barbados were keen to keep the slave population under their absolute control.<sup>9</sup> A statute of 1688 stated that the "barbarous, wild and savage nature" of the Negroes required stringent regulations to "restrain the disorders, rapines and inhumanities to which they are naturally prone."<sup>10</sup> The negroes were thought to be thieves, lazy, unclean and shameless. And by sentiments such as these the colonizers sought to justify the abominable cruelties they

practiced. "The safety of the whites demands that we keep the Negroes in the most profound ignorance. I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the Negroes as one treats beasts. ' Such is the opinion of the Governor of Martinique in a letter addressed to the Minister and such was the opinion of all colonists. "11

The effect of the whole colonial experience was essentially to destroy the identity of the black man in the Caribbean. Once removed from their native Africa, the negro slaves quickly lost much of their traditional culture.<sup>12</sup> This was due primarily to the fact that, in order to maintain discipline, the European masters would geographically separate slaves from their kinsmen; thus, on a plantation there was little likelihood of finding two members of the same tribe. The differences in language precipitated the breakdown of practising and maintaining individual cultures.<sup>13</sup> However, "Negro society never reached a state of disintegration. Even when slavery, and the new urban ways of life which succeeded it, destroyed the original African models, the Negro reacted by reconstructing his own community."<sup>14</sup> Thus, despite adverse circumstances, some elements of African culture survived and the slaves constructed a society quite distinct and separate from that of the white colonialists. The problem of identity remained, however. For, being removed from his native land, the Negro experienced feelings of rootlessness and alienation. Not even with the abolition of slavery in 1834 were the Barbadians free of their

colonial yoke. In fact the emancipation of the slaves marked only the beginning of a long and difficult struggle towards the establishment of an identity for the black man in the Caribbean.

In 1825 the Church of England sent its first Bishop, William Coleridge (a nephew of Samuel Taylor Coleridge) to the island to begin Christianizing the native population. Between 1834 and 1845 over 10,000 labourers were converted to Christianity and baptized.<sup>15</sup> It was also at this time that schools for the education of the poor were promoted. A few students were sent to England to be educated and some were able, by their own talents, to obtain a meagre education in Barbados. But for the great majority life on the island remained miserable. Blacks were not allowed to give evidence in the law courts against a white man, and employment was denied them beyond the mechanical trades and humble positions in shops.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, the planters remained in general unwilling to accept the implications of emancipation. They felt that there was no need for any form of social legislation or poor relief, the Assembly going so far as to declare that the condition of the labouring classes was "dependent entirely upon their own energy and intelligence".<sup>17</sup>

While there had been attempts made by humanitarians to improve the status of the Negroes during the two centuries since the settlement of the British West Indies, it was not until Charles Duncan O'Neale returned to Barbados from Britain in 1924 that the road to

reform was opened. A fervent socialist and keen admirer of Keir Hardie, O'Neale resolved to devote himself to awakening the consciousness of the common people. He began a new movement known as the Democratic League--modelled on the British Labour Party--which saw in Barbados a need for adult suffrage, compulsory education, workmen's compensation and health and unemployment benefits.<sup>18</sup> When Grantley Adams returned to the island in 1926 the time was ripe for action.

In 1935 a state of general unrest broke out all over the Caribbean, culminating in the 1937 Riots in Barbados. The reasons for the outbursts of violence were: heavy unemployment, miserable wages and the closing down of channels for emigration to the United States.<sup>19</sup> When war broke out in 1939 plans were already in the making for a better West Indies, including the establishment of the University of the West Indies. In 1941 the Barbadian Workers' Union was formally launched and in 1943 women were given the vote for the first time. After the break-up of the West Indies Federation, which was formed in 1958, (Sir Grantley Adams of Barbados was the first Prime Minister)<sup>20</sup> Barbados was granted independence within the Commonwealth in 1966. Yet, while Barbados has been independent for almost fifteen years, her ties to Britain are almost as pronounced as ever.

Many of the fundamental social, political and economic institutions that were established during the Seventeenth Century characterized Barbadian history

until fairly recently<sup>21</sup>. . . . Institutions such as the parish system, a representative assembly and the common law were of English derivation;<sup>22</sup> they were modified to varying degrees in the Barbadian setting as were other institutions, such as the religious establishment (the Anglican Church) and the educational system, which closely paralleled those in the mother country. After emancipation these institutions continued to exist along with other socioeconomic, demographic, and ideological patterns that had been established earlier: the dependence on sugar and on the plantation system (with the descendants of emancipated slaves forming the labour force on plantations); the persistence of various fundamental features of plantation labour organization; an ideology of white racism, nurtured and encouraged during the period of slavery and used to justify and perpetuate the social and legal subordination of non-whites; the denigration of cultural traits and racial attributes associated with African ancestry; widespread poverty and limited opportunities for social mobility; a rigid stratification system in which class position was ultimately linked with racial origins and phenotypic characteristics; and a minority white population that continued to control the society's major internal political and economic institutions until fairly recent times.<sup>23</sup>

These prevailing British institutions re-affirm the particular "Britishness" of Barbados. As a consequence the problems facing the black man in the Caribbean are intensified. René Dépestre asks: "In what way will the black man of the Caribbean come to terms with himself, convert himself to what he is, find his true self in society and in history? How will he make the synthesis of the diverse historical components of his culture? Under what conditions will he eventually decolonize the socio-economic structures which have made life in the Caribbean one of the greatest scandals of the Twentieth Century?"<sup>24</sup>

It is not surprising that Afro-Caribbean literature in general is tinged with a note of special bitterness and hatred towards the European colonial domination. Since the early 1960's the black power movement in North America has added another dimension to the identity problem black West Indians express in their literature. One such author is the Barbadian-born Austin Clarke. Born in Barbados in 1932 Clarke was educated in a British-modelled school system. In the first volume of his memoirs, Growing Up Stupid Under The Union Jack, Clarke recounts his life as a young boy in Barbados during the 1940's. The most significant aspect of the book, as the title suggests, is that even during the time of the Second World War Barbados was still under the blanket of British Colonialism and that, indeed, the Barbadian people grew up ignorant of their own black culture and heritage.

Clarke says:

I knew all about the Kings; the Tudors, Stuarts and Plantagenets; and the War of the Roses; but nothing was taught about Barbados. We lived in Barbados, but we studied English society and manners. <sup>25</sup>

In essence the colonial school system attempted to turn Barbadian students into little black Englishmen, filling their heads with propaganda about the Empire and freedom. While Growing Up Stupid Under The Union Jack is not dominated by a tone of bitter rage and resentment against the remaining strongholds of British Imperialism, underlying the somewhat paradisaical portrait Clarke paints of his early

years, there is evidence of tension created by the presence of a white power structure.<sup>26</sup> While life on the island for black labourers was hard--low wages, poor living conditions and rampant discrimination--for the fortunate few an "Imperial" education provided a passport for advancement. This passport has taken Austin Clarke a long way.

After graduating from Harrison College in Barbados, Clarke taught high school on the island for three years before emigrating to Canada to study economics at the University of Toronto's Trinity College. Subsequently he has taught black studies at Yale and other American Universities. From 1974-1976 Clarke served as Cultural Attaché to the Barbados Embassy in Washington, D. C. At present he is living in Toronto.

Clarke's self-imposed exile to Canada has had a tremendous impact on his writing. "It is a widely accepted thesis that West Indian novels traditionally seek to define a 'West Indian' consciousness, usually in terms of racial and national identity, and that the process of identification is sparked by the novelists' absence from the West Indian scene."<sup>27</sup> While Clarke's themes are similar to those of most other West Indian novelists during the last thirty years--black awareness and national identity--he has also added a North American dimension to the characteristic identity motif of the West Indian novel.<sup>28</sup> Clarke is among the few West Indian writers of any note to have lived and worked in North America since the beginning of the new black

revolution.

The movement, or progression, of Clarke's six novels may be seen as a preparation for exile (in The Survivors of the Crossing and Amongst Thistles and Thorns), exile (in The Meeting Point, Storm of Fortune and The Bigger Light), and finally, a return from exile (in The Prime Minister). Within this framework the theme of exile is also internalized and is manifested in an individual's alienation from the characters around him. In The Survivors of the Crossing Rufus, the central character, attempts, and fails, in a revolt against the white plantation owner for whom he works. His insurrection is prompted by a letter from Jackson (a friend who has recently emigrated to North America) which paints an enticing, yet false, picture of the riches to be reaped in Canada. Rufus' revolt, instead of acting to unite the poor black labourers, provokes an alliance of whites and middle-class blacks (who have a violent hatred for working class blacks),<sup>29</sup> demonstrating that the conflict is essentially one of poor versus rich, black versus white. While the political implications are obvious, the real import of the revolution is cultural and emotional. Rufus' awakening to self-identification results in his alienation, not only from the white establishment, but also from members of his own race. Ultimately, his dream of North America is shattered when Jackson admits that, in reality, he has only exchanged one kind of slavery for another. When Rufus phones him, Jackson says:

... Rufus? Rufus? Lis'en to me!... I write you a letter, but I had to write that kind o' letter--But, by the way, you not thinking o' making me pay for this blasted long-distance telly phone call, eh? 'Cause I is a car-washer, and the money is only eighty cents a' hour! Rufus? You still there? I sorry to paint a technicolour picture o' the place, but, Jesus Christ, man! I couldn't let you know that up here in this country is the same slavery as what I run from back in the island--you understand, Rufus? Rufus? (p. 91)<sup>30</sup>

In Amongst Thistles and Thorns, Clarke's second novel, the central conflict of white versus black, rich versus poor is still evident yet it is overshadowed by the more psychological approach Clarke takes in developing the identity motif. The impetus behind young Milton Sobers' search for self-identity is the dream of black pride, symbolized by faraway Harlem, and initiated by his father's stories of black America. At one point in the novel Milton "escapes" for the weekend during which time his insight and self-identification come to fruition. Yet, at the same time as his short-lived "exile" acts as a catalyst in his quest to recapture his blackness it also throws him headlong into conflict with his unsympathetic environment (this being not only the white colonial system but, more importantly, the apathy exhibited by other blacks).

Lloyd W. Brown sees both Rufus and Milton as "tragic isolatoes because they cannot communicate their ethno-political ideals to their Barbadian communities":

The full realization of self can only be attained within the context of communicating these new insights with others, with apathetic or treacherous peasants who reject Rufus as an outlaw, or with an unimaginative mother who blocks Milton's dream by removing him from school to work in a stone quarry. . . . To be isolated is, ipso facto, to be a tragic failure. The isolated self is the futile ego.<sup>31</sup>

The isolated figure is also prominent in the Toronto-set trilogy in which the white/black conflict becomes even more tense than in the previous novels. This conflict, however, is not as clear cut as in The Survivors of the Crossing and Amongst Thistles and Thorns. The predominant white group in the Toronto novels is Jewish. Thus Clarke creates an interesting situation between two ethnic groups that have been equally intensely discriminated against. The relationship between the two groups is one of attraction and repulsion. Bernice, one of the central characters of the trilogy, alternately despises and pities her wealthy Jewish employers, the Burrmanns, for whom she works as a domestic. The ironic title of the first novel, The Meeting Point, denotes not harmony and reconciliation but rather a clash of hostile attitudes. This clash is intensified by the mutually exploiting relationships Clarke sets up between Agatha, a young Jewish university student, and Henry White, a middle-aged unemployed black labourer, and between Estelle, Bernice's sister, and Mr. Burrmann.

The identity motif is most interestingly developed by Clarke in the characters of Henry White and Boysie Cumberbatch. In Storm of

Fortune Henry, who has finally married Agatha, finds the pressures of the hostile environment around him unbearable and turns to writing poetry as a means of self-expression. He cannot, however, communicate this to his friends, and he finally kills himself. The tension, apparent throughout the novel, is brought to a climax when Dots, another domestic, blames Agatha for Henry's death. In a sense this is true: Agatha represents the white status quo with which Henry, and his friends, are in constant conflict. As with Rufus and Milton, Henry's self-realization brings no transcendental resolutions and the reader is left at the end of the novel with an intense feeling of futility, pathetically expressed in the lines of Henry's poem, dedicated to his wife:

But was it really time that killed  
 The rose of our love? Was it time?  
 And was it time to die? Is it time?  
 This rose?  
 It was not, could not, be time. Time  
 Has no power over roses, or over love  
 Or over me, or over you.  
 Time has no gun over love and beauty. (p. 285)

In the final novel of the trilogy, The Bigger Light, Boysie Cumberbatch--the n'er-do-well of the first two books--finally "makes it" in the white world and in so doing not only becomes trapped in his own materialism but also attempts to reject his West Indian origins. In his eyes he has become "a very important person" yet, in reality, his newly-acquired "identity" leaves him rootless, and alienated from his

friends. As he becomes more and more conservative he becomes contemptuous of the new West Indian immigrants whose "radical" attitudes he finds hateful. Tragically, he has no place in either the white society nor in the society of his fellow West Indians. The novel ends on an ambiguous note with Boysie driving across the border to the United States. He feels that the highway in front of him leads to happiness and freedom.

He can feel the bigness of space around him, for he knows he has left one kind of space for another one. (p. 288)

Yet, the ambiguity of the final statement leads the reader to believe that, like Jackson in The Survivors of the Crossing, Boysie may only exchange one kind of slavery for another.

Clarke's latest novel, The Prime Minister, presents an interesting, and not entirely fictional, exposé of modern or post-independence Barbadian society.<sup>32</sup> John Moore returns to his native island after several years in exile in Canada, to serve as the Director of National Culture for the newly established black government. He finds that the country is ruled by a corrupt élitist group just as contemptible as its colonial predecessor. Historically, this is one of the tragic facts of many newly-emancipated colonial nations.

The direct, colonial presence, when being wiped out, is inclined to put in its place structures as sterilized as those of the past. Pseudo-élitist intellectuals, full of cowardice and treachery, humiliate national feeling and the dignity of our peoples.<sup>33</sup>

The steps that should be taken towards transforming the newly-independent country--stabilizing the economy, raising the general standard of living, and bringing about national unity--are ignored as the national bourgeoisie attempts to defend its own interests.

In The Prime Minister John Moore is accused of being a radical, becomes alienated and ostracized from the other members of the ruling party, ultimately fearing for his life. In the end he leaves the island--exiled from his native land--with the sad observation that "The land is beautiful, the only truly beautiful thing about this country" (p. 191).

The theme of exile, with which this thesis is concerned, has its roots in the history of the West Indies. Exile from one's native land causes problems of rootlessness and alienation, and this has given rise to the strong identity motif in West Indian literature. In The Colonizer and The Colonized, Albert Memmi offers two solutions to the problem: the colonized can either become assimilated into or revolt against white society.

The first attempt of the colonized is to change his skin. There is a tempting model close at hand--the colonizer. . . . the colonized does not seek merely to enrich himself with the colonizer's virtues. In the name of what he hopes to become, he sets his mind on impoverishing himself, tearing himself away from his true self--the crushing of the colonized is included among the colonizer's values. As soon as the colonized adopts those values, he similarly adopts his own condemnation. . . . [or] Being unable to change his condition in harmony and communion with the colonizer, he tries to become free despite himself. . . he will revolt. . .

The Colonial situation, by its own internal inevitability, brings on revolt. For the colonial condition cannot be adjusted to; like an iron collar, it can only be broken. . . Assimilation being abandoned, the colonized's liberation must be carried out through a recovery of self and of autonomous dignity. <sup>34</sup>

In a very general sense the characters in Clarke's novels may be divided into these two groups. On one side we find Rufus, Milton Sobers, Henry White, Estelle and John Moore, all of whom attempt, to some degree, to come to terms with their black identity; and on the other side we find Boysie Cumberbatch, apathetic peasants, Milton's mother, Bernice, Dots and the treacherous politicians in The Prime Minister all of whom are either self-complacent in the way in which they accept their "inferiority" or who willingly become assimilated into the white man's world, rejecting their origins. Yet, this division is only general, for many of the characters vacillate, to varying degrees, in their attitude towards their own self-identity. Clarke does not offer a solution to the problems created by exile. He presents a series of experiences that portray the difficulties of being black in a white-dominated society.

## NOTES ON INTRODUCTION

1. Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, Plantation Slavery in Barbados, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 15.
2. Ronald Tree, A History of Barbados, (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 14.
3. Handler and Lange, Plantation Slavery in Barbados, p. 16.
4. Ronald Tree, A History of Barbados, p. 23.
5. Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, (trans. , Joan Pinkham, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 20:
 

... the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself into treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.
6. C.L.R. James, "The Slaves", Slaves, Free Men, Citizens, (Lambros Comitas and David Lowenthal, editors, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 9.
7. Ronald Tree, A History of Barbados, p. 25.
8. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, (trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press Inc. , 1968), p. 210.
9. Handler and Lange, Plantation Slavery in Barbados, p. 44:
 

Most whites were neither plantation owners nor wealthy, and many were quite poor, but as in other slave societies the white group as a whole encouraged a rigid stratification system based on racial origins. Its plantocracy in particular ardently defended the institution of slavery on which the Barbadian social order rested.
10. Ronald Tree, A History of Barbados, p. 68.

11. C.L.R. James, "The Slaves", p. 15.
12. Roger Bastide, African Civilizations in the New World, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 23:  

... slavery tended, little by little, to destroy... cultural imports from The Dark Continent.
13. Ibid. , p. 23.
14. Ibid. , p. 42.
15. Ronald Tree, A History of Barbados, p. 89.
16. Ibid. , p. 90.
17. Ibid. , p. 92.
18. Ibid. , p. 97.
19. Ibid. , p. 99.
20. David Lowenthal, "Social Background of Federation", The West Indies Federation, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 69.
21. Handler and Lange, Plantation Slavery in Barbados, p. 41.
22. Ibid. , p. 42:  

... the major components of [Barbados] tripartite political system were a House of Assembly whose twenty-two members, usually large plantation owners and merchants, were elected annually on a narrow franchise based on property, sexual, religious and (by the early Eighteenth century) explicitly defined racial criteria; a twelve-man Council whose members, also leading planters and merchants, were appointed by the Crown on the nomination of the governor; and the governor who was appointed by the Crown and was assigned to represent and protect its interests. All bills passed by the Assembly

and Council required the governor's approval to become law. These three bodies composed the island's legislature which structurally and organizationally resembled the system found in Britain's other Caribbean and American mainland colonies. The British legal system in Barbados was supplemented by colonial laws and slave codes, reflecting local conditions. These laws were sanctioned by the Crown or its representative when they did not contradict British law or violate metropolitan political and economic interests.

23. Ibid. , p. 42.
24. René Dépestre, "Problems of Identity for the Black Man in Caribbean Literatures", (trans. G. Irish), Caribbean Quarterly, (XIX, iii, Sept. , 1973), p. 51.
25. Austin Clarke, Growing Up Stupid Under The Union Jack, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980), p. 72.
26. The power structure is not exclusively along racial lines. Middle and upper-class blacks are also antagonistic towards members of their own race.
27. Lloyd W. Brown, "The West Indian Novel in North America: A Study of Austin Clarke", The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, (No. 9, July, 1970), p. 89.
28. Ibid. , p. 90.
29. This syndrome is commonly called black Negrophobia.
30. After a quotation the page reference will be given in brackets. If out of context, the titles will be abbreviated as follows:

The Survivors of the Crossing - SC.  
Amongst Thistles and Thorns - ATT.  
The Meeting Point - MP.  
Storm of Fortune - SF.  
The Bigger Light - BL.  
The Prime Minister - PM.

31. Lloyd W. Brown, "The Isolated Self in West Indian Literature", Caribbean Quarterly, (Vol. 23, No's 2 & 3, June-Sept. , 1977), p. 55.
32. Although Barbados is not mentioned in the novel, for the sake of unity I have assumed that the island is Barbados. One might just as easily see The Prime Minister as an exposé of any newly-independent nation for, indeed, the problems are common to most.
33. René Dépestre, "Problems of Identity for the Black Man in Caribbean Literatures", p. 60.
34. Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and The Colonized, (New York: The Orion Press, 1965), pp. 120-128.

## CHAPTER I

Clarke's first two novels, The Survivors of the Crossing and Amongst Thistles and Thorns, attest to the fact that even in the early 1960's slavery has not been abolished on the Barbadian sugar plantation nor has the Colonial attitude held by whites and middle-class blacks towards the poor black villagers been substantially changed.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of independence, the novels express the sad reality that lower-class blacks are still considered as inferiors--subjected to the will and whims of a white dominated power structure. The central characters of the novels, Rufus and Milton, attempt to revolt against their unsympathetic environment, realizing finally that exile is the only way to escape the system of slavery that still exists on the island. In this sense The Survivors of the Crossing and Amongst Thistles and Thorns may be seen as a preparation for exile, which becomes a reality in the Toronto-set trilogy. Ironically, and as William New points out:

The "crossing" of Clarke's first title The Survivors of the Crossing (1964) refers to the increasing emigration from the Islands northwards, and at the same time to the passage out from Africa in the slave ships centuries before. The sardonic use of the term "survivors" forces us to recognize that in the first case--and by inference the second, too--if one survived the passage one ended up a slave.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, even while the dream of attaining brighter shores is an unattainable one for both Rufus and Milton and, indeed, even though Jackson finally admits that exile to Canada has only meant an exchange of one kind of slavery for another, both characters persist in their quest to "shake off the chains of bondage" (SC, p. 75) that tie them to an unfulfilling life in Barbados.

In The Survivors of the Crossing Rufus, tired of the years of oppression, humiliation and shame, and inspired by the socialist ideas held by the Bridgetown Labour Party, recognizes that there is an immediate and desperate need for change in the system. The plantation for which Rufus and Boysie work has laid off sixty men and is planning to close down the factory altogether. Rufus claims that "in terms o' socialism" this means "sufferation, starvation, a plague!" (p. 7). In retaliation he devises a plan to strike against the plantation, yet it is apparent from the outset that he is to come up against stiff opposition. When Rufus discloses his plan to Boysie, Boysie says:

I gets credit from Miss Gertrude' Food Store for what the plantation pays me. I ain't no blasted socialist, man! And without that twenty shilling' on a Sa'rday, I can't get my saltfish and rice, yuh!  
(p. 8)

Exasperated, Rufus replies: "That ain't progress though, Boysie! Jesus God, man, that is backwardness you talking!" (p. 8). Boysie's attitude is typical of the apathetic self-hatred that characterizes the black labourers on the island. His remark points to two important

facts: first, that the plantation wields unchallenged power over the lives of the workers and, second, that the workers are self-defeating in the complacency with which they accept their lot. Even when Jackson, in his letter, claims that he is treated as an equal in Canada, even by his employer, and ends with: "... that is what I call progress. You boys down there on the plantation should be treated in that manner. As men." (p. 11), Boysie is not willing to admit that there is one "tinkling o' progress and advancement" (p. 9) in his words. Rufus, on the other hand, finds a deeper message--one "o' progress and striking", and embraces Jackson as a symbol of liberation.

The characters that surround Rufus--Boysie, Biscombe (a mulatto rum shop owner), Whippetts (the black school master) and the Minister--are all against Rufus' plan, as a strike against the plantation would endanger their livelihood. For Biscombe a strike would mean that the men would not be paid and thus his sales would drop; for Whippetts, a strike could mean the destruction of his career for the government would not look kindly on the fact that he "was sponsoring the son of a strike-strike-strike maker for a government scholarship" (p. 30), and for the white Anglican Minister a strike would be a violation of church doctrine: "It was not ordained by God for the people to rise up against their leaders, whether spiritual or temporal" (p. 30). Yet Biscombe is also quick to remind the Minister that a strike would also mean "fewer people coming to church during the crisis. . . [and]

smaller congregations meant also smaller collections" (p. 30). In an attempt to protect their own interests Biscombe, Whippetts and the Minister all fail to acknowledge what seems to be so clear to Rufus-- the need for change that can only be brought about by solidarity. The help and influence (albeit minimal) these men could offer is thrown aside by fear and greed, reducing the issue at hand to one of personal economics--how much money the workers may spend on rum, or put in the collection plate.

Rufus' revolt, although it begins as an economic crusade for higher pay, ultimately surpasses this as his self-awareness and self-identity grow. Yet, this new experience also alienates him from society, setting him apart from and in conflict with the apathetic poor (represented primarily by Boysie), middle-class blacks (like Biscombe and Whippetts who, by supporting the status quo enjoy a certain degree of affluence), and the white plantation owner and a white-controlled police force, that exerts its power both directly and indirectly through native sycophants. With such strong opposition, Rufus' well-intentioned revolt is doomed to failure.

Rufus' first organized protest march on the plantation is undermined when Biscombe, eager to maintain a good rapport with the plantation owner, warns the manager of the impending insurrection. The police open fire on the workers, dispersing the crowd and wounding Rufus. Boysie maintains that the plan is futile, that nothing can change

"what been happ'ning here since Adam was a little boy" (p. 49). The strongly ingrained influence of the whole colonial experience which began and perpetuated the idea that the black man is inferior and subordinate to the white man, has resulted in leaving the black man with this kind of defeatist attitude. Although Rufus retains a painful souvenir for his efforts, his attitude is vastly different from that of Boysie: "He realized that his wound was the symbol of his having suffered for the good of all the men and women in the village" (p. 49). Rufus takes it upon himself to be the symbol of suffering and liberation for his people. The sad reality is that the people are not united behind him nor have they the means by which to effect a successful revolution.

Undaunted by the failure of his first attempt, Rufus organizes a meeting for the next evening. As he sets out he thinks of the Scripture lesson his daughter Conradina was learning that night: "'And having land, [the people] sold it and...brought the money, and lay it at the apostles' feet'...the idea of sharing, of having the villagers bring together all their possessions appealed to [Rufus] as the only defence against the plantation" (p. 79). Ideally, unity of the people would be an effective force against the ruling élite. Yet, as Fanon points out "...Unity can only be achieved through the upward thrust of the people, and under the leadership of the people, that is to say, in defiance of the interests of the bourgeoisie."<sup>3</sup> The elements opposing the success of Rufus' revolt are twofold. First, not having land to sell, the people

are not in a position to contribute to the cause and, secondly, their disunity and unwillingness to defy the plantation owner ensure the failure of the revolution and shatter the hope of achieving a better standard of living for the people as a whole. A more apt scripture might have been Judas' betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. And although the parallel may not be taken too far, Rufus sees himself as the leader of his people, makes sacrifices for them, only to be betrayed in the end.

These people were stupid, poor, backward, ignorant people, who had to be led. He could lead them. . . He could not lead them worse than the plantation had been leading them for generations past. It was his calling in life to lead his people out of this prolonged slavery. (p. 102)<sup>4</sup>

After the second meeting fails, and Rufus is delivered into the hands of the enemy by Jo-Jo, it is apparent that the plan will never be fulfilled. Rufus is taken to the plantation where he is beaten and questioned. The Officer says: "They are all communists! You give a black man a little learning and Christ, he turns round and tells you how to run the blasted show" (p. 119). Ironically, it is only through education, as Whippetts rightly claims, that progress can be made.

He says:

. . . this is a new age, a' age of progress, and that progress coming through education, not through politics, not through independence, not through rabble-rousing." (p. 24)

However, the education Whippetts is talking about is "white" education.

And under the system as it exists in the novel, the more educated one is the more white one becomes. Whippetts is a prime example in this respect: he always used "artificial English. . . in the company of his inferiors" (p. 23). This further illustrates the educational and class barriers that stand as a bulwark against an effective kind of racial self-identity.<sup>5</sup> When Rufus says: "Is education what going to release this village, this island, from the tyrannies o' slavery. . ." (p. 24), he is talking about the re-education of the people--understanding and coming to terms with their racial and cultural heritage. Rufus' experiences have enlightened him as to what it is to be black in a white-controlled society. Where Whippetts' argument goes awry is in his contending that education excludes politics and independence; it is rather that education leads to enlightenment, which in turn leads to discontent and finally to action, usually of a violent nature.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, even Rufus' enlightenment and his self-realization is not enough to effect a successful change in the system. He does, however, reap small satisfaction when he starts a cane fire that threatens to burn the plantation to the ground. For this he is severely punished and, ultimately, he is deserted even by the men for whom he has suffered. When Stella defends Rufus near the end of the novel, the workers drinking in the rum shop stop and listen for a moment, "trying to make up their mind whether to continue drinking or not. But their minds were made up for them when Biscoombe appeared with a large

tray of biscuits and corned beef. The men forgot their loyalties to Rufus and to Stella and they scrambled for the food like ants" (p. 196).

As The Survivors of the Crossing portrays, the primacy of individual survival as opposed to class consciousness, the treacherous ambivalence of mulattoes, middle-class blacks and the more alienated workers (like Boysie), and the economic stranglehold maintained by the plantation owner over the villagers are all reasons for the failure of Rufus' revolution and, indeed, for the continuing failure to eradicate plantation slavery in all its forms. At the end of the novel Rufus is an isolated, tragic figure and even his new realization brings no transcendental resolutions.

Clarke's second novel, Amongst Thistles and Thorns, develops the identity motif as the personal quest for identity of a nine year old boy. Milton's introspection provides this novel with a subjective unity that is overshadowed, at times, in The Survivors of the Crossing, by the strong political motif that is the basis for Rufus' revolution. While Milton's self-realization is not translated into action, as Rufus' is, the central conflicts and ensuing conclusions are essentially the same as in the first novel.

Like Rufus', Milton's environment is inherently hostile to the development of a black social and cultural self-identity. The series of events that span the two-day narrative, and Milton's interspersed reflections, portray this hostility, leaving Milton an isolated and

lonely character at the end of the novel despite, and as a result of, his newly awakened sense of self-identity.

Milton is propelled on his "wanderings" by an unfortunate event in which his mother, after going to Mr. Blackman's house to complain about the brutal beating Milton received at school, beats him herself for making her "look like a damn fool in front o' that gentleman. . . ." (p. 62). Yet, while this event acts as a catalyst for Milton's "escape" it is really only the culmination of what Milton considers a "whole life of grief, grief, grief!" (p. 47). The real powers in Milton's world, those exerting the most influence over his life, are the people around him: his mother, the schoolmaster, his father Willy-Willy, and his "father" Nathan. Unlike the situation in The Survivors of the Crossing, the conflict is not a politically based one of the hero versus the establishment, rather it is an emotional and moral conflict between Milton and an unsympathetic, at times aggressively hostile, environment. He attempts to run away from a sterile and hypocritical school system, represented by a cruel and sadistic black master; from his mother whom he alternately fears and hates; and from a segregated society in which an impassable boundary is drawn between blacks and whites. Milton's only ally is Willy-Willy, his real father. From him he has inherited a sense of racial pride and awareness yet, like his father, Milton is unable to communicate this to the apathetic characters that surround him.

Near the beginning of the novel Milton makes a deliberately sarcastic comment on the ways in which England exerts a strong influence over the lives of the islanders.

I imagined all the glories of Britannia, our Motherland, Britannia so dear to us all, and so free; Britannia who, or what, or which, had brought us out of the ships crossing over from the terrible seas from Africa, and had placed us on this island, and had given us such good headmasters and assistant masters, and such a nice vicar to teach us how to pray to God--and he had come from England; and such nice white people who lived on the island with us and who gave us jobs watering their gardens and taking out the garbage, most of which we found delicious enough to eat... Britannia, who, or what, or which, had ruled the waves all these thousands and millions of years, and had kept us on the island, happy--the island of Barbados (Britannia the Second), free from all invasion... Britannia who saw to it that all Britons (we on the island were, beyond doubt, little black Britons, just like the white big Britons up in Britannialand. The headmaster told us so!)-never-never-ne-verr, shall be slaves! (p. 13)

The irony of the last line is obvious for, as Milton discovers, and as Rufus points out, although "One kind [of slavery] they abolish,... they forget to abolish the next kind" (SC, p. 24). Milton's experiences bring him time and again up against discrimination and hatred displayed not only by the whites "out the Front Road", but also by members of his own race. In a particularly poignant scene Milton describes the annual visit of the School Inspector who "... came as he always came, dressed in the white of colonial power" (p. 173). After administering severe floggings to the school boys, "... as if he were still

in the midst of slavery" (p. 175) he would leave them to be further humiliated by Mr. Blackman who would "curse [them] and call [them] black animals because [they] had let him down in front of 'the blasted white man'" (p. 176).

Like Whippetts in The Survivors of the Crossing, Mr. Blackman judges his little black schoolboys according to white standards; and in an attempt to safeguard his own position, he criticizes and condemns members of his own race. Yet, he is not the only character guilty of subjugating himself to the whites. In another way, Milton's mother, the washerwoman of a white prostitute, displays the same inability to come to terms with her black identity and to shatter the stereotyped role she is forced to play. While she would "curse God for not helping us out of the hands of the white people" (p. 35), she was "never... brave enough to raise her head from under the years of subjection by these people" (p. 34). Like the characters surrounding Rufus in the first novel, these characters illustrate the apathetic, self-hating attitude that cannot but perpetuate the problems in the society. In a discussion between Milton, and his "arch friend" Lester, Lester says: "How could Selassie be the most wisest man in the world, when Selassie is only a black man?", and goes on to insist that "it was Churchill, because... Churchill lived in England" (p. 165). This shows not only to what extent England still maintains effective control over the system, but how the colonial mentality has influenced

and distorted the black man's view of himself. Milton's awakening to a sense of self-identity is heightened by the fact that Clarke surrounds him with apathetic characters.

After Milton "escapes" from his mother, he takes refuge beneath the village church where he has a dream in which he imagines himself in a kind of Barbadian Harlem. In the first part of the dream Milton finds himself listening to a pastor preaching about "Step-n'-Fletchett. . . that nigger that had so much o' money that he uses to wear gold slippers" (p. 93). The stories recounted to him by Willy-Willy take on epic proportions and it is obvious that Harlem has become for Milton a symbol of black pride--a place where a black man may break the shackles of slavery and enjoy a degree of respect and affluence foreign to the Barbadian society Milton knows. In the second part of the dream, in which Milton returns to Bath Corner, the implications of his place in his world are fully realized. After he has fallen in the public shower, the laughter of the older boys brings Inspector Waterman who banishes Milton from the Bath for twenty weeks. He says:

You is a savage, Milton! A savage do not need a bath. You is a African. And Africans do not know what water mean. You big, idiot-headed black cannibull! (p. 95)

This comment illustrates the extent to which the black African has been placed in a stereotyped role. And while it awakens Milton to his sense

of self-identity it also points to the fact that Mr. Waterman's quest, like that of Lester and Mr. Blackman, is not for a black, but a white identity. Milton, however, embraces his African origins. Upon returning home his "whole life of running away from the thistles and thorns of poverty came before [him], but [he] could not make sense of it" (p. 154). Although Milton may not be able to "make sense of" his experiences his transformation leaves a deep psychological impact on him that is manifested in his longing to be far away from the island. He dreams of "discovering new worlds and countries and happiness like Columbus, and perhaps, if the day was long enough, I could even reach as far away from this village and from Nathan and my mother, as Harlem New York, America" (p. 179). The sense of alienation that accompanies Milton's new insights is obvious from this last soliloquy. And in the end, after Nathan has moved in to assume the role of "father", Milton is left "in a world by [him]self", with the bleak prospect of a future as a semi-literate labourer.

The tragic irony that accompanies Milton's awakening of consciousness is that, unable to communicate this new consciousness to an insensitive environment, he is left an isolated character, unable to translate his new awareness into transforming action. Yet, even characters like Rufus in The Survivors of the Crossing, who seek to instigate a change, are beaten and beaten badly by the system. Both Rufus and Milton are initially awakened to a sense of self-identity by

stories recounted to them by Jackson and by Willy-Willy. In comparison to their lives on the island North America appears as a promised land--a progressive rather than oppressive society. In his two Barbadian-set novels Clarke not only illustrates the feeling of alienation that accompanies a transformation to a sense of racial and cultural self-identity, but also concludes that exile is the only solution for escaping the West Indian predicament.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER I

1. Although slavery had been legally abolished in 1834 there still remained a rigid power and class structure. The labourers were treated as objects to be exploited at will not only by the white plantation owners but also by middle-class blacks.
2. William New, Among Worlds, (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1975), p. 12.
3. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p. 164.
4. Clarke draws an important parallel here with the Biblical story of Moses leading the Jewish people out of Egypt where they had been severely discriminated against under Pharaoh. The relationship between these two oppressed groups (the blacks and the Jews) is central to the Toronto trilogy. And although the parallel is not developed in The Survivors of the Crossing, the allusion is obvious enough to prepare the reader for the intense rapprochement Clarke portrays in The Meeting Point.
5. David Lowenthal, "Social Background of Federation", pp. 89-90:

For most West Indians, schooling is almost the only opportunity to gain wealth, power, and status. Education can be a solvent of social stratification: it weakens caste and colour barriers, and it makes achievement rather than origin the main measure of merit. But education has also become another dividing force. The educated man is remote from the common people, partly because he is expected to be, partly because he prefers it.

6. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p. 35:  

... decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.

## CHAPTER II

### I

In The Meeting Point, Storm of Fortune and The Bigger Light Clarke explores the life of Barbadian immigrants in Toronto. Previously, North America has stood in the background as a kind of Paradise or Promised Land, yet the novels of the trilogy expose the harsh truth that the promise and the reality differ greatly from one another. While exile in Canada affords the characters a degree of material success unattainable in their native land, the difficulties of adjusting to a different culture create conflicts within the characters themselves. Indeed, the situation is highly paradoxical. As Bernice, one of the central characters of the novels, says:

"Change?... That ain't the word. The word is mashed-up-destroy!" She moved her arms around the apartment, taking in all its contents. "All this! all this. And not one ounce o' happiness." (MP. p. 116)

Like Jackson, in The Survivors of the Crossing, Bernice realizes that she has only exchanged one kind of slavery for another.

In his article "Austin Clarke in Canadian Reviews" Lloyd Brown describes the "meeting point" as

not the harmony of reconciliation, but the conflicts that have been sparked by the black revolution--the inner tensions of the black individual and the external confrontations between black militancy and the white status quo.<sup>1</sup>

On the external level the familiar symptoms of interracial hostilities are painfully obvious in The Meeting Point. Bernice and her West Indian friends meet time and again the cold, prejudiced attitude of Canadian society. One example of this comes early in the novel.

One snow-filled afternoon, a woman driving a blue Cadillac stopped and waited until Bernice and the children got along-side; and when she thought they could hear and were in smelling-shot of her Estée Lauder Youth Dew perfume, she pulled her spectacles down her long Semitic nose and said "Well!" in that short aggressive manner, as if she really meant to say "Shit!" That was the day Bernice wished everybody in Forest Hill, man, woman and child, dead; the day when a tear came to her eyes, and shimmered her entire view of the road and the world. (p. 6)

Bernice's resentment towards white society is only heightened by her employers' attitude towards her. Although Mrs. Burrmann "was subject to bouts of great affection" she also displays an inability to accept Bernice fully as a human being. Bernice "always saw herself as a servant; a sort of Twentieth-century slave. It was mainly the amount of hard work which reminded her of her status. And also, the small wages" (p. 5). The exclusive "whiteness" of her environment serves to remind Bernice of her status at the same time as it perpetuates the interracial tensions.

Silently, she grew to hate Mrs. Burrmann even more than she hated the snow. To her, Mrs. Burrmann not only symbolized the snow, she symbolized also, the uneasiness and inconvenience of the snow. Her loneliness grew, too; and so did her hatred of Mrs. Burrmann: deeper and deeper, the same way as December, January, February piled snow on the ground. (p. 7)

The prejudiced attitude of whites toward blacks is evident when Estelle, Bernice's sister, arrives in Canada for a visit. Estelle's dispute with an immigration officer over her lost passport provokes a cynical comment from an impatient bystander: "Somebody further back [in line] said, in a soft voice which carried more than he had expected, or intended it to, . . . 'hope Canada don't get like Britain!'" (p. 44). These familiar interracial conflicts are made even more complex by the psychological ambiguities Clarke attributes to black self-identity and awareness itself. In this same scene Estelle experiences the unsympathetic attitude of blacks toward members of their own race--the same kind of attitude that characterized much of the first two novels. When the immigration officer leads Estelle into a cubicle to search her bags, "The black family held down its head in shame and embarrassment; the black woman sitting on the other side of the ocean from the white woman averted her eyes. . . ." (p. 46).

These internal contradictions--the conflict between the new "blackness" and the old self-depreciation--are symbolized by the

paradoxical attitudes exhibited by the characters. At the centre is Bernice Leach. She oscillates between Black Muslim literature and complexion "lighteners", between the Toronto Negro Baptist Church and the White Unitarian Congregation. Of the latter we are told:

It was a cleaner, wealthier church than her old Negro Baptist Church; and the congregation was all white--or mostly white; and they did not come to church to moan and groan, and exchange experiences about white people and about racial discrimination. Bernice felt purged, in a way.... (p. 22)

On the one hand, Bernice is fierce in her resentment of white exclusivism and even admits, at one point, that Shaw Street--the address of her old Church, (a community of immigrants like herself)--was the only street "where people talk and walk in a million and one different nationalities and languages, and nobody don't stop talking the moment I walk by... And one thing on this street I notice: nobody don't look at you with wonder and scorn... I don't feel that I am either a black person or a white person. Not on this street. This is like home in Barbados" (p. 101). On the other hand, however, Bernice's latent self-hate and quest for material success cause her to be hypocritical in her attitude towards her own blackness. At times Bernice is sufficiently envious of the Burrmanns to imitate their habits, and in a letter to Mammy she says: "I following the lead of my mistress and trying to improve

my mind" (p. 22). Yet, she wishes to improve her mind only to "learn how to out-smart them bitches and bastards, and use the same weapons they use on you; them weapons is brain power and brainwashing, and I know 'cause I come across it in a magazine I got in Harlem..." (p. 37). Ironically, it is also in Harlem that Bernice discovers the complexion lighteners she uses in a futile attempt to alleviate her blackness. Indeed, these inner contradictions are obvious on numerous levels. In a conversation between Bernice and Dots one can see these internal tensions at work:

Dots said... "This is no place for a person to live in, and feel like a human being, gal..."

"I feel the same way as you;" Bernice said, but she hastened to point out a condition which she felt would extenuate this denouncement: "But I still have to think of when Thursdays come, pay day. For that, and that alone, I think Canada ain't such a bad place."

"You know something, gal?" Dots was now laughing in her sensuous way. "You want to hear a piece o' the hard truth, today? Well, listen. No matter how we two bitches sit down here in this white woman' place, and say the worst thing 'bout Canada and the white woman, 'cause she is as Canadian as Canada is... had it not been for that woman and Canada, where the hell would we, both me and you, be, right now, at this very minute...." (p. 98)

This discussion exposes two important points that are central to the novels as a whole. First, despite the fact that life in Canada

is demoralizing and empty, Bernice is obviously trapped in a heartless materialism--a materialism she and her fellow domestics pride themselves in being superior to and detached from. Second, Dots' comment expresses the old self-depreciating attitude that the black race is inferior to that of the white: the black man is "only abiding through the tender mercies o' God and the white man" (p. 189). This is reminiscent of the parent-child relationship that characterized the colonial experience; at the same time it stands as a barrier against a black cultural and social self-identity in the North American experience.

In a sense, Henry White, (another member of Bernice's circle) is "abiding through the tender mercies o' God" and his rich, white, Jewish girlfriend Agatha. Henry too oscillates between affirming his blackness on the one hand and, on the other, the fact that he has "made it" in the white world. Henry's relationships with white women are an expression of revenge or "repayment" (as Henry says) for the racial and social injustices exercised by the white man over the black race. In a conversation with Boysie Cumberbatch (a character carried over from The Survivors of the Crossing) Henry describes the state of mind in which he makes love to Agatha.

"Man, one night it was hell in this bed. I'm thinking of all those black people lynched

and killed, all those black cats murdered and slain, all those black chicks raped and de-humanized, demoralized. . . . I'm driving and driving, baby, . . . she was thinking I was loving her. But, man, I was re-paying! I was re-paying her for what her brothers do to my sister, you dig? There ain't no such thing as love, baby. It a re-payment. A final goddamn re-payment" (p. 199).

Furthermore, he has little faith in the possibility that white women actually love black men. He says to Boysie "They love you, not because they love you, but because they sympathize with you. . ." (p. 198). Henry's comment is an important one in light of the fact that Agatha is Jewish. In the novel Clarke portrays a complex, ambivalent relationship between the Jews and the blacks. Since it is a central aspect of The Meeting Point it shall be discussed at length later. The important point here is that Henry appears to make a distinction between love and sympathy only to rationalize his own contradictory feelings toward Agatha, and whites in general. At the same time as Henry exploits Agatha, he also uses her, along with imaginary bank accounts and real-estate holdings as "white" status symbols. And while he praises Agatha for "putting sense into his head", he also begins to resent and even hate her for his own feelings of intellectual inferiority. As Henry begins to experience great insecurity in his relationship with Agatha he becomes increasingly attracted to Bernice because, as he says,

"She is my people" (p. 83). Yet he is also regretful of the breakdown in relations with Agatha. Although Henry has an intense racial consciousness he is also subject to the kind of self-betrayal displayed by Bernice and her friends.

Henry's black awareness is matched in the novel only by that of Estelle, who openly admits that she is a Muslim in a brief discussion with Bernice on racial conflict. This discussion is sparked by a black protest march which arouses Bernice's scorn and Estelle's admiration.

Bernice walked off as the lights changed; and she pulled Estelle behind her, saying, "Come woman, we don't have the whole day, standing up watching a bunch o' black people walking 'bout the place, making themselves look more foolish."

"It is like in the South", Estelle said, a little sad she had to leave the marching. "I remember now that I saw coloured people marching like this, on television. . ."

"Child, they have been marching down South, up South, up North, all over the States. Whenever you open a newspaper, whenever the summer come, whenever you turn on the damn television, all you seeing these days is a lot o' stupid black people marching 'bout the place." She made a wicked rasping noise with her lips to show her disgust. . . "Christ! it sickens me to my stomach to see what this blasted world o' black people is coming to." She shook her head, from side to side, to show how despondent she was with this aspect of life. "And these niggers in Canada! Well, they don't know how lucky they are!"

"I think you are wrong Bernice. I think you are wrong, wrong, wrong." (p. 220)

Later, Bernice makes a distinction between West Indian blacks and American blacks--claiming that the protest march has nothing to do with them because they are West Indians. It is obvious that Bernice's insularity of vision blinds her to the real facts of the social situation. As Henry says: "...that is your fight too, baby! West Indian, Canadian, American, Bahamian--we is all niggers to Mister Charlie!" (p. 224). Yet, while Henry and Estelle display an intense black self-awareness, their fervour serves only to heighten the eventual disillusionment of self-contradictions they experience as a result of their liaisons with white partners.

Both Henry and Estelle therefore exemplify the central irony of The Meeting Point: the internal conflicts of self-identification are heightened in direct ratio to the intensity of emergent blackness. Moreover, their disillusionments never quite succeed in undermining even the qualified triumph of their self-awareness. . . the apparently inconclusive ambiguities of The Meeting Point are no less realistic than the trenchant ironies of the two earlier novels: like Rufus and Milton Sobers, Henry and Estelle are satiric reflections of psychological and social conflicts that are vividly dramatized by, though not exclusive to, the current Afro-American revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Contrasted with this is the placid contentment exhibited by Bernice, Dots and Boysie Cumberbatch--the archetype of black

apathy. As in The Survivors of the Crossing Boysie's primary concerns are women and drink. Since he is essentially devoid of any racial self-identity he is left far removed from the turbulent experiences of Henry and Estelle. Dots, Bernice and Boysie retreat into an apathetic world centred around an obscene materialism. To a certain extent Henry and Estelle become alienated from this group because of their social and racial self-awareness, and their relationships with members of another race leads to a tragic compromise which threatens to destroy them both.

While part of the complexity in The Meeting Point is derived from the internal contradictions of the characters themselves, this complexity is heightened by the ambivalent Jewish-black relationship. The cultural problems this leads to is far from being a fantasy of the author, it is a fact of life: "... Jews are the largest single group of employers of black West Indians in the Toronto area."<sup>3</sup>

Since both the Jews and the blacks are minority groups that have been discriminated against there is a curious double-edged rapport between the two. At the same time as there are moments of intense sympathy--a mutual recognition of suffering and oppression--there is also an overriding sense of mutual distrust and even hatred. In Notes of a Native Son James Baldwin, writing on the

attitude of black Americans towards Jews, claims that "the more devout Negro considers that he is a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt. . . . this same identification, which Negroes, since slavery, have accepted with their mothers' milk, serves, in contemporary actuality, to implement an involved and specific bitterness. Jews in Harlem are small tradesmen, rent collectors, real estate agents and pawnbrokers; they operate in accordance with the American business tradition of exploiting Negroes, and they are therefore identified with oppression and are hated for it. . . .there is a subterranean assumption that the Jew should "know better", that he has suffered enough himself to know what suffering means. An understanding is expected of the Jew such as none but the most naïve and visionary Negro has ever expected of the American Gentile. The Jew, by the nature of their own precarious situation, has failed to vindicate this faith."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Jew sees 'his Jewishness' as 'a paradigm' for the lot of the Negro: 'This is simply a revolutionary age variant of the Jew's traditional presumption about himself being the elder brother to all men in suffering."<sup>5</sup> Yet, as The Meeting Point portrays, the Jews, represented by the Burrmanns and the Gassteins, exploit and patronize their domestics. The recently oppressed, once secure in a position of power and prosperity,

in turn become the oppressors.<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Burrmann is the central character in Clarke's portrayal of Jewish ambivalence towards blacks. As a young boy growing up in the Spadina area ghetto, Sammy Burrmann came into contact with children from many ethnic backgrounds, among them "'coloured boys', sons of West Indians who had come to Canada to work as porters on the railroads, and as domestics in white, rich kitchens and homes" (p. 106). Yet, although

... he had had his share of Negro culture...  
had thrown dice with the Harlem-like men,  
and had even consciously imitated their  
mannerisms, and a few of their diversions,  
such as smoking marijuana, because he  
had found his orthodox life dull and boring  
... he had emerged "clean" from all this,  
because he had a university degree, and  
was ambitious; and he wanted to be a law-  
yer. (p. 131).

As Mr. Burrmann rises to success his relationship with black people changes. He no longer considers them as friends and social equals: instead he patronizes and exploits them, as is evident in his treatment of Bernice, his servant, and Estelle, his backstreet mistress.

Mr. Burrmann's seduction of Estelle is tinged with all the hateful reminders of the slave days. "The man came to the ches-terfield, standing over her like a landlord and not a lover" (p. 137). Like Henry with Agatha, Mr. Burrmann not only exploits Estelle, he also uses her to bolster his own sense of himself. Unlike Henry,

however, Mr. Burrmann does not use Estelle as a "status symbol" but, rather, as a means to recapture the past and to compensate for his failure in sexuality. In taking Estelle as a mistress, Mr. Burrmann takes himself back to his Spadina Avenue days, and a sexual encounter with "a large vulgar-laughing black woman named A-Train, who roared in and out of the El Mocombo Tavern, like an express train, singing rhythm-and-blues" (p. 131). A-Train "had done that thing to him, with such vulgarity and completeness, that it never left his mind or body" (p. 131). And A-Train had also rejected him as "a little teeny child" (p. 131). This rejection not only destroys Mr. Burrmann's pride but also instills in him a terror of responsibility in bed, that results in the emotional and physical sterility in the Burrmanns' marriage. Estelle releases Mr. Burrmann from the prison of his impotency, and after their love-making he "has a new power and a new glory" (p. 140). Yet, the exploitation is not entirely one-sided. Estelle's "motives for giving him her gift of love, were to put him in a position to be exploited" (p. 161). Their liaison is really a love-hate relationship for them both and stands as a paradigm for the other black/white relationships in the novel.

Throughout The Meeting Point Clarke counter-balances the moments of sympathy with those of prejudice; thus, although Agatha

attempts to persuade Bernice and her West Indian friends that she is not prejudiced because of her own Jewish background, when she tries to teach them a game they do not understand she wonders "... if their I. Q. is really correlated to their cultural depravity" (p. 86). Similarly, the brotherly demonstration by the Jewish man, who led the protest march "holding hands with a black woman" (p. 219), is undercut by the lessons on race-relations Mrs. Gasstein teaches her ill-mannered son: "My mummy says you people are nasty... And my mummy says you shouldn't live among us. You're different from us" (p. 20). "It is this identification with the prevailing norm of white prejudice that undermines the claims of Agatha, the Burrmanns, and other Jews to some special status of brotherhood in suffering."<sup>7</sup>

The Meeting Point portrays not the familiar connotations of the phrase but rather the point at which two cultures meet in conflict. Unlike the first two novels, the white man is not merely the patronizing exploiter of the black; rather, the races are partners in misery, mutually loving and hating. The Meeting Point goes one step beyond the earlier novels and adds a North American dimension to the interracial problems--one that becomes more complex because of the inner conflicts of the characters themselves. By carrying the character of Boysie Cumberbatch over from The

Survivors of the Crossing Clarke creates an effective link between the themes of the Barbados-set novels and those of the Toronto trilogy. Boysie's apathy is contrasted with the intense social and racial self-awareness of Rufus, in the first novel, and with that of Henry White in the later novels. Yet, the internal contradictions within Henry himself lead to a complexity in the Toronto trilogy that stems from the problem of adapting to a new cultural environment.

## II

At the end of The Meeting Point Henry staggers home after being severely beaten by Brigitte's white boyfriend and Estelle is taken to the Toronto General Hospital after attempting to abort Mr. Burrmann's baby. These two events serve as the central focus for the first part of Storm of Fortune entitled "Violence and fear at the base". The responses of the characters to these events are, as the title suggests, ones of either violence or fear, expressing the psychological state of each individual (primarily the degree to which he or she has come to terms with his or her black identity).

Dots' reaction to Henry's beating by the white police officers is one of deep hostility. She says:

"I waiting to hear their story concerning this violence, this blasted racial injustice

that we Negroes have to live with, day in and day out!" (p. 6)

Furthermore, she tries to convince Bernice to leave Mrs. Burrmann, as she has decided to leave her employer, Mrs. Hunter, and "unite over Henry's tragedy" (p. 5). Bernice, however, is less than enthusiastic in her response.

"So what do you have to say to that, gal?"  
Dots asker her.

"You got a point. "

"I got a point! Is that all you can say, I got a point?"

"Work is very hard to find, Dots. "

"Did I tell you different? I haven't just emigrated here Bernice! 'Course, I know work's hard as hell to find. And for us, it harder still. But is it more harder to find than pride? Could it ever be harder to find than that? You tell me, because you is the Black Muslim. "

"Well, I don't mean it that way. "  
Bernice said, feeling trapped. (p. 5)

Bernice's response is reminiscent of Boysie's attitude in The Survivors of the Crossing when Rufus discloses his plans to strike against the plantation. And, like Boysie, in the first novel, it points to the fact that Bernice is self-defeating in the complacency with which she accepts her lot in a white man's world. She is more concerned with keeping her job than with asserting any kind of

racial pride. At the root of her apathy is fear. It is this fear, "Fear of implication. Fear of disclosure. Fear of criticism. Fear of allegiance" (p. 37) that causes her to withhold the fact that she witnessed Henry's beating from her window. It is also this fear of "public" criticism that causes Bernice to condemn Estelle for her attempted abortion.

On Bernice's part, there was still the heavy terrible immorality of abortion, even though it was she who had suggested it, and even though she was therefore responsible, to a large extent, for Estelle's being on this hospital bed. Bernice was such a woman, of such ambivalent and puritanical disposition, that she would not have criticized Estelle or anybody else had the abortion been successfully performed. What worried her, what was immoral to her, was that Estelle had to be taken to the hospital in an ambulance and that the public had to know; that Priscilla, a nurse on the ward, had to know. The public knowledge and the public exhibition worried her much more than the private commission of the immorality. (p. 29)

Indeed, Bernice's disposition is extremely ambivalent. While she has an inherent hatred and distrust of all white people, she is not willing to acknowledge openly a racial bond between herself and members of her own race. Thus, while on the one hand Bernice displays a fierce racial consciousness--as portrayed by her desire to go out only with black men--on the other she is equally fierce in her desire not to associate herself too closely with her West Indian

friends. Like the plantation labourers in The Survivors of the Crossing Bernice is representative of a kind of stereotyped personality-- that of a "non-aggressive... dependent, accommodating, and deferential negro who [knows] his place and [stays] in it." <sup>8</sup>

Contrasted with this, is the violent, self-asserting attitude of Henry White. In a conversation with Boysie, Henry says:

"Boysie, there's a lot o' crime in this... city, and a lot o' murders that nobody don't know nothing about. And you telling me, godblind-you, Boysie, because you are talking like a... white man now... you're telling me that it isn't time for a black man to get some fun from killing people? Wait, you mean we so inferior? Everybody does it. Everyday a white man does kill another white man and get away with it. And be-Christ, they never stopped killing black people. And nobody ever ask them about that corpse." (p. 52)

Henry's display of aggression is based on his unwillingness to tolerate what he had formerly accepted and what he was, indeed, expected to accept. Like Rufus in The Survivors of the Crossing and Willy-Willy in Amongst Thistles and Thorns Henry's frustrations are manifested in a violent manner. Rufus' cane fire and Willy-Willy's burning of the local church are paralleled by Henry's violent outbursts against Agatha. The psychology behind these events appears to be a desire to destroy the cause or root of the frustration. Thus, when Agatha insists on calling Henry a "Negro" over his insistence that he be called "black", Henry resorts to physical violence

in an attempt to relieve his frustrations: "And his hand continued to strike her, left and right, plax-plax-plax in a kind of warlike African hitting of stick upon wood, a savage rhythm." (p. 85). It is interesting, (and not entirely accidental), that Clarke describes this act as "African" and "savage". Later in the novel, in a scene in which Henry and Boysie are looking at a picture Agatha has drawn of Henry, Boysie says: "That's it. This picture that Agatha draw make you look like a African, a Watusi" (p. 275). While Henry had initially been violent in his reaction against Agatha's comment that he looked like an African, "if Boysie could see it, and Agatha, then it must be true. Henry was beginning to like the idea that he looked like an African" (p. 276). These two incidents taken together recall the scene in Amongst Thistles and Thorns in which Mr. Waterman calls Milton a savage and a "cannibull" (p. 95), and, as in Amongst Thistles and Thorns, they serve not only to reinforce a stereotyped image but also to reaffirm Henry's black self-identity. By implication, Henry's self-realization, like that of Milton's, will bring no transcendental resolutions. And, as Rufus and Milton find in the first two novels, Henry's racial consciousness sets him apart from and in conflict with the characters that surround him.

Like Henry's, Estelle's experiences serve to affirm her own self-identity. When she is in the hospital, recovering from

her attempted abortion, Estelle recalls a passage from a book she once read which described a case identical to her own:

... it was the lot of most West Indian women in general who form part of matriarchal societies, that Peggy had to find some means of keeping the boy alive on her meagre resources. . . . Peggy would have welcomed going to bed with the master of the house inasmuch as it had meant the customary promotion from the cane fields. Catching the doctor's eyes was easy for a young buxom slave like Peggy. Already she had possessed most of the characteristics which all white men had traditionally fancied in coloured women. (p. 41)

Estelle's realization of what "a terrible truth" this story portrays serves to heighten her self-awareness. When she is in Union Station waiting for the train to Timmins to visit Mrs. MacMillan (a fellow patient) Estelle is asked if she is an American Negress: "With her new consciousness of blackness. . . Estelle was disappointed that no one ever asked her if she was an African princess" (p. 79). Similarly, when Estelle is on the train, a sexual advance by a white passenger prompts her to question: "But what does a bloody white man think he is? What he think a woman like me is? What the hell he thinks I am, still a slavewoman, or a child, this day and age?" (p. 122). The possibility that the man does think of her as "a slavewoman" is not of immediate importance; what is important is the fact that Estelle's new self-awareness causes her to bring this very possibility into question. Estelle's new

consciousness of blackness causes her already obvious distrust of white people to deepen. Thus when, near the end of the novel, Agatha tries to convince Estelle to give her baby up for adoption, Estelle's reaction is one of strong resentment. She says to Agatha:

"Listen to me! You have come in here, telling me a lot o' blasted foolishness 'bout adoption and responsibility. But I want to tell you something now. The man who breed me and got me pregnant and who hasn't looked back yet to see if I'm dead or alive is not a West Indian, yuh know? He ain't a negro, Agatha! He's a . . . white man, just like you! And he is the same blasted Jew as you, too. Now, I want you to go to him, and tell him about his responsibilities." (p. 262)

While the ambivalent Jewish-black relationship is still apparent in Storm of Fortune it is not as prevalent as in The Meeting Point. In the second part of Storm of Fortune Dots finally leaves her employer and Bernice is fired by Mrs. Burrmann. From this point on the interracial tensions become focused in a more general direction--that is, the hostilities are those between blacks and whites (in general) as opposed to blacks and Jews (exclusively). The lives of Dots, Bernice and Boysie change substantially once they are removed from their hitherto inhibiting environments. One might say that, for these three characters, all tensions have vanished. As Boysie says: ". . . there ain't no tension in here because there ain't no blasted white people sneaking 'bout

in here!" (p. 237). For Henry, however, the full impact of inter-racial hostilities has only just begun. His marriage to Agatha not only perpetuates the tensions already apparent in the relationship, but also brings Henry into head-on collision with a prejudiced white society.

At this point mention must be made of Boysie Cumberbatch, for, where Henry's intense black awareness brings him into conflict with white society, Boysie's lack of awareness facilitates his eventual assimilation into the very society that contributes to Henry's death. In The Meeting Point Boysie says: "I figures that my stay here could only be better if I mix-in with the people in command, not with West Indians" (p. 129). In Storm of Fortune Boysie finally obtains his first "ipso facto" job and, after he has a taste of the "good-life", any racial self-awareness is discarded in favour of the material success he may enjoy by adapting to the white man's world. When he starts his own janitorial service it becomes obvious that Boysie's quest is for a "white" identity. Evidence of this may be seen in the way in which Boysie begins to emulate one of his "clients": "Boysie decided to make his life as close as possible an imitation of Mr. Macintosh's, for Mr. Macintosh was successful" (p. 257). Boysie's dreams of material success nullify any sense of racial pride, providing an effective contrast to Henry's growing sense of

self-awareness.

Henry's social and racial consciousness brings him into conflict not only with his wife Agatha but also with the inherently hostile white society that surrounds him. These conflicts work on both the external and internal levels--affirming the interracial hostilities and also the conflicts within Henry himself. Although he decides to marry Agatha, "Henry knew there would be a great strain on him trying to measure up to Agatha's intellectual level, and to her social level" (p. 143). As in The Meeting Point Henry's own feelings of intellectual inferiority coupled with his awareness of his social position create a tension in the relationship with Agatha that is essentially insoluble. Henry's realization of the difficulties that are to ensue in his marriage to Agatha caused him to have deep reservations about "tying the knot" at the same time as it reaffirms his earlier desire to have a relationship with one of "his people". At the engagement party Henry thinks:

... even if he did marry this white woman, Agatha, he would have to find the primitive, real, funky, passionate passion and the bodily satisfaction in the tightening thighs of a black woman like Dots. (p. 158)

And although subsequently Henry tells himself that "Agatha is a better woman, better in everything" (p. 158) and that sex "isn't the end-all and the be-all in life" (p. 159), the doubts already planted

in his mind will haunt him for a long time to come.

Agatha, in an attempt to prove that she is not prejudiced, ultimately over-compensates to the point where Henry feels that she is trying to give him an inferiority complex. This is primarily brought about by the fact that Agatha hangs pictures of black people all over their apartment. Henry says, commenting on a photograph of three little starving black girls:

"She is trying to give me a inferiority complex, Boysie! And she is calling it beauty. I don't see one. . . beautiful thing in being poor, or in being black or in being hungry. . . Man, I feel I am under a. . . microscope twenty-four hours a. . . day! That woman knows too much 'bout black people, baby!"  
(p. 277)

Agatha's constant reminders to Henry of his blackness (even to the extent where she tells him: "If you were lighter in complexion, like Estelle, I would not like you so much, because that would not be a perfect match of opposites" (p. 279)) serve not only to exaggerate the apparent differences between Henry and Agatha (and whites in general) but also to heighten Henry's sense of self-identity. Consequently, Henry finds his relationship with Agatha destructive.

Yet, Agatha too suffers as a result of her liaison with Henry. Just before the wedding she receives an anonymous letter wishing her bad luck and unhappiness.

"Marry Henry, Agatha, and you will never know normality again, as the world understands normality; but a crazy kind of fulfillment you certainly would know. I am holding you responsible. Love him Agatha, and know that your close friends will be delighted to know that you have at last ceased to embarrass them; and his friends would be delighted to know you have joined their coterie, their fortune, their storm of fortune. . . ." (p. 218)

This letter sends Agatha "into a pit of self-argument". On the one hand she rationalizes it as a "symptom, an example of the inane people living in this city, in this world--a gesture, but a clear explicit gesture, of bigotry, or sickness even" (p. 219). On the other hand, the letter plants seeds of doubt in her mind--the same kind of doubt that haunts Henry.

When Henry and Agatha look for an apartment after they are married, the fierce prejudice they experience adds to the tension in the relationship, intensifying the doubts both of them already hold. While Henry is incensed by the fact that he "can't get a chance to behave like a human-civilized. . . being" he is also sympathetic towards Agatha's plight. In a conversation with Boysie, Henry says:

"Hunting for an apartment in this rass-hole city, boy, for a black man, and with a white wife, Jesus Christ! well, I don't have to tell you. Sometimes, I was embarrass. Sometimes, I just laughed. But I was thinking of my wife, my goddamn rich white woman, and she can't find a decent place to live, merely because she happened to be walking beside a man with the wrong brand o' colour,

according to the landladies and landlords in this... Toronto" (p. 281)

It is as a result of this discrimination that Henry begins writing poetry--"to express these feelings" (p. 284). The poem dedicated to his wife attests to the fact that it was not "time" that killed the rose of Henry's love, but rather the pressures of a prejudiced society. And it is not only Henry who suffers as a result of these pressures, but also Agatha who (we find out in The Bigger Light) ends up in a psychiatric hospital.

The circumstances surrounding Henry's death are ambiguous. Dots is adamant in her accusation that it was "that white bitch Agatha" who "kill-im" (p. 312). In a sense this is true. Agatha's over-compensation in the relationship heightens the conflicts Henry already feels with white society. Moreover, Henry's acute racial consciousness makes it impossible for him to continue to live in a society where the racial boundaries are distinctly drawn and impassable. The fact that Henry takes his own life serves finally to affirm his self-identity.

Contrasted with this is the neat, complacent life into which Boysie, Dots and Bernice have withdrawn. The gradual rejection of their African heritage acts to remove these characters from the turbulent experiences of Henry and Estelle. It is the absence of whites in their environment that enables them to live in an

atmosphere of happiness and contentment. Yet, even this is undermined in The Bigger Light in which Clarke explores the devastating psychological repercussions that occur as a result of assimilation into a different cultural milieu.

### III

In The Bigger Light there is a curious twist in white-black relationships. Apart from a few scattered incidents, interracial conflicts are notably absent from the narrative. The emphasis in this novel is on the psychological development of the main character--Boysie Cumberbatch--who, in his quest for success, not only becomes trapped in his own materialism but also attempts to reject his West Indian origins. Boysie sees this rejection of his heritage as a prerequisite for succeeding on Canadian terms. In so doing he essentially takes on a "white" identity, becoming contemptuous of other black immigrants he feels are invading "his" country. As a consequence of his assimilation into Canadian society Boysie becomes alienated from his West Indian friends, ultimately losing the ability to make contact even with his wife Dots.

For years he had taken Dots to the Mercury Club downtown, where they listened and danced to calypso music, and mixed with each batch of arriving immigrants. Now Boysie began to dislike their raucous behaviour and the bright colours they wore and

the noise they made. . . [he wondered] why they did not change their ways when they came to a new country. (p. 15)

Boysie's newly-adopted conservatism ("conservative to him meant a very good life and excellent education and being a Canadian" (p. 17)) causes him to "deliberately. . . take the sensuality in his background out of his present life" (p. 58). He throws his calypso and rhythm and blues records down the incinerator, dresses in dark three-piece suits, listens to CBC radio, and thinks of himself as "a man in my position". Boysie's life becomes a dull, conservative and boring routine. This is symbolized by the woman in the brown winter coat who emerges from the subway station at precisely the same time everyday, and with whom Boysie has become infatuated. The monotony in Boysie's life is portrayed in the novel by the repetition of scenes in which he waits impatiently for the woman's arrival.

Part of Boysie's "transformation" is caused by the realization that through language (and education) he may break the stereotyped role he feels he was destined to play. In a conversation with Henry in Storm of Fortune Henry tells Boysie that the image of the black man is one of a "cleaner-crab" (SF, p. 60). In The Bigger Light Boysie says to Dots:

"I used to feel that as a black man living in this country there was a certain level of things that I could do. And that I could get out of this country. I used to think so. And

I even helped whoever said so believe it is so. I was destined to be a cleaner. And I used to feel that I could only be a cleaner . . . . I was living a kind of life that somebody destined me to live. And only after that young Canadian fellow showed me certain things about his life in terms of this language-thing did I see what he was meaning in terms of my life. . . . It was really like looking through one o' them windows there in the living room, and seeing things every morning and every night, and still not seeing one damn thing. Until, bram! all of a sudden I see for the first time that what I was looking at was nothing. . . ." (pp. 42-43)

Although this new realization enables Boysie to break the stereotyped image and to attain a degree of material success he never thought possible, ironically he still remains a "cleaner-crab" and his economic security is undermined by his insecurity as a person. When Dots jokingly comments on the fact that Boysie has gained weight, Boysie thinks:

He was secure in material ways. He could not understand why the mention of the size of his belly should upset him. There must be a deeper reason. (p. 59)

Boysie's growing contempt of sensuality causes him to be uneasy about his own self-identity, and this "language-thing" further alienates him from his friends and from his wife Dots--all of whom he finds it impossible to communicate with. Boysie has become isolated in his own world, and sadly wonders if "the new language [could] be clouding his perception" (p. 46). He realizes that his whole life with

Dots is based on expectation.

He had found himself living in this routine of expectation with her. It was the same with meals and other things she did around the apartment. He expected she would cook. Would wash. Would clean... How many other things had he taken for granted in his routine life with her? (p. 45)

In an attempt to alleviate this monotonous routine he tries to replace Dots by the woman in the brown winter coat yet, ironically, he only exchanges one routine for another.

Boysie's relationship with Mrs. James (a fellow apartment dweller) is a further means by which he attempts to escape from his unfulfilling life with Dots. "He used his friendship with Mrs. James as a buffer against what he considered as a lack of consideration he got from his wife" (p. 170). Indeed, Dots appears to be essentially apathetic towards Boysie's new "position".

... Boysie was successful and had respect and some name; but with his wife, and trying to impress her, he was a very ordinary man, a man with great failure. (p. 87)

Boysie begins to hate Dots and to wish she were dead, because "she had killed the way he saw himself" (p. 218). Mrs. James, on the other hand, bolsters Boysie's opinion of himself and the relationship they establish is, for Boysie, special, in the sense that it goes beyond the level of sexual desire.

It was bigger things he was involved with in their relationship, and he had always hoped that these bigger things would show him the light he had been searching for all these years. The bigger light. (p. 175)

The meaning of the "bigger light" is ambiguous. For Boysie, the "bigger light" appears to be something that goes beyond and, indeed, necessitates a rejection of the "sensuality" in his background. Yet, in so doing, Boysie ultimately seals his own fate. In a scene in which he goes to the International Airport Boysie attempts to come to terms with his own identity as he watches the arrival of other West Indians. On the one hand he sees them as "unwanted persons", coming into "his" country--"noisy and unnecessarily loud and prone to display" (p. 177). On the other, he realizes that "them and me is the same thing" (p. 177).<sup>9</sup> Yet, Boysie's latent self-hate and his quest to "make it" in white society cause him to neglect his responsibility in the black community.

When Mrs. James takes Boysie to the Home Service Organization (a black welfare organization) in an attempt to convince him of his social responsibilities, Boysie's reaction is that, since no organization had ever helped him "It was therefore their problem" (p. 203). Boysie's aversion to black community activism leaves him disconcerted when members of the organization call him "brother".

It was the first time anybody had ever called Boysie "brother". He did not like it. He did not at all like this assumption of closeness based on colour alone. (p. 207)

Furthermore, he finds this "closer way of living... too mysterious, too ritualistic, too tribal for him" (p. 209). Because Boysie has made a deliberate attempt to reject his West Indian origins he can no longer tolerate a close relationship with members of his own race. And when Mrs. James says: "A man should be proud of his community, as a man is proud of his African heritage" (p. 210) Boysie sees this as a threat to his success and to his position in the society.

Boysie's unwillingness to become involved in the racial problem is apparent from the beginning of the novel.

Boysie began writing letters to the newspapers to voice his opinions on matters such as pollution, urban development and high-rise apartments in the downtown area where he lived... These were matters which affected him, he said, more than the problems of immigration which affected some other immigrants he knew. He chose not to waste his time writing letters to the editor about the racial problem in the city, or about police brutality. He was a successful immigrant. And he maintained that he had not experienced discrimination and prejudice.... (p. 3)

As the novel progresses Boysie becomes less willing to "get involved": "He soon became more involved in making money, and bit by bit he dropped off his letter writing altogether, and he began to feel uncomfortable among poor people like the Jameses" (p. 203). Like

Mr. Burrmann in The Meeting Point Boysie's rise to success causes his relationship with those less fortunate than himself to change. He begins to consider only those of the same economic and "intellectual" level as his friends. When he ponders over his "'friends-in-need'... among them were the Canadian young fellow, and ...Mr. MacIntosh" (p. 177).

Slowly, Boysie begins to hate Barbados and to consider Canada as his country. "He did not think in terms of land and birth, and culture and warm soil" (p. 233). The novel has been progressing towards Boysie's final denunciation of his West Indian roots, and it is at this point that the significance of the woman in the brown winter coat is fully realized. One night in the Coq d'Or Tavern Boysie becomes mesmerized by a black singer who appears to exude a kind of freedom on stage as he sings "A Rainy Night in Georgia"--"It was that freedom that Boysie found himself lacking all these years" (p. 236). When, the next morning, Boysie finally "sees" the woman in the brown winter coat and notices a change in her, he is freed from the embryonic state he feels he has been living in. He says: "If she can change, then certainly [I] can change" (p. 240).

The novel ends with Boysie driving in his shiny new Buick, (a symbol of middle-class success), towards the bright lights of success in the United States, "the fountainhead of the 'brother' thing",

perhaps to "find out some answers there" (p. 219). The only thing he is conscious of is "the bigness of the space around him, for he knows he has left one kind of space for another one" (p. 288). Apparently Boysie has succeeded in his quest for "whiteness" yet, for this success, he has paid dearly. Like Rufus and Milton, Boysie is an isolated character at the end of the novel. It is interesting that neither the characters who revolt against the system nor those who become assimilated into it can be said truly to succeed in the end. For, while Rufus, Milton and Henry all have an intense racial consciousness, they are ultimately beaten by the system, and Boysie, who succeeds materially, fails to come to terms with his own identity. Yet, even Boysie, who consciously refuses to "get involved" in the racial problem, displays an interest in the "hip" American negroes he has seen.

Most of the problems portrayed in the novels are left ambiguous. Clarke does not offer a neat solution to these problems because in reality one does not exist. Instead, the novels raise fundamental questions that are a part of, but not exclusive to, the West Indian/North American experience--In what way can the Colonial yoke be finally broken and the cultural and historical components of the oppressed people be recaptured? How may one adopt to a new cultural environment and at the same time maintain one's heritage?

Is it necessary to reject one's origins in order to succeed on Canadian (or other) terms? And finally, how may one synthesize these opposing elements without losing one's sense of self-identity?

## NOTES ON CHAPTER II

1. in Canadian Literature, (vol. 38, Autumn, 1968), p. 104.
2. Lloyd W. Brown, "The West Indian Novel in North America", The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, (No. 9, July, 1970), p. 99.
3. Lloyd W. Brown, "Austin Clarke in Canadian Reviews", p. 102.
4. James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 67-69. (See also a discussion between Boysie and Henry in Storm of Fortune, pp. 58ff.)
5. Lloyd W. Brown, "The West Indian Novel in North America", p. 103.
6. Evidence of this may also be seen in The Survivors of the Crossing where Rufus, dreaming of a time when he would have "more money than a' idiot, more money than Lord Bowring" (p. 190), envisions himself as the new master, the new landlord of his "Kiss-me-arse village", assuming the same role and mannerisms as the plantation overseer.
7. Lloyd W. Brown, "The West Indian Novel in North America", p. 101.
8. C.V.D. Hadley, "Personality Patterns, Social Class, and Aggression in the British West Indies (1949)", Consequences of Class and Color: West Indian Perspectives, (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 24.
9. Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, p. 123:

There is concrete foundation for his impatience with them and their values. Almost everything in them is out of style, inefficient and derisory. But what is this? They are his own people, he is and has never ceased to be one of them at heart!

## CONCLUSION

The Prime Minister provides an interesting conclusion to the five novels discussed in the previous chapters. As mentioned in the Introduction the progression of the novels is one of a preparation for exile, exile in a foreign country, and finally a return from exile. Within this framework the theme of exile is also internalized and is manifested in an individual's alienation from the characters around him. Like Rufus in The Survivors of the Crossing, John Moore's quest to instigate a change brings him into conflict with and alienates him from his unsympathetic and at times hostile political and social environment. One may say that Rufus is the archetypal hero figure on whom Milton Sobers, Henry White and John Moore are modelled. And, like Rufus, these characters are ultimately beaten by the system.

John Moore returns to his native island after twenty years in exile in North America to assume a government post as Director of National Culture, only to find that what the tourists call "paradise" is really a hotbed of political intrigue. Despite the country's newly acquired independent status the people remain in a state of ignorance

and the ministers of government are involved in a vicious power struggle. Unfamiliar with power, John Moore is innocently drawn into a plot to overthrow the government. He is used by the Junta<sup>1</sup> as a scapegoat and is publicly proclaimed to be a dangerous radical. The irony lies in the fact that what is needed in a newly independent country is a radical, unified move towards social, political and economic justice and stability. As portrayed in The Prime Minister however, the ruling élite is more concerned with protecting its own interests than with putting itself to school with the people--providing the intellectual and technical capital necessary for the success of an independent, democratic state.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the needs of the people are essentially ignored while the ministers conspire to destroy all opposition and seize control of the country. As the intrigue builds towards a climax John Moore becomes increasingly paranoid, ultimately fearing for his life. He is powerless to retaliate and finally decides to leave his native land because "there would be nothing more for him in the country" (p. 186).

On his return from North America John Moore finds that the country is plagued by a rampant national inefficiency.

[His] experience abroad implanted in [him] the idea that a new, young, small developing country could be a good challenge. One could do so many things here. All the new techniques, both of living and of working could be applied here. And the country, poor as it was, with its

monumental unemployment and scarcity of skilled and professional people; the country, like its people, would be glad, should be glad for these time-saving, money-saving techniques. (p. 49)

Yet, it is apparent throughout the novel that the country is not "glad" for these techniques. In fact, the government is violently opposed to integrity in all its forms. When John Moore states that "Tourists are not good for the development of a free country" (p. 22), he is accused of being a radical and warned not to apply his North American point of view to the situation on the island for, as Weekesie says: "Tourism is we, boy" (p. 22). The we, of course, is the ruling élite, and it is obvious that the prosperity brought into the country by tourism falls only into the hands of the few in power. A taxi driver tells John Moore that "... all the money they bring-in in here, don't ever reach-down to people like me" (p. 42). Despite the country's newly acquired independent status the position of the proletariat remains essentially the same as that portrayed in Amongst Thistles and Thorns. John Moore notes that "the native people were now serving the tourists" (p. 24). And although there is evidence of widespread discontent among the people, a feeling that "the government ain't no blasted good", no one is willing to voice their discontent openly.

At a cocktail party one of the guests tells John Moore that "People don't talk freely anymore. And still, only last month, in

an American magazine, this country was voted the freest country in the whole world" (p. 24). The irony of this statement becomes increasingly obvious as the novel progresses. People do not "talk freely anymore" because the country is run on "feedback and gossip" (p. 30).

... the country had become a place in which each action and word had to be thought out carefully before its expression; and the known and unknown repercussions understood clearly beforehand. (pp. 26-27)

John Moore realizes that in order to maintain his position he must be careful of what he says: "He must remember not to say stupid things like 'blackness' and 'black is beautiful'. People didn't use these terms here. They might call him a radical for saying them" (p. 32). Like Rufus, Milton Sobers and Henry White, John Moore's racial consciousness brings him into conflict with the society around him. And in The Prime Minister this dilemma is even more poignant than in the earlier novels as the struggle is not one of black versus white, rather it is a class and power struggle between members of the same race.

In The Wretched of the Earth Fanon makes a clear case for the necessity of establishing a national culture in a newly independent country.<sup>3</sup> The political situation in the novel, however, expresses the fact that the ruling élite is essentially opposed to this. On one

occasion John Moore is asked to prepare a paper on indigenous culture only to be told later that it is not needed. And when "The Rate of Exchange" (a calypso about "beach boys") becomes a national success, the government conceives "a carefully designed plan to counteract the nationalism in the country: a yearly festival to be called CRAPPO ("Cultural Regeneration of the Arts of the People's Pragmatic Orientation") (p. 78). John Moore "who felt that 'The Rate of Exchange' was culturally relevant to the consciousness of the grass-roots, and had worked behind the scenes to get the calypso played as often as possible" (p. 78), is ignored by the authorities who proceed with the plans for the festival without his authorization. When he asks Shirleigh if he should have a meeting with the minister responsible she says: "Don't do that. . . that's not what you should do. You know what you should do? Nothing" (p. 78). Earlier, in a conversation between John Moore and Shirleigh in which he tells her that he has never come "second" in his life, she warns him:

"You can't be that ambitious here, though. While you're home now try not to come first. They won't like you for that. . . Down here Johnmoore, people kill one another to come second. Second-place is admirable here." (p. 45)

Although John Moore attempts to take heed of these warnings, the government has already singled him out as the scapegoat of their conspiracy. His position as Director of National Culture makes it

easy for him to be condemned as a radical man-returned to the island to start a black power revolution. The highly influential newspaper, the Weekly (a foreign-controlled paper) manipulates an interview John Moore had done with Malcolm X (when he was the leader of the Black Muslims in America), turning his questions into inflammatory remarks. Consequently, he is marked as a dangerous radical and the whole nation turns against him for threatening to destroy their "paradise".

Vagabond (the janitor in John Moore's office) says:

"Yuh can't put a black man in charge o' nothing nowadays in these days o' inflation, man! Put a black man in charge, and every-blasted-thing is deflated. . . . Whenever you put a colored man in a big important position, and give him some power, he must turn into a rass-hole radical. . . . A black power revolution in this democratic country? Not for shite! Not when it is the white people they going start killing-off, the same white people who is responsible for putting food in our mouths and in our children's mouths. The same white people who have been so good over the years o' history and slavery to the colored people in this country, one of which, mind you, one of which, is the same bastard Johnmoore! All this disruption is running-up the national debt and running-out the tourisses. . . . Man, this place was a staple, peaceable, the most freest country in the whole whirrrrl, before he came back here. " (pp. 126-127).

This statement provides perhaps the best example of the alienation and ignorance of the people and expresses the same kind of self-

defeating attitude displayed by the characters who surround Rufus, Milton Sobers and Henry White in the earlier novels. It also points to the fact that, because of their ignorance, the common people still maintain a kind of dependency on the white man. Earlier, Vagabond says: "I don't believe in having no colored man over me, as no director. This director-job shouldda been given to another white man" (p. 88). Moreover, the power that is in the hands of the blacks in power is misused--used, that is, not for the good of the people but to safeguard their own positions. As John Moore notes:

Everything was ends. "The Lord Giveth and the Lord taketh away." The paradise had reverted back to the plantation. No one ever questioned the historical meaning and the contemporary appropriateness of the quotation, as if they knew it applied to the power over them: the power to give and the power to take. (p. 116)

Through Kwame (the grass-roots politician) the people are manipulated into believing that at least some members of the ruling party are working towards raising the general standard of living--providing adequate food, and jobs for the people. But even Kwame has no real power and he too is used by the Junta in the end. The ministers of government are self-deceiving in their attitude towards the real social and economic situation and their advocacy of worn-out colonial institutions only perpetuates the problems faced by the newly independent nation.

In the Letters to the Editor column a Civitus writes:

"This country has prided itself on three hundred and more years of uninterrupted English institutions and culture. In that time, we have seen our dear land flourish, and today we are a democracy within the sound framework of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Radicalism of whatever form has been kept at bay in this country for too long for some foreign interloper to come with these strange philosophies of radicalism now." (p. 127)

John Moore wants to tell the public that "they were seeing the matter the wrong way" (p. 127), and decides to make a statement on television. Instead of broadcasting the interview with John Moore, however, the station airs a speech by the minister (your-humble-servant) who denounces "all this revolution-talk" (p. 128), and appeals to the audience's emotions by holding a .38 revolver to his head, squeezing the trigger and asking: "Is that what wunnuh want to see in your city? In your neighborhood? In your village? In your country?" (p. 129). In so doing the minister implicates John Moore, about whom rumours had been spread that he was bringing guns into the country to start a revolution. It is apparent that John Moore's term in office, a job that "would last only the life of a government" (p. 8), is soon to be terminated by the powers that be.

While the country's attention is turned towards John Moore, the Junta proceeds to set the wheels in motion for the overthrow of the government. After the minister has denounced revolution and

violence on the television, he states in a meeting of the conspirators:

"The ends justify the means. The ends are, gentlemen, that we are in a position to take-over this country. If violence is the only answer, we will still be taking over. This is war. My whole political future is at stake. And not even my mother is going to screw-up this plan. The action is the ends. We control the means of reaching those ends. And if the present Prime Minister is still Prime Minister the morning after, well everybody's arse is going to be hot. Hot-hot-hot! So, you see what I mean" (p. 162).

Despite the fact that the lives of many innocent people would be sacrificed for the sake of the "cause", the Junta initiates its plan to stir up violence in the city to "counter-act" the "mercenaries" (p. 97). At a meeting held by Kwame in the Market Square the police, under orders from the minister, start a fight, and before long the whole city erupts into chaos. While violence and killings rage in the city the minister calls a television press conference at which he says:

"I have always been a member of the grass roots.... Never before in my political life have I condoned violence. In any shape. In any form. In any manner. This country which I have the humble honor to represent has the reputation, and I may add, the best reputation in this entire region, of being the most stable, most democratic country. All of us in government, and all of you, support our Prime Minister. Our Prime Minister is one of the world's leading statesmen. And I have always given him my full-hearted support. You-all know that. Imagine therefore,

my personal conster... concern, my personal concern, my personal shock, when I learned earlier today that some persons in this community have sought to link my name and my ministry to a plan to overthrow this honorable government!" (p. 174)

The hypocrisy of this statement points to the fact that the ruling party is riddled with duplicity. And although the plan to overthrow the government ultimately backfires and the ministers involved in the conspiracy are arrested, John Moore "worried more about Kwame. They would make sure that he bore all the blame. He would be forgotten soon, and perhaps, in another five years, there would be another grass-roots leader like Kwame whom the ministers and the politicians would coach and program to make their exploitation of the poor more palatable. It would always be the same with the representatives of the grass roots" (p. 179).

If one reads Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth it becomes clear that in The Prime Minister Clarke has not merely fabricated a story. In fact, this most recent novel is a very real exposé of the aftermath of independence. During the struggle for independence, the nation unites and forces colonialism to withdraw but eventually it "cracks up, and wastes the victory it has gained."<sup>4</sup>

The state, which by its strength and discretion ought to inspire and disarm and lull everybody to sleep, on the contrary seeks to impose itself in spectacular fashion. It makes a display, it jostles and bullies them, thus intimating to the

citizen that he is in continual danger. The single party is the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unmasked, unpainted, unscrupulous, and cynical.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the treachery of the pseudo-élitist intellectuals in power the dignity of the people is humiliated and the "democracy" they speak of is a sham and a lie. The party, after independence, "becomes more and more anti-democratic, an implement of coercion".<sup>6</sup> The bitter irony is that, instead of assuming its historical responsibility of awakening a national consciousness, the government betrays the people and creates instead anarchy and repression.

As in his other novels Clarke offers no solution to the problems depicted in The Prime Minister. At the end of the novel John Moore realizes that he must leave the island again. From the moment of his return he has felt threatened and alienated--a stranger among his own people. In this final novel Clarke portrays the difficulties of re-adjusting to one's own culture and society after an extended stay abroad and the narrative is tinged with a special bitterness that is not felt in the earlier novels. The Prime Minister portrays perfectly a line in a letter written to Boysie from Freeness in The Bigger Light:

"The Barbadians who remain here don't want expatriate Barbadians who went abroad and made gentlemen and ladies out of themselves to return back here." (BL, p. 275)

If they do return the underlying assumption is that they will be destined to a fate not unlike that of John Moore. Sadly, John Moore realizes that he has no place in the society and concludes that "You never know how free you are. . . how much freedom you have living in an alien society, until you come back to your own free and independent country" (p. 44).

The Prime Minister essentially brings the novels full circle for, even after independence, the common people are as ignorant as in the first two Barbados-set novels: there is no effective link between the intellectuals in national politics and the grassroots workers, and there is still a grossly inequitable distribution of wealth, power and influence. As in the other novels evidence of the colonial mentality still lingers, particularly in the way in which characters like Vagabond see themselves--as inferior to and dependent on the white man. The characters who seek to instigate a change come into conflict with and are alienated from society. And while one might argue that John Moore is not a radical in the same way in which Rufus is, for instance, his efficiency and honesty are considered "radical" in a corrupt and stagnant society. The conclusion, if it may indeed be called a conclusion, is, in The Prime Minister, essentially the same as that in The Survivors of the Crossing and Amongst Thistles and Thorns--that exile is the only way to escape the system of social and political slavery that exists on the island.

## NOTES ON CONCLUSION

1. The Junta is a body of men gathered together for some secret purpose, especially political intrigue. This body will usually form itself into a party and take control of the country after a coup d'état.
2. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p. 150.
3. See: Chapter "On National Culture", pp. 206ff.
4. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p. 160.
5. Ibid. , p. 165.
6. Ibid. , p. 172.

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