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Alienation in the Life and Works of Richard Wright

Theresa Drew Haymon
Loyola University Chicago

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ALIENATION IN THE LIFE AND WORKS
OF RICHARD WRIGHT

by
Theresa Drew Haymon

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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The author, Theresa Lenora Drew Haymon, is the daughter of Theodore and Alma Drew. She was born April 2, 1946, in Chicago, Illinois.

Mrs. Haymon received her elementary education in the parochial school system of the archdiocese of Chicago. She received her secondary education at Aquinas Dominican High School, Chicago, Illinois, where she was graduated as valedictorian in 1964. Her scholarship there gave rise to the inception of a "Tiara" club (T-here I-s A-ways R-oom A-t [T-he T-op]), reserved for students maintaining a 4.0 average over their four year attendance. Her performance at statewide science fairs and Latin competitions was acknowledged in a special tribute printed by her fellow students in the school publication, Taquin, in June, 1964.

In September, 1964, she entered Loyola University of Chicago on a full tuition Loyola scholarship and an honorary Illinois State scholarship. While attending Loyola University, she was a founding member of the Loyola Concert Choir, an active participant in the "Big Sisters" program for entering students, and was invited into the Honors Program. She received the Bachelor of Science degree in Humanities with a major in English in June, 1968.

In September, 1968, she was awarded an NDEA fellowship for graduate study leading to the doctorate in English at Loyola University of Chicago. While working on this terminal
degree, she was awarded the Master of Arts degree in English in February, 1972 to facilitate full-time employment at Indiana University Northwest, Gary, Indiana. Since August, 1971, she has been a resident faculty member in the English department of Indiana University Northwest of Gary, Indiana. On October 13, 1974, the author married Mr. James Haymon of Gary, Indiana.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Three times within this century, writing by Negroes has been done nearly to death: once by indifference, once by opposition, and once by the enthusiasm of misguided friends."¹ Perhaps no black author's fate better illustrates this lament than that of Richard Wright.

Less than three months after Wright's untimely death, Irving Howe, author of some of the most provocative criticism of Wright, wrote, "It is hard to suppose that he [Wright] will ever be regarded as a writer of the first rank, for his faults are grave and obvious."² Yet Howe also expressed an enthusiasm that provoked his now famous exchange with Ralph Ellison³ by calling the works of Wright "one of the great American testaments" and by bemoaning Wright's neglect by "serious literary persons." Equally contradictory, in view of that harsh opinion that Wright


³Howe's "Black Boys and Native Son" (1963) was a commentary on James Baldwin's criticism of Wright in his essays "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and "Many Thousands
would always be considered inferior, are Howe's concluding remarks that "any view of 20th-century American literature which surmounts critical sectarianism will have to give Wright an honored place" and his further remark that Wright "had told his contemporaries a truth so bitter that they paid him the tribute of striving to forget it." Such ambivalence is unfortunately representative of Wright criticism.

Wright comes to us with a firmly established, yet continually debated reputation as a "protest novelist," a spokesman for the Black man in America, a bitter expatriate. Often he and his creations are judged by these assumptions and found deficient. If Wright is indeed to be remembered primarily as the founder of the "Wright school" of fiction, then indifference or mere historical acknowledgement does not seem unfair. If "Wright's contribution to the Negro was precisely his fusion of a pronounced racialism with a broader tradition of social protest," then it is

Gone" (1951) and on Ellison's rejection of naturalism expressed in his National Book Award speech for Invisible Man, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion" (January 27, 1953). Howe took exception to both young writers' objections to Native Son. Ellison angrily replied in "The World and the Jug"; Howe answered; Ellison penned "A Rejoinder." This exchange is highlighted in Ellison's Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1964).


understandable that Wright is treated in literary histories more often than he is represented in literary anthologies. But do Wright's works allow such facile labeling? Occasionally Wright's academic reputation is ignored or overlooked, and he is "rediscovered." On these occasions, Redding's lament should be heeded by those who would destroy Wright by misguided enthusiasm in an effort to compensate for decades of neglect. Perhaps instead, a calm sorting-out of the most popular labels used to discuss Richard Wright is needed.

Richard Wright is most often associated with the "protest novel." Let us begin our reassessment here, working from the insights of recent critics like George E. Kent. Calling for some shift in the criticism of black literature, Kent discusses terms used as "game names." Elaborating, Kent says, "For example, the term protest covered Richard Wright for thirty years, concealed his depths from us, so that we are just now beginning to find out what his meaning for us is." Kent also incisively discusses universalism as a function of psychological readiness, and explains that Wright's "protest" themes are now being recognized as universal. Certainly, this was not always so.

Precisely the opposite, a presumed lack of universal interest, was often attributed to Wright as proof of his severe limitations. Linking Wright firmly with the protest

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tradition, Bone calls those disciples of the mid-1940's who stressed social consciousness in their fiction the "Wright School." Bone does distinguish Wright's search for meaning in his characters from his imitators' too often sensational compilation of details. Still a guilt by association is implied. Both Wright and his imitators have been treated as merely significant for an historical understanding of the evolution of black writers. Perhaps because of the vigorous rejection of protest fiction found in Baldwin's essays on Native Son, the label "protest writer" stuck to Wright. Perhaps Ellison's achievements in Invisible Man or his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1953, in which he denounced "narrow naturalism," was a major factor solidifying critical opinion against Wright. At any rate, Wright has been relegated to the sub-literary plane of "proletarian novelist" far too long.

It seems clear that Wright's works themselves do not support so narrow a treatment. It now appears true that even his established critics often require a second reading for accuracy. For example, Baldwin's criticism of Wright's "gratuitous and compulsive" use of violence is a well known

7Bone, The Negro Novel in America, pp. 157-160. The explanation that many of Wright's followers, like Ann Petry, Chester Himes, and William Gardner Smith, had newspaper experience that may have led them to stress realistic detail is ironic. Since Richard Wright also had a considerable career in journalism, the explanation becomes a further indictment of guilt by association, rather than the intended vindication of Wright.
assertion from Nobody Knows My Name (1961), published soon after Wright's death. In that same essay, however, Baldwin remarks, "It is strange to begin to suspect, now, that Richard Wright was never, really, the social and polemical writer he took himself to be." 8 Maybe it is more accurate to say Wright was not the mere social, polemical writer Baldwin and others took him to be. It now seems unwise to have relied on the remarks of Baldwin and other writers in direct competition with Wright as decisive guides for assessing Wright's worth. Speaking from the perspective of Wright's death, Baldwin was forced to admit, "...Richard was right to be hurt, I was wrong to have hurt him. I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own." 9

Reflecting further, Baldwin applauds Wright's forte of conveying inward states by means of externals, and suggests that Wright's landscape was not simply the Deep South or Chicago, but the world and the human heart. Consistent with this posthumous reappraisal, Baldwin admits Wright's influence on him long before they had met by claiming, "his example had helped me to survive." He continues, "...Richard Wright had a tremendous effect on countless numbers of people whom he never met, multitudes whom he now will never meet." 10 How sad that Baldwin's second thoughts were


9Ibid., p. 197.

10Ibid., p. 201.
never as widely read or as seriously followed as his earlier essays. The record is being set straight now, but the damage has already been done for generations of readers of Richard Wright who know of his critical reputation.

So it seems that "protest writer" was too restrictive a label for the achievement and influence of Richard Wright. Let us consider another then. Can an impact such as that Baldwin later acknowledges be explained by Wright's role as a self-made sociologist? Eldridge Cleaver, learning of Richard Wright years after his death while Cleaver was in prison wrote, "Of all black American novelists, and indeed of all American novelists of any hue, Richard Wright reigns supreme for his profound political, economic, and social reference." Of course, no one would argue Cleaver's authority to make a formal evaluation, but he is only a recent addition to the group of readers who find Wright's sociological content valuable. Earlier, for example, Irving Howe had infuriated Ellison by asserting that a black novelist was, by nature, involved with sociology. He had said,

How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulse to protest....

11For an accurate summary of the objections Baldwin raised and for an analysis of his intentions and motives, see Maurice Charney, "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright," American Quarterly 15 (Spring 1963), 65–75.

The 'sociology' of his existence forms a constant pressure on his literary works, and not merely in the way this might be true of any writer, but with a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove.\textsuperscript{13} Ellison countered that an artist can transform his life into his art. He angrily asked, "How much, by the way, do we know of Sophocles' wounds?"\textsuperscript{14}

Yet despite Ellison's retort and his assertion that an artist's response to his social awareness need not diminish his craft, Wright's reputation as a social spokesman seems hard to forget. Even in this decade, Nathan A. Scott, Jr. believes, "Mr. Wright's crucial failure: he simply did not know enough about the labyrinthine interiorities of the human soul."\textsuperscript{15} Scott feels Wright makes no allowance for human existence outside of purely social and historical dimensions. How wrong Scott is. Wright's highest achievement is precisely his ability to transcend the purely social or historical and to treat distinctly "human" concerns. The works themselves remain the ultimate proof of Wright's achievement. A closer look at the texts will decide whether or not Wright was successful in moving beyond sociological concerns. Still the commercial and critical success of

\textsuperscript{13}Quoted in Ralph Ellison, \textit{Shadow and Act}, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{14}ibid., p. 119.

Wright's foreign translations at least suggests a significance beyond the social or national.\(^{16}\)

Though even his successors Baldwin and Ellison have conceded that Wright was more than a "protest writer," "naturalist," or "sociological spokesman," Wright was even more severely restricted by those who labeled him an unfortunate expatriate. At a symposium on Wright attended by Horace Cayton, Arna Bontemps, and moderator Herbert Hill, Saunders Redding sternly criticized Baldwin's repudiation of any debt to Wright (a recently corrected position, as we've seen). Yet on the subject of Wright's move to Paris, Redding is as unfair to Wright as Baldwin has ever been. Redding notes,

Well, I think going to France, for Dick, was a mistake .... My feeling is that his abandonment of America did things to him, weakened him emotionally—he no longer had anything to write about.\(^{17}\)

While alive, Wright had bristled over the numerous criticisms of his move to Europe. Upset by Redding's negative review of The Outsider, written while Wright was in France, Wright had asked why Joyce, Hemingway, and Faulkner were assumed to have been enriched by their moves to Europe but

\(^{16}\)Within the first decade of its publication, Black Boy was translated and read in Brazil, Palestine, Argentina, England, and the Scandinavian countries. The novel received the French Critics' Award in 1948. Native Son appeared in a French and Italian edition, as well as Wright's Argentine stage version, Sangre Negra. Wright's works were often better received in foreign versions than in English by American critics.

\(^{17}\)Hill, Anger and Beyond, pp. 205-6.
he, only criticized. Bontemps, recalling Wright's anger and answering him at the symposium, replied: "Wright wrote best when angry, tense, unhappy. Paris relaxed his tension."
Redding added that Wright's estrangement from French culture and his basic Americanism were unlike the other expatriates' alleged cosmopolitanism. The replies seem unfair and superficial. Personal prejudice seems to be operating. Redding had always criticized Wright for leaving his homeland, it should be noted. For example, in an essay written the year before the symposium, Redding had denounced the effects of Wright's move on his created characters. He concluded, "Richard Wright had forgotten the tough American idiom. He had been gone from home too long."

Redding's words reveal an oversimplification, since expatriate is a logically unacceptable description of Wright during his pre-Paris years. Yet there are remarkable similarities in the themes used during these years and those Wright treated in the later works written while he lived in Europe. Apparently his geographical location is not the cause for his subjects, then. The subjects treated after Wright's 1946 move are often mere logical extensions of earlier concerns. It seems then that we cannot accept Redding's assertion that "Southern Negro life was Wright's

only true theme"; particularly not when two years later, discussing *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, Redding himself said, "Because it was not in the truest sense particular and confined; because it was in the absolute sense universal, the stuff with which Wright employed his pen was stern and terrible."¹⁹ Wright's themes cannot be simultaneously parochial and universal. Surely labels that cause such obvious contradictions should be carefully reconsidered.

Still yet another label impedes progress on an accurate assessment of Richard Wright. In a strong repudiation of the novel that brought Wright to national and international prominence, Scott follows the example of Baldwin and Ellison in his denunciation of Wright's black characterizations:

...when one reads today the story of Bigger Thomas, one cannot but be struck by how little the novel gives us of the bite and flavor either of social actuality or of the particular kind of human individual of whom Bigger is offered as an exemplum....²⁰

Continuing, Scott gives Wright the newest label--perpetuator of black stereotypes. (Ironically this was precisely the fault Wright himself had criticized in the Harlem Renaissance writers.)²¹ Scott believes *Native Son* "moves wholly

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²⁰Scott, p. 76.

²¹In "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge* (Autumn 1937), 53-65, Wright's most complete statement on black writing, he called for literary description that would correct the socially imposed stereotypes and allow for greater creative autonomy.
within the envenomed abstract of racial myth" because of the author's insistence on "the racial tragedy." Scott seems to be blindly following Baldwin's criticism of the fifties that Bigger is not representative of the Negro's realities or one of the Negro's roles. Baldwin's inaccuracies can perhaps be excused when we recall that he had also said, "The idea of Bigger as a warning boomerangs not only because it is quite beyond the limit of probability that Negroes in America will ever achieve the means of wreaking vengeance upon the state but also because it can not be said that they have any desire to do so." So Baldwin simply underestimated the black rage Wright could appreciate because he had so often lived with it himself. On the other hand, Scott has lived through Watts and Detroit and Boston. How can he believe Wright's characters "in no way removed from the wild and lickerish nigger who inhabits the demented imagination of the racial paranoiac"? Perhaps because respected critics have so long and so consistently moved from Wright's emphasis on social conflict to assumptions about his fiction. In fact Wright's alleged tendency to create


23Scott, p. 81.

24For an even more recent criticism of Wright's alleged stereotypes, see Theodore L. Gross, The Heroic Ideal in American Literature (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pp. 149-57.
stereotypes has been extended to his non-fiction as well by the same oversimplifications and use of outdated assessments.

The facts are that many of the labels used to describe Wright originated after his publication of *Native Son* (1940) and have little to do with his early poems, non-fiction, or even later fiction. Nevertheless these labels formed the basis for sharp criticism of the very existence of Wright's later works. He has been patronized for being a mere racial or social protester, yet he was also severely criticized when he attempted to expand his literary or personal interests. Ironically from his "existentialist novel" or "novel of ideas," as *The Outsider* (1953) is often called, Wright derived one final label—"misguided Negro intellectual."

While alive, Wright was never comfortable with the term "intellectual." He recalls for us his discomfort with black Communists' assumptions of his educational superiority long before this became a popular label for him: "I was shocked to hear that I, who had been only to grammar school, had been classified as an intellectual." Yet after the publication of *The Outsider*, Wright was vehemently condemned for refusing to stay in his intellectual place. Often the assertion was made that Existentialism was over his head and that his failures stemmed from his mistaken move to France.

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For example Redding, speaking at the aforementioned symposium said,

Dick was a small town boy—all of his days. The hog maw and the collard greens. He was fascinated by the existentialist group for a while, but he didn't really understand them. 26

Even harsher is Noel Schraufnagel's recent criticism that Wright left the area of his abilities when he considered a subject beyond race. He writes,

In concentrating on existentialism from what is essentially a nonracial standpoint [in The Outsider], Wright divorces himself from the emotional atmosphere of Native Son only to find himself in a frigid intellectual mausoleum that is largely devoid of artistic significance. 27

So it seems Wright was to be criticized whether he focused on emotions or sociology or characters or concepts.

But a dilemma exists. If critics have found Wright deficient as a novelist, a racial spokesman, a sociological writer, and an intellectual, how do we explain the results of a recent survey of Black Literature courses and teachers in American colleges and universities reported in the February, 1975 issue of College English? Roger Whitlow, author of the article, reports:

At a time, then, when especially senior college and university enrollment has declined more than ten percent nationwide, as it has during the past three years, and when, during the same period of time, the number

26 Hill, Anger and Beyond, p. 107.

of English majors, the largest group of students traditionally enrolled in literature courses, has declined nearly fifty per cent ... almost 80 per cent of the senior institutions' enrollments in black literature courses are either holding stable or actually continuing to increase....

More to the point, Whitlow reports that the list of authors considered important enough to merit courses specifically in their own names is headed by Richard Wright. He also heads the list of those thirty-five black authors regularly studied in the 648 responding institutions. Is it possible that Wright has proven stronger than decades of critical neglect or narrow criticism?

Sixteen years before Wright's death, Edward Embree made a prediction that apparently escaped the notice of Wright's readers. Perhaps it contains a clue to the author's admirable resilience. Embree said,

He will perhaps continue to use Negro characters, for he [Wright] knows their lives with a wealth of detail that would be hard to gain about any other group. But more and more his writing is likely to show the struggles of human beings regardless of race or class. His stories are likely to grow more and more universal, to move more and more with the compelling fate of a Greek tragedy.

Embree was right, though his remarks went unheeded. Richard Wright has been called a novelist, playwright, poet,


29Whitlow, pp. 642-43.

polemicist, journalist, essayist, Marxist, puritan, agnostic, existentialist, non-Communist revolutionary, integrationist for America, nationalist for Africa and humanist for the world. Any man who has attempted all of these roles can never be defined by any one or any combination of them. Yet that final role, humanist for the world, deserves further exploration, for it comes closest to the whole man and to a fair assessment of the body of his writings.

George Kent, who earlier warned us of the word games involving "protest," also clarifies the meaning of "universalism," too often misused in literary criticism. Kent says its current use misdirects the writer and critic to speak of vague abstractions like "Man" and "the Human Condition." On the contrary, says Kent,

any universalism worthy of recognition derives from the depths of exploration of the density, complexity, and variety of a people's experience—or a person's. It is achieved by going down deep—not by transcending.32

In all fairness, we must agree that the exploration of an individual's experiences can be genuinely universal in appeal

31 This catalogue appears in Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, trans from the French by Isabel Barzun (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), p. 529. Fabre's text superseded Webb's biography and now appears to be the definitive biography of Wright. Because of Fabre's exclusive access to the unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, and other private papers of Wright, made available to him by Mrs. Ellen Wright, this text is an indispensable tool for all serious work on Wright, and is quoted throughout this study.

32 Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, p. 11.
and meaning. Wright's focus on the alienation, poverty, and brutality he knew need not be merely "racial" or "proletarian" because it is personal.

Of course Wright's focus did begin as a purely personal search. He was black in a white world; independent in an oppressed race; curious in a conformist family. His own needs and dire circumstances intensified Wright's sense of being alienated and isolated. For survival, Wright set out to explore the variety and complexity of his experiences. But his gropings for an explanation soon led him outside of himself to his family, his Southern environment, to his country, his historical era, and finally to the frightful reality that Wright grappled with in his writings—the fact of man's alienation. Wright is most compelling when his poems, essays, and stories succeed in exploring this theme and its corollary, man's contradictory impulses toward conformity and towards individuality. Wright is misunderstood and criticized when this theme is not clearly defined or when the subject dominates Wright's artistic control. Thus the term requires some definition before it is traced through the body of Wright's works.

Alienation, for Richard Wright, was never merely personal. It could not be completely explained by his poverty or his race, though Wright tried, probed, and finally rejected both explanations. Instead alienation was an expansive spiritual, nearly cosmic reality Wright believed
inherent in humanity. Common to all men in all places, alienation seemed part of the challenge of being fully human to Wright; that is, of being innately valuable, rational, hence worthy of respect. His writings reveal a growing conviction that man needs to be accepted by a group yet free to exist apart from and outside of that group. More and more, Wright reaches through his experiences and those of the characters he created to the conclusion that man is naturally, inevitably, and utterly alone. Wright often lingers over the point where lover, family, church, or state are incapable of sustaining man. In the simultaneous struggle for acceptance yet insistence on individuality, Wright eventually locates full humanity and defines the supreme challenge facing modern man.

In this theme of ultimate, inevitable alienation, I believe we have a key to the uneven quality but consistent depth of concern in the works of Richard Wright. For example, *Native Son*, Wright's most famous and most controversial novel, could not have survived nearly four decades if the "protest" label given it were accurate. If Bigger Thomas were only a puppet dangling amidst Communist propaganda, he would have fallen to oblivion as our fear of and interest in Communism waned. Again Embree seems to have been perceptive, if not accurate when he said, "Wise readers quickly saw that this was the story of not only one miserable Negro boy, but in some degree of all individuals who are rejected by their
world and who fight back in blind and futile fury." Have there been too few "wise readers" in America who dared to acknowledge the larger scope of Wright's interests? Fortunately, there have been some honest enough or brave enough to acknowledge Wright's true subject in Native Son and to give Wright the credit he deserves for identifying this modern problem. For example, Edward Margolies, a student of Richard Wright's works for many years, referring to Native Son seven years ago wrote,

Whatever the case, on rereading the novel some twenty-five years later, one finds that much of the criticism seems clearly beside the point. What Wright was describing, although he may not have known it at the time, was his vision of modern man.

Margolies has made a crucial discovery, though his discussion does not suggest any further interest in the point. Margolies is accurate if patronizing in his conclusion that Wright's subject was modern man. Why must we assume he was unaware of this vast subject? Too often Wright tells us quite the opposite. One example is the beautifully lyric expression of his disillusionment with Communism found in Crossman's collection. After the May Day incident where he was physically ejected from the ranks marching in a public parade, Wright reflected,

33 Embree, 13 Against the Odds, p. 42.

I headed toward home alone, really alone, now, telling myself that in all of the sprawling immensity of our mighty continent the least-known factor of living was the human heart, the least-sought goal of being was a way to live a human life.  

These were the questions plaguing Wright. What were the demands of the human heart? How did man manage to live a "human" life? Wright was renewed, he tells us, after that May Day incident by a vow "to fling a spark into this darkness" out of a need for his own survival and "to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexorably human." The experience was enlightening; Wright's words, illuminating. Wright was forced to admit that the brotherhood and dignity he had looked for in the Communist party was illusory. The "god" with which he had tried to replace his family's tyrannical Christian God had failed him. If dignity and self-esteem could not be found within, Wright was forced to admit, it would never be found, for all man had that he could count on was himself. As he recalls that memorable experience, Wright reflects on the human, not merely racial or even national aspects of his desire to belong and his disappointment with the Party. His words tell us that Wright's view of what it means to be a modern man includes a deep, basic sense of alienation and individual isolation. Alone,

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36 Ibid.
Wright vowed to feed the hunger for life that gnaws in all men by reminding man of the treasure of his humanity. He set out to achieve this goal the only way he knew how—in his writing.

Therefore while rejecting the usual critical labels for Richard Wright, I acknowledge the challenge of assessing the body of his writings. Chronology, tradition, race—none is sufficient to order the collection into a logical, coherent framework. Wright was a sensitive, complex individual. However, one theme does seem naturally to link his concerns. The desperate struggle to belong Wright waged with his family, his country, his profession, and later with the world seems rooted in his belief that each of us is inevitably alone. I believe the tension between this intuition and his own strong needs for acceptance contributed to misunderstandings about Richard Wright, his social and literary goals, and his degree of success in achieving them. There is no question that a large number of Wright's works are defensive in tone. Wright was not merely justifying his decision to become a writer, to marry outside of his race, to live outside of his homeland, to have an opinion on world affairs. Wright was defending his right to think and feel and express himself and change his mind—in short, to be human. It is this very defense of his humanity that continues to speak so eloquently to readers across racial, cultural, and linguistic barriers. It is this emphasis
on the human that seems to have escaped many of Wright's critics who saw and judged him as a black writer, not simply as a man who used his writing to cope with the complexities of his world. We need to consider how alienation figured in that world.
CHAPTER II

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF RICHARD WRIGHT

"That a novelist rather than a criminal emerged from the racial prejudice, poverty, family disorganization, and inadequate education that affected his early years is a phenomenon not easy to explain."¹ Thus opens Kinnamon's recent study of the effects of his social reality on the literary personality of Richard Wright. It is true that Wright's life helped to structure his art, but the usual conclusions based on this truism underestimate Wright's intentions and achievement. For example, Kinnamon concludes his study asserting, "Wright's chief subject is the racial problem, and his chief importance is as an interpreter of it in imaginative literature...."² Kinnamon can be allowed this conclusion, since his study treats only the "emergence" of Wright. Too often, however, this evaluation is offered as a final assessment of Wright, because his critics know only

¹Keneth Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society (U. of Ill. Press, 1972), p. 3. This excellent study of the life, literary career, and social milieu of Richard Wright from his birth to 1940 contains a premise that fear and alienation are central to Wright's early fiction (p. 33). I would extend the theme of alienation to the entire body of Wright's work and define the term more expansively than Kinnamon does.

²Ibid., p. 161.
his life (primarily as Wright sketched it in *Black Boy*) and his major novels. Considered more fully, Wright's life confirms my belief that his chief subject matter goes beyond the racial problem to the human problem of alienation.

Richard Wright's genealogy boasts of four slave grandparents. His father, Nathan, born just before 1880, left the village of Stanton (east of Natchez) to be a sharecropper. Nearby at a party, Nathan met Ella Wilson. He later married the school teacher who taught spelling, arithmetic and geography in a one-room school four months a year for twenty-five dollars a month.\(^3\) The Wilsons, who had been a part of Natchez's black bourgeoisie before they were economically ruined and forced to move to Jackson, considered Ella's marriage to an illiterate sharecropper a mistake. They were especially upset that Ella was to leave her mother's distinctive Adventist religion to join her husband in Methodism.\(^4\) However, the marriage did take place in 1907, and on September 4, 1908, in the midst of desperate poverty on a sharecropper's farm, Ella Wilson Wright gave birth to a


\(^4\)Since it prohibited working on Saturday, often necessary to supplement the low wages of blacks, and forbade the eating of pork, a staple of the Southern diet, Adventism indeed distinguished the Wilsons from their lower-middle class black neighbors.
son named for his two grandfathers, Richard and Nathaniel.

When Richard Nathaniel Wright was four years old, a crucial incident occurred that may have significantly shaped his personality. When Richard Nathaniel Wright was four years old, a crucial incident occurred that may have significantly shaped his personality. Angry, fretful over continual scoldings from his mother to keep still, and yearning for the outdoors, Richard was playing with his brother in the family's front room. The Wrights were now living with Grandmother Wilson, and Richard had already found the atmosphere stifling. There were so many things he was forbidden to do. Fascinated this day with the effect fire had on the billowy, white curtains he had been forbidden ever to touch, and eager to show his superiority over his younger brother, Richard defied Leon's warnings and succeeded in burning down part of his bed-ridden grandmother's house. He was to suffer severely for his mother's fears that he had perished in the flames. During the blaze, Wright tells us, "I yearned to become invisible, to stop living." But he was not invisible. Despite his hiding under the burning house to escape punishment, Richard, feeling lonely and "cast forever

5Fabre believes this incident, long before Wright had ever experienced racism, may account for Wright's original feelings of deep insecurity and estrangement. The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, p. 10. Certainly the event prepared Wright for his life-long reflections on fear and isolation and human worth.

6Interestingly Wright tells us he was only a year older than his brother in Black Boy, Perennial Classic (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 9. Born September 24, 1910, Leon Alan was actually two years younger than Richard.
out of life," was discovered. His mother beat him unconscious. A doctor had to be consulted when Richard was confined to bed with a nightmare-ridden fever. Physically and emotionally he had responded gravely to his mother's hysteria. Wright tells us he never forgot how close she had come to killing him out of her fear for his safety. Surely that must be considered a formative incident linking estrangement, betrayal, and uninhibited independence in young Richard Wright's mind. Richard had wanted to assert himself before his younger brother by defying the rules of the household. Instead he had incited the person he felt closest to in the world, his mother, to express her love by nearly taking his life. Four year old Richard Wright must have been thoroughly confused by it all.

Wright's erratic childhood continued. Sometime in 1911, Richard's father, Nathan, took his family on a riverboat, the Kate Adams, and migrated upstream to Memphis, then a famous center for cotton and banking, the metropolis of Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. The Wright family had a kitchen and bedroom apartment off Beale Street that was a far cry from the clear air and green expanses of Mississippi. In these bleak surroundings, Richard became accustomed to the world of the streets. His father worked as a night porter at the Lyle Drugstore, so the boys had to keep quiet during the day while Nathan slept. Tensions mounted as the cramped quarters estranged family members, and Richard
withdrawn from his father. Soon Nathan, frustrated by long hours, low pay, and the temptations of the big city, withdrew from his family too. After his desertion to live with a mistress, young Richard came to know real hunger. He tells us in *Black Boy* that whenever he felt hunger, he thought of his absent father "with a deep biological bitterness" (p. 22).

Fatherless, hungry, brutalized by the streets of Memphis, nearly overcome by his youthful alcoholism (acquired by roaming the streets unsupervised while Ella worked at odd jobs), upset by his mother's attempts to isolate him from the neighborhood children whom she considered "not of his kind," Richard sought refuge in learning at an early age. The coal man taught him to count in a single afternoon. His mother helped him to read the Sunday paper. At a small private school in the neighborhood, Richard also learned the shame of being different. Now about age seven, Richard was unlike the other students at Howe Institute. He was too shy to participate in classroom activities, too poor to dress like the others, and without a father. About this time, Ella Wright sought refuge in religion, but Richard rejected its restraints. When Ella became ill, Richard and Leon were sent to a Methodist orphanage where Richard lived in fear of the directress, Miss Simon. Wright tells us of this period, "I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others. I held myself in, afraid to act or
speak until I was sure of my surroundings, feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a void."  

Memphis had "lifted [Wright] in its burning arms and borne [him] toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing."  

Surely the seven-year old Wright was beginning to think survival a lonely struggle and man an alien.  

The summer of 1916 gave Richard a needed reprieve in the joy of a seven-room house with a garden. His mother and the boys had gone to Jackson, Mississippi to stay with her family before moving on to Elaine, Arkansas. Ella's sister, Maggie, had invited them to live with her. During his happy hiatus, Eloise Crawford (a young teacher lodging in the Wilson house, called Ella in Black Boy) told Richard the story of Bluebeard and fired his imagination. Unfortunately she also enflamed Granny Wilson's religious fanaticism. Granny considered fiction "lies," and evicted Miss Crawford for corrupting her grandson. How interesting that much later in life, Wright was to recall Granny's charge when he met stern criticism concerning the degree of realism in his fiction. He was much later to be criticized for his "lies" about American race relations and the quality of modern life.  

The summer of 1916 also introduced Wright to the tyranny of race, since the location of his grandparents' house  

7 Wright, Black Boy, p. 38.  

8 Ibid., p. 43.
caused him increased contact with whites. He resolved, "If anybody tried to kill me, then I would kill them first." Although no one tried to kill Richard, his words were a foreshadowing of a murder he was soon to experience in Elaine, Arkansas. Aunt Maggie, his mother's closest sister and Richard's favorite aunt, had just married a divorcé, Silas Hoskins. In Elaine, where he owned a flourishing black tavern that served the hundreds of black workers from the nearby sawmills, Uncle Hoskins and Aunt Maggie welcomed Ella and her fatherless sons. Here Richard had plenty to eat, was free of Granny's discipline, and grew close to his uncle and the freedom of the countryside. But one day Uncle Hoskins did not return from the saloon where he often spent the night armed with a revolver for protection against the envious whites of the town. Learning that he had been killed by those always threatening whites and that Uncle Hoskins' murderers were now threatening to kill the rest of his family and steal their property, the terrified sisters left everything—including slain Uncle Silas's body—and fled to West Helena, Arkansas. So racial hostility was added to the list of hunger, desertion, urban brutality, and religious restrictions Wright had endured by age eight.

Unhappy in West Helena, the sisters returned to the Wilson home in Jackson. After a few months of somberness and all the old differences of opinion and temperament, Ella

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9Ibid., p. 58.
and Maggie preferred the independence of working in West Helena. They returned to the small, young industrial suburb of Helena, Arkansas. For nearly two years, the sisters and Ella's young boys moved from house to house, depending on their finances. Richard learned about whorehouses, trains, and his mother's insistence that he maintain his distance from the beggars, prostitutes, thieves, and unruly children about him. Richard was being taught that living next to others did not automatically make him one of them. Richard fought constantly to maintain his status in the black gangs despite his mother's objections. Membership in the gangs may have been socially undesirable, but the only alternative, total isolation, seemed much worse to young Richard. Briefly, when his mother's job with a white doctor allowed him suitable clothes to attend the community school, Richard felt a part of the black community. Then Ella's health started to deteriorate into paralysis, and Richard experienced an utter loneliness he describes as terrifying. At age ten, Wright lived with the constant, gnawing recognition of human frailty and with a tragic sense of human existence somehow identified with individual suffering. In a well-known passage from _Black Boy_ on Ella Wright's suffering, Wright tells us it grew to symbolize "the meaningless pain and the endless suffering" of life. He concludes,

> A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart
and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me.10

Yet critics were to say years later that Wright's existentialism stemmed from a misguided attempt to fraternize with the French thinkers he met in Paris. Poverty, neglect and illness had prepared Wright to believe that each man exists as an individual in a purposeless universe that he must structure with his own free will. Life taught the young Wright that alienation is man's lot.

In 1918 when Ella Wright became paralyzed, Granny Wilson collected money from the rest of the family to bring the boys and their helpless mother home. It was decided that the boys would have to be separated, since the added expense of two extra dependents was enormous for such poor people. Richard went off to Greenwood, Mississippi and Leon returned to Detroit with Aunt Maggie to ease the burden. Richard would have preferred living with his favorite aunt, Maggie, rather than with his Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody. Because of their reserve and his heightened need for attention and affection, Richard felt uneasy in his new home. He began to sleepwalk. He suffered guilt feelings for his mother's illness. Finally when he learned that a little boy had died in his new bed and he could not be convinced to conquer his fears of being haunted, Richard was allowed to

10Wright, Black Boy, pp. 111-12.
return to his grandparents' home in Jackson. Problems quickly arose there because of Richard's strong objections to his grandmother's strict Adventism. He recalls, "I longed for happiness here and now, in the form of feeling with the feelings of my body....I was too sensual for Protestantism...." At this point, Wright's rejection of religion was caused by the conflicting demands of his need for emotional survival and his insistence on personal freedom. Adventism threatened both. Young Richard's rejection of Adventism made him an outcast in his own family.

The religious conflict with his grandmother and the physical confrontation such arguments finally brought about with his Aunt Addie, teacher of the Adventist school Richard attended in 1920, sent Wright to his peers for acceptance. He despised the poverty and religious customs that made him so different from the others. These differences so often led to misunderstandings, even ostracism. For example, Richard's consistent refusal to accept invitations to parties out of shame for his ill-fitting clothing or his inability to bring a present caused some to think him conceited and aloof. Recalling his separateness from his classmates, Wright says, "Again and again I vowed that someday I would end this hunger of mine, this apartness, this eternal difference; and I did not suspect that I would never get intimately

into their lives...."12 Fortunately a job as a newsboy after school allowed him a little extra money and introduced Richard to the stories of the illustrated literary supplements in the Ku Klux Klan supported papers he innocently delivered. Reading heightened Wright's interest in becoming a writer. Ironically this interest further estranged him from the Mississippi youngsters Wright longed to know. They were unable to accept a fellow black who wanted to write. Their surprise at his aspirations was oddly flattering to Wright, however. He longed to impress his friends, to be accepted by them. Yet he was proud of the growing realization that he was different from them. Isolation and the nagging alienation he felt could not be overcome by mere conformity, Richard was learning.

In 1922 Richard served as a secretary accountant to Mr. W. Mance in the Mississippi Delta area. Wright felt absolutely no kinship with "the monotony and stupidity" of black sharecropper life. Furthermore, Grandfather Wilson's illness and eventual death impressed Richard with the injustice the white world so easily, callously, and constantly inflicted on illiterate and defeated black people.13 He would never be like them, the young Wright vowed. He was

12Black Boy, p. 140.

13Grandfather Wilson had escaped slavery at age eighteen to serve with the Union Army. He later lost the sight of one eye and suffered from chronic rheumatism. Yet because of a clerical error made in copying his surname,
beginning to assert himself more at home now too. Threatening to leave unless allowed to work on the Sabbath, he triumphed over his grandmother's religious strictures. He felt suddenly free. His triumph caused him total estrangement from his grandmother and aunt, however. "Now I was truly dead to Granny and Aunt Addie, but my mother smiled when I told her that I had defied them. She rose and hobbled to me on her paralytic legs and kissed me."14 Ella Wright's support of her son's independent spirit no doubt comforted him, but it certainly must have contributed to his growing confusion about separateness, conformity, acceptance, and independence.

By June of 1923, Wright had finished the Jim Hall School and had gone on to work for a white family, the Walls, to help finance his eighth grade instruction at the Smith-Robinson School. An incident that occurred at the Wall home reminded Wright of his alienation and may have helped him construct certain episodes in Native Son years later.15 However innocent his intentions, Wright was

Richard Wilson was discharged as Richard Vincent, and was never able to prove his right to a pension. He died believing himself the victim of a Confederate plot. Fabre, p. 42.

14Wright, Black Boy, p. 126.

15Entering Mrs. Wall's bedroom without knocking, Wright found her partially undressed. He was severely reprimanded and made painfully aware of his sex and race by a family that had seemed to accept him. Dr. Wertham relates this incident to an earlier one in Wright's life and
finding out that he could not assert his personality, demand respect for himself and his ideas, and still be accepted. Always he found himself on the outside angrily, earnestly, futilely trying to belong. His interest in writing continued to be a real consolation.

Wright soon produced his first published story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre," introducing James "Bigger" Thomas as the hero. The protagonist, like the young Wright, was alone and misunderstood. Unlike Wright, "Bigger" had learned to control his situation by defiant revolt. Richard's efforts to assert himself seemed wrong, self-defeating. "Bigger's" defiance worked. One major significance of this protagonist is the key his alienation provides for our reading of later Wright characters, especially Thomas's namesake in Native Son. Thirteen year old Richard Wright never really knew James Thomas, but he recalls for us the bully's power over the other children and their efforts to make him feel superior in order to retrieve their toys. Although Wright admits his own fear of and a secret identification with the bully who demanded their respect, others knew Thomas as a usually inebriated illiterate. 16 So it is not the accurate representation of a youth Wright sought to

to Bigger's burning of Mary's body in the novel. For a fuller treatment, see Frederic Wertham, "An Unconscious Determinant in Native Son," Journal of Clinical Psychopathology, VI (July 16, 1944), 113-14.

16 Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, p. 537n.
present in his story, but an impressionistic rendering of a little known, little understood figure who allowed Wright to glory in the power of assertive individuality. Often in his later fiction, Wright would substitute such an impressionistic view for realistic characterization because the figure he had chosen for his story was only partially knowable. Such a fictional character was generally unable to communicate with others and often knew himself too little to be able to explain his feelings or actions. His isolation makes such a character both intriguing and yet unsatisfying. Wright himself would later acknowledge an inherent weakness in his inarticulate characters and would move on to more comprehensible figures.\textsuperscript{17} Wright's first story suggests that alienation is an important theme. The alienation felt by his character allowed Wright identification with his hero, yet led the work to an inevitable weakness in characterization. Wright could not satisfactorily create a figure he never really knew.

Publishing a story in the \textit{Southern Register} did not ease Richard's isolated position within the Wilson household. Granny objected to \textit{Hell} in his title. Other family members considered the story pointless and objected further to Richard's determination to be a writer. Initiative and determination were no better rewarded in school.

\textsuperscript{17}See chapter three of this study for treatment of characterization in Wright's fiction and the problem alienation created.
In 1925 Richard was a ninth grade graduate whose determination to deliver his own valedictory address, "The Attributes of Life," rather than the prepared speech offered by the school's administrator to appease the white community, again caught him between alienation and accommodation. Since he had apparently started too late to learn to live passively in the South, Wright felt the need to leave Jackson for the North after his graduation. Frustrated in his attempt to save enough money from his job as a bellboy, Richard toyed with the idea of stealing funds for his departure. The controversy over his speech assured him of difficulty acquiring a teaching position, and there was never any assurance of using his education to become a writer. So leaving the South was necessary; hence, stealing was necessary.

Fear of being caught, not moral scruples, haunted Richard. Finally, Richard got a job as a ticket collector for the Alamo Theatre and joined the illicit plot his black fellow workers had formulated to exploit the Jewish owner of the theater maintained for the blacks of the neighborhood. The money earned from this plot, added to that received from a stolen gun and a raid of the Jackson College storehouses, made Richard's escape from the South a reality. He had paid dearly for his freedom, Wright was to show us in the relevant pages of Black Boy (pp. 215-27). There is some ambivalence in Wright's recollections. He says that his
alienation from white society saved him from any severe pangs of conscience about the thefts. "He [the Jewish proprietor] was white, and I could never do to him what he and his kind had done to me. Therefore, I reasoned, stealing was not a violation of my ethics, but of his...."

The rationalization did not satisfy Wright. His acts of theft had cost him the self-esteem he was leaving his home state to find. On the train heading north, Wright recalls for us,

In that moment I understood the pain that accompanied crime and I hoped that I would never have to feel it again. I never did feel it again, for I never stole again; and what kept me from it was the knowledge that, for me, crime carried its own punishment.

If his recollections are accurate, the isolation that comes from moral alienation and fear of detection was a feeling Wright mastered. The deeper alienation he had felt as a black, as a Southerner, as a man he would find more difficult to master. It is this deeper alienation that should concern us, even in this incident where race seems a crucial factor. Wright felt no kinship with the Jewish proprietor. He thought he felt an allegiance to his fellow blacks who had found a way to compensate for the exploitation of their fellow black neighbors. But Wright found himself troubled by a deeper issue than race. He could not reconcile his notions of trust, justice, and humanity with the act of stealing. He could not explain away his guilt by alluding

18Wright, Black Boy, p. 223.

19Ibid., p. 227.
to the economic inequities that had forced him to steal. Despite his brave words, he had violated not a "white man's" ethic, but a human one.

Arriving in Memphis, where he was to stay until he saved enough money to move farther north, Wright met the motherly baker's wife and her daughter whom he was to immortalize in Black Boy as Bess and Mrs. Moss. With them, Wright found genuine warmth, the offer of total self-surrender, but again estrangement. He had lived alone in his thoughts and dreams too long to be able to accept spontaneous trust and personal surrender. Wright tells us he could not believe in such "terrible simplicity." Seventeen turbulent years had already caused Wright to suspect a view of life that did not proclaim man alone, engaged in a desperate fight for survival and personal dignity.

Working in Memphis as a dishwasher to send for his mother and brother, Wright learned about the Jim Crow laws that governed racial interaction, the stereotypes blacks and whites perpetuated, and the way that daily necessities diminish man's consciousness of his humanity. While working at an optical company, where Wright's efforts to learn the trade were frustrated by racism, he ran across an editorial in the Memphis Commercial Appeal soundly criticizing H. L.  

20Wright, Black Boy, p. 235.
Mencken, then editor-in-chief of The American Mercury. Wright schemed to gain entry to the nearby public library by borrowing a white co-worker's card and claiming to want the books for the card's owner. In the library Wright found Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces* and a volume of his *Prejudices*. He tells us he was stunned to see words used as weapons. Following the example of this controversial editor, Wright decided to modify his earlier view of literature as escape or compensatory control of his environment. Writing now became a means for analysis of the society and an instrument for overcoming the gap he had always felt between himself and the outside world. From the final chapters of *Black Boy* comes the familiar statement, "All of my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them." This chapter also reveals Wright's conception of literature as a means for overcoming the alienation his life had defined for him. Wright concludes, "It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities." 

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21For a discussion of the controversy over the precise subject of the editorial Wright must have read, see Fabre's extensive note, p. 537.

22*Black Boy*, p. 274.

23*Black Boy*, p. 283.
Accepting his alienation because writing seemed a way to correct it, Wright left the South. Like so many other Southern blacks seeking a new life up North, Wright looked to Chicago as a promised land of opportunity and fulfillment. Like so many others, he was profoundly disappointed. If he had ever felt alone, the size and speech and speed of this vast metropolis made Wright feel that way now. In Chicago, Wright read, wrote, and pondered this new form of life he was witnessing.

Working at the Chicago Post Office for the summer and being reunited with his family helped Wright adjust during his twentieth summer. Having failed an autumn appointment at the Post Office in 1928 because he was under the minimum weight required, he found himself again quarreling with family members in cramped quarters. Wright could not long endure a situation so similar to the painful memories of his childhood, so he relentlessly worked to gain weight. He gained enough to pass the next postal exam and won a temporary position. At the Post Office Wright found the grueling, dehumanizing duties he relates so memorably in Lawd Today his only reward for months of exercise and dietary discipline. Concentrating more and more on his writing, Wright finished a number of short stories which he recalls were filled with "death, poverty, nervous collapse, and
"hysteria." Again his writing led to Wright's alienation. Even the dozen or so black boys and girls he met with in a kind of black literary society seemed to lack Wright's serious commitment to writing. To the bulk of his neighbors and co-workers, Wright made no sense at all.

His commitment to writing seemed irrelevant when the Wall Street crash caused Wright to lose his coveted postal job. He was able to publish "Superstition" in the April, 1931 issue of Abbot's Monthly Magazine, but the economic crisis folded the magazine before Wright was ever paid for the story. He was able to find work as an insurance agent for a funeral home, and thus came to realize his distance from the South Side Chicago blacks he resentfully helped the companies to exploit. Despite this distance, Wright felt for the evicted, destitute families, and he grew to admire the militant Communists he heard atop the soap boxes in the park. Yet even here he realized "a vast distance separated the agitators from the masses, a distance so vast that the agitators did not know how to appeal to the people they sought to lead." His perception of the distance between like-minded but estranged men would lead Wright into the Party of those

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24 Fabre, p. 79 (quoting an unpublished version of Black Boy).

25 Wright, "American Hunger," Mademoiselle, No. 21 (September 1945), p. 25. This is a part of the second manuscript section of "American Hunger" left out of Black Boy.

26 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
agitators. When the Depression caused Wright to succumb and ask the state for bread, he saw his kinship with other dis-inherited men in a clear light. In poverty and betrayed pride, Wright experienced a human solidarity that ignored racial barriers. Man, Wright began to believe, was alone yet united with other men in his solitary fight for survival and meaning. How to achieve this deeper sense of unity despite the fact of alienation became Wright's goal. His writings reflect this ultimately unresolved dilemma.

Uneasy on Welfare, Wright worked as a street cleaner, went back to the Post Office during the Christmas rush, and dug ditches for the Cook County Forest Preserves. Later he secured a job at the Michael Reese Hospital where he suffered the indignities of being confined to the basement levels merely because of his color. The incident of the overturned guinea pig cages told in Black Boy and later the subject of "What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You" happened in this hospital. Wright was disillusioned by the attitudes of the Jewish doctors. He had expected them to be sensitive to humanitarian concern, sympathetic to prejudice stemming from ignorance, supportive of his persistent demonstrations of

27 Two black workers, fighting with a knife and ice pick in the basement area to which they had been confined, overturned some cages of test animals. Afraid of losing their jobs, Wright and the other black workers joined the two in trying to replace the animals, undoubtedly ruining the experiments in progress. Wright's story was published in Harper's Magazine in December, 1942 and by Negro Digest in January, 1943 as an ironic commentary on the universal damage done by segregation.
intelligence. Instead Wright was alternately ignored or ridiculed by the majority of staff physicians. He was dehumanized by efficiency experts, like the one who believed he should clean a room in seventeen minutes and insisted on timing him as he worked. Only his writing helped.

In 1932 the John Reed Clubs, expanded from the New York leftist club to include other radical young men and women, were successfully spreading to Chicago. Following a deliberate effort to recruit blacks, a friend invited Wright to a meeting where he would meet those who were to form the first sustained relationships of Wright's life. He had long been impressed by but alienated from the Western culture of his homeland. Here, among the members of the John Reed Club, Wright felt at home and of value. He tells us in *The God That Failed* how he saw a place for himself in helping the Party overcome its inability to speak to the masses. Here Wright was to begin his literary career as a revolutionary poet and to become an elected official of the Communist Party. 28

Much has been written about the extent of Wright's involvement with the Communist party, but most accounts agree with his own assessment of the Party's appeal for Wright:

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28Because of a power struggle within the John Reed Club between the writers and the painters, Wright was elected executive secretary two months after joining the club without having aspired to the office. Fabre, p. 101.
It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole. 29

An answer to that old paradox of man's isolation yet the possibility of unity based on a common humanity seemed near. So Wright eagerly attended the First National Conference of the John Reed Club in May of 1932. In 1933 he was elected executive secretary in Chicago. By 1937 Wright was in New York contributing to the newly established New Challenge and trying to ignore the friction in the Harlem office. Two of Wright's stories had appeared in New Masses, which had also published a good deal of Wright's proletarian poetry. 30 Wright's story, "Fire and Cloud," received the Story Magazine prize for the best writing done by a member of the Federal Writers' Project. Wright had become valuable to the Party. The Communists were also becoming afraid of Wright's ideas and his naive resistance to strict authority. He had not recognized it yet, but the Party did not offer Wright the freedom of expression he craved. He would soon find that here too he was an outsider.

For the time, though, Wright's efforts to improve his writing skills were beginning to pay off. In his first


30 Wright's poetry will be discussed in chapter nine of this study.
collection of stories, Uncle Tom's Children, Wright set out to consider what quality of will the Negro must possess to live and die in a country which denies his humanity. In "Big Boy Leaves Home" Wright points to a strong individual will and shows the black community's survival instincts. In "Down by the Riverside" he again shows the black man's determination. This time, Wright allows Mann, his central character, to choose his death rather than submit to the authority of others. In "Long Black Song," "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star," Wright continues his probing of the reality of the estranged black American's humanity. Despite the black middle class's objections to the stories, the reviews were consistently enthusiastic. Especially noteworthy was Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's letter remarking that Uncle Tom's Children was "Beautifully written and so vivid I had a most unhappy time reading." From her gracious response and the white reviewers' remarks, Wright began to sense that his stories allowed the readers merely to rid themselves of the necessity for action through their tears and sympathy for his characters. He vowed his next book would force the reader to go beyond tears in his acknowledgement of his characters' humanity.

31 A detailed study of each story centering on Wright's use of the alienation theme follows in chapter four of this study.

Wright succeeded. Only the rare reader finds anything to cry about in Native Son. Fully aware of all the opposition it would receive, Wright worked daily trying to put Bigger Thomas, a brutal symbol of the solitary dispossessed, on paper. In four months the rough draft was complete. In 1940 Native Son exploded onto the public. Its reverberations are still being heard. Shortly before the publication of his historic novel, Wright had married Dhimah Rose Meadman, a ballet dancer. Ralph Ellison was his best man. Dhimah, of Russian descent, had been married to an Englishman, and was divorced with custody of a two year old son, Peter Woolman. So Wright was not alone to relish the book’s selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club, to hear of book stores being stamped for copies of his novel, or to find himself favorably compared to Dreiser, Steinbeck and Farrell. While enjoying a belated honeymoon in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Richard was contacted by Time-Life, Inc. They agreed to fly him to Chicago for photographs for a proposed article he was to write on the South Side. While back in Mexico, Wright was approached by a representative from Warner Brothers’ Motion Picture Co. to discuss a Broadway production preliminary to a film version of Native Son.

Such financial security and glamor seemed unreal to Wright. Was he finally to find acceptance? Could he believe it was to come as he had always dreamed it would—from his writing? Security and glamor were not to be Wright’s lot.
He soon became disenchanted with Mexico, his life of leisure, and his new bride. Wearied by quarrels and a sense of isolation, surrounded as he was by servants and American expatriates, Wright left Cuernavaca and fled to Jackson, Mississippi, and on to Memphis, Tennessee to rediscover his emotional roots. Then he went to Chicago to visit his family, and continued on to Chapel Hill to discuss the Broadway production of *Native Son*. Back in New York, Wright faced his wife for the last time at the Ellisons' apartment. She had hoped to enlist the aid of their friends in a reconciliation, but Wright was ready to admit his marriage to the dancer had been a mistake, prompted by his life-long flight from loneliness and a sense of alienation. Soon, free of the mistaken union with Dhimah Meadman Wright, Richard was eager to search for Ellen Poplar, his real love. Ellen Poplar lived in Brooklyn and was in charge of the local Party organization when Richard Wright had first met her in 1939. By spring of that year, he had fallen in love with her, but he misunderstood her delay in responding to his proposal. Before Ellen could respond, she learned of his plans to marry Dhimah instead, and made no effort to reach Wright. Presuming that her hesitation was prompted by an unwillingness to marry a black man, Richard had clung to the woman who seemed to see beyond his race. Now, only two years later, Richard realized that he had never given Ellen a chance to explain her reaction to his proposal. He rushed to find her now, and on March 12,
1941, they were married in New Jersey.

Richard had no personal conflict marrying the daughter of naturalized Polish immigrants. Her parents disapproved, but eventually accepted the union. They were even pleased when a daughter, Julia, was born on April 14, 1942. Wright was beginning to adjust to his new family, and he started in earnest on his life story. His decision to write an autobiographical work had been sparked by a Fisk University audience's response to an impromptu speech on himself that Wright gave in 1943. Now that he had a wife and child and home, Wright felt better about himself than ever before. Still he was not able to reveal the pain of his life to indifferent readers. He was not that sure of his subject.

Once he decided to go beyond mere autobiography to a symbolic treatment of black life in the South, Wright found the writing much easier. In December of 1943, Wright sent *American Hunger* to his agent, Paul Reynolds. Because of a paper shortage, Harper and Brothers told Wright to cut the book by one-third. *Black Boy*, as the shortened version was called, was soon on the New York best-seller lists. Wright felt strongly uncomfortable in the maze of interviews, radio programs, and letters that followed. Adulation might have been new to Wright, but hostility and racism were not. When Mississippi banned the sale of *Black Boy* and Senator Theodore G. Bilbo attacked it and its author before Congress, Wright remembered his old fears of isolation and
racial hatred. He feared even more for his new family. Wright doubted that he would ever be really accepted by the society of his birth.

Not even the Communist Party had been able to ease Wright's newly rediscovered sense of isolation. Wright had quietly withdrawn from the Party in 1942. One of the major areas of conflict between Wright and Party officials had been his vocal opposition to the Party's inaction on racial problems, preferring instead to focus on issues relating to international politics. Wright, on the other hand, had worked throughout 1940-41 on Twelve Million Black Voices, his first non-fiction work. As his July 21, 1941 letter, to Edward Aswell, his friend and editor, shows Wright had not only remained faithful to racial issues, but began to see blacks in America as a metaphor for modern man. America had to solve her racial dilemma if she hoped to survive, Wright was beginning to believe. Nearly twenty years before his death, it seems Wright had decided to consider the broader questions his Communist affiliation, travels, and keen observations had disclosed to him. The alienation he now sought to overcome was no longer a merely personal concern.

33During a filibuster against integration in war industries, Bilbo said, "It [Black Boy] is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen in print.... But it comes from a Negro and you cannot expect any better from a person of this type." Precedings and Debates of the 70th Congress: First Session, Vol. 91, No. 218, June 27, 1945, 128: 91, p. 6915.
He saw himself and other blacks as mere representatives of man in a crucial stage of development from the feudal state to the age of technology.  

So it should not be surprising that as early as 1945, Wright had searched for a place where he could work out the international significance of American problems. In January of 1946 he applied for a passport, with Dorothy Norman creating the title "Paris correspondent" for Twice a Year Magazine to aid his application. Following some suspicious "mix-ups" with the State Department, Wright secured his passport, received an official invitation from the French government, and set off to begin his controversial "exile."

Wright, thinking only of a visit and not planning expatriation, was shown around Paris by Gertrude Stein and feted by literary and governmental groups. France caught his imagination, but surprised the man who had come to expect isolation and misunderstanding as a way of life. He enthusiastically wrote Aswell on May 15, 1946, "Paris is all I ever hoped to think it was .... There is such an absence of race hate that it seems unreal." After brief visits to

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34 In a letter to Constance Webb, Wright had written, "Everywhere in the Western World men are rejecting the life of an industrialization which has pounded their lives to meaninglessness, which has reduced them to appendages to machine." Later he said the problem of the American Negro is only a phase of the problem of the world's dispossessed. n.d. Available in the Schomburg Collection of Richard Wright documents, pp. 10, 14. This view is also scattered throughout Wright's speeches and articles.

35 Fabre, p. 306.
Switzerland and London, Wright and his family were back in Manhattan after eight months abroad. It was longer than it seemed. The courtesy and recognition received in Paris began to compete with the physical comforts but brutal realities of home. The spring of 1947 was a dangerous time for an interracial couple in Greenwich Village. White gangs had invaded the area and were known to throw blacks out of the restaurants and to viciously harass mixed couples. Then too, Wright feared for the emotional security of his five-year old daughter. Wright vowed that she would never grow up with the sense of alienation and inferiority he had always known. By June of 1947, the Wrights were ready for a second visit to France and for Wright's "existentialist period."

The next half-decade was not as sterile as the label, "existentialist period," or as the absence of a new book might suggest. Wright's major projects from 1947 to the composition of The Outsider (1953) led him to believe he was on the verge of an answer to his life-long dilemma. Perhaps man could conquer his separateness in the modern, industrialized world if he remained faithful to his roots. Wright concluded that the Third World held the only key to the salvation of humanity in contemporary society. He firmly supported Présence Africaine (a group including André

36 The Senegalese teacher Alioune Diop, with a group of intellectuals who had surrounded him, launched a magazine called Présence Africaine in 1946. According to Diop's
Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus who were concerned about the survival of African culture in a rapidly industrializing society). Wright explored his kinship with those African, European and West Indians he termed "marginal men," thereby linking them to his own sense of alienation. He believed their cultures could correct the dehumanization he attributed to industrialization. He continued to write and to think about man's place in the modern world. These were years of reorientation for Wright. He was becoming less preoccupied with purely American issues, like the role of blacks in American society, and more interested in a global view of modern man in society. He found much to distract him from the completion of his novel; most notably, the birth of a second daughter, Rachel, on January 17, 1949.

Wright also went to Argentina to film Native Son in this developmental period of his career. From 1948-50 he wasted time, money and energy trying to bring his alienated representative of modern man to a larger audience. Returning home to his family in France, Wright continued to study the movements and ideas buzzing around him. Finally, after nearly six years, Wright completed The Outsider.

editorial for the first issue, the publication was "open to the collaboration of men of good will (white, yellow and black) who are willing to help us define the African's creativity and to hasten his integration into the modern world." This group of thinkers soon became known by the name of their magazine. Fabre. p. 317.

37See chapter five of this study for a fuller treatment of Wright's failure in his efforts to film Native Son.
The usual controversy that followed Wright's publications was not absent from the American reviews of Wright's newest novel merely because he was living abroad. Some thought it was a "ghastly joke"; others, a sure sign of Wright's need to return to America. Many readers accurately found a statement of the author's new position in this work. The novel was, after all, the product of long years of reflection and personal inventory. Michel Fabre, who has carefully traced Wright's activities during the years he worked on the novel, believes he had "assumed the position of an outsider [and] condemned himself to a lasting spiritual isolation."38 It is true that Wright had outgrown his faith in the European cultural tradition he once reverenced. It also seems that he had gained a wider perspective on himself in the process. However, Wright had felt condemned to isolation long before he went to Paris or wrote The Outsider. By choosing to become a citizen of the world, he now was able to observe his native country from a distance and to conclude that his own inability to merge his identity with the goals and values of that society was a human rather than racial reality. In the novel Wright tells us over and over that "man is nothing in particular"; he is naturally alone in his search for meaning and worth.39

38 Fabre, p. 374.

39 See chapter six of the study for a discussion of alienation in The Outsider. Efforts to read the novel as an "existentialist" work or to evaluate Wright's command of the
Even as he worked to complete *The Outsider*, Wright had been working on a "completely non-racial novel dealing with crime per se."\(^{40}\) The result was published as *Savage Holiday* (1954). Again Wright expected and found misunderstanding from American reviewers who ignored it or dismissed the novel as a "pot boiler." Parisian reviewers, on the other hand, seriously discussed Wright's novel. He was finding himself no longer anxious for American approval of his writing.

Despite the approval he found there, no real evidence can be presented that Wright ever planned to stay in France permanently. He seemed to have considered London his next move so that Julia could attend school in her native tongue.\(^{41}\) Thus it was not difficult to leave France for a long-considered desire to see Africa. In June of 1953 Wright set sail. Although he was received by Kwame Nkrumah, he preferred to mingle with the people more than with government officials. In the government bungalow provided for him, a trained boy served Wright in silence. He was further dismayed to find himself so uncomfortable among the Gold Coast dwellers Wright moved into the Seaview Hotel to be

philosophical tenets included in the novel dominate the usual criticism of the work and cloud the fact Wright tried to stress in his title. The novel is really about the alienation and efforts toward self-definition of the protagonist.

\(^{40}\) Wright's letter to Paul Reynolds, his agent, written December 26, 1952. Quoted in Fabre, p. 376.

\(^{41}\) Fabre, p. 383.
near. He wrote,

I'm of African descent and I'm in the midst of Africans, yet I cannot tell what they are thinking or feeling.... I looked like the Africans, but I had only to walk upon a scene and my difference at once declared itself without a word being spoken.42

Wright had been encouraged by his friend, George Padmore, political adviser to Prime Minister Nkrumah, to make this trip. Talking to George and his wife, Dorothy, Wright came to the opinion that the Gold Coast provided an excellent example of a nation in transition from tribal civilization to pre-industrialization. Here Wright expected to find proof of the humanistic resources of the Third World. His agent was also enthusiastic about the project, and helped Wright secure a large advance and partial financing from Harpers. Ten weeks later Wright left Africa with voluminous notes, photographs, newspapers and government pamphlets. His journey had not been entirely successful, for Wright never really felt that he had come to know the Africans. Until the spring of 1954, he tried to coordinate his notes and feelings into a volume that would be published as Black Power. Again a major theme of that work is that old nemesis, alienation.

America again ignored or admonished Wright's efforts. 43 Wright devoted his energies to another journalistic venture, and seemed unmoved by the slights. This time the setting was Spain. By March of 1956, he had finished the manuscript of *Pagan Spain: A Report of a Journey into the Past*. When the book came out in February, 1957, it was a commercial failure but surprisingly, was not harshly criticized. From April 17-25, 1955 Wright was in Bandung for a meeting of black leaders to which the West was deliberately not invited. The *Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* was first published in Paris in December of 1955 and later in America on March 19, 1956. Despite expectations of rejection, 44 Wright's report on the Third World and his conclusion that it would soon free itself from economic neocolonialism were well reviewed by specialists on the subject and by other visitors to the conference.

In 1955, in response to Edward Aswell's request that Wright project his fiction for the years to come and begin to see a new publisher, Wright wrote Aswell, his publisher

43 For example *Time* and *Newsweek* did not even review the book. Numerous reviewers severely attacked Wright's premises, conclusions, or motives for the report, though they praised Wright's journalism.

44 Fabre notes the intriguing fact that Wright told his editor, Donald Friede, to send no galleys to Baldwin, Ellison, Horace Cayton, or others Wright felt could not give his book their honest reactions. Apparently he had tired of what he considered ill-informed or unfair reviews. Fabre, p. 422.
at Harper now working for McGraw-Hill, a long letter. In the letter, Wright described a group of novels he wanted to write with *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941) as their framework. Elsewhere Wright had set forth his grand aim of examining the individual's relationship to modern society. Somewhat vaguely, he said,

> ... The central idea of this work would be a depiction or dramatization of what, for the want of a better name, I'd call the 'life force' at its highest expression in each work touched upon....

*Savage Holiday* (1954) was the first of the group. "Strange Daughter," a study of religious and social prohibitions, inspired by the experiences of the daughter of a couple he knew in New York, would be the next. The third, "When The World Was Red," would consider the psychology of colonization, using Montezuma as its hero. Fabre, who has read the entire plan that took Wright over a month merely to outline says, "He [Wright] was trying to present, sometimes awkwardly, but with great foresight, a major problem of our

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45 The student of Richard Wright remains dependent on secondary sources for knowledge of his correspondence. Dr. Edward Margolies, recognized scholar of Wright and one-time correspondent with Wright's widow, says that a dispute with Harper has caused Mrs. Wright to withhold publication of Wright's collected letters, originally scheduled for release in 1973. Yale University Library is allegedly negotiating for publication rights. Copies of a few of Wright's letters are in the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library, but this extensive outline is not among those copies. (Letter to this author, dated Nov. 4, 1975, from Edward Margolies and phone conversation with Dr. Margolies on November 11, 1975).

age: how to establish cultural pluralism." If that forty-page outline had been published, how much reductive criticism of Wright could have been avoided—at least criticism of Wright's later works. Wright's achievement is still subject to analysis, but his intentions were clearly to move beyond the racial and personal concerns of his earlier writing. This is not to suggest that Wright's agent approved of his plan for "Celebration of Life." Reynolds replied, as others would do in their eulogies, that "the human gain has been offset by a creative loss." That is, Wright's period in France had been destructive to his creativity. Wright did not pursue the idea, but sent Aswell a plot sketch for "Mississippi" (published in 1958 as The Long Dream) instead. His concern for man's "Celebration of Life" would have to remain part of his essays and lectures.

September, 1956, found Wright in Paris, a part of the First Congress of Negro Artists and Writers. In October he was in London for the Congress of Cultural Freedom. In November he was on a lecture tour in Scandinavia. These lectures were later to comprise White Man, Listen! (1957). As a further proof of his continued creativity, Wright flirted with the adaptation of a French play, Papa Bon Dieu, which Wright called "Daddy Goodness." It is unfortunate that his

47Fabre, p. 430.

rare attempt at humor was never published, for the play demonstrates Wright's continued efforts to understand how man strives to overcome his alienation. Wright believed the roots of religious feelings, especially the human thirst for miracles and fanatical adherence to sects, stemmed from this need to belong, heightened by the impersonalism of contemporary society. This satire on man's irrational devotion to religion was never published, but Wright's literary reputation flourished. Even though Wright was never quite known or consistently appreciated at home, he was read and respected throughout Europe by 1956.

Still life was rarely without trauma for Richard Wright. His favorite aunt, Maggie, died of cancer January 20, 1957. Then Wright felt slandered by Ben Burns of *Ebony* magazine, who had reportedly accused Wright of poisoning European thinking about America's race problems by deliberately ignoring progress on the racial question and instead preaching anti-American remarks. A number of similar incidents led Wright to believe there was a general plot to discredit him going on in America. Furthermore, Wright was depressed that his carefully considered views on racism, the Third World and other large subjects were not accepted. He regretted mainstream America's decision to regard him as

49 In response to Burns' "They're Not Uncle Tom's Children," *The Reporter*, March 8, 1956, pp. 21-25, Wright asked his agent if he felt a lawyer should look at the article. Legal action against Burns was eventually determined inadvisable. Fabre, pp. 448-49.
The black writer of the forties. He brightened, however, when an African-Asian Conference was scheduled in Cairo. He had not even imagined that he would be unable to find financial support for the trip and would be unable to attend the conference. Finally, Wright became involved in "the Gibson affair" and felt his very existence in Paris threatened. As a friend of Ollie Harrington, a key figure in the situation that had separated the black community in Paris, a witness in the case, and a controversial figure on his own, rumored to be an FBI agent, Wright was indeed threatened.  

To add to his depression, Wright was also receiving severe criticism for his last novel *The Long Dream* (1958), when his brother wired him on November 5, 1958 that their mother was seriously ill. The next day, Wright's long-time friend and editor, Edward Aswell died suddenly of a heart attack. To compound his growing anxieties, a remark on the three hundred year old race problem in America was attributed to the incident.

50 The incident began in 1956 when Ollie Harrington rented his Paris studio to Richard Gibson, a black novelist in Paris on a scholarship. For nearly two years the men argued over ownership of paintings, furniture and personal effects left in the apartment. Harrington finally moved elsewhere to avoid calling in the American Embassy and possibly jeopardizing his status in Paris.

In 1957 letters condemning French policy in Algeria bearing Harrington's signature were sent to *Life* and *The Observer* in London. Since the letters jeopardized Harrington's stay in Paris, he enlisted the legal services of Jacques Mercier, a criminal lawyer. French and American police proved Gibson the true author of the letters, and a violent confrontation between the two American blacks left Gibson hospitalized for injuries.
to Wright as his alleged justification for preferring France to America. Wright was upset because he had refused to grant *Time* the interview from which the remark was allegedly taken. So as a retreat, Wright returned to his work on "Island of Hallucination," a sequential novel to *The Long Dream*. Correspondence with his agent, Paul Reynolds, shows that Wright had worked on this novel with a special zeal. He considered it a turning point in his career. If it received the negative reaction *The Long Dream* had been given, Wright said, "I must seriously think of abandoning writing for a time." His work on this crucial novel was disturbed by word of his mother's death on January 14, 1959. Wright's plans for a return trip to Africa were dashed. While planning to move his family to England, Wright fell ill of an attack of amoebic dysentery, probably contracted while on the Gold Coast years earlier. Later he experienced such hostility in England while on a tourist's visa that he decided against British residency and returned to Paris. There Wright's medical problems persisted. The stage adaptation of *The Long Dream*, which Wright hoped might bring his family financial security, closed after five performances in New

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51 Wright responded by cable to *Time*: "Quotations attributed to me in your article Amid Alien Corn completely false and fabricated. Astounded at *Time*’s journalistic ethics. Did not see your reporter. Are you aping Communist tactics of character assassination?" Quoted in Fabre, p. 472.

52 From a February 16, 1959 letter Wright sent to Reynolds along with the manuscript. Fabre, p. 475.
York. Wright confided to Reynolds, "I'm the only 'uncontrolled' Negro alive today and I pay for it." As usual Wright blamed his inability to fit in anywhere for his long list of troubles. Alienation, exacerbated rather than relieved by his writing, was the only answer Wright could give to the turn for the worse his life had taken.

During his illness Wright experimented with some 4,000 Japanese haiku poems. To the end he faced opposition that made him feel estranged. The selection of poems he sent to World Publishers was not accepted. Although he had considered looking for another trade, writing still helped. Wright worked on a new novel, *A Father's Law*. More than ever he vowed to stay busy. His last speeches, letter, and radio broadcast all treat the subject of his resentment over American secret service behavior in Paris. In few of his efforts, making an unbroken line of activities, did Wright give any real indication that he was beaten. Thus his sudden death on November 28, 1960, took family, friends, even his physician by surprise. It was November 30 before the press announced Wright's death. Talk raged for a while that mysterious circumstances were involved. African Nationalists and American espionage agents were the groups most often considered. After reviewing scores of isolated remarks and innuendo dating from the confusion surrounding Wright's

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death, I am forced to accept Fabre's conclusion: "The evidence, in fact, betrays nothing more than intense physical exhaustion due to recurring disease, combined with a nervous reaction to numerous 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.'"54 Wright's battle with alienation was finally over, and he had succumbed in the struggle.

So everything in Richard Wright's life, and most of the events surrounding his literary career prepared him to accept alienation as a natural state. In his last unpublished novel he wrote,

when you make a person feel that what he sees and lives each day and hour is not true, then it is as though you shunted him off the earth. He is on an island and this island is himself.... No man can stand alone and make any meaning out of life....55

The contradiction of Wright's life is that race, ideology, and an insistence on truth as he felt it forced him to stand alone. Yet he refused to abandon the search for life's meaning that he says in the lines quoted above man can not find alone. It was no perversity on Wright's part that compelled him to continue his search. Wright firmly believed that the man who had ceased to ponder and fight to assert his humanity had already surrendered a part of it. Man was as driven to

54 Fabre, p. 525. As a Frenchman writing of an American, Fabre is understandably cautious to discuss CIA or other American governmental involvement in Wright's final difficulties. Perhaps America's recent reassessment of intelligence procedures will suggest areas for productive reconsideration concerning Wright's death or his plummetting career as he died.

55 Quoted in Fabre, p. 481.
seek the meaning of his life as he was to live much of it totally alone and misunderstood. Thus Wright's life doomed him to failure, on his own terms. Still Wright's was a noble failure that deserves far more recognition and gratitude than modern man, especially Wright's American countryman, has ever given it.
Constance Webb's biography of Wright ends simply with Julia Wright's haiku, "This is Daddy":

Burning out its time
And timing its own burning
One lonely candle.¹

No where is Wright's fiery determination to speak for the alienated or his intense loneliness more present than in his fiction. Much of the criticism leveled against Wright's novels and short stories concerns the characters' inarticulateness and their allegedly gratuitous violence. Wright's driving rhythms of dialogue, his engrossing action, and his rich symbolism are often overlooked in a denunciation of these two areas, characterization and use of violence. So a reassessment of Wright's fiction must first counter these charges.

It is easy to see how reviewers looked to biographical sketches, and learning of Wright's poverty and loneliness, concluded that his aesthetic flaws reveal a lack of artistic control. His own traumatic alienation was spilling over onto his characters and their predicaments, the critics said. True, of course, but far too simple an explanation. Wright's

fiction must be viewed in the light of his ideas about writing and only after a consideration of his continuous personal and creative expansion.

One valuable source for Wright's view on writing is his essay explaining his disillusionment with Communism, contained in *The God That Failed*. Here he says, "My writing was my way of seeing, my way of living, my way of feeling; and who could change his sight, his sense of direction, his senses?" We need not argue with Wright's rhetorical question, though it is clearly true that his sense of direction and his perspective often changed. The importance of the question seems to be Wright's admission that he used his writing in a way that may have been more personal and more unencumbered by artistic discipline than some critics would have desired. From his youth on, writing was a means of escaping within himself to find reasons for his pain and courage against the loneliness and confusion outside. Often Wright's fiction seemed to offer him the mastery over the world that his race, poverty, and social circumstances denied him. Just as often, that mastery within was limited by the same forces he fought without. Thus alienation plagued Wright's fictional characters as it did their creator. It is the basic theme of most of his stories; a consideration in evaluating most of his characters.

2 The God That Failed, p. 137.
Consider for the moment some of the assumptions about the novel contained in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). Fabre tells us that Wright had read and even reviewed the work in 1947. Furthermore much of the criticism of Wright's novels, especially of *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, and *The Long Dream*, is consistent with his alleged violation of principles stated in Forster's study. Yet many of Forster's premises are incompatible with Wright's growing conviction that alienation is natural to man.

In his chapter on characterization titled "People," Forster has written, 

> The novelist ... makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself ..., gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gesture, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently. These word-masses are his characters.⁴

How accurately do these concepts apply to Wright's fictional practice? It is true that the characters of his early fiction roughly described Richard Wright. Later it is more difficult to conclude that Wright's chief figures were self-portraits. Often, as is true of his childhood acquaintance, James "Bigger" Thomas and of the courageous females he depicted, the characters were merely representative of personality types Wright admired. The intended consistency

³Wright was ignorant of Forster's work at the time, however, and thus treated the work on its own merits with no reference to Forster's practice. As a result Wright's review is quite vague. Fabre, pp. 309-10.

of their behavior poses an even greater problem. If readers agree with Forster that "it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source..." or that a character in a book is real "when the novelist knows everything about it," then they are bound to be dissatisfied with Wright. This problem of false expectations seems to be at the root of the dispute when reviewers insist that Wright created fictional monsters and stereotypes. Wright's response that his characters were misunderstood and deliberately maligned is often the truth of the matter.

No one would argue that we know—or even feel we could come to know all about Jake Jackson or Bigger Thomas or Cross Damon. And though it may disappoint us, Wright would reject our premise that we should know them as strongly as he rejected the South's insistence that it knew Negroes. Wright believed some of the mystery surrounding the characters was the conscious goal of the protagonists, a defense for their survival. Neither Jake nor Bigger, two characters Wright introduces to his readers in the company of like-minded peers, could risk even these supposed friends' knowing of their fears and self-hatred. Neither could Wright's characters reveal themselves to a hostile world that had already rejected them. So the characters Wright created

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5Wright, Black Boy, pp. 283-84.

6Wright's use of a deliberate, even defensive approach to black characterization recalls Paul Laurence Dunbar's lines: "Why should the world be overwise/ In counting all
required some ambiguity to be true to his conception of them. Another part of the problem, Wright attributed to the nature of his characters—usually uneducated, inarticulate, and fearful. They are, by design, lacking in self-knowledge. If we recall, as an example of actual models for Wright's characters, his alienation from the black sharecroppers he had met while working as an insurance secretary in the Deep South, we should not be surprised to find Wright's feelings about the stunted humanity of such figures in conflict with his efforts to find meaning in life through his writing.

Those real-life peasants scarcely knew the meaning of their own lives and never would have been able to tell anyone else about themselves if they had wanted to. It was by accepting this limitation that Wright was able to live with his tangled reactions to the father who had deserted his family so many years ago. Fictional characters like these peasants would not have been "real" for Wright if he purported to

our tears and sighs?/ Nay, let them only see us, while/ We wear the mask." Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," in the anthology, Dark Symphony, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 41, reprinted from The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1940).

In Dunbar's poem inaccurate characterization is the result of a forced isolation. Wright's figures are even more tragic, since often they are themselves unable to distinguish the "mask" from their "real" selves. Only striking out at their alienation returns them to a measure of self-knowledge and full humanity.

7In a moving passage, Wright says, "That day a quarter of a century later when I visited him [Nathan Wright] on the plantation—he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed
know all about them or if they pretended to tell all about themselves.

So the readers who found Wright's fiction full of stereotypes assumed a lack of artistic ability where there seems to have been a conscious structuring that simply opposed more traditional assumptions. Fictional stereotyping of black characters was denounced throughout black and white literary circles in the mid-twenties. An example is a symposium reported in the March-August, 1926 issue of Crisis. Serious interest in how the Negro ought to be portrayed in American literature is evident. Wright, like so many other writers of this era, was aware of the tendency of Harlem Renaissance writers to pander to set expectations about the black characters they depicted. Wright seems to have been determined to change those images in his fiction. In 1935 when he was fighting for the retention of the John Reed clubs at the American Writers' Congress in New York, Wright had cautioned those in attendance against indirectly contributing to this stereotyping by allowing black writers to remain isolated from the mainstream of letters.

Some of the more obvious results are lack of contact with other writers, a lack of personal culture, a tendency toward escape mechanisms of ingenious, insidious kinds. Other results of his [the black writer's] isolation are the monotony of subject matter with dim recollection ... I was overwhelmed to realize that he could never understand me or the scalding experiences that had swept me beyond his life and into an area of living that he could never know." Black Boy, p. 42.
and becoming the victim of a sort of traditional Negro character....

It seems ironic then that Theodore L. Gross, famous for his works on black stereotypes, should not acknowledge Wright's common goal of fighting stereotypes but should quip that Wright's strategy of using words as weapons backfired. Generalizing about Wright's fiction, Gross has recently concluded, "... as the Negro confronts his environment, more than he confronts himself--words have indeed become weapons, but awkward and ephemeral and abstract weapons because the people who use them have no inner life." Wright's characters rarely confront themselves, it is true. Their inability to express or surmount their alienation and their subsequent isolation does not allow them this vital confrontation. But these limitations do not mean Wright's characters have no inner life, as Gross asserts. It seems more accurate to say that readers have been disappointed that they could not fully explain these "people." Unlike another modern critic, Nathan Scott, Jr., who concludes that Wright "simply did not know enough about the labyrinthine interiorities of the human soul," I would conclude that Wright probably

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8Hart, ed., American Writers' Congress, pp. 178-79. Quoted in Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright, p. 64. Kinnamon also discusses Wright's objections to the Harlem Renaissance writers and Wright's "Blueprint for Black Writing" as a correction of their mistakes.


10Nathan L. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of
felt that interiority too keenly. He knew too much about the alienation man experiences when has nowhere to turn but within and no tools to analyze what he finds there when he does look within. Perhaps the end result of a character whose inner life is held from the reader is the same, but it is important to understand the reason for this distance. Wright's views on man's alienation, not any alleged artistic incompetence, are to blame. Since he came to doubt man's ability to communicate his deepest needs to another who could understand and respect them, Wright could not create characters able to overcome their isolation.

It is not debatable that Wright's characters often mystify us. We cannot, for example, understand Bigger's decision to trust his lawyer, Max, at the end of Native Son. And although we are given an explanation for his brutal murder of his girl friend, Bessie, we have difficulty accepting it in the primarily sociological terms in which it is offered. So Bigger seems to prove Gross's remark, "Negroes may want, in Baldwin's words, to be treated like men, but the fact is that Negro authors have not yet created men, they have projected types."\(^{11}\) Wright's best known character is read as the ape-like "Brute Negro" image of the twenties and earlier. Yet there is an explanation for him and for the other anti-heroes that people Wright's fiction. Gross is correct that


\(^{11}\)Gross, Ibid.
Wright's figures confront their environment. Conflict, usually involving man's need to develop and assert his full humanity or involving the limitations placed on human freedom, is a part of every Wright work in some way. Wright is hampered in his treatment of such a subject by his selected point of view. Since his chief figures usually dominate the point of view, we are limited to one-dimensional portraits of white and authority figures because they are themselves limited in their knowledge of these figures. Wright's blacks are never allowed full human interaction with whites. Physical necessity rarely even allows them full inter-mingling among themselves. Since Erskine Fowler, Wright's white protagonist in *Savage Holiday*, is also isolated from those in authority and from those with whom he lives, the alienation does not seem to be a mere racial concern. Baldwin and others may decry Wright's "failure to convey any sense of Negro life as a continuing and complex group reality," but the truth is that life was not a group reality for Richard Wright. His constant moves as a child, the problems of religious alienation his grandmother's religion caused him, his consciousness of the breach his desire to write made with his peers, as well as Wright's sensitivity to the racial and political strife of his homeland had made

12James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Images of the Negro in American Literature*, p. 244.
him cling to individualism. Wright grew to believe man was never really close to or understood by those around him. He even began to believe that man never fully understood himself. "Modern man is afraid of himself and is at war with himself," he would one day write. It would be incredible to suppose his creations would behave differently. They too are alone, and are as incapable of understanding those around them as the others are of understanding them.

It is not only their stereotyped perceptions of others that Wright's characters have in common, but their limited apprehension of others through their actions alone. "Big Boy" knows nothing of the white woman whose screams cause death for his friends and lonely flight from home for him other than her demonstrated fear of their innocent, black nakedness on white property. What she was like, how she felt about the man with her who was to come to her "defense," why she feared the boys or assumed that they meant her harm remain unanswered questions. In another story from Uncle Tom's Children ("Long Black Song"), Sarah is a lonely farm girl who knows nothing of the young white man at her door other than his appearance ("like a little boy selling clocks") and his later physical desire for her. Therefore, Wright stresses such actions. His stories may indeed seem flawed when authorial intrusion is needed to go beyond the

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protagonist's perceptions, but that is the only credible way Wright could lead his readers to the deeper meaning of his stories, often unavailable to the chief characters. Once he decided to use pathetic, inarticulate characters for his focus, Wright had set the groundwork for a continuing conflict between realistic portrayals of complicated individuals and the reductive impressions these characters received.\textsuperscript{14} As we shall soon see, Wright himself certainly recognized and sought to correct this weakness. It was a serious problem occasioned by his views on alienation.

If Forster's premises do little for our understanding of Wright's fictional characters, those of W. J. Harvey are even less helpful, since they go further. He says, "For the author is not to his characters as we are to other people; his relationship to them is not human, but god-like.... The novelist is and must be both omnipotent and omniscient."\textsuperscript{15} Whether aware of Harvey's assertion or of his distinction between intrinsic and contextual knowledge or not,\textsuperscript{16} many of

\textsuperscript{14}Kinnamon defends the character, Bigger Thomas, on precisely this point of Wright's selected point of view and the resulting unevenness of characterization between black and white figures in \textit{Native Son}. \textit{The Emergence of Richard Wright}, pp. 132-34.


\textsuperscript{16}since he believes life allows only intrinsic knowledge of self and contextual knowledge of others, Harvey considers fiction superior to, not bound by, reality. One of the great consolations of art, for him, is the release from our actual imprisonment within our single point of view
Wright's reviewers seem to agree that a work of fiction which does not allow both types of knowledge to the reader is unsatisfactory. An author who does not approach his characters with this assumption of total knowledge is presumed inept.

Once again the premises are not appropriate for Wright's fiction. Few novelists could have felt any less god-like than Richard Wright as he groped for portraits and for a view of reality he considered "true." He did not feel he could make his characters act as he willed. He felt, even before the determinism of his Marxist period, that man behaved as he had to, or at least as his circumstances allowed him to act. Wright's successful characters do not merely elicit our sympathies, however. They achieve a certain stature in their refusal to be dominated by circumstances of birth or geography or time. They demand our respect by using their minds, will, or their physical and moral strength to fight against an often certain ill-fate. Thus they are often tragic, even when Wright's protagonists are incapable of the intelligent, skilled responses we might like to think we would make if placed in their situations. It is precisely their tragedy that Wright's characters have not seen enough or experienced enough of life to act as the

that art offers. Harvey, pp. 32-33.

Wright looked for a similar release from isolation in his art. He neither found it for himself nor attributed it to his characters.
reader might like to believe they should. Their alienation has led to an "arrested heroism," that makes them "incipient heroes." 17

Although Gross has given us terms for Wright's figures that suggest at least some degree of achievement, he makes the usual critical jump from Wright's own alienation to the limitations of his characters to the resulting failure Gross finds in Wright's art.

All of Wright's work suggests his desire to enter into the white western world and his frustration at being excluded. That collision and all the consequent anxieties that torment the characters in his fiction lead to the inevitable violence which finds no satisfying or perdurable solution in communism or negritude or self-considered alienation but leaves the Wright victim simply alone and misanthropic. 18

Wright's work is not so easily summarized as the inevitable end of his own struggles to belong. Biography is only one factor contributing to an artist's work. Wright's weaknesses should not be automatically considered the result of his personal problems, when identifiable weaknesses in his craft could be the problem. Certainly Wright was realistic enough to expect to make mistakes that could be identified and corrected as he matured. He was also serious enough about his work to look for areas of weakness.

As a matter of fact, Wright was among the first to realize structural weaknesses in his fiction. He attributed

17Gross's terms for Wright's characters, pp. 149-57.
them to his mode of characterization. As early as March 1, 1939, Wright wrote his agent:

The type of characters I have been using—the inarticulate Negro—and the manner of treating them which I've held so far, made some of the weaknesses almost inevitable. My next set of characters will be more conscious articulate, and will move in wider social areas.\(^19\)

As he prepared to conclude *Native Son*, Wright wrote essentially the same thing to Margaret Walker, who had provided him with valuable materials for that novel. "I feel that I've gone as far as I care to go with Negro characters of the inarticulate type," Wright told his assistant.\(^20\) Later characters, like Cross Damon of *The Outsider*, Wright's next novel, prove Wright's sincerity in correcting this problem. It seems Wright was wrong to conclude his fictional weaknesses could be cured by changing from inarticulate black figures. The protagonist of *The Outsider* is weak for the opposite reasons—he is too self-conscious and incredibly introspective. Still Wright's recognition of the problem suggests he was not at the mercy of his personal struggles.

Even within the acknowledged limitations of Wright's usual characters, Gross is wrong to conclude that Wright's characters are merely alone and misanthropic in the end. \(^19\)Letter, Wright to Paul Reynolds, quoted in Fabre, p. 557.

glance at the stories of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright's first collection, proves otherwise. "Big Boy" is recovering from the trauma of seeing his friends killed and Bobo lynched and castrated, when he looks up at the golden blades of sunshine announcing a new day. He peacefully sleeps in the truck carrying him North to safety as that story ends. Mann, Wright's second protagonist of the collection, dies having exercised the dignity of choosing suicide rather than submitting to a forced end as "Down by the Riverside" concludes. Silas experiences a partial triumph, in "Long Black Song," by dying inside his burning home after returning the gunfire of the white men who had come for him. And even Sarah, who seems to be dreaming while the "two toy men" face each other, understands her husband's final triumph. Reverend Taylor brings "Fire and Cloud" to a conclusion joyfully shouting, "Gawd ain no lie!" to a group who had just proved "Freedom belongs t (sic) the strong!" And certainly no one could deny the mother of "Bright and Morning Star" her triumphant killing of the traitor, Booker, or her final taunting of the Sheriff who has tortured her and her son to no avail, "Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna git it!" These fictional characters are neither merely alone nor are they misanthropic in the end.

Even Bigger Thomas, Wright's most familiar inarticulate anti-hero, has been seriously misunderstood by those who insist that he dies defeated, in hatred, and as a proof of
Wright's inability to cope with his own alienation. Our final picture of Bigger is largely that his terrified attorney, Max, gives us. Yet Wright has consistently revealed his doubts that the Communists ever really knew Bigger, except as part of an oppressed group it was to their advantage to befriend. Max believes Bigger dies defeated, it is true, but we who heard Bigger correct himself and tell Max to tell Jan—no longer Mr. Jan—hello know better. We know that the "wrty, bitter smile" on Bigger's face as the novel ends is not merely misanthropic. It is his accurate recognition of the irony that he must die just as he has begun to live fully. We know that his needless death is in a real sense triumphant, since Bigger has vindicated his early glimmers of self-esteem by the end of the story. Recognition and acceptance of his alienation has brought Bigger to full

21 For example, Robert A. Bone sees dying in hatred as Bigger's real tragedy. The Negro Novel in America, p. 150. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. accuses Wright of a "desperate sentimentality" and identifies this alleged extension of his own paid to his characters as the fault that "renders Wright's works humanly impertinent." Scott, "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," in The Black Novelist, p. 80.

22 Corroborating my reading, Dorothy Canfield Fisher says, "...there is no one single effect in Dostoevski finer than the last page of Native Son in which--just before he dies, not having yet lived--the stultified Negro boy is born at last into humanity and makes his first simple normal human response to a fellow-man." Native Son, first edition, p. x.

This valuable text, autographed by Richard Wright, is currently available in the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library among the Wright Documents. Mrs. Fisher's introduction is replaced by "How Bigger Was Born" in the more familiar Harper editions.
One final aspect of Wright's fiction needing clarification and defense is his emphasis on violence and melodrama. Wright calmly acknowledged his use of melodrama. He deemed it necessary if he were to record the truth as he saw it. "Negro life is melodramatic. I accept that. To try to dodge it would rob me of my subject matter." Wright once wrote.24 Those who would reject Wright's stories of the burning and looting of black homes in Wright's South or the lynchings and castrations that hang shamefully over America's history, not merely in Wright's fiction, have succeeded in denying the most easily documented truths of our country's past. Wright is not stressing violence out of any "desperate sentimentality." Contemporaneous events paralleling Wright's fictional incidents served to deepen his convictions not to abandon his materials because of potential opposition. For example, the famous Scottsboro case25 that tormented the American conscience for nineteen years confirmed Wright's personal experiences. Only on the advice of Whit Burnett, who had

23 Alienation in Native Son is the subject of chapter five of this study. Wright's achievement is evident when this theme is traced in the work itself.

24 Letter, Wright to Timothy Seldes, November 19, 1958, quoted in Fabre, p. 616. (Seldes was Aswell's replacement at Doubleday).

25 While hoboing from Chattanooga to Memphis on a freight train in March of 1931, nine black youths were accused of raping two white girls. The International Labor Defense of the Communist Party allegedly raised over a million dollars for their defense, after eight of the boys were
secretly told Wright that "Bright and Morning Star" had been selected for the *Story* magazine prize of $500 did Wright delete explicit references to the Scottsboro trial and the International Labor Defense from his tale. 26 Undoubtedly the portraits of Sug and Johnny Boy were influenced by Wright's knowledge of those innocent black boys undergoing persecution in Alabama even as he wrote. Real life, not a sentimentalized personal history, helped Wright structure his fictional materials.

One of the most interesting occasions in which Wright used actual events but was criticized for "melodrama" is his use of details from the Robert Nixon case in *Native Son*. 27 Wright used this front-page Chicago story for parts of Bigger's capture and trial and to study the larger society's reactions to an outcast. Margaret Walker Alexander gives us a firsthand account of sending Wright lurid newspaper clippings daily for over a year and of her surprise when they

...sentence to death and one to life in prison by an Alabama court. The fight went on, with an international audience, until the last man was freed in 1950. Haywood Patterson, one of the accused, recorded the horror in *Scottsboro Boy* (1949).

26Fabre, p. 163.

27On May 27, 1938 Robert Nixon, an eighteen year old black youth, had allegedly taken a brick and murdered the white mother of two in the act of robbing her apartment. The Chicago police soon got him to confess to two other attacks on white women and five attempted murders. The Chicago papers sensationalized the story with suggestions of Nixon's bestiality and sexual implications the evidence did not support. In August of 1939, Nixon was executed for the crime.
turned up in Wright's newest novel. 28 Max's defense of
Bigger in the novel, often deemed inappropriate and melodra-
matic, was modeled on attorney Clarence Darrow's real defense
of an actual case, not on any "desperate sentimentality'
Wright allegedly exploited.

Although the fact of melodrama cannot be attacked, per-
haps Baldwin's claim that Wright uses it gratuitously and
fails to go the root of the violence still needs examina-
tion. That question seems best answered by a close consid-
eration of the individual texts in which violence dominates.
A general response has already been made, however, in the
above discussion of Wright's characters. Precisely because
of their inarticulateness, Wright is often compelled to an-
alyze the roots of his characters' violence through an omnis-
cient narrator. This analytic method is not always success-
ful, but it suggests Baldwin's mistake in presuming Wright
gloried in the violence itself or was incapable of going
beyond the acts of violence. Indeed, soon after its publica-
tion, Embree wrote of Native Son, "[Wright's] professional

28 Margaret Walker Alexander, "Richard Wright," in
Mrs. Walker also tells us of Wright's access to the legal
brief of attorney Ulysses S. Keyes, one of Nixon's defense
lawyers, of a trip to the Cook County Jail to view the elec-
tric chair, and of other aspects of the trial Wright wit-
nessed. She recalls trips to the library with Wright to re-
search the Leopold-Loeb case mentioned in the novel and in-
fluential in Max's defense.
knowledge of motives and behavior commands the respect of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts." 29 More than one student of the behavioral sciences has been interested in Wright's fiction, 30 but Kent is right to call for a disciplined psychological approach to this neglected area of Wright study. 31 It is simply not true that Wright's use of violence is without cause or justification. It is more precise to say that he does not always succeed in using his violence to reach the deeper meaning of his characters' actions. Still it is absolutely untrue that Wright makes no attempt to discover the roots of the violence. Since Native Son is the novel most often discussed as "proof" of this failing, it is a good example to pursue briefly. Wright's protagonist terrifies his family, bullies his friends, manages to murder and behead the daughter of his employer only a few hours after their first meeting, and brutally murders his girlfriend. Yet Bigger's need to "blot out" the stifling world around him, not these horrible actions, leads us to the point of the novel. We  

29 Embree, 13 Against the Odds, p. 44.  
30 The discussions are normally attempts to study Wright's psychological state at the time of composition or to relate his life experiences to his writings. See Frederic Wertham, M.D., "An Unconscious Determinant in Native Son," Journal of Clinical Psychopathology, Vol. 6 (July 6, 1944), 113-14, or White, Ralph K., "Black Boy: A Value-Analysis," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, XLII (Oct. 1947), 440-461 for examples of this approach.  
are constantly asked to share Bigger's pain; only momentarily to experience any triumph. Bigger's beheading of Mary's corpse is memorable, perhaps, but surely no more memorable than his paralyzing fear of being found alone in her room or his total isolation during the frigid hours of the manhunt. In Native Son, as in most of Wright's fiction, the necessity of violence, not merely the realistic detail of execution, is Wright's true focus. The careful reader, aware of non-verbal modes of communication, symbolism, and the forces that drive Wright's characters to act, does not find his use of violence gratuitous.

This criticism of Wright's characters and his use of violence is actually part of a larger argument. A dilemma of the twenties and thirties was how the black man should be depicted in fiction. Controversy then, as now, raged between those who felt an artist had to be true to his perceptions and those who felt the black author had a special responsibility to project acceptable images that would further black assimilation into American society. Proponents of the latter view have consistently criticized Wright's "monsters" (i.e., Jake, Bigger, Cross, the underground man, Fishbelly), because they fear such vivid and undesirable images from a black man's own pen may forever perpetuate the negative, inhuman pictures of blacks already deeply entrenched in too many American minds. Wright was not unaware of that possibility, but he considered the "truth" more important than any imposed
racial obligation or than social imagery. Wright refused to consider his characters representative black men. He saw them as alienated men with a message, a warning, for all modern society. Since he sincerely believed too many oppressed people had already become dehumanized and brutalized for society to ignore the problem, Wright could not create positive, self-satisfied figures and present them as representative men. The negative, fearful, often inhuman characters he depicted were the sad but true portraits of man Wright feared would some day be true of all "civilized" men.

There is always a danger in moving too directly from fiction to society. Novelists are not necessarily accurate social commentators. Unfortunately the vivid naturalism of much of Wright's fiction makes that move appear natural. Nathan A. Scott Jr. is right when he says,

So it is rather a sad irony that his [Wright's] own art did in point of fact so often drift toward a definition of man, and particularly of the American Negro, that deeply undercut his conscious intention to make it serve a genuinely humane vision.32

It should be added, however, that Scott is placing on Wright's art a burden it is unlikely any author could have transcended. Literary works are rarely intended, and only with great danger taken to be valid contributions to racial or social change. It is unfair that Wright should be

expected to uncover and correct social ills that had festered for centuries. Certainly solutions to the problems of alienation and isolation, which Wright thought inherent in the very definition of man's humanity, were beyond the scope of his writing. Though he seems to have thought he could reach some solution, when he first started to write, Wright was later forced to modify his aims. He became content merely to start the process of a full analysis of the quality of modern life. Earlier, Wright recalled how a candid speech on his life experiences before a racially mixed audience at Fisk University had prompted him to pursue the subject of race relations in Black Boy:

I had accidentally blundered into the secret, black hidden core of race relations in the United States. That core is: nobody is expected to speak honestly about the problem.... And I learned that when the truth was plowed up in their faces, they shook and trembled and didn't know what to do.33

Wright recalls over and over in the lectures and discussions that he consolidated into "How Bigger Was Born" his position on the challenge of his art. He felt the human right of a man to think and feel honestly was more important than his race or his politics or the critical response his work might bring. Wright vowed to assert his own humanity, exercise his own freedom, and write what he felt he must. It was left to America to cease her conspiracy of silence on the racial

question. When his subject became more clearly the problem of modern man's alienation, the threat to his ability to retain and share with another his full humanity, Wright was surely less likely to reach any final solutions in his writing.

History has vindicated Wright's honesty. Oppressed people have exploded in violence far beyond that of his stories. Theorists are still debating whether the author's responsibility is depicting what is or leading the public toward what could or should be. Yet Wright's fiction continues to move and impress his unprejudiced readers. His stories are often flawed, but Wright's fiction was and remains some of the most powerful produced by an American. When his subject is man's alienation from himself or his isolation from his surroundings, Wright achieves an uncomfortably familiar realism known to many harassed city dwellers and suburbanites the world over.
CHAPTER IV

THE APPRENTICE WORKS

Sheer idleness drove Wright to compose his first published story, he tells us in \textit{Black Boy}. In his eighth grade composition book, Wright entertained himself with a simple story of a villain and a widow that he gave the exotic title, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre." In his own estimation, the story that took him three days to complete and that he proudly submitted to the local Negro newspaper was "crudely atmospheric, emotional, intuitively psychological, and stemmed from pure feeling."\footnote{\textit{Black Boy}, p. 182.} When the story was published in the spring of 1924, Wright received his first taste of negative criticism from readers of the \textit{Southern Register}. He further isolated himself from those he had hoped to impress. His schoolmates, who had never received any literary instruction in school, wondered why anyone would want to write a story. Wright's grandmother was outraged that he would write a "lie," the Devil's work. Wright's mother feared that word of his writing might cost Richard the possibility of a later teaching job in Jackson, the only secure, prestigious position a.
young black could aspire to. Uncle Tom Wilson saw no point to the tale. And Aunt Addie, believing it a sin to use the word Hell, saw the story as one more proof of her headstrong nephew's need for a strong hand. Wright, accustomed to misunderstanding and isolation, was not at all discouraged by the criticism.

The satisfaction of seeing his work in print outweighed all the negative reactions and compensated for the pay he never received. Ever since his grandmother's roomer had whispered the story of Blue Beard to him, Wright had vowed to escape the restrictiveness of his life by buying up all the novels he could find. Kinnamon tells us about Wright's early efforts at writing hymn verses too. When he was twelve, Wright wrote a tale about an Indian girl who committed suicide. So the alienation that his desire to write caused him at age fifteen was probably ignored in Wright's thrill of seeing three installments of his own writing in print for all to read. He vowed some day he would leave the South and write novels.

It is unfortunate that we do not have an extant copy of Wright's first published story. Fabre tells us that the

\[2\text{Recalling Wright's dedication of Native Son "To My Mother who, when I was a child at her knee, taught me to revere the fanciful and the imaginative," it seems unlikely that her criticism went beyond this maternal concern for his future well-being in the community.}\]

\[3\text{Kenneth Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright, p. 37.}\]
typesetter of the Southern Register in 1924 (identified as Mrs. Lillian Perkins by Constance Webb and Mrs. Tillie Perkins Scott by Fabre) recalls Wright's story a bit differently from the tale Wright describes in Black Boy. The typesetter says the title was simply "Hell's Half Acre," and that Wright's hero was James "Bigger" Thomas, a neighbor whose influence over Richard, Granny and his mother feared. How interesting if the first character Wright had published was the bully he remembered in "How Bigger Was Born." That would mean not only that the act of writing contributed to Wright's own alienation, but also that the subject of his efforts toward independence would be an actual model for flagrant defiance of convention. If Mrs. Perkins' (Scott's) memory is correct, Wright was interested in alienation from the very beginning.

By the spring of 1931, Wright was trying to become known among the black press, with the hopes of one day rising to editor or reporter. His efforts resulted in his publication in the only black magazine of the time printing nearly 100,000 copies an issue, Abbot's Monthly Magazine. "Superstition" was Wright's interesting tale of a family whose yearly Christmas reunion resulted in a death. The story is narrated by a black businessman, Fentley Burrows, who has heard the tale from a neighbor of the family who later also dies. Speaking to a group of fellow businessmen who have decided each will tell a tale after their meal,
Burrows decides to share his disturbing experiences in Keogan, a small Southern town he has visited on successive years. Some of Wright's decisions about setting and focus are significant. Since the severe unemployment problem was a reality exacerbated by the Depression as he wrote, Wright was apparently not interested in authenticity when he set his tale among successful black businessmen. He explains the narrator's presence in the home of a black family by relating that the hotels were full. It is more likely that a black stranger would have been unwelcome in the hotels of a small Southern town. Wright, it seems, was not interested in racism or strict realism in his desire to reach and captivate a black audience used to sensationalized journalism. He later seems to regret his priorities by renouncing the tale as a "blood and thunder story." Fabre reads Wright's decision never again to sign a work with his middle name included as an effort to partially deny authorship of the story. It is true that no other Wright work bears the signature Richard

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4Abbot's Monthly Magazine, founded by Robert S. Abbot, founder of the Chicago Defender, was a sensational publication. In addition to serious analyses, reports of contemporary issues, and articles on Africa, scandal reports, personal confessions, provocative photography, and stories stressing the bizarre or mysterious were encouraged.

5Letter, Abe Aaron (a Jewish student who met Wright in 1930 at the Chicago Post Office) to J. Conroy (editor of Anvil, a proletarian magazine), January 13, 1934. Quoted in Fabre, p. 86.
Nathaniel Wright. It perhaps struck him as fitting that the magazine went bankrupt and he never received the thirty or forty dollars the tale should have earned him.

Still "Superstition" is important for Wright's early treatment of alienation as a human inevitability. The repetitions and undeveloped characterization of the tale do not overshadow Wright's skillful exploitation of the intrigue surrounding the unexplained deaths. Wright's sensationalized style does not detract from his assertion in the story that man's isolation is his greatest tragedy. Consider the narrator's recollection:

In that silence there was revealed, hideously and repellently, the stark nakedness of the fearful haunts of a primitive folk,—fearful hearts bowing abjectly to the terror of the unknown created by their own imaginations. The outside world had fallen away, leaving only that room and its superstitious implications present.6

The story is significant for Wright's use of realistic details to consider man's reliance upon superstition when reason fails to answer his questions about life and death. Also noteworthy is a detached, skeptical "outsider" who remains aloof from the family yet, like them, seeks an explanation for the mysteries of life. Wright's constant theme is here in rudimentary form: man is alone and confused. He seeks meaning for his life, vindication for his misery, and an end to his loneliness in his common fate with other men. Those forces, like superstition or religion, which tend to deny

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man's alienation and purport to have the answers to his ultimate questions, must be rejected as threats to man's reason and total freedom.

An entirely different effort was claiming Wright's attention as he worked at the Chicago Post Office in 1930. Wright wanted to record the monotony of the work and the reactions to the tedium of the complex personalities who shared his daily part-time Federal job. To remain objective and vivid, Wright took copious notes on the speech, customs, and routines that he would use in his first novel, Lawd Today. He totally re-worked the novel in 1935 and it was published posthumously in 1963, but the broad outline and some of the techniques were conceived well before Wright's enthusiastically well-received stories of the '30's. Although the novel is more appropriately discussed in chapter six of this study, "The Minor Novels," it can be stated here that Wright was interested in alienation when he decided to narrate a typical day in the life of Jake Jackson. Lawd Today is illustrative of Wright's concern with the challenge of remaining human in the absence of supportive interpersonal relationships, beliefs, or institutions.

Looking at Wright's early fiction, alienation seems already a dominant, haunting concern. He had meant to write a novel when he started on "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1935). But not knowing what else to do with the sixty or so pages, he decided instead to condense the work into a short story.
In November of 1936 the story was published in The New Caravan, an anthology. The reviews were encouraging, and the work allowed Wright reclassification as a "creative writer" by the Federal Writers' Project.

The plot of "Big Boy Leaves Home" is simple but clear in Wright's emphasis on alienation. The story opens with four black youths lured to the swimming hole of the white Mr. Harvey by his "No Trespassing" sign and by their own gay, adventurous mood. They are discovered naked by a young white woman, Mr. Harvey's intended daughter-in-law. Her screams, as the boys scamper near her to retrieve their discarded clothing, occasion her fiancé, a soldier returning home, to kill two of the boys. Big Boy, one of the terrified black youths, manages to kill the soldier and save himself and his friend, Bobo. With the aid of his family and the fearful black community, Big Boy escapes the lynch mob sent after them. His friend, Bobo, is less fortunate. He is caught, tarred and feathered, lynched, castrated, burned; and his charred remains are collected as souvenirs by the crazed mob.

From his hiding place in a kiln, Big Boy beats to death a

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7 Positive reviews appeared in New Masses, The New York Times, Saturday Review of Literature, and New Republic, where the story was considered the best work in the anthology.

8 In the spring of 1935, Wright signed up for the Illinois Federal Writers' Project, a newly created branch of the Works Progress Administration. He was classified as an "unemployed writer," and put to work doing research on the history of Illinois.
six-foot long snake, struggles against thirst, dampness and fear of detection, and finally must choke to death a dog sent after him. The next morning, Big Boy hides aboard a truck carrying him to Chicago, the city the boys had earlier envisioned as a land of excitement and equality. He "Leaves Home" looking for safety and the full life the South had never offered him.

Wright's story concerns alienation in a typically paradoxical way. Both Constance Webb's biography and Kinnamon's study of Wright's early writing contend that he deliberately minimized the role of friendship with his peers in the autobiographical Black Boy. They point to his role as leader of the "Dick Wright Klan," a group with whom he corresponded for many years after he left Jackson, as a source for the youthful camaraderie of Wright's stories. "Big Boy Leaves Home" helps us understand the real meaning of group participation in Wright's stories—and possibly in his own life. The fact that Big Boy is one of four young boys who are thoroughly happy enjoying the brilliant day and each other as the story opens in no way diminishes the horrors that follow. Nor is the fact that the community works together to help Big Boy escape a sign of comforting group support. The other blacks simply realize that all of them suffer when one has offended the dominant society. Their common fate is announced in the refrain the mob sings: "We'll hang ever nigger t a sour apple tree...." (sic) It is proven earlier by the burning
of a black owned shack because the old woman who lived there had refused to help the mob find the boys. The black community helps Big Boy primarily because it is the only way it can hope to save itself. Such forced common interest often results in pressure for conformity rather than true understanding or an acceptance of individual freedom. In such a society, the protagonist would be forced to remain a big boy. If he insisted on his manhood, he would be defensively ostracized.

The racial animosity depicted in the story needs no discussion, but ample evidence of isolation and alienation bears some analysis. Big Boy is actually alone, although in the physical presence of others, from the very beginning. As the story opens, only he initially opposes the idea of swimming on private property. He risks the ridicule of the others by expressing his fears of being lynched if caught. In a reckless mood, the others easily ignore him and his prophetic warnings, and they continue on to the Harvey land. Trying to hide his fears in playful roughhouse, Big Boy triggers some feelings of evident animosity. The other three boys join forces to beat him into submission (conformity?), and he proves himself superior to their combined strength, no doubt causing greater estrangement. That Big Boy alone should survive a brutal death and actually go to the North of their playful reveries is a further suggestion of his separateness from the group. Critics have often mis-read Wright's
treatment of Big Boy's relationship with his friends. For example, Kent believes Big Boy's indifference to his friends' murders is a serious flaw in an otherwise creditable story. On the contrary, the boys' relationship reflects Wright's thematic decision to consider alienation. The story itself offers adequate explanations for Big Boy's apparent indifference. He is justifiably preoccupied with his safety and his own physical needs after the shootings. While hiding, Big Boy reviews the jealousy of the others and regrets the imagined wrongs he has done his pals. He even vows never to treat anyone as he had them, as if doing an act of penance following confession. Next morning, he can matter-of-factly relate the night's incidents to Will, who will take him North to safety, because all of it seems too horrible to be true in the light of a new day and because a part of him had never really belonged with the other boys anyway.

The imagery of "Big Boy Leaves Home" attests to Wright's careful structuring of the tale and suggests that alienation is his basic theme. The story opens with the boys walking in a cleared pasture. Coming out of the woods, they find rich grass, warm sunlight and the ground "jus lika bed." The boys remark, "Ah could stay here forever" (p. 19). In

9George E. Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, pp. 84-85.

this paradisiacal setting, Wright places the boys in their innocent nakedness and introduces the threatening presence of a woman, shame for their nakedness, anger and violent removal from the "garden," even a snake. The biblical allusions are unobtrusive, but present. They are effective in the dramatic mood changes of the story. It might be a mistake to take Wright's allusions to Genesis too far. The precise nature of Big Boy's "original sin" would be difficult to determine, for example. Still he does function as a youthful Adam who must find both redemption and his manhood on his own, as an outcast. The imagery of Genesis does reinforce the theme of alienation in Wright's story. Besides the sickness of racial prejudice and the mortal harm it does to all involved, "Big Boy Leaves Home" offers a view of man alone, in search for the meaning of his life. The cost of an insistence on freedom and the stiff price of conformity are other considerations of man's response to his alienation in Wright's tale.

In "American Hunger" Wright says that "Big Boy Leaves Home" had posed the question of the quality of will a Negro must possess to live and die in a country that denies his humanity. A tale inspired by the 1927 floods was Wright's attempt to answer that question. "Down by the Riverside" pictures man struggling against physical and human opposition. Mann, a black farmer, is trying to get his pregnant wife to a doctor and his family to higher ground, as the
story opens. He is unable to find a boat, and must choose between the stolen one his brother has secured and certain death for his wife and baby. Mann is forced to kill the white postman, who discovers the flood victims in his missing boat. Mann valiantly overcomes devastating flood waters and gets his wife to a hospital, only to have her die from complications and medical neglect in childbirth. Ignoring his emotional and physical distress, the troops, called to duty to prevent looting and maintain order, force Mann to work on a rescue squad. Rather unbelievably, Wright has Mann called to save the dead postman's family from the flood waters. Once he is recognized by the Heartfields' son, Mann must choose between more killing and his own death. He dies exercising his freedom of choice of the time and circumstances of his execution. However, it is a meager triumph to "die before he would let them [the soldiers] kill him" (p.102).

Again the alienation theme is clear. Wright's insistence on this theme nearly ruins the story, in fact. Mann is not merely a helpless, submissive black in a white, oppressive world. He is man—certainly a play on the protagonist's name—struggling against forces larger than he, but maintaining human dignity merely by engaging in the struggle. The racial animosity contributing to Mann's situation appears early when he recalls rumors that blacks would be conscripted to pile sand and cement bags on the levee. Shots ring through the air as proof of the racial hostility in the town.
Mann has resolved to stay clear of the town—to remain alone and self-sufficient—but the flood and his family's needs will not allow him continued isolation. The racial theme is complicated when Mann's efforts to purchase a boat fail and he is forced to use the stolen property of old man Heartfield, an avowed racist. Mann has to kill him or be killed. Racial hostility and self-preservation have combined to place Mann in an impossible situation.

Wright allows his story to become too complicated, however. Although the abominable insensitivity of the two soldiers who refuse to acknowledge the crisis but routinely question Mann about his pass and his race rings true, the point is confused. Despite the rigid behavior and offensive language of the soldiers ("His bitch is sick. Having a pic-aninny"). Wright does not seem concerned with the inhumanity that often results from racial hostility. His white characters are not uniformly insensitive to Mann's situation. A white nurse at the hospital sympathizes with the stunned husband who has just learned of his wife and baby's death. The doctor briefly tries to comfort Grannie, who is present at the hospital with Mann. The colonel who dispatches Mann and Brinkley, the young black who is allowed to navigate one of the rescue vessels, to the Heartfields' allows them the choice of saving the white family if they think they can or saving themselves if their lives are imminently endangered. Wright confuses us by stressing the racial overtones of
Mann's dilemma while suggesting that the root of his problem lies in a conflict far deeper than race. The racial aspects of Mann's alienation are clear enough. In times of crisis, fear and prejudices can hold a paralyzing grip on man's rationality. Despite Mann's ordeal in getting to the hospital, he is expected to send the rest of his family away and to join the troops in the rescue of white families. When his murder of Heartfield is discovered, Mann knows that his valiant efforts to save lives at the hospital will count for nothing, despite the colonel's commendation of his work or the justifiable circumstance of self-defense in the shooting. The problem is that this racial question does not seem to be Wright's real focus.

When the story opens, Mann has withdrawn in fear and self-recrimination into himself. Suffering from fever and a lack of food and supplies as well, he tries to clear his head and analyze his predicament. He recalls Sister Jeff's criticism of his decision to stay on their land rather than leave for the hills behind the cow, Sally. Mann blames himself for poor judgment in not following the animal to safety. As head of the household, Mann feels deeply the responsibility of caring for the others with no boat, no doctor, no money, no food, and no means to secure any of these necessities. Faced with his brother's glee at stealing from old man Heartfield, a glee he cannot share, and sadly aware of Grannie's objections against the morality and the safety of flight in a
stolen boat, issues he cannot afford to consider, Mann is alone. He is in the lonely position of decision-maker in a crisis. Neither alternative offers much hope; either choice assures him of criticism. If they stay, death is certain for Lulu, Mann's wife, and their unborn baby. Without food or medicine and considering the steadily rising flood waters, the rest of the family would eventually die too. If they use the stolen boat, they might perish in the strong currents. Even victory over the waters could not assure them equal success with the racist troops, vindictive Heartfield, or panicky townsmen they would surely run into. Mann anticipates the Elders' refusal to help if they were to find out about the stolen boat. No community or religious support can be expected. Mann would be totally unrealistic to expect to give Heartfield an acceptable explanation for being in possession of the postman's missing boat, given the racial animosity stressed in the story. He must reject this seemingly rational approach as futile, then. So Mann faces the currents absolutely alone and totally aware of his separateness, when he sets out from home.

Race offers Mann no consolation, further suggesting that racial conflict is not crucial to the point of Wright's story. If Wright was trying to show white inhumanity to blacks, we could expect Mann to find some solace in his own race and to be alienated from the opposing whites. That is not the case. Brinkley, the black boy handling the rescue
boat is black. If Mann had told him of his earlier shooting of Heartfield, Brinkley would have had no reason to betray his confidence and no motivation to insist on saving the white family. Wright seems to have consciously provided for this conclusion by including an option of saving the Heartfield family or themselves in the colonel's directive to the two black men. When they reach the sinking house, however, Mann cannot tell Brinkley that their rescue mission will cost him his life. Wright allows Mann to consider the possibility, but gives us no reason at all for the conclusion that he cannot tell Brinkley. Later Mann finds himself among a group of blacks who have been given temporary shelter around a kitchen tent. He tries to console himself by thinking of them as his people and looking for hope in their black faces, so like his own. When he is identified as Heartfield's murderer, however, Mann is taken away before the black crowd whose faces "were blurred and merged one into the other." Although Mann allows himself to wonder for a split second why they do not help him, he knows that they can not help him fight forces greater than their collective strength. He does not feel anger or betrayal, for he recalls too many scenes where he idly watched a black man being taken from his home. As the title and the message of the spiritual from which it comes suggest, Mann's only end is lonely submission. He can neither overcome his isolation nor vindicate his overlooked humanity. He can only hope to "lay down [his] sword n
"Down by the riverside." His life, his death, his tragic losses that day are equally weighted—all count for nothing.

It is understandable that Wright felt unhappy with "Down By The Riverside." His focus wavers in the story. Sometimes Wright seems to be interested in Mann as a black man; sometimes, as a man; sometimes, Wright seems interested in subjects outside the protagonist altogether. Certainly the story does not answer Wright's question about the black will to live. He vowed to try again in the next story of the collection, "Long Black Song." Wright recalls for us that while working on the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago, the question of how to write a social commentary in fiction was raised. One boy suggested digging into the characters as a solution to the problem. Wright decided to let the consciousness of his female character speak for the Negro people in an indictment of the conditions of the South.11 That is not exactly what he accomplishes in "Long Black Song," however. The first problem is that now, for the first time, Wright has two protagonists, Silas and his wife, Sarah. Although Wright meant that Sarah's innocent, sensitive perceptions would dominate, Silas clearly takes over the end of the

11 Wright says that the group was strongly influenced by Hemingway, but felt that his naturalistic style left no room for social comment. An interesting irony is that most criticisms of Wright's use of detail attribute the wealth of detail to Wright's purpose of providing social comment. Writers' Club Bulletin (Columbia U., Vol. I, 1938), pp. 15-16, Quoted in Fabre, p. 122.
story. Secondly, allowing the consciousness of his major character to form a racial comment proved far more difficult than Wright anticipated, regardless of which character he allowed dominance in the story.

As "Long Black Song" opens, Sarah is lonely for her husband, Silas and lost in dreams of her real love, Tom, who is a soldier away in Europe. Sarah's dreams are interrupted by a young white man from the North at her door selling a combination clock-phonograph. The two have some difficulty talking. They have nothing in common but a growing physical attraction, which results in the salesman's seducing Sarah and assuaging his conscience by leaving the sale item at a ten dollar discount. He plans to return the next morning for Silas's decision and a down-payment.

Silas, thrilled that he has sold his cotton and can now buy more land and hire help as the successful whites do, returns home later that night. He discovers the salesman's phonograph-clock, hat, pencil, and a dampened handkerchief in his bedroom. He takes a rawhide whip to Sarah, but she escapes his hurt pride by fleeing to the nearby hills. Next morning when the salesman returns for his money, Sarah watches her husband struggle with the young white man and his assistant. Silas kills one, but the other escapes and returns with a caravan of whites. Despite the pleas of Sarah, Silas chooses to remain on his land and resist the lynch mob. He returns their gunfire and stays inside his
burning home to die when they set it afire. With Sarah's revulsion from the needless killings, Wright concludes his story.

Despite Silas's refusal to flee and his success in killing some of his pursuers (as Big Boy had merely dreamed of doing in Wright's opening story), Wright was not yet satisfied with his fictional answer to the question of black humanity. The alienation of both of his characters, Sarah and Silas, may explain part of Wright's dissatisfaction—and our own. Sarah, Wright's intended protagonist, is painfully alone as the story opens. She misses her husband, cannot soothe her fretful child, and is plagued by memories of her first love. She fears that Tom may have died in the war. "She felt that merely to go so far away from home was a kind of death in itself. Just to go that far away was to be killed" (p. 105). Sarah's remarks are unconsciously ironic, since her own home does not offer the comfort and satisfaction she seems to be presuming. Nevertheless, she fears for Tom and is ambivalent about Silas, her absent husband. She can only sigh in gratitude for Silas, although she must admit that he never quite satisfied her need for Tom, whose "leaving...leaving had left an empty black hole in her heart, a black hole that Silas had come in and filled. But not quite" (p. 106). So when the young salesman shows up, Sarah is glad for the company. She feels oddly maternal toward the stranger peddling his pretty toy. Her own baby had been only a
further source of frustration, as the story opened. Sarah has cried, "Lawd, tha chiles a pain!" and acknowledged a greater sense of loneliness being home with her fretful baby than she could imagine by being home alone. It is not surprising, then, that Sarah's hopes about the stranger should be proven naive. Despite her own sexual longings, Sarah does not find herself attracted to the young man. She does not so much yield to him as passively allow him to do his will with her, remembering all the while her distance from him and the superiority over her his color gives him. Soon she is lost in her own passions and does not have to try to reach him. In the act of physical intimacy, Sarah is acutely alone.

Silas's return brings Sarah no comfort after the incident with the white salesman. She is further distressed by the news that Tom is back from the war and that the returning black soldiers are clashing with some whites in town. Once Silas discovers the signs of the white man's intrusion, he is lost to her forever. She feels sorry for having hurt him, but leaves home to escape a fierce beating, musing that she may yet find Tom, her first love. When she returns to beg Silas to flee, he sends her away and her isolation is as complete as it is when she later silently watches Silas battle to his death.

Alienation is even more basic to the characterization of Wright's second protagonist. Living with a woman who never really loved him, Silas has still seen to it that
Sarah never had to work in the fields. He has given her a home, and was returning home proudly to tell her of his financial success. He thought the ability to hire workers of his own would make him the equal of the white landowners. But discovering the sales item and hat, Silas must admit he could never have entered a white man's home as the young man had entered his. He would never be a complete equal. Once he deduces all that has transpired in his absence, Silas is totally alone in his hatred of whites, and he dies resenting the fact that, "Yuh die if yuh fight! Yuh die if yuh don fight! Either way yuh die n it don mean nothin..." (p. 125). The homeland he had worked so hard for ten years to own literally comes crashing down on Silas's head as the story ends. "Long Black Song" is one of Wright's most pessimistic tales.

As she predicted, Sarah suffers a kind of death by being forced to leave her home. Silas is no less alone and is eventually dead, though he refuses to leave his home. If Wright has dug deeply into the consciousness of his characters to produce a social commentary, as his FWP colleague suggested, we cannot be sure what his commentary was. Sarah (Wright?) had wanted to believe that man, regardless of color, was linked to the cornfields and grey skies in gladness and dreams, "like the spokes in a spinning wheel" (p. 126). However, Sarah's vision of total harmony between all men and between man and nature is never vindicated in the story. So Wright was forced to look still further for an explanation
of humanity and the black will to live in the face of denial. Maybe a combination of Big Boy, Mann and Sarah could result in a picture of one of his black friends in the Communist Party. He was to write later, "With the exception of the Church and its myths and legends, there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist Party." 12 It seems clear then, that in 1936 Wright set out to show the growing political awareness of blacks in a story that joined the best in Communism with the best in Christianity. Wright also describes it as a depiction of the relationship between the leaders of both races. 13 "Fire and Cloud" was the award-winning result. 14

When "Fire and Cloud" opens, the Reverend Dan Taylor has been recognized as a black leader in his town for some time. He has tried unsuccessfully to persuade white relief administrators to feed his people. Now Reverend Taylor is torn between the mass demonstration, planned by local Communists, and the possibility of continued black starvation. Then too Deacon Smith is eager to discredit Taylor among the

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14 The story won the first prize ($500) in a contest sponsored by Story magazine. Open to all Federal Writers' Project members, the contest had attracted over six hundred entries before Wright won on February 15, 1938.

In early 1939, Wright received an O. Henry Memorial Award of $200 for the story. Fabre, pp. 156, 188.
whites and seize his position for himself. As he slowly returns home, Reverend Taylor surveys the surrounding fields. They remind him of the abundance of his first married years, when he had thought himself a black Moses, ready to deliver his people from the wilderness of their poverty into the promised land of abundance. Now he must return home empty-handed.

Taylor's angry young son, Jimmy, meets him to tell him that the mayor, two other whites, his deacons, and two Communists are all waiting for him back at the house. Still another group, a committee Taylor has sent to the mayor for help, mill around him bemoaning their defeat. All Taylor can offer them is the temporary solace of a group prayer.

At home, Taylor must scheme to prevent the presence of the Communists waiting for him from becoming known to either his deacons or the mayor's group. He succeeds in speaking first to the interracial pair, Hadley and Green, about the scheduled demonstration that they insist will fail without Taylor's endorsement. His fears for his congregation, his hesitancy about the Communists, and his unwillingness to defy the establishment he had always looked to with respect and cooperation stop Reverend Taylor. What could he ever again do for his black people? The Communists leave disgruntled, and Taylor goes on to face Mayor Bolton, the Police Chief, Bruden, and Mr. Lowe, head of the town's "Industrial Squad." The mayor is there to dissuade the blacks from joining the
demonstration, and neither his feigned pleasantries nor Bruden and Lowe's open threats produce a firm commitment from Taylor to condemn the march. Weary, Taylor goes on to meet with the deacons of his church. The treachery of Deacon Smith is only too apparent. The assembled deacons have decided to march, and Taylor is unable to reason them out of it before his son interrupts with a message that Taylor is wanted outside by some white men.

The men have come to kidnap Reverend Taylor. They drive him to a deserted part of the countryside, tie him to a tree, and beat him unconscious when he verbally resists. Taylor regains consciousness and begins the long walk home. There is met by his son who is now enraged at the assault on his father. Taylor learns that the deacons have been made to believe that he deserted them and have dismissed him from his own church. Refusing to become bitter, Taylor uses his beating to show his son the reason for solidarity when revenge seems warranted. When the people march the next morning, Taylor is there to see the races joined in an effort that frightens the mayor into a strong promise of food and aid.

Wright's final story in the original edition of *Uncle Tom's Children* is masterfully illustrative of the struggles of a man alienated from all the forces that had sustained him. His people, who had once looked to him as an agent of their God, are now desperate for food and impatient with his
failures to secure it. The deacons of his church are rather easily led by a self-serving man in their midst. The whites he had considered friends show their true regard for Taylor's leadership by their threats that he submit to their wishes. The Communists whom he had admired clearly reject his explanation for inaction. Even among his own family, Taylor's son resents the passivity he reads in his father's efforts to find another way rather than alienate the authorities. His wife fears he will make a decision that may harm their son's future. Wright had correctly foreseen the conflict that would rock the leadership of the black community in the '60's. The religious resignation and patience that had sustained black people throughout bondage was now giving way to a strident cry for militancy. Reverend Taylor, alienated on all sides, must come to a painful decision, seared into his body with the fire of the whip. Wright, believing as he did that Communism offered alienated individuals the power of united effort to relieve their suffering, has Taylor tell Jimmy, "We los when wes erlone! Wes gonna be wid our folks..." (p. 171). Taylor experiences a rebirth, a "baptism of clean joy," when we confronts the mayor and forces the trembling, pasty-white faced figure to tell the crowd himself that he would see to it that they receive food if they return home peacefully.

Wright's story was deserving of the $500 Story magazine prize he received. It is ideological, yet not propagandistic.
The same theatrical bent that was to have Wright place all of the important figures in Bigger's past in his jail cell in *Native Son* shows up here as all the conflicting forces in Taylor's decision are waiting unknown to each other in different rooms of his house. "Good Gawd, whut a mess!" Taylor says. We must agree. Yet the portraits are realistic for each group, and the figure of Dan Taylor rises well above the "Uncle Tom" he might so easily have been. He is a sincere, fearful, pragmatic, yet religious man whose struggle to merge his fate with those around him reflects the real, human problem of the individual in a troubled society. The decisions that must be reached by Mayor Bolton, Taylor's son, Jimmy, and the ambitious Deacon Smith, all realistically drawn, help broaden Wright's theme from the purely individual to the racial then biracial, on to the human level.

The story is ultimately about faith and self-esteem and the value and dignity of the individual. Not surprisingly, alienation figures in Wright's theme too. A closer analysis will show that the dialogue, imagery, and characterization work together to form a comment about man's separateness and his ability to conquer his isolation from other men.

As the story opens, Reverend Taylor is alone. His mouth utters a derogatory jingle about the inferiority of the black man while his shoulders shake, as if to dispel the ideas. As he nears his home, Rev. Taylor muses on his race and introduces a color symbolism that is well known to readers of
Wright's later fiction. "We black folks is just los in one big white fog," he concludes (p. 130). The buildings of the white-owned town Taylor passes through are alien and hazy to him. Yet "he knew by sight or sound every black man, woman and child living within those huddled walls" of the valley just beneath the town. Color would appear to be the explanation for Taylor's isolation. However, even in his early writing, Wright was rarely satisfied with an explanation for man's alienation based solely on race. He had too often felt most alone with members of his own race. In "Fire and Cloud" Wright urges his story beyond the question of racially determined isolation to that larger realm of alienation all men share. Hadley and Green persistently seek Taylor's help with the demonstration, and Hadley is white. Deacon Smith constantly contradicts and threatens Taylor's authority, yet Smith is black. In the early scenes of the story, Taylor is painfully alone though at that very moment his house is incredibly full of people of both races seeking his attention.

Often in our history blacks, searching for fellowship, have looked to the Christian Church. Wright seems to be calling for an evaluation of the techniques of the black

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15This thesis has been carefully explored by Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Chaplain and Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Dickinson College in Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). Washington asserts that Negro congregations constitute not churches but religious fellowships, founded as a release from the tensions of being excluded from full participation in the Christian church.
church even as he borrows one to underline his theme of alienation. When Reverend Taylor, "ashamed of his own helplessness and theirs," leads his congregation in prayer, we are given a demonstration of the structure and effectiveness of oratorical stimulation, as it was used in the black church. Wright lingers over Taylor's sermon, as if challenging us to evaluate its usefulness in solving the spiritual or social problems Taylor faces. The preacher is not handicapped by his emotional unrest. On the contrary, he escapes his frustrations by immersing himself and his followers in his skilful flow of words. Taylor's words are persuasive and appropriately couched in biblical roots. As he alludes to the Creation, the exodus of the Jews from Egyptian bondage, the battle of Joshua at Jericho, Jonah's struggles in the belly of the whale, and the miraculous powers of Christ, Taylor recalls the time-worn stories that comfort the congregation by their familiarity and provide a firm message of hope. The sermon is actually a joint project, since the

16 Discussing a wide-spread consensus among black seminarians that "spiritualizing" the congregation is a primary task of the black preacher, Dr. Washington quotes an instructor in an unidentified Southeastern school of religion: "...You will be successful to the extent you are commanding, articulate, clear, convivial, illustrative, and dramatic. Remember Aunt Jane [the average black churchgoer] is impressed less by what is said than by the enthusiasm with which it is said." Quoted, p. 90.

17 Discussing "Folk Religion and Negro Congregations," Dr. Washington explains how a typical worship service leader uses the Bible as a source for imaginative improvisation. The minister who can apply his sermon to contemporary situations and who selects Bible stories which parallel black life
congregation automatically and enthusiastically repeats Taylor's words. Hearing these responses, echoes of his own desperate affirmations, Taylor feels himself a deep, vital part of a large, receptive whole. Still the prayer does not fill the empty stomachs of his people. He must isolate himself from their pain or succumb to it. His ears are filled with the sound of wailing voices as Taylor closes the door behind him and goes out from his flock to meet with his wife, May.

Mrs. Taylor is very close to her husband. It was she who taught him to read and write. She encouraged him to follow his call to the ministry. Taylor has not confided in her lately, however. She is terrified by the violent conflict that seems imminent, and is unable to be of much help to her.

is considered skillful. "That preacher who is able to preach the whole Bible and not miss a single high point from the Creation through the Crucifixion to the Last Judgment will be around for a while " (p. 99).

By these standards Wright has created a successful black preacher in Reverend Daniel Taylor.

18 e.g., "Yuh made em all, Lawd, n Yuh tol em whut t do!"
yuh made em lawd
"Yuhs strong n powerful n Yo will rules this worl!"
yuh rules it lawd
"Yuh brought the chillun of Israel outta the lan of Egypt!"
yuh sho did... (Uncle Tom’s Children, p. 137)

19 Shutting off the people and events around him as a means of protesting his helplessness and inability to change them is characteristic behavior in Wright's alienated
troubled husband. When she balks from deliberately lying to the mayor about her husband's health, thus giving him time to see and get rid of the Communists, Taylor is forced to further alienate the woman he has always relied on. He shouts to her, "We gotta lie t white folks! Thesy on our necks. They make us lie t them! What kin we do but lie?" (p. 140). May is frightened by her husband's outburst.

She looks at him in "amazed helplessness" as if he were a stranger.

With Hadley and Green, Taylor is no better understood than he was by his wife. He seems to feel a legitimate moral dilemma. He cannot justify risking the lives of his helpless churchmen. The pair remind him of an earlier occasion where the minister saved a man from the mob. Taylor replies that a mass demonstration is a different matter. "Ah wuz goin ergin some of the white folks. But this thing is going ergin em all! This is too much like war!" (p. 145).

A leader must expect to make some enemies, but a man cannot function when he alienates those in control of the means to characters. Often he effects this self-imposed isolation by a series of "blotting out" incidents. Sometimes the protagonist suddenly becomes acutely sensitive to the sensations around him (i.e., to colors, odors, sounds, and the like). Less artistically, Wright has an omniscient narrator tell us of this defense. Cf. Bigger's responses: "He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them..." (Native Son, p. 13). Even more direct are Wright's words about Cross Damon: "He was conscious of himself as a frail object which had to protect itself against a pending threat of annihilation" (The Outsider, p. 17).
satisfy his needs, Taylor concludes. His arguments are sound, but not personally satisfying. Believing that the Communists consider him merely afraid, Taylor "flushes hot with shame and anger" and again prays for guidance. Again Taylor has looked for understanding and has found only rejection.

There is little effort to disguise the estrangement when Rev. Taylor meets with the mayor and his assistants. The mayor's false camaraderie is offensive. "Why, Hello Dan," he says, refusing to acknowledge the minister's proper title of address. Later he refers to Rev. Taylor as "the boy I was telling you about," when Mayor Bolton turns to the police chief. On another occasion he offensively pats the minister on the knee in an unconscious gesture of paternalism. When the talk turns to Communists, Mr. Lowe reveals his bitter antagonism toward blacks and dissidents. Lowe has been introduced as head of the "Industrial Squad" of the town, but Taylor is correct when he later calls Lowe head of the "Red Squad," a Red-baiting movement in town. The group's true regard for Taylor--and for all of the poor who associate with him--becomes clear as the false smiles disappear and the epithets fly. The group leaves with Chief of Police Bruden shouting, "A nigger's a nigger!" and Rev. Taylor suspecting treachery. Again he feels alone and vulnerable in his indecision.
Isolation begins to seem a welcome escape from the pressures around him now. Taylor's wife asks, "with suppressed hysteria," questions about the mayor's visit that Taylor would like to forget. He shouts for her to leave him alone. He mentally links May's questions to his son's demands for action as a source of irritation. "Ef it ain one its the other," he says of the couple that had been his support against the pressures of his job. Going downstairs to meet his deacons, Taylor faces "a dense cloud of tobacco smoke and a circle of black faces." He is as estranged from this "black cloud" as he was earlier from the "white fog." Both threaten to engulf him. The deacons are divided. Nervous bickering characterizes the discussion of the proposed demonstration. Finally, Taylor acquiesces to the will of the majority. "Waal, Ahll march wid em... They won march erlone" (p. 156). Reverend Taylor is not yet convinced that the march is the best solution to their problems of poverty and unemployment, however. His rival, Deacon Smith, taunts Taylor for his attempts to create unity. "Yuh wanna stan in wid the Reds! Yuh wanna stan in wid the Deacon Board! Yuh wanna stan in wid everybody n yuh stan in wid nobody!" (p. 156). Though his motives are reprehensible, Deacon Smith's words are accurate. It is part of Rev. Taylor's dilemma that he seeks acceptance from all of the factions involved. It is his tragedy that he can be accepted by none of them if he remains true to his own conscience.
When the long, black car carrying strangers pulls up, and Taylor is lured outside and then kidnapped, his estrangement is complete. He is taken to a symbolic crossroads in a deliberately isolated section of town. Though he can clearly feel the rubber tires on the rough road and see a glimpse of starry sky, Taylor sees the faces of his attackers as first "blurred" and then "blotted out." The beating the minister receives from these shadowy figures is vicious. It serves only to strengthen Taylor's growing belief in communal strength. "Well git yuh white trash some day! So hep me Gawd, we'll git yuh!" he cries before he lapses into unconsciousness (p. 164).

Coming to at two o'clock in the morning, Taylor stagggers towards home weak and soaked in his own blood. The scene is a bizarre echo of the opening scene where Taylor reviewed his life and his beliefs. This time images of separation, like the serene white houses in the cool night or the segregated graveyard "protected" in its isolation by a high iron picket fence, demand Taylor's attention. The lush green hillside and the soft, yellow dust of that scene are replaced by house-tops glinting dully in the moonlight and a road of black asphalt turned to cinders. Taylor passes a man, a boy, a woman and a policeman whom he cannot ask for help. Though he is seriously injured, the preacher is in a white neighborhood. His greatest hope is that the passers-by will pretend not to see him and allow him to pass
unnoticed. Even that meager hope is denied the battered minister. The young boy turns to stare at him; the woman crosses the street to avoid him; and the policeman stops and frisks him without provocation. Continuing on, Taylor sees his own church and relaxes, feeling himself finally safe from hostility. Wright cannot allow us the simple answer of race for the problem of Taylor's deep sense of alienation, however. Burning with shame as painfully as he burned from the lashes of the whip, Taylor reluctantly faces his son, Jimmy. He is too ashamed to even allow Jimmy to call for May. Jimmy tells his father that his absence has been misunderstood and the deacons have voted him out of his own church. " Seems like Gawds don lef me," Rev. Taylor replies in total frustration. His loneliness is severe, though his son stands by. Taylor berates himself for the frustrations of his life. He tries to explain them to Jimmy as the result of his isolation, a fate he shares with all defeated men. "The reason we cant do nothin is cause wes so much er-lone" (p. 171). He tries to impress his son with the need for joint action. A man must stay close to his people, Taylor decides. Communism and religion are powerless to help an alienated individual. Taylor begins even to identify God with the masses. "Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us!" (p. 172). He concludes a bit too emphatically, "all the will, all the strength, all the power, all the numbahs is in the people! Yuh cant live by yoself!" (p. 172).
Wright thought he had found the answer to the alienation and isolation of man. It could not be denied, but it could be overcome. By recognizing the forced isolation and needs they share, individuals could join together to conquer their personal helplessness. The fog and clouds of Wright's story give way to "White and clean sunshine" near the end. Taylor merges into a "many-limbed, many-legged, many-headed crowd that was he" (p. 179). May is lovingly by his side again. Jimmy is proudly close by as well. The red-faced mayor turns a pasty white as Rev. Taylor experiences "a baptism of clean joy." According to Wright's overly dramatic conclusion, man has shaken the universe by overcoming his isolation. As the story ends, the sky trembles; the buildings waver as if about to topple; and the earth shakes (p. 180). Dan Taylor achieves a triumph over alienation that Richard Wright was never to know.

Wright was pleased that "Fire and Cloud" had been selected first from among six hundred entries. The award provided him with income, and it encouraged him to seek acceptance through his writing. The prize also helped Wright secure a commitment from Harper's to publish Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas (1938). Yet Wright had not yet satisfactorily answered the question he wrote these four stories to resolve. The black will to survive was constantly in conflict with forces in society that threatened to destroy it—poverty, ignorance, racism. How could racial alienation be
overcome and black humanity be fully acknowledged? Indeed, could he be sure the isolation and misunderstanding was essentially a problem caused by race? "Bright and Morning Star," which appeared in the enlarged 1940 edition of Uncle Tom's Children, was one more attempt at an answer. It was another effort to define Communism and Christianity as aids to man's ability to persist. The difficulty is that Wright seems undecided about the place of these two sources of strength. The story was a literary success, chosen for inclusion in two anthologies. The Communist Party shared with Wright the financial success of the tale, when he gave rights to his story to the Earl Browder Defense Fund in 1941.

In "Bright and Morning Star," first published in the May 10, 1938, edition of New Masses, Wright focuses on Sue, a middle-aged, beloved black widow who works hard to support herself and her two sons, Sug and Johnny-Boy. Sug, a Communist who worked among the sharecroppers of their Tennessee

20 "Bright and Morning Star" appeared in Best Stories of 1939, which was even dedicated to Wright and Jesse Stuart, and in Fifty Best American Short Stories (1914-1939). So popular was the story that Theodore Ward wrote a stage adaptation of it that the two men tried to get black actress, Ethel Waters to finance. Fearing to offend the white audience, Miss Waters declined. Fabre, p. 94.

See Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright, p.116, for an impressive list of recent reprintings of the story.

21 Browder was National Chairman of the Communist Party of the United States. When Wright made this contribution to his defense, Browder was celebrating his fiftieth birthday in prison.
area, has been jailed for weeks and Johnny-Boy is out spreading word of a party meeting when the story opens. Reva, the young white girl who loves Johnny-Boy, comes in to warn Sue that her father's house, the scheduled site of the meeting, is being watched. To protect the members, the meeting must be cancelled. Johnny-Boy arrives soon after, only to have to go back out in the downpour to warn those he has just notified of the change in plans.

As Sue fitfully sleeps, the sheriff and his men appear for information about the identities of the Communists in the area. They beat the defenseless woman unconscious when she refuses to give them any names. Sue regains consciousness and finds Booker, a new white recruit, standing over her with the news that her son has been caught and he must now continue the task of alerting the members. Sue has intuitively distrusted Booker, but she takes a chance and gives him the names. When Reva returns with the news that Booker is not to be trusted, Sue resolves to rectify her mistake by going to the sheriff with a winding-cloth, as he had directed. Concealing a gun with the sheet, Sue arrives to witness her son's brutal torture, and is further tormented by the sheriff's mob for her silence. When the traitor appears, Sue shoots Booker before the startled group of whites torturing her son can stop her. The heroism she displayed when the sheriff's men invaded her home is intensified in the final scenes of the story. Sue has a triumphant death that allows
her to prove her superiority over the sheriff and to join her son in a death that is an end to suffering.

"Bright and Morning Star" took Wright no further towards an answer to his dilemma of black life or man's alienation. It is essentially a reworking of "Fire and Cloud" which, despite its frequent publication, seems inferior to the earlier story. Sue is well drawn, but she lacks the complexity of Reverend Taylor. Her conversion to the Communists' version of collective social action as a solution to social and political inequities is primarily motivated by maternal love; her desire to save the other comrades, by racial ties. She instinctively distrusts whites (except Reva, who is insufficiently developed to be considered a valid exception), and is proven correct by the betrayal of Booker. Thus, there is no real fusion of the races nor of Communism and Christianity in this story.

Surprisingly this is the first story where Wright has not concerned himself specifically with man's alienation. Instead Wright traces the evolution of Sue's strength from religious fervor to political commitment. The exact relationship between her Communism and Christianity is a problem to most readers of the story. George Kent feels that Sue is caught between the two worlds of escapist religion and Communism, sustained by a kind of revolutionary will that Kent
sees as existential. The text supports this placement of Sue. Wright tells us that "day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision, and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace" (p. 185). Since Sue was alone in the world with only her two boys and they had refused to accept her God, she stayed close to them by embracing theirs. Yet her conversion from Christianity to Communism is never complete. When she learns of Booker's treachery and agonizes over a way to save the other comrades, Sue finds herself "mired... between two abandoned worlds, living, but dying without the strength of the grace that either gave" (p. 206). As further illustration of the ambiguities of the story, Constance Webb calls Sue a "Christian turned Communist," then says that Sue dies embracing her own religion and her kinship with all oppressed people, not with Communism. There are some problems concerning the inconsistency of Sue's motives that prompt such contradictions. It is Sue's love for her sons that causes her to accept their Communism, waive her distrust of white people enough to accept Reva as a daughter, remain silent under the blows of

22Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, pp. 87-88. Although he offers no support for the opinion, Kent believes this last story superior to "Fire and Cloud" because of Wright's investigation of the psyche of the female protagonist. Too little of Sue's psyche seems to have been uncovered to justify the investigation, however.

the sheriff, defy her instincts by trusting Booker with the names, and finally to watch Johnny-Boy's legs being broken and eardrums being split without responding. Religion and politics seem to be secondary to the love she has for her sons in all of Sue's actions. Like the question of motive, Wright uses symbols that are subject to a variety of interpretations, all seemingly valid. In a phrase reminiscent of *Native Son*, Wright speaks of the "white mountain" that had driven Sue from the earth (pp. 188, 206). Unlike his later use of the image, this barrier seems as readily symbolic of Sue's feelings of unexplained shame as it is of racial animosity or simple loneliness. Sue says that she was alone in her mistake of trusting Booker and that alone she must rectify her mistake. But the love she has for her sons carries her through both incidents and even on into death. The sheriff's enraged order, "Kill em both!" brings Sue the pleasure of seeing her son put out of his pain and the peace of being allowed to join him "buried in the depths of her star."

Perhaps the weaknesses of the story, suggested by its early rejection, stem, at least in part, from Wright's inability to believe that love alone could conquer the racial and personal alienation he had known to be man's lot.

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24The story was actually ready in time for the publication of *Uncle Tom's Children*. Harper's Magazine rejected it and *New Masses* eagerly picked it up for its relevance to Party themes, when it was decided to publish the work separately. It came out, amid a great deal of fanfare, in a special literary supplement on May 10, 1938. Fabre, p. 164.
Perhaps he could not believe in Sue's strange freedom from alienation. Love for her sons had given Sue peace of mind, had removed the white mountain from her horizon. Love never worked so effectively for Richard Wright. He seemed to be unable to convincingly present characters who did not share with him the awesome sense of being alone, rejected, and unable to reach another who shared this fate.

Besides the stories of Uncle Tom's Children, there are few works of Wright's apprentice period that require discussion. "Cesspool" (published posthumously as Lawd Today) was written during the thirties, but will be treated in a later chapter. Likewise "Almos' A Man," rejected in 1936 by Story magazine then published in Eight Men as "The Man Who Was Almost A Man," is better reserved for later discussion. It can be noted here that this story is part of the unpublished novel, "Tarbaby's Dawn" that Wright dropped after Vanguard, Viking, Modern Age, and Norton all rejected it despite numerous revisions. Specifically the story comes from the final pages of section one, "Tarbaby's Sunrise," written in 1934 or 1935. The work is about the childhood and early career of a black boxer, Daniel Morrison. A plot summary of the unpublished manuscript includes the following topics: family pressures, peer influence, religious strictures, dreams and nightmares, an attempted conversion, the death of a beloved aunt, racial terrors, and alienation. It seems then that Wright probably used all of the major concerns of this story
elsewhere, though only "Almos' A Man" and parts of The Long Dream were ever published from this source.

A final work of the thirties is "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow--An Autobiographical Sketch." Written in the fall of 1935, this piece appeared in the enlarged 1940 edition of Uncle Tom's Children. Its first appearance was in a huge anthology of the Federal Writers' Project, American Stuff (New York, 1937, pp. 39-52), but the sketch is better known for its incorporation into Black Boy.

Discounting for the moment the poetry for which Wright was first known, by 1940 he had frequently developed the theme that man--especially the black man in America--is alone, often helpless but strangely determined to survive. Wright's Communist affiliations coaxed him to say that oppressed men found strength in communal social action, but basic instincts made him look elsewhere for the source of strength in the human personality. What if communal interaction were denied him? Could man cut off from spiritual sustenance, national culture, family, peers, even self find meaning in his life? Envisioning the Bigger Thomases Wright had known all his life resurrected in the Promised Land of the North, Wright fashioned a bomb entitled Native Son, whose reverberations still echo around the world. In this novel Wright utilized imagery, characterization and plot to probe into man's alienation. With the 1940 publication of Native Son, Wright's apprenticeship was over.
CHAPTER V

NATIVE SON: NOVEL, PLAY, MOTION PICTURE

Recalling *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright tells us, "I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it, that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."\(^1\) It is precisely the hardness and the depth of Wright's explosive novel that engendered much of the criticism that has raged on in every decade since its publication.

There are few literary characters as controversial as Bigger Thomas. Extensive summaries of the novel's critical reception have been adequately presented elsewhere,\(^2\) but one contemporary response made by a respected black scholar is illustrative of the areas of controversy. In his study of the hero in American literature, Theodore L. Gross retorts,


\(^2\)For example see Fabre's thorough account in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, pp. 178-80, 184-87. Kinnamon also considers this question crucial to *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, pp. 143-152. He classifies the remarks according to race, nationality and political background when relevant to the reviewer. Kinnamon also cites Samuel Sillen, "The Response to 'Native Son,'" *New Masses*, XXXV (23 April 1940), 25-27, a Communist work that avoids direct response by offering a series of real and imaginary reactions to the novel.
Native Son is indeed hard, but it is not very deep; and if the reader does not weep, it is not because he has experienced those thoughts that go beyond tears, it is because he has ceased to believe in Wright's hero, Bigger Thomas, and, as a consequence, ceased to care.  

My personal experiences, those shared for six years with a racial and socio-economic mixture of student readers at the University level, and the plethora of character studies that fill the literary journals each year show Gross badly mistaken. Few of Wright's most staunch supporters have ever tried to declare the novel without faults—some rather serious and disturbing. Yet Native Son survives. My contention is that Wright's sympathetically portrayed anti-hero is the key to the novel's resilience. Bigger's impact is among the most powerful in American letters because Wright insisted on our feeling for ourselves "the horror of Negro life in the United States." This is the horror Wright defines as the moral of the novel. However, he broadened this announced theme to the horror of life. Race and nationality are not central to much of Native Son. The alienation that Wright comes to identify with human life is at the core of this greater, more disturbing horror.

It is this question of the reader's experienced horror that initiates both the highest acclaim and the most severe criticism of Wright's intention and his achievement. If he


4Wright, Native Son, "How Bigger Was Born," p. xxxiii.
were merely depicting Negro life, those who resent Bigger's presentation as a representative black American have a real, if overstated and often defensive grievance. Many readers fear a boomerang effect, a confirming of racial prejudices and removing of the shield of respectability from even educated and accepted black Americans. Bigger's role as a black representative troubled the Communists of Wright's own day as well. The Party wanted to hold the book up as an example of black artistry developed under their tutelage. Yet the portrait of Bigger could so easily be used to justify further repression. Wright was wrong to speak of racial oppression without relating it to class struggle, most Communists believed. He had damaged their image in the novel by showing the Communists insensitive to Bigger and black life. When Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., a black Communist graduate of Harvard Law School and a friend of Wright, criticized *Native Son*, Wright feared that his novel had alienated him from the one group that he believed had really accepted him. Although Earl Browder, head of the American Communist Party at the time, found no specific faults with the work when called upon for a formal statement, Wright privately told his friends otherwise.⁵ Thus when Mike Gold came to his defense in an

⁵Horace Cayton says that Wright told him of severe opposition from the Party to the characterizations and ideas of his novel. *Anger and Beyond*, p. 198. Just before his death, Wright revealed a threatened expulsion notice he received from the Party over the novel. The irony, Wright noted, was that even as he was being threatened with expulsion, black
April 29, 1940 column for the *Daily Worker*, Wright happily responded. His reaction to this official Party verdict in favor of the novel tells us much about Wright's intentions in creating the character of Bigger. In part, Wright answered Gold's remarks by asking:

...Are we Communist writers to be confined merely to the political and economic spheres of reality and leave the dark and hidden places of the human personality to the Hitlers and Goebbels? I refuse to believe such....Not to plunge into the complex jungle of human relationships and analyze them is to leave the field to the fascists and I won't and can't do that. If I should follow Ben Davis's advice and write of Negroes through the lens of political theory, I'd abandon the Bigger Thomases....

Wright faced a dilemma. He could not abandon the Bigger Thomases. In their aloneness, their struggles for self-knowledge, their consciousness of being rejected, they were too much a part of Richard Wright. Once again writing of reality as he saw it was separating Wright from those he most wanted to understand him.

Despite the hostility, he felt obliged to speak the truth, Wright's response to Gold tells us. And indeed he was drawing a "truthful" picture in the character of Bigger. There were (and still are) more Biggers than successful America would like to admit. He may not be an accurate

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and white members of the bourgeoisie claimed that *Native Son* was part of a Communist plot. For details see Speech, "The Negro Intellectual in the U.S. Today," delivered by Wright in Paris, November, 1960. Available in the Schomburg Collection of Wright Documents.

representative of black Americans as Baldwin and his followers shriek, but Bigger is nevertheless an authentic figure. Bigger stands on the corner looking angrily at the political billboards, church steeples, and status symbols around him, even as I write, as some black Americans work to make these realities their own, and as other black Americans fight for even deeper realities. There is no reason to presume any one literary figure could represent the complexity of black American life. There is no reason to presume a black fictional character has no relationship to all human life.

The confusion surrounding Wright's novel can be further avoided once we realize that Native Son is not a mere depiction of Negro life, as Wright unfortunately stated. It goes beyond this horror to one known to all Americans, indeed to a subject recognizable to the international audience Wright's novel eventually reached. Wright's character, Mary Dalton, tells us much despite her insensitivity and blindness when she excitedly chatters about her ignorance of black people. "Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human...." It is surely no new interpretation that Wright's novel is psychological as well as socio-political. As Wright moves deeper and deeper inside Bigger Thomas, he takes us to a realm beyond his poverty, ignorance, and blackness to his humanity. So those

7Native Son, p. 70. All subsequent quotes from the novel are from the Harper paperback edition.
who reject Wright's remarks in "How Bigger Was Born" that his protagonist did not have to be black have not moved far enough within the character in their scholarly pursuits of the chronology of these remarks or the circumstances of Wright's creation. The real concern of the novel is not Bigger's social deprivation. The Communists who looked for this focus in Wright's work realized his interest was elsewhere. The real concern of Native Son is the alienation a man feels when his world denies him human recognition. As technology, urbanization and "progress" reduce the value of the individual, more and more readers have seen Bigger's struggles as their own. Bigger's fight is not unlike our struggle to live in spite of the mortality we recognize as innately human. It is Job's "rebellious complaint" with which Wright thoughtfully opens Native Son.

As he shows us elsewhere, Wright associates Job with man's frustrated attempts to reach the ultimate meaning in his life. A brief look at his source may clarify Wright's use of the biblical figure. Job, once rich and respected and powerful, suddenly finds himself impoverished and alone. His so-called "comforters" are with him, following the loss of health, position, family, and wealth, but they offer him

8Cf. "Why were some people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be?" (The Outsider, p. 19). Such people are stark examples of the alienation Wright identifies with full humanity. Those unaware of this debate or not engaged in this struggle appear less than fully human, unenviable, somewhat tragic in Wright's work.
no comfort. Their presence and continued denunciations of him only make Job all the more isolated and self-aware. His is an anguished sensitivity to the vast wonders of the world and the comparatively insignificant plight of man. Job's faith remains, however. He vigorously entreats God to give him an explanation for his fate. When God finally responds, it is in a whirlwind reminding Job of man's inability to comprehend the Divine plan. Job knows that his indignation and confusion are futile, yet he feels compelled to cry out against the fate he cannot hope to understand. Only the rewards of a constant faith offer any relief from the agony of isolation and doubt that fills the Book of Job.

Wright's protagonist shares Job's frustrations. He too is caught up in a net of circumstances he does not understand. Though he lives among others, Bigger is alone. His yearnings, his fleeting visions and his fears form a trap unknown to his family, his peers, or to the larger society of his native land. Like Job, Bigger is unable to suffer in silence or in passive despair. His complaint is rebellious. Lacking the comfort of Job's faith in a just God, Bigger is left to strike out blindly against forces he can neither control nor even clearly identify. In *Native Son* Wright has set for himself the task of explaining such a figure to a society that denies his existence. Even more challenging than this ambitious goal is the method Wright has decided to use. He plans to allow this rejected figure, who does not
understand himself or his human fate, to communicate his own alienation to us so that we can more easily share in his struggle. Wright's project was an ambitious one, subject to miserable failure or phenomenal success. Wright achieved a degree of both in *Native Son*.

Wright opens the novel in full control. A blaring sound announces the beginning of "Fear," section one of the novel. The alarm clock and Mrs. Thomas's impatient shout to "cut that thing off!" jar Bigger from the peacefulness of sleep into sudden awareness. This opening is as effective a foreshadowing of the novel's meaning as that famous rat of a later scene. The outcast is prodded into participation, though he is denied full acceptance. He is unable to ignore his surroundings, though he is allowed to retreat into himself for brief periods of escape. The escape is hardly satisfactory, since what he finds within is even more frightening than the shadows outside he lingered in sleep to avoid. He might as well awaken. Bigger responds to the assaults of the alarm clock and his mother's shouts with "a surly grunt." It is no easy task to face another day as drab and unrewarding as all the others. Using imagery and dialogue, Wright wastes no time in revealing Bigger's isolation within his scandalously meager home. It is clear why the young man is reluctant to start the day. Like his mother's voice, sunlight floods the room and leaves Bigger rubbing his eyes after the attack. He must proceed blind and somewhat dazed.
Mrs. Thomas begins a day of clearly defined though dreary tasks. She cries out, "I want you-all out of here," in her determination to get started on the laundry. Bigger has no plans for his day. Whatever he is going to do, he will have to begin, although blinded and unprepared. There is no room for him at home.

Wright also uses realistic detail in his opening scene to convey Bigger's isolation. He stands "in a narrow space between two iron beds," as he rubs his eyes against the sun. The four members of the Thomas family overflow the one-room apartment. So tiny is their home that the very presence of one is a threat to the privacy and dignity of the others.

To begin their day, Bigger and his brother, Buddy, must keep their heads turned while their mother and sister dress. The boys must wait for the courtesy to be returned before they can begin to dress. The condition of their lives places each person in the Thomas household at the mercy of the other for the privacy most of their countrymen consider a basic right. It is a frustrating situation Bigger faces where each family member needs the cooperation of the others, though he craves the right to be alone.

Into this cage where separation and interdependence vie for supremacy, Wright introduces a rat to remind the family of the fear, hostility and brutality that comprise their daily routine. Forgetting "their conspiracy against shame," they prepare to fend off the black, pulsating symbol of their
struggles for survival. Their preparations are significant. Vera runs to a corner and gathers up the hem of her skirt for a flimsy shield. Mrs. Thomas scrambles onto the bed screaming and shaking with "fascinated horror." Soon Vera will run to her mother, and the two will huddle together in their helplessness. Buddy is eager to follow Bigger’s lead. Conscious of the need for action, Bigger looks around wildly for a weapon to use against the intruder. Like Bigger, the rat is aggressive. It squeals and leaps for his trouser-leg. Like Bigger, the rat is strong. Slammed against the wall by Bigger’s efforts to shake it loose, the rat rolls over and leaps again. Like Bigger, the rat is afraid. Its belly pulses with fear. The rat emits a "long thin song of defiance." Its beady eyes glitter. Like Bigger, the rat succumbs to a strength that is stronger and even more violent than his own. The point, of course, is just that—the rat is entirely too much like Bigger. In the cage to which his isolation and alienation has confined him, Bigger is a "huge black rat." Faced with the daily battle he wages against fear and hunger and hatred, Bigger also leaps out in defiance and is also threatened with destruction. Entering a hostile world that denies him entrance, could he do any less?

After the encounter with the rat, Bigger retreats to the unawareness he had had while asleep. It allows him to ignore his mother’s criticism of the violence he has just
displayed. He cannot, however, escape her misgivings about
having given birth to him. Bigger counter-attacks with his
own misgivings, "Maybe you ought to left me where I was"
(p. 12). In no uncertain terms, Bigger is told that his
presence adds nothing to the household. So he ignores his
family's voices to avoid "being swept out of himself with
fear and despair" (p. 13). There is nothing at home to sus-
tain Bigger. Indeed, by their insistence on his taking the
job offered by the welfare officials, Bigger feels "tricked
into a cheap surrender" by a group of individuals who nei-
ther understand his struggle nor accept him. The defiance
he must display in the hostile world outside of his home is
needed there too.

Bigger's exact relationship to his family is complex.
They live miserably. Their breakfast of coffee, bacon and
bread convinces us that even now, while they are still re-
ceiving government assistance, the Thomases are starving.
Their one-room apartment does not allow them the space or the
materials for health or even modest comfort. If Bigger con-
tinues to reject offers of a job, their funds will be stopped
altogether and even this bit of food and shelter will be de-
nied them. Under these circumstances, Mrs. Thomas does seem
to be fair in her hostile criticism of Bigger's failure to
accept responsibility. Yet she has already acknowledged,
"Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do"
(p. 11). So we would be mistaken to presume her judgment of
Bigger is necessarily a fair one. A problem throughout *Native Son* is Wright's insistence on Bigger's total alienation. Since no one really understands him, no one can help us to understand him. We are, instead, forced to rely on our own perceptions and to make our own judgments guided by a variety of non-verbal clues Wright supplies as a supplement to the dialogue. We are tempted to follow the lead of other characters in our responses to Bigger, since we must react to him in some way to interpret the action. Yet we are challenged to acknowledge the superiority over the other characters in the novel our omniscient perspective gives us (especially when it is limited to Bigger's distinctive point of view). Seeing the world as a confused, isolated boy like Bigger sees it is bound to result in a vision different from the average.

In this instance, Bigger's turning from his mother, his eagerness to drop the subject, his futile efforts to escape his mother's eyes in that crowded room, and the "nervous irritation" of his responses all show us that Mrs. Thomas is wrong to conclude her son does not care about the way they must live. On the contrary, Bigger is angry and guilty about their lives. Unfortunately, he is completely mystified by it all too. Wright's narrator tries to tell us that Bigger shuts his family out of his mind because he knows that they are suffering and that he is powerless to correct the situation. He would be conquered by despair if he ever admitted this knowledge, we are told. Wright's
omniscient narrator is as wrong about Bigger as his mother was. Bigger's tragedy is precisely that he does not know anything about his feelings, needs, and reasons for acting. Bigger does not understand why he enjoys his sister's hysteria over the dead rat he dangles in front of her, but he does enjoy it, though he fears such urges will one day destroy him. Perhaps Wright deliberately has Bigger remain silent when his mother and sister question his behavior. If they could have answered the question of violent outbursts and lingering depression, Bigger would have been the first to want to hear their answer. His mother and sister do not have any solutions for Bigger, however. They do not understand him either, and they have resolved to accept his isolation from them. In frustration, Mrs. Thomas concludes, "He's just crazy...Just plain dumb black crazy" (p. 12). Vera tacitly agrees. 9

As we move with Bigger from the hostile circle of his family outside to the street, we are struck by the conspicuous absence of any feeling of expansion. Wright has quite cleverly restricted Bigger's movement. He leaves his apartment only to stand in front of the building and look across

9This is the first of several scenes in the novel where Wright allows others to discuss Bigger in the third person in his presence. His separation from them is so complete in these cases that the desired effect of his invisibility is achieved. Rejection thus becomes a denial of his very existence. Bigger's refusal to be ignored becomes then, not a peevish attempt to gain attention, but an affirmation of his existence and his worth.
the street. Bigger is still undecided about his plans for
the day. He has few options, so the pause is brief. How­
ever it is long enough to show us that Bigger resists too
much introspection. He is ill-equipped for and fearful of
self-analysis. Since there is little scenery to distract
him in the blighted neighborhood, Bigger's attention is
easily absorbed by the poster being plastered to a signboard
in front of him. The poster announces State's Attorney
Buckley's campaign for re-election. Although he welcomes
any distraction from his immediate decisions, Biggers feels
affronted by the stern face and uplifted finger attacking
him from the billboard. He is angered by the hypocrisy he
sees in the incumbent's law and order platform, and he
strikes back at the silent form by accusing Buckley of
graft. The real problem is that Bigger deeply resents his
constant lack of money when he so desperately needs the re­
lease it can buy him. The twenty-six cents in his pocket
would not be enough to get him through the day, Bigger re­
alizes. He does not envy Buckley the power and material
comforts of his office. Bigger is upset because his tenta­
tive plans for the day require at least twenty more cents.
The sprawling, taunting power of the big city should be
forced to surrender to Bigger enough of its wealth to meet
such meager demands! Understandably Bigger's thoughts lin­
ger hungrily over the proposed robbery of Blum's store. He
probably did not see the job as a "symbolic challenge of the
white world's rule." Bigger cannot be expected to know why
the idea of the robbery holds such promise for him. How-
ever, he cannot shake the thought, though his friends oppose
the plan and he himself reacts to the idea with compulsion.

When Vera passes Bigger on her way to a sewing class
and pleads with him to stay away from his friends, he lash-
es out at her. Her passive acceptance of her life, not her
opinion of his friends, separates Vera from her older bro-
ther. Bigger resents her presumption to advise him when
"she did not have any more sense than to believe everything
she was told" (p. 18). Once the other boys arrive as Bigger
walks toward the poolroom, we can see that their companion-
ship does little to diminish his fears or to compensate for
the isolation back home. In fact, Jack, Gus, and G. H. con-
vince us of Bigger's total isolation. Like his family, the
boys are often a threat to Bigger. Even when partially re-
inforcing, they do not provide the stability and acceptance
Bigger craves. They ridicule Bigger's ambition by reminding
him of racial strictures in the larger Chicago society.
They succumb to his bullying, though at least Gus recognizes
in Bigger the same fear that draws them all together. The
other boys are content to laugh away their need to be recog-
nized as men. Unlike them, Bigger cannot accept his "place."
He predicts "with a tinge of bitter pride" that he'll one
day be noticed. He will make someone notice him. As he
did in "Big Boy Leaves Home," Wright shows his central
figure in a group scene in order to dramatize the fact that he is not understood or accepted by that group. With the other boys, Bigger is more alone than he was on the doorstep of his dreary apartment building.

The boys try to laugh at their alienation. They criticize the lack of consideration in the white landlords their families struggle to pay. They mimic the behavior the movies have convinced them is typical of the military and political heads of their country. They try to imagine themselves those responsible for racial discrimination. Only Bigger is unable to forget their imprisonment within the ghetto of the city by fleeing to the more crushing imprisonment of his twisted mind. Gus tells Bigger that something awful will indeed happen to him as he imagines, because Bigger thinks too much. Bigger replies, "What in hell can a man do?" (p. 24). Once again Bigger is too alienated from himself to know the real cause of his anguish. It is not true that he thinks too much about his life and its disparity from that of the rich and powerful whites he sees in the movies. Bigger's problem is that he can only feel. Feelings like fire and like an obstruction in his throat and chest that threatens to suffocate him are pitiful substitutes for constructive thoughts about his life. Bigger finds himself with no weapons with which to arm himself for his daily battle, yet with no alternatives to the combat.
Bigger retreats from the conversation by moving inside the poolroom. Here Gus and Bigger meet the rest of their clan. Unable to pay for the pool game and preoccupied with the idea of the Blum store robbery, Bigger plays badly. He angers the group by talking loud enough to betray their plans to Doc, the fat, black manager of the place. Fearful of his insistence on the dangerous robbery, the boys rally together against Bigger. Unable to face the group criticism or his own fears, Bigger transfers his anger to Gus. Of course he does not realize what he is doing. Bigger only knows that he is suddenly filled with a need to destroy his friend. Bigger glories in the variety of violent responses open to him. Wright's point is powerfully clear. "He could stab Gus with his knife; he could slap him; he could kick him; he could trip him up and send him sprawling on his face. He could do a lot of things to Gus for making him feel this way" (p. 30). Bigger is likely to commit himself to such violence, because it is the only area of his life that offers him the freedom of choice and wealth of options his independent spirit craves. Through actions so violent that they allow him to escape the things he cannot understand or control, Bigger sees the possibility for a degree of mastery over his own life. He does not have to use this weapon, but Bigger is calmed by the knowledge that Gus was at his mercy for a time. Vindicated in his own mind by his demonstrated superiority to the others, Bigger leaves the
poolroom with the boys. He walks down the Chicago street with them, but Bigger is alone.

Idly passing the time in a leisurely walk that takes them past the Regal theater, a South side movie house, the boys stop to read the advertisements. A mere twenty cents would allow Bigger escape from his confusing thoughts into the worlds of "The Gay Woman" and "Trader Horn." Bigger has only twenty-four cents, but he considers the distraction worth the price. Much can be made of the functional use Wright makes of "The Gay Woman" to reveal common stereotypes of Communists and upper-class society, to explain Bigger's final decision to take the Dalton job, and to unsuccessfully foreshadow the personality of his employer's daughter. Since it is true that Bigger's viewing of this movie leads directly to his acceptance of the chauffeur job, let us stop here and try to clarify Bigger's objections and his state of indecision about the offer as he enters the movie house.

Bigger's alienation is responsible for our initially negative reactions to his rejection of welfare designated work. His mother called into question, not his sense of responsibility, but his manhood, we should recall from that earlier scene. In his own way, Bigger is trying to preserve just that. He was not willing to do the low-paying, unskilled jobs he presumed the social workers would find. He resented the ultimatum given to his family unless he go to work. Bigger was most angry with himself for being unable
to come up with an alternative. Bigger's hazy idea of manhood involves a range of choice that his own life has never offered. Perhaps a dim awareness of this lack of choice explains Bigger's irritation with a song his mother sings earlier in the novel (p. 14). His life has never been like a mountain railroad from the cradle to the grave run by a brave engineer. Bigger has never been allowed behind the controls long enough to prove his bravery.

Sitting in the theater, Bigger allows himself to think about the strange white world on the screen. He had said that he would rather go to jail than take the job, but his own life was too much like an unearned prison term already to consider that a real alternative. On the other hand, Bigger would actually be paid to sit behind the wheel and control an expensive, powerful machine. Perhaps this was a step towards exercising some real control over his life. It is true that the other boys titillate Bigger with the suggestion that his potential employer might have a sexually responsive daughter like the one in the movie. Bigger is only mildly interested in the possibility of a forbidden sexual involvement. The "gaiety" of her life, not the physical attractiveness of the woman, captured Bigger's attention. Not surprisingly, Bigger's reactions to the film, "The Gay Woman," are neither shared by nor understood by the
The second item on the bill is no less significant. "Trader Horn" with its pictures of naked blacks against a barbaric background, holds absolutely no meaning for Bigger or for his friends. Wright's point in introducing the film as a rerun used to fill out the double feature seems to be an assurance that Bigger's Americanism is far more important to him than any faint stirrings of black nationalism or pan-Africanism. While the Africans give way to abandon on the screen, Bigger replaces this unfamiliar group with the white, wealthy, smiling forms his homeland has taught him to idolize. Bigger feels no identification with "free and wild men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria" (p. 36). Bigger is segregated on the basis of race and color, but Bigger's alienation is not a racial question. If it were, Bigger would feel threatened and frightened in the world of the Daltons but safe and welcome at home. Wright has taken pains to show us that Bigger is safe and secure nowhere. His greatest fear is not of the whites or of the hostility he receives from his family and friends. Bigger is most

10In the original manuscript version of the novel, Bigger actually sees Mary Dalton, daughter of his potential employer, on the screen. She is identified by name in a society item of the newsreel and is subtly criticized for preferring a radical to the respectable, wealthy young men of Chicago's high society. The revision, allowing Bigger to see only the type of woman Mary might be, is certainly better. It properly directs the focus of Bigger's change of mind away from the girl and over to the challenges.
afraid of his gropings to feel like a man. He fears his own humanity, because he does not understand it yet feels compelled to defend it. He fears himself.

Equally significant to Bigger's reactions toward the two movies is his distraction during the newsreel. The "real world" is no match for the glamorous dream world the boys believe typical of the leisure class. They need to believe a world existed that was as gay and carefree as their own was dismal and laborious. Bigger has spent his last few pennies to retreat into the lush world of the movies. His own life allows him more of "reality" than he is strong enough to master. At least in the dark movie house, there was no need to think, no challenge to demand acceptance.

Realizing how intensely Bigger craved acceptance, as full of self-hatred as his stunted life had made him, and how unsuccessful he was at finding it at home or among his peers, we should see the clever ambiguity Wright gives the Blum store fiasco. Bigger leaves the theater reluctantly. He is not yet ready to engage in the combat of the real world. With about fifteen minutes to spare, Bigger leaves the others and walks home "with a mounting feeling of fear" (p. 37). He doesn't want to rob a white-owned store, but he can no longer stand the sound of his mother's Christian hymns of acceptance. Back at Doc's poolroom, Bigger is so frightened he feels sick when Gus arrives and he no longer has an excuse for discarding the plan. Of course, the fight
is a transparent attempt to hide his own fears, but more importantly it is a decisive way to break with the gang that has begun to disgust Bigger. A man who cannot face his own failures cannot afford to surround himself with mirror images of his own weaknesses. Bigger is not less alone in the company of black youths as isolated and fearful as he himself is. There is deliberate irony in Bigger's later remark that he could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling the hate and fear of the white world. He was preparing to face the alien white world as he forced Gus to help him abort the robbery. Bigger was preparing to face the alien white world precisely because he had found nothing sustaining "among his own people." Indeed, he was not like them in the variety of ways they tried to adjust to life's failures. An adherence to religion as compensation or escape, a feigned ignorance of his rejection, and a habit of merely shuffling through one dreary day after the other are scarcely more "human" responses than Bigger's undirected outbursts. Though we too feel a hovering doom, we applaud Bigger's initiative in moving beyond the fear and hatred of his world to an unknown fate. A man cannot passively wait for doom to engulf him, Bigger intuitively reasons. There is courage as well as pathos in Bigger's arming himself for the combat, as he prepares to leave his friends and go to the Daltons. Although we know a knife and a gun are insufficient ammunition against the tools of modern social warfare,
we agree with Bigger that no alien should enter hostile
territory unarmed.

The world Bigger leaves his own to enter as a retreat
from his fear and confusion is undeniably hostile. Bigger
was not so out of touch with reality that he expected it to
be otherwise. While viewing "The Gay Woman," he mused, "I'd
like to be invited to a place like that just to find out
what it feels like" (p. 33). He soon gets to visit a rich
white home, but Bigger does not allow himself to believe for
a moment that he has been "invited." He hopes to escape the
boredom and frustration of his black life, to "see what it
[white life] feels like," not to attempt to belong in that
world. Watching "The Gay Woman," Bigger was also intrigued
by the behavior the movie suggested is typical of Commu-
nists. He did not understand the wide range of emotional
responses on the screen, but Bigger watched "full of the
sense of a life he had never seen" (p. 35). It is this per-
sonal freedom and emotional abandon Bigger now heads toward
the Dalton home hoping to find. A more intense sense of
isolation than he has yet experienced awaits Bigger in
Chicago's Hyde Park area.

Wright is often criticized for the symbolism of white-
ness and coldness with which he discloses the white world of
the Daltons to Bigger. The color symbolism is sometimes ex-
cessive (white-haired Mr. Dalton, ghost-like Mrs. Dalton,
the big white cat, the "two vast looming walls" Jan and Mary
form as Bigger sits between them in the car, and a multitude of white mountains and clouds). The color symbolism is often unobtrusive and effective (the black iron picket fence of the Dalton's home that stops Bigger in his walk through the "world of white secrets carefully guarded"). Readers are finding that Wright's use of symbolism to introduce Bigger to this strange, new world is often more subtle than they had imagined. For example, Kinnamon believes that the name Dalton may have symbolic importance. From his years of employment in the basement of Michael Reese Hospital, Wright could have learned of Daltonism, a form of red-green color blindness, named for the English chemist and physicist, John Dalton. Wright's insistence on blindness as the source of Bigger's alienation runs throughout the novel and lends support to Kinnamon's suggestion about the name. Not mere "color" blindness (a clever pun for a racially motivated refusal to acknowledge Bigger's existence) but total blindness abounds in the work, however. The blindness of family members, peers, the Daltons, the police, the Communists, and the larger society renders Bigger both isolated and invisible. He does not really exist for the blind all around

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11 Dalton (1766-1804) is better known as the originator of the atomic theory.

12 Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright, p. 120.

13 Wright's linking of blindness and invisibility appears in later publications where characters like "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Cross Damon (The Outsider) share
him at all. A man cannot be truly visible if those around him refuse to see him. Covered by ice and snow in a hostile society that denies him the warmth of love and acceptance, he is not really alive. Even if Kinnamon is correct, Bigger struggles against much more than color blindness at the Daltons' house. He fights for the right to live a fully human life in his native land, for the right to be. 14

The dialogue and action of the novel support Wright's imagery in describing the coldness Bigger finds in the Dalton household. His perceptions are only objectionable if extended to all whites or all wealthy benefactors of the poor. They are true of this particular family. Bigger is rightfully intimidated by Mr. Dalton's "amused smile" as he self-consciously flounders in a deeply cushioned chair. He is right to resent references to him as "the boy." He finds the Daltons' third-person discussions of him, filled with sociological jargon and impersonal in tone, "another language" used to exclude him. The careful reader will note that Mr. Dalton talks to the cat, Kate, but continually talks about

Bigger's alienation. Wright insists on personal freedom, but he seems to believe that a man so rejected that he is no longer visible is not "real," does not exist, in such an alienated state. His aliens struggle to affirm their existence and their full humanity.

Bigger. Furthermore, the man's patronizing air, his presumption that he knows all about Bigger because he knows the facts in the relief files, and his paternalistic budgeting of Bigger's salary for him even before he has earned it are further demonstrations of Mr. Dalton's insensitivity.

The wealthy realtor tells Bigger to feel free to talk over any problems he may have in the future with him. When Bigger is in trouble just a few hours later, he sorely needs such a confidante and advisor. It is not Bigger's perversity but his accurate intuition that leads him to disregard Mr. Dalton's offer. His words prove Mr. Dalton's ignorance of Bigger's first impression of him and sense of his place in the house. He has not yet met the young man he so thoroughly interviewed. Seeing his idea of conversation, we can understand Bigger's decision to ignore the offer of future counseling. Mr. Dalton would never listen to Bigger. He hears only what echoes his own words and legitimizes his own perceptions. His actions in this early scene belie his alleged kindness and justify Bigger's sense of alienation in the Dalton home. When Mary Dalton comes in asking about his membership in a union and Mr. Dalton identifies himself as a supporter of the NAACP, Bigger marvels that they are not at all like the wealthy whites introduced to him in the movies.

Even the cook, Peggy, reminds Bigger of his marginal position in the household. She gives him an ample meal and tries to link her Irish heritage to Bigger's to express a
kinship with the youth, but she is not as blameless as she seems. Peggy presumes to advise Bigger on his future by suggesting that he should follow the model of the previous black chauffeur. Green, the last black befriended by the Daltons in their home, finished night school and now works for the government, she explains. Bigger's only knowledge of the government comes from political posters, movie newsreels, and idle gossip. He aspires neither toward graduation from night school nor towards "respectable" employment. He has only recently decided to work here at the Daltons.

Peggy reveals more about the Daltons' household and personal affairs than Bigger can or should be able to absorb on his first day. Even Bigger catches Peggy's first person reference in her rambling remarks. When she talked of Green, "Bigger wondered why she said 'us.' She must stand in with the old man and old woman pretty good, he thought" (p. 56). Bigger is right. Peggy is like the Daltons in her unconscious isolation of him.

Peggy does more than contribute to our experience of Bigger's growing alienation, however. She makes the important disclosures that the Dalton's "live like human beings" and that Mr. Dalton's philanthropy is largely at the insistence of his blind wife, who brought most of the money into the family. So we are prepared to discover later that Mr. Dalton's real estate practices prove his ignorance of the common humanity he shares with Bigger and other blacks. We
are furthermore prepared to conclude that the Daltons are not really trying to help the distinct individual who has just come into their homes, but are blindly using their wealth to perpetuate the status quo. They are using Bigger. Wright suggests Peggy is like them on this point too. The Irish woman seems to be exploiting Bigger's confusion by shoving the furnace job onto the chauffeur duties Mr. Dalton specified when he hired Bigger. Our narrator makes this suggestion and claims that Bigger settles his doubts about Peggy by reminding himself that he can always talk to Mr. Dalton if she becomes oppressive. Bigger would never seriously consider such direct confrontation. He knows that the unity of the Dalton household would never allow him to so freely resist any demands made on him.

Significantly Bigger feels most at ease in the coldness of the Dalton house when left alone. Peggy has said they were like a big, happy family; but Bigger knows whites have never acknowledged his existence—no one in his narrow environment has,--and he has no delusions about belonging here. Wright cleverly reinforces Bigger's rejection of Peggy's invitation to feel at home by having Peggy ask Bigger twice more during her chatter for his name. She has not been talking with a man she truly accepts as her equal. She has not seen or heard him at all. Bigger is content, nevertheless, because he is accustomed to the lack of recognition he receives, once that traumatic interview with Mr. Dalton is
over. Only Mary poses a threat, because she refuses to maintain the distance he has grown to expect and threatens to pierce through his shield of invisibility.

So Mary contributes to Bigger's confusion when she insists on Bigger's friendship, gives Bigger conflicting directions about his duties for the night, forces Jan and his friendship upon Bigger, patronizingly asks to intrude upon black night life, and goes through the other antics of the evening. As more than one astute student reader has pointed out, if Mary had observed even the most basic conventions of the employer-employee relationship, Bigger would not have had to kill her. But since she, like her parents, would not allow Bigger the human responses she or any other novice would have felt in a strange situation, Mary contributes to her own death.

Wright's handling of Mary's death is problematic, though not for the reasons usually given. Wright does not glorify the violence of the scene. Almost as if compensating for the other characters' denial of Bigger's humanity, Wright falters by implausibly exaggerating it. Why does Bigger hesitate to call Mr. Dalton or Peggy to help the inebriated girl to her room? Peggy has already described Mary as "kind of wild. Always in hot water" (p. 58). Why should "betrayal" concern him now, when Bigger has cowered from Mary from the first? He has not had time to feel any kinship with her; indeed, Bigger has not yet been able to connect her to
any reality. "She looked like a doll in a shop window," he had concluded (p. 62). Bigger should have left Mary at her door or left her on the first floor to get up to her room on her own. Wright decides to have Bigger accompany Mary upstairs to protect her. His sense of excitement is plausible, but it seems more likely that Bigger's fear of Mary would dominate and he would hurriedly flee to more familiar grounds to satisfy any aroused passions he may have felt. Bigger should have let Mary handle her parents as she always had done with complete success. His alienation theme seems to have forced Wright to strain Bigger's credibility at a crucial stage of the plot. The sexual overtones seem unwarranted.

Wright regains control in his presentation of the accidental murder, however. Bigger has never felt welcome or accepted. His reveries often sustain him when his alienation and fear are most severe. He had retreated into silence when his mother and sister discussed his violence battling the rat. Reclining against a wall, smoking a cigarette and "playing white" with his friends, Bigger had gone into a kind of trance. "There was in his eyes a pensive, brooding amusement, as of a man who had been long confronted and tantalized by a riddle whose answer seemed always just on the verge of escaping him, but prodding him irresistibly on to seek its solution" (p. 20). Wright's point seems to be that Bigger's inability to lose himself in his family or friends forces
him back into himself to confront the meaning and value of his life. He has no where to run to escape the confrontation, but Bigger is unprepared to make the analyses that seem necessary. Bigger is filled with fear. He has become his own worst enemy. He can never completely escape the threat of self-knowledge if he desires to live a rational human life. He finds periods of relief, however, in the dreams and trances that surround much of his action in Native Son.

So the horrid details of his accidental murder of Mary and the gory method he chooses to dispose of the body are made credible by the dream-like state Wright gives Bigger. Wright's presentation of the act forces us to consider the deeper meaning of the murder in Bigger's life. Experiencing the action through Bigger's consciousness, we know that he moved stiffly and mechanically and unthinkingly from one decision to the next. He would blame Jan because the young man was an outsider hated by the whites. He would use the trunk because Mary had mentioned being gone for three days and she would have taken some luggage. Since she had gone off unannounced before, the missing trunk would not seem strange. Recalling some strange nightmare, Bigger struggles to get the body into the trunk, more aware of the slightest sounds and of his uncontrollable trembling than of the actions he performs. Characteristically, he is better able to respond to sensation than to analyze his behavior. He
decides to burn the body because that seems the safest way to dispose of it. He is forced to decapitate the corpse because he had arbitrarily put the feet in first and the body is too long. In Mary's room, he had "felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (p. 83). After the corpse has been made to fit the furnace, Bigger "wanted to lie down upon the floor and sleep off the horror of this thing" (p. 91). Understandably, Bigger goes home and sleeps soundly. It has been a long, bizarre day.

Next morning, as "Flight" opens, the dream has not yet become real. Mary's purse that he had noticed on the car floor as he left the Daltons' jolts Bigger into awareness. He is now as uncomfortable as he was in the Hyde Park mansion, though he is back in the crowded familiarity of home. Only after Bigger begins to accept the reality of Mary's death is he able to relax. He feels comfort in being "outside of his family now, over and beyond them" (p. 101). In his desire for personal privacy, Bigger has moved to a fateful solitude that now excludes the family and friends he had never been able to join. The pride Bigger feels in the only creative act left for him, Mary's murder, is based on his assurance that he can no longer be ignored now. He no longer has to fear Gus and the gang. No longer must Bigger wonder why the black community holds no bond for him.
The answers he had once feared are starting to come into focus for Bigger:

Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they ever done? Perhaps they had not done anything. Maybe they had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much (p. 100).

Bigger is beginning to realize that the acceptance of their total isolation, not the isolation itself, separates him from his family and friends. He has never felt deserving of his fate. He has always wanted to sound "Job's rebellious complaint." Now, in the act of killing a young, rich white girl, Bigger has done just that. He has proven that he is not like the passive outcasts with whom he lives. Our only problem lies in believing that a young man able to make this analysis would have been unable to solve his problems some more constructive way. Again Wright's omniscient narrator has forgotten Bigger's fear of and limited capacity for self-analysis. These crucial insights could not have come from Bigger. He would not have had the presence of mind to calmly and successfully reflect on the horror he had escaped into sleep to avoid the night before.

Filled with elation, "like a man risen up well from a long illness," Bigger moves past his family, the gang, other blacks on the street, and the once terrifying details along the bus route to the Daltons'. Eagerness, confidence, fullness and freedom have replaced fear in Bigger's mind. His isolation from the Daltons allows Bigger to continue to
relax in his new frame of mind. Even when Mrs. Dalton in- forms Bigger that the trunk he drove to the La Salle Street Station was not fully packed to go and he again feels fear, his estrangement from the worried old woman saves him. "He was a boy and she was an old woman. He was the hired and she was the hirer. And there was a certain distance to be kept between them" (p. 121). To relieve her shame in Bigger's knowledge of Mary's foolish behavior, Mrs. Dalton gives Bigger the rest of the day off. Unlike the morning before, Bigger knows what he wants to do with his unexpected free time. He wants to see his girl, Bessie.

For once, Bigger is eager to see Bessie, although their relationship is mutually exploitative. Each has settled on the other as a source of distraction from their frustrations. Bigger looks to her for other reasons now. At her apartment, he is initially irritated by Bessie's misunderstanding of the scene at Ernie's Chicken Shack the night before. He had been painfully uncomfortable with Jan and Mary, while Bessie accuses him of flaunting his new white friends. Like all the others, Bessie has no idea of Bigger's thoughts and feelings. Bigger's urgency to see her today has been a typical response of retreating from threatening situations. The promise of physical satisfaction and the complete absorption he sees on Bessie's face as she tries to guess why Bigger seems so different reward him for the decision to come. Bigger even begins to enjoy Bessie's questions. Her teasing seems a
testimony to her heightened sense of his value. Using the money from Mary's purse ($125), Bigger triumphs over Bessie's teasing and retreats into her body. Afterwards, talking to Bessie about his job, Bigger is inspired to send a ransom note to the Daltons. It is not long before Bessie guesses what Bigger has done. His reaction confirms our growing realization that Bigger has never been united with Bessie and he was wrong to expect Mary's death to provide an end to his isolation. "He was enjoying her agony, seeing and feeling the worth of himself in her bewildered desperation" (p. 140). She has never known of his gropings for recognition. Bessie cannot accept his confident mood—or him.

Back at the Daltons', Bigger is able to face Britten, the detective called in to find Mary. His hatred and rejection allow Bigger to revel in his secret sense of victory. He cannot so easily face Jan, because he makes Bigger feel the human response of guilt. Nor can Bigger remain calm before the newsmen who barge into the Daltons' demanding facts. They do not honor even white humanity, so Bigger defensively senses their ruthlessness and tries to avoid them. His fears are justified by a newsmann's discovery of a bone in the blazing furnace.

Again Bigger's isolation comes to his rescue. He is able to sneak away from the scene unnoticed because no one even considered him capable of the crime. Again blindness has rendered Bigger invisible. He is free to kill again.
Bigger's murder of Bessie is another occasion in the novel where Wright's insistence on Bigger's humanity is a weakness. Instead of another surge of power in the "creative act" of murder, Bigger feels sorry for the whimpering girl. She has given up her life long before Bigger can take it from her. Bigger has told us that there were two Bessies. One was the body he so often retreated into; the other was the mind that asked questions and bargained the body to advantage (p. 133). We are a bit disappointed that the "other Bessie" whose questions challenged Bigger never surfaces. Like Mrs. Thomas and Vera at the beginning of the novel, Bessie has already "died," since she would not assert her presence in the world. Bigger kills only the body that he had once ached to pick up and place within him as proof of some power over his life. Bigger has never been close to the totality that was Bessie Mears, so he can feel only a vague regret that his survival instincts easily overcome. The "blind woman waiting for some word to tell her where she was going" has been led to a death clearly preferable to her life. Wright's insistence on Bigger's alienation does damage to Bessie's characterization and calls into question his earlier definition of murder as Bigger's sole avenue for creativity and self-direction. It weakens the novel.

While fleeing for his life, Bigger overhears blacks discussing the repercussions of Mary Dalton's murder. He finds he was right to assume no group allegiance. Although
some blacks realize their common plight, others prefer accommodation as the safest way to deal with the dominant race. Some would eagerly deliver him to the Chicago police. Hearing singing from a nearby church, Bigger realizes that he was also right to reject the resignation his mother's Christianity taught. Religion told him to accept his separateness and wait patiently for a new life. Bigger has already been tantalized by power and recognition in this life. With eight thousand men, armed with guns and gas, looking for him in the tiny circle of the city restricted to blacks, it is only a matter of time before Bigger is caught. Faced with a capture that would mean the end to his questions about race and religion and his failure to belong. Bigger finds that he is no longer afraid. Fear is useless now. Following an icy chase over the rooftops of abandoned ghetto buildings, the "white looming bulk" closes in. As usual Bigger retreats into a dream-like state, "a deep physiological resolution not to react to anything."

Once caught, Bigger is forced out of the stupor by his pride. He is crushed, therefore, to find himself again overlooked except as a symbol with which to threaten other blacks. The sight of Jan arouses a deeply human response. Jan has always acknowledged his humanity. Although insensitive to Bigger's inner turmoil, Jan has not needed the sensationalism of Mary's murder to accept Bigger as an equal. Seeing Jan at the County Morgue, Bigger retreats into shame.
and then guilty anger. He relaxes, then, and prepares to face his fate.

Despite general agreement that "Fate" is the weakest book in the novel, Wright's inclusion of it confirms his intentions in the work. Bigger's alienation from himself requires a spokesman who can articulate his motives and trace his development for us. Yet Wright's use of Jan and Boris Max for this task is not entirely successful. As his surname suggests, Jan is "erlone" (commonly used in Wright's fiction as a dialectic form of "alone") in his compassion and acceptance of Bigger. He actually admits, rather implausibly, his own blindness and asks for the opportunity to befriend Bigger now. If the "reality of Jan's humanity" shocks Bigger, it is scarcely less of a shock to us. Jan's compassion goes far beyond the merely human; and in his earlier frivolity with Mary, we do not suspect him capable of so profound a love for another. When Jan is ruthlessly questioned on the witness stand, Bigger might more logically have felt confusion than the alleged kinship. This exhibited hatred of Jan contradicted Bigger's previous conclusion that society's hatred of him stemmed purely from racism. It is unlikely that Bigger could move from the notion of race to class so easily. Wright's Communist critics feared that he was unable to clearly differentiate the two.15

15Black Communists like Wright's friend, Benjamin Davis, Jr. and James W. Ford were especially sensitive
Max, the Marxist attorney defending Bigger, is equally unsatisfactory. He sees Bigger as a symbol rather than a unique individual. This may be consistent with Wright's alienation theme, but it presents problems. Wright offers little motivation for Bigger's trust in Max, yet he proceeds to have Bigger tell the attorney things we must presume the youth has never admitted even to himself. If Max does not really know Bigger, why should Bigger behave as if he has finally been accepted? Max's Jewish faith and Marxist ideology allegedly allow him to see Bigger as the rest of society cannot. Despite his eloquence, Max reveals as pronounced an ignorance of Bigger's individuality as those he seeks to convince of it. He talks often of the collective, not the singular. As Bigger understands little of Max's courtroom defense, Max cannot even remember the discussion that allegedly brings Bigger to a triumphant sense of self-worth. The novel convinces us of Wright's essential honesty. He believed the Communist Party, to which he was totally committed at the time, was as alienated from the black oppressed as the oppressor was.16 Thus Wright's ending, with

to the "nationalist racial spirit" of the novel, their reviews reveal. Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, pp. 185-86.

16Cf. "My aim in depicting Jan was to show that even for that great Party which has thrown down a challenge to America on the Negro Question such as has no other party, there is much, much to do, and, above all, to understand ...." Letter, Wright to Mike Gold, May 1940 (?), Quoted in Fabre, p. 186.
Max groping for his hat and eager to leave the cell of a man whose first positive self-image fills the attorney with fear, presents a final picture of Bigger still in isolation. Bigger had never reached even Max. He dies at peace, but undeniably alone. Alienation pervades Wright's searing novel.

Native Son is a significant achievement. As Dr. Margolies has said of the novel:

Wright goes beyond the mere shock of reader recognition and the subsequent implications of shared guilt and social responsibility, and raises questions regarding the ultimate value of man. What are man's responsibilities in a world devoid of meaning and purpose? 17

Wright is specifically concerned with man's alienation and his efforts to preserve his humanity in spite of it. Yet his commitment to the theme of alienation is a reason for many of the weaknesses in the novel. The plot of Native Son moves us to seek an answer to this question of man's responsibilities, though Wright's characterization of Bigger results in a figure totally unable to answer it—indeed, largely ignorant of the very existence of such a question. Since the action of the novel is filtered through Bigger's consciousness, no other character is sufficiently developed to decide on the meaning of life for him. So Wright must risk credibility or leave the work unfinished. It was a

precarious situation he created. Choosing to allow Bigger sufficient development to vindicate his yearnings for acceptance, Wright may have weakened his character. In turn, he gave his novel a psychological dimension that allows modern readers deep identification with Bigger. It was a fortunate choice.

Alienation also led Wright to some of the artistic strengths of the novel. The imagery successfully supports this theme, for example. One recent study of the imagery in Native Son moves from the easily recognized black and white symbolism to a subtle variation of light and dark patterns. James Emanuel sees this as a successfully developed complement to Wright's use of white for hostile and threatening forces.\(^{18}\) Examples include the light that awakens Bigger in the opening scene and the unnatural glare in the Dalton household. Even more interesting are the thirteen categories of wall-curtain images Emanuel identifies and locates in the novel. He believes some wall-curtain imagery denotes protective or enforced isolation, some depicts a shield of indifference or detachment, some reveals an artificial separation of certain classes of people, and some attests to the deprivation of human needs. Emanuel's categories often seem redundant, but his efforts point to an otherwise

unnoticed barrage of images denoting separation. Certainly these walls and curtains, together with the more familiar mountains and barriers further prove Wright's concern with man's alienation and isolation in the novel. His use of images to make this statement is part of Wright's success.

Another recent approach to Wright's imagery in *Native Son* concentrates on the animal imagery used. Robert Felgar moves with convincing agility from the rat of scene one to the caged Thomas family, the white cat of the Daltons, the sensationalized newspaper accounts, and the dramatic rooftop scene where "the prey is being suffocated in the jungle." Looking at "chubby puppy," Buddy and "scared rabbit," Vera and even at the fire-breathing dragon of a furnace at the Dalton house, we are inclined to agree with Felgar's thesis that "Bigger is a beast among beasts, living in the world forest." Felgar's thesis recalls Wright's own words in his previously quoted response to Gold about the "complex jungle of human relationships." Felgar's conclusion that "the prospect of *Native Son* is a wild forest in which beast-preys upon beast" is equally tempting. The

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20 Felgar, p. 333.

21 See above, p. 107 of this study. Wright often refers to modern life as a jungle that threatens to deprive man of his humanity and reduce him to the level of the bestial.
problem is that an emphasis on the beast imagery minimizes the point of the story. If the world is a jungle, then survival is man's only concern. Yet Bigger cannot accept this. He cannot just survive from one dreary day to another as his mother and sister and his girl friend, Bessie do. Bigger demands more than mere "life in a world forest." He, unlike the blacks who despair of it and the whites who have taken it for granted, craves recognition and acceptance of his right to independent action. So Bigger is not a beast. Wright could not portray his "dispossessed and disinherited man" whose crimes stem from his refusal to have his life count for nothing as a beast. Bigger's stark separateness and his struggles to improve the quality of his life are central concerns that the landscape of the novel does not fully convey. By so often placing Bigger in a setting that intensifies his alienation, in fact, Wright works through landscape to his real theme of alienation as human destiny and struggling against alienation as the challenge facing modern man.

Since Wright had explained his design of presenting Bigger's story "like a play upon the stage or a movie unfolding upon the screen,\(^{22}\) it should not be surprising that the novel was actually adapted to these media. Various offers had been refused by June of 1940 when Wright signed a

\(^{22}\)Wright, Native Son, p. xxxii.
contract with United Productions for a stage adaptation to be written in collaboration with Paul Green. John Houseman, the producer of the Broadway version, recalls for us his own misgivings about Green's Southern, rural attitude toward the race problem in America. Houseman is sure that Wright worked uneasily with Green, though Fabre produces glowing letters Wright sent to his agent about Green's warmth and understanding. At any rate, it is a matter of record that Green received some significant concessions from Wright. He secured the right to make Communism somewhat comic, the right to invent new characters and make editorial changes in the story, and Wright's promise to come to Chapel Hill to work with him on the collaboration. The result of their collaboration, a play in ten scenes, focuses on Bigger's psychology with important deletions and significant changes.

Produced by Orson Welles, Native Son (The Biography of a Young American): A Play in Ten Scenes opens with an unidentified Negro song. The theme of the verses is man's fierce independence in the face of acknowledged aloneness. Key lines read:

I've got a life that's long and weary,  
I got to live it for myself....

23 John Houseman, "Native Son on Stage," in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, p. 89.
24 Ibid. See also Fabre, p. 564 for quotation of Green's 1963 letter to Edward Margolies on the "stipulations."
I've got a grave that's cold and lonesome,
I got to fill it for myself.

Statements from Thomas Jefferson and a National Youth Commission Report also appear on the opening page, suggesting that alienation, freedom and crime will be somehow related in the play. The time is the present. The setting is Chicago's Black belt.

Minor changes have been made in the cast of characters. Bigger is twenty or twenty-one years old. Bessie Mears is now named Clara Mears. Boris Max is Edward Max. A social worker named Miss Emmet has been added.

The play opens as the novel does with a shrill alarm. Bigger and Buddy sleep on a pallet; Mrs. Thomas and Vera, on a rusty iron bed. Added to the room are crayon likenesses of dead relatives (Bigger's paternal grandparents) on the wall. Above the bed is a large colored lithograph of Christ with the verse "I am the Resurrection and the Life." The point seems to be that Christ is more "real" to the Thomases than their own ancestors. At least His likeness dominates the wall of the room. Bigger is still alienated from his family, though he has applied for a job at the relief station. Wright and Green improve over the novel by clarifying Bigger's attitude towards employment. We can see that Mrs. Thomas is unfair to call Bigger lazy and irresponsible.

25Bigger was nineteen years old in Wright's original manuscript and twenty in the novel. Apparently his increased awareness in the play calls for an increase in his age.
since we learn that racial prejudice was Bigger's reason for leaving his last job and since Bigger's shoes are still wet from his efforts to find a job four days ago. So his estrangement from his family over the Dalton job, though no less severe in the novel, is less subject to misunderstanding in the play. When hostilities erupt, Vera says, "He gets more like a stranger to us every day." Her third-person reference to Bigger in his presence supports her remark. She does not understand or even acknowledge the presence of her brother. As Mrs. Thomas reads vengeful words from the Bible, the rat appears. Some new touches are Bigger's naming the rat Old Man Dalton and the presence of the social worker at the Thomas house to see that Bigger takes the job. Miss Emmet is present to observe Bigger's violent behavior. Still symbolic of Bigger, the rat now stands for the oppressive power and the poverty Bigger hates as well. Bigger's separateness within his own home remains apparent in the play.

Scene II takes place the same afternoon on a South side Chicago street. Jack and Bigger discuss the Blum robbery. Clara enters and shows affection for Bigger. Their relationship seems more warm than that in the novel. The movie scenes are missing, so we have little idea of Bigger's view of another, more glamorous way of life. We are also denied knowledge of his intense desire for such a life. Only the airplane scene shows the boys' longing to be free
and powerful. This second scene does extend Bigger's alienation from his family to his peers, however. When Bigger produces a gun, he frightens the others and makes Gus leave the group. Buddy comes along and interrupts a fight between Bigger and Ernie. In this version, Bigger is actually optimistic about the Dalton job, since it represents a means for advancement beyond the gang, not unity with them. Jack speaks for the others when he comments, "Takes more'n a job to cure what ails him!" (p. 41). Bigger clearly believes himself superior to the group, and they think he is crazy.

In the third scene of the play, the next morning in the Dalton breakfast room, we learn more about the other characters than we did in the novel. Our attention is temporarily distracted from Bigger. We learn that Mrs. Dalton went blind only after the birth of a second child who died. We begin to suspect that all is not well in the Dalton home. Mary's direct warning to Bigger to "keep away from us--from Mother!" (p. 51) foreshadows trouble that is unrelated to Bigger's alienation. Something seems amiss in the household. Dalton does assign Bigger the furnace job in the play, so Peggy is cleared of the suspicions we had in the novel. Peggy tells Bigger that looking after Miss Mary is also his responsibility. In general, better preparation for later events occurs in this act of the play than in Wright's novel.
The unsettling ride Bigger takes with Mary and Jan is omitted from the play. Scene IV opens instead in Mary's bedroom before dawn of the next day. We have no idea why Bigger accompanies her to her room, but we see Mary's erratic behavior and know that Bigger is painfully uncomfortable there. Mary bemoans her self-defined role as one of "the penitent rich." She wants to talk. Then unaccountably Mary slaps Bigger, as if she is suddenly aware of some stranger whom she fears in her room. She then passes out. The accidental murder that follows conforms to Wright's account in the novel, only Bigger recognizes and then rejects the fact of Mary's death. "Naw--ain't nothin' happened," he mumbles as the scene ends. Again the revision presents a more self-aware, less introspective Bigger. In the absence of his dream-like state during the murder, Bigger must assume more responsibility for the accident. His attempts to deny it lack the depth of Bigger's "physiological rejection" of his actions, the stupor of the novel.

Britten's interrogation of Bigger differs little in the two versions. Bigger's guilty rejection of Jan is the same. His relationship to Clara (Bessie) is quite different, however. She is warmer than Bessie was. Clara does not regret her involvement with Bigger. On the contrary, she tells him, "...and I'll go on being a fool 'cause I love you--love you clear down to hell..." (p. 89). Bigger is more vulnerable to Clara's affection than he was to Bessie
in the novel too. He cries out, "You all around me--like a swamp sucking me under--can't see--can't think--Goddam, I hate it! I hate it!" (p. 81). Apparently Green or Wright felt that the audience would not accept the mutually exploitative relationship Bessie and Bigger have in the novel. By minimizing Bigger's alienation from his girl, Wright may be humanizing him, but he is certainly making Bigger less archetypal. Some of the intensity of the character is sacrificed.

There are few major changes in the play beyond this alteration of the character of Bigger. The idea of a ransom note evolves as in the novel, only Bigger's response to it is excessively enthusiastic. As he completes it he envisions, "...the millionaires bowing low before their God--Hunh-huh. It ain't God now, it's Bigger, Bigger, that's my name!" (p. 90). Not only will the note bring him triumph over the rich whites, Bigger believes, but allegedly it will help him even a grudge against the Deity. This is a "rebellious complaint" unknown either to Job or to the protagonist of Wright's novel.

A final difference in plot or emphasis involves Clara's death. After she returns with food, the police find Bigger hiding in an abandoned building. Thinking she has sent them, Bigger uses Clara as a shield to go the window. Police gunfire, not a brick, kills Clara in the play. Bigger is also shot and grabbed by the police. There is no frenzied rooftop chase. The vividly racist newspaper accounts of his
capture are missing, so there is far less emphasis on society's responsibility for Bigger's crime. There is no crowded jail scene symbolizing Bigger's total alienation from family and friends. When the trial begins, there is no jury to be influenced by sensational tactics like the introduction of Bessie's body as evidence. Max pleads only before a judge. His speech is too brief to explain Bigger, and there is no time for any self-knowledge to evolve as Bigger listens to his attorney.

Despite these deletions, Wright still stresses alienation, though with considerably less success in the play. Echoing the opening Negro song, Bigger says, "Yeh people can live together but a man got to die by himself" (p. 139). He makes some tentative remarks on the meaning of his life, but he is interrupted by a telegram (apparently denying his appeal). The play ends in deep melodrama. Bigger hears an airplane motor and jubilantly calls out, "Fly 'em for me— for Bigger." Max tearfully leads him to the death house as a priest intones, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" from the shadows (recalling the lithograph on the Thomas wall). The lights go out. The prisoners' death chant sounds. The death house door closes. Bigger emerges a Christ-like figure, not unlike that lithograph. Canada Lee, a former boxer, had a challenging job giving credibility to such a curious character. The role of Bigger would have confused even a veteran actor.
After the opening of the play had been postponed to re-train the stage crew and to work through technical problems, the play opened March 25, 1941 in the St. James Theatre in New York. *Native Son* ran for two uninterrupted hours with scene changes kept to less than a minute. Orson Welles, the director, had the entire stage framed in yellow brick and changed the size of the stage itself to portray each scene symbolically. For example, the cramped Thomas kitchenette apartment was seen through a mere fifteen foot opening. Max was brought out over the orchestra to engage the audience in the trial scene. Sound effects (bells ringing, clocks striking, hymns, the Dalton furnace roaring) were prominent, sometimes distracting no doubt. However, the play went 115 performances. It played the Apollo Theatre in Harlem before it moved on to New Jersey, broke records at the Windsor Theatre in the Bronx, and toured the country. Some of the power of Wright's character had reached a large audience, despite the modification of the character and the simplification of the text. Topical changes, such as Wright's addition of


27Houseman says the text Harper printed (that discussed above) was markedly different from the version he and Wright rewrote by returning to the novel. The Wright-Houseman version, discarding Bigger's view of himself as a black God, not Green's opened on Broadway, Houseman clarifies.
references to Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, were included to encourage the audience to identify with Bigger and his fate.

While Native Son was being readied for the stage, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer offered to purchase the movie rights if Wright allowed them to change the title and use white characters. He indignantly refused. His friend and biographer, Constance Webb, pictures Wright laughing at the preposterousness of the idea. Her remarks seem to belie Wright's insistence in "How Bigger Was Born" that Bigger's race was unimportant. However, his insistence is true to Wright's expressed theme: the horror of Negro life in America, if not to the more expansive theme that emerges from the novel. Wright told his agent, Paul Reynolds, to ask $75,000 for the rights to deter other producers from attempting to make a film that would significantly alter his story. That drastic step was taken because white producers from 1940-1948 had clamored to produce the film if Wright would dilute his message or alter his characters. One, for example, had wanted to make a musical of the novel.

28 Webb attributes this offer to the Harold Hecht Co. in Hollywood. She quotes from a March 10, 1947 letter that Hecht wrote Reynolds, Wright's agent. Webb, pp. 292-93, 415n.

29 Fabre, p. 336.

30 Wright allegedly replied, "Can you see Bigger Thomas being dragged down the steps to the tune of the 'Surrey with the Fringe on Top'?" Webb, p. 293.
Finally, in 1948, Wright was approached by Pierre Chenal, the French producer. Chenal had seen Sangre Negra in Buenos Aires and had been impressed with the Argentine translation. He wanted to film the story. Persuaded by Chenal's intention to work from the novel, Wright had Reynolds buy back the rights from Paul Green and the Welles-Houseman company for $6,000. Problems abounded, but Wright continued to work on the screenplay. He cut a bit from the trial scenes, condensed others, and Chenal added some flashbacks. As in the play, Wright decided to insert several points stressing the psychological aspects of the story. To this effect, he added several dream sequences to the screenplay. Surprisingly, Chenal insisted that Wright himself play the part of Bigger, after Canada Lee turned down the film role he had created on stage. In August of 1949, Wright was once again in Chicago, a disappointment after his eight-year absence. Few real changes had been made to eliminate the dirt and poverty Wright remembered. Because friend, Louis Wirth had reserved a room for him under the name of the American Council on Interracial Relations at the Palmer House, Wright was able to escape the South side and stay

31 Political pressures prevented filming in Italy and France. See Fabre, p. 337 for the suggestion of American opposition as the cause of Wright's difficulties.

32 Dreams are used in this way in Lawd Today and The Long Dream.
downtown. His filming took him back to the depressed areas that had compelled Wright to tell Bigger's story. Having lost thirty-five pounds (from 180 to 145), Wright was ready to play Bigger. The outdoor scenes were completed and the crew, assembled.

After the work in Chicago, the group reassembled in Buenos Aires in September of 1949. Financial and legal problems continued, causing Wright to devise a code for secret communication with his agent. English-speaking actors were hired from among the American tourists and residents. Progress was slow. Only at the end of October, 1950, was the film, costing Chenal three times the estimated $100,000 finally completed. Wright returned to Paris without approving the final release print. Native Son premiered aboard a Pan American strato-clipper on November 4, 1950, on a run from Buenos Aires to Nice. In New York, a cut version

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33Jaime Prades, the Uruguayan who was to raise the money, had misled Attilo Mentasti, director of Sono-Films and a supporter of the film, about the money and time needed. Wright and Mentasti drew up a confidential agreement excluding the others. All feared the government.

34See Fabre, p. 340 for identification of these actors.

35A January, 1951 Ebony magazine story, "'Native Son' Filmed in Argentina," gives the total cost at 5,000,000 pesos ($350,000), pp. 82-86. Despite this cost, Wright never received a dollar from the receipts in profit. Sono-Films went bankrupt. Fabre, p. 351.
appeared on June 16, 1951. Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Ohio banned the film. A nearly complete version was shown at the Venice Film Festival on August 22, 1951. Back home, the film was seen in such disparate places as Hollywood's Beverly Hills and by some of Wright's family in his native Mississippi. Fortunately for Wright, it never reached a wide audience, however.

In general, the film did little for Wright's career. Jan Erlone, reduced to a simple labor organizer, was an ineffectual figure. A narrator was used to explain Bigger's past, but he gave insufficient information about Bigger's motives to develop Wright's alienation theme or establish credibility. Max had too little to do with Bigger in the film version, so the character's presentation is unconvincing and Max's defense of Bigger is greatly weakened. The dream sequences Wright added to achieve psychological depth in the character of Bigger went unheeded in the reviews. The acting was generally poor. Jean Wallace, the former wife of actor Franchot Tone, was apparently an exception, for she is said to have given a commendable performance as Mary.

Wright wrote Reynolds that the New York State Board of Censors had demanded elimination of the killing of the rat, the making of a home gun, the point of the boys' attempt at robbery of a white store, the dialogue between the news­men, and the sound track of the trial scene. Fabre, p. 348. On the other hand, Cripps, "Native Son in the Movies," says most of the supposedly cut scenes were actually in the surviving print, but added nothing to the story. Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, pp. 110-112.
Dalton, though the character was considered lifeless. Wright proved he was not an actor, most accounts tactfully conclude. Wright lost money and three valuable years on the project. As historian Thomas Cripps, who has spent years studying the portraiture of blacks in the movies, concludes:

Like Paul Robeson and Oscar Micheaux before him and the Poitiers and Gordon Parkses and Melvin Van Peebleses after him, he [Wright] had learned the hard lesson that the most impervious white institution was like Mary Dalton, well meaning, solicitous of black plight, but ultimately useless for the kind of strong black expression that was possible in the solitary medium of fiction. 37

It is true that Wright had found himself an alien in the land of motion pictures.

In the decade following publication of Native Son, Wright had taken his alienated man to the stage and the screen. He had found Bigger even less understood than on the pages of his novel. Deprived of his intense isolation and desperate search for the meaning of his life, Bigger is only a mildly interesting criminal. Alienation is at the very core of Wright's creation. In his frightening familiarity to modern readers, Bigger continues to startle the reader who has only his own mind and his personal experiences with him as he confronts the novel.

37Cripps, p. 115. This decade has seen the rise of the so-called "blaxploitation" film. Aesthetically inferior and racially simplistic, these pictures have been phenomenally successful at the box offices, but offensive to many blacks. These movies lend support to Cripps's conclusion about Native Son on film.
CHAPTER VI
THE MINOR NOVELS

Wright's view of "the horror of Negro life" was not restricted to fictional treatment in Native Son. All of his fiction, indeed even much of Wright's nonfiction as well, reveal a preoccupation with the effect of restraints on the human personality. Usually Wright questions the precise nature of man, not merely the fate of blacks in America. What is innate, what transcends custom or ritual, is an important question for a man outside of his race and culture. Wright was just such a man, but he came to believe he shared this fate with many modern men. In a controversial passage early in Black Boy, Wright mused parenthetically,

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.1

Wright's concern is the distinctly human. He looks for an answer in the specific society of his birth, however. Considering the limitations of this field, he is unlikely to

1Black Boy, p. 45.
find the answer he seeks. Wright's minor novels share this disappointment.

Wright's first novel, *Laud Today*, written between his days as a postal worker in 1928 and 1937, but published posthumously in 1963, is an artistic rendering of the conclusion that cultural barrenness prevents human development. More than biographical detail is needed to explain Wright's placement of a sordid day in the life of a wretched human being, Jake Jackson, in the city of Chicago. Wright's introduction to the classic study, *Black Metropolis*, provides a fuller answer. It reads: "Chicago is the known city; perhaps more is known about it, how it is run, how it kills, how it loves, steals, helps, gives, cheats, and crushes than any other city in the world."² Wright continues, "Do not hold a light attitude toward the slums of Chicago's South Side. Remember that Hitler came out of such a slum.... Out of these murky slums can come ideas quickening life or hastening death...."³

Out of *Laud Today*'s Chicago slums comes one of the most unsympathetic characters Wright ever created. Here is the "monster" readers look for in Bigger Thomas. Wright's sociological orientation is a key to the weaknesses Jake


³Ibid., p. xx.
does not share with Bigger. Unrelieved by the psychological depth of *Native Son*’s anti-hero and burdened by naturalistic detail, Jake Jackson is only a crude illustration of the urban life Wright presents as a warning to future America. Jake and the others are men reduced to squirrels meaninglessly turning in a cage of compensatory daydreams, prejudices, superstition, brutality, sexual release, violence, and total despair. Like Wright’s more successful novels, *Lawl Today* is about racial, sexual, and economic isolation. Wright never quite reaches the deeper theme of alienation as human destiny, however. The final lines of the novel, describing the wind "whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit," suggest Wright’s original title, "Cesspool." These lines also reveal Wright’s interest in the total human loss threatened by unrestrained urban deterioration. Such an emphasis on the sociological distracts us from the larger concern of his better fiction.

*Lawl Today* is the story of a typical but significant day in the tortured life of a black postal worker with bourgeois illusions. Wright’s title, a folk exclamation that appears monotonously throughout the novel expressing minor variations of emotion, prepares us for this view of the struggles of daily life. The naturalistic scenes of

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Chicago's black ghetto fill the novel. The monolithic Chicago Post Office building where Wright had worked and had painstakingly kept records of his observations is here. Black preoccupations of the thirties (i.e., Garvey's return-to-Africa movement, the lure of the numbers racket, the appeal of evangelist, Father Divine, the growing awareness of Communism, and a partial awareness of world affairs) are here as well. A detailed depiction of lower and middle-class Chicago black life is given here too, with Wright's customary vividness. There is little wonder that Wright's agents had trouble finding a publisher for the book, however. It is unlikely that he would have released the work for publication had he lived. The novel is often boring and detailed to the point of tedium. Still *Today* is helpful for an understanding of Wright's insistence that modern man have the freedom and feel the need to preserve the warmth, sensitivity and intelligence that give meaning to human life. In Jake Jackson, Wright was looking for answers about alienated man.

Jake Jackson is not unlike Bigger Thomas or Cross Damon. As a matter of fact, many parallels between *Lawd Today* and the published novels are clear. From just such a life as Jake's, Cross Damon concludes that "man is nothing in particular."\(^5\) Jake, like Bigger, looks resentfully at

\(^5\)Wright actually used his then unpublished *Lawd Today* as a source for Cross's life in Chicago before his existen-
those who control his life and remarks "God must' ve made them folks wrongsideoutward" (p. 182). Actually Jake is even more frightening than Bigger, who initially finds vindication in the "creative act" of murder and later begins to explore the significance of his life. Jake knows no remedy for the death he lives but the losing of himself in the noises of the traffic and squalor of the gaming house. In the one day of Wright's novel, Jake has no time to develop beyond this living death. It may be too late, anyway.

Wright's third-person point of view allows us to witness the vanity, cruelty, frustration, transitory joys, and wry humor of Jake's world. Wright allows us, for example, to overhear Jake reading an article about old lady Lucy Rosenball, who has donated a million dollars to a Southern black college but five million to build a hospital for stray cats and dogs. Surprisingly, Wright avoids the weakness of his usual authorial nudges. It is for us to see how Jake's brutish existence compares to the life of befriended strays. It is for us to explain Jake's blindness to the old lady's scandalous priorities. Wright shows us "the kind of world which Negroes have built up under their separate subordinate status" so clearly that we move from the "common-places"

6Wright, "Introduction," Black Metropolis, p. xix.

Wright was given access to some of the sociological data his friends collected for this work to supplement his observations.
of Jake's morning to the dehumanization of his "squirrel cage" at work to the tragic release he finds in a "rat's alley" (i.e., the titles of the three divisions of the novel). We make these moves as naturally as Jake does. We can see that the gluttony of Jake's 250 pound friend Al, together with Bob's gonorrhea and Slim's tuberculosis diminish the degree of comfort Jake could ever expect to find in their hearty acquaintance. The problem is that Wright's vivid details do not alone allow us to identify with Jake. We understand the causes for his brutalization, but we fail to see ourselves in him as we can see modern man in Bigger. Jake moves through his day essentially alone.

This day, when Jake awakens "thinking, longing for something" and feeling like a slave, is February twelfth, Lincoln's birthday, 1937. Jake is shown with "a pair of piggish eyes," "low growls," and an Adam's apple that jumps "like a toy monkey on a string" (p. 10). The flabby pouches under his eyes, his shaggy sideburns, and itchy, greasy scalp contribute to Jake's beast-like portrait. Like Bigger, Jake is more than the animal he seems, even if we feel the difference less intensely. His songs confirm our belief that a man desires recognition. Jake sings as he dresses for the day of his frustrated desires to be valued. His songs present a rather crude characterization:
You took away my soldier when you took away your love
You said it was a plaything I wasn't worthy of
You packed away my soldiers on a shelf 'way up above
And I'm just little boy blue... (p. 27).

Later, browsing through the morning papers, Jake speaks en-
vously of both German soldiers and gangsters. Both have a
freedom and joy Jake naively imagines an improvement over
his own dreary existence. Both have the opportunity to
prove their worth. Jake also sings of waking too soon from
a dream. Playing "policy" later in the day, Jake reveals
an implicit faith in dreams. Frequently in the novel, Jake
longs for sleep and the satisfying world of his dreams. A
figure who both dreams and aspires to prove his worth is
not wholly a beast. The "commonplaces" of his day lack an
affirmation of Jake's humanity, though he shows occasional
signs of awareness and aspirations toward deeper life.

As "Squirrel Cage," part two of the novel, opens, Jake
is reluctant to leave all the life he sees in the color and
lights of the streets. "Deep in him was a yearning for
something else," as Jake looks at the Chicago Post Office
building. At the Post Office, Jake resents the young white
employees who are financing their way through the university.
He wonders why this job is supposed to be the height of his
aspirations. He feels insulted by the indifference to him

7"Policy" is an elaborate, illegal form of a lottery
well known in the black ghetto. Wright tediously explains
the game and something of the odds on pp. 48-54 of the
novel.
and his problems that Jake reads in the jostling of the other postal clerks. At his work table, he finds a "legion of cat-footed spies and stoolpigeons," slits along the walls for detectives to peer through, and a foreman who makes periodic rounds of inspection. Believing unions a "gyp game" yet faced with the dehumanization of recording the time spent in the washroom in a daily ledger, Jake is justifiably frustrated at his job. Wright summarizes his responses:

He did not know of any other way things could be, if not this way. Yet he longed for them not to be this way. He felt that something vast and implacable was crushing him, and he felt angry with himself because he had to stand it (p. 147).

Jake is fumbling toward an examination of the meaning of his pain. In a novel full of racial and economic barriers, Wright is groping toward the alienation he comes to identify with humanity. Jake is alone and oppressed by a power much more puzzling than the facts of his color or his poverty.

In a conversation that Wright's narrator describes as "more like thinking aloud than speaking for purposes of communication," the co-workers reflect on their lives. Realizing "how little stands between [man] and death," how unfair it seems that man, unlike the proverbial cat, has only one chance to die, and yet how every monotonous, futile day brings him closer to that end, Jake is one more modern man reaching out for meaning. He quickly changes the subject to the more comfortable subject, dreams. Here too
Jake is interested in meaning. Toying with the theme of alienation from self, Wright shows the men discussing the opinion that the body changes every seven years. The notion of an inner self, invulnerable to change and hidden from man is a frightening idea Jake readily discards.

Only in "Rat's Alley" does Wright develop his usual theme to any extent. The gong for quitting time sounds, allowing the men to leave their daydream retreats. "As though they were dead men suddenly come to life," Jake and his friends rush to leave the building. "They were almost satisfied now, but not quite," Wright tells us. In the rau­cous dance hall, filled with gamblers, pimps, dope peddlers and the like ("rats"), Jake finally feels a sense of ease and freedom. We can only shudder when, at the end of the novel, when he is alone, beaten, robbed of the $100 he has just borrowed at a 20% interest rate and the cost of his dignity, Jake yells, "But when I was flying I was a flying fool!" (p. 219). How desperately man needs to feel his worth. How little there is in Jake Jackson's life to fulfill this need. He is only vaguely aware of his yearnings, so estranged from himself has he become.

Wright's novel never really treats alienation in the fullest sense, however. Petty prejudices, ignorance, racial discrimination, and other sociological ills dominate the action. Wright presents us only one day in Jake's life. Yet we have heard Jake attempt to go beyond these problems
to a correction of his anguished existence. We have seen him retreat from the mystery of his basic worth into the vague hopes of his dreams. If Lincoln's birthday had marked Jake's emancipation, he might have found himself faced with the enormous challenge of trying to reach a plane of existence on which he could justify his desires and achieve that "something else" he so hungered for. Wright's decision never to publish *Laud Today* suggests his disappointment with the shallow view of human worth his copious notes about postal life had led him to depict. Jake, his friends, and his pitiful wife, Lil, are more dead than alive. Wright never had much patience with men who refuse to claw and scratch for the freedom to live a full life.

It would be too easy to presume from *Laud Today* that man's isolation is a racial or even a social issue. Wright was not satisfied with this explanation. During the years between publication of *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953), Wright read and traveled in search for an answer to the question of man's alienation. On the Gold Coast of Africa, in Spain, and at the Bandung conference of Third World nations, Wright learned that the isolation he had always felt as a black man in America is a human experience rather than a consequence of his race or his color. Wright relentlessly explored the extent to which alienation threatened future civilizations in his nonfiction of this reflective period. *The Outsider* is a fictional treatment of this subject.
In this next novel, Wright presents alienation as a perplexing metaphysical concern that affects all modern men. Critics rushed to see Cross Damon's alienation in terms of his color. Indeed, Wright does use Cross's blackness to advantage. The dread, self-hatred, longing for acceptance, and "double vision" of Wright's protagonist are credible for a black man in America. But Cross is not alone and miserable merely because of his race. The hunchback of the novel, Houston, is as isolated, though he is white. Like so many of Wright's protagonists, Cross first appears in the company of his peers, painfully aware of his isolation from them. The postal employees Cross has socialized with for over six years do not understand his fears or his guilt and dread, though they share his race and color. Later in the novel, Cross laments his beloved Eva's identification of him with his race: "Could he allow her to love him for his color when being a Negro was the least important thing in his life?" A thorough atheist, Cross Damon is isolated

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8For an example, see Morris Beja, "It Must Be Important: Negroes in Contemporary American Fiction," Antioch Review, XXIV (Fall 1964), 330. Beja sees color as the "overwhelming cause for the alienation depicted" in this work. The "It" of his title refers to race and color. Wright's works do not completely support Beja's title, a popular critical stance about black writing.

from the religion of many of his race. He can only look
enviously at a black church where worshippers huddle to-
gether in their loneliness. He craves their acceptance of
life, though he cannot find peace of mind in their religion.
Throughout the novel, we see a man detached from, often sus-
pended above, race and religion.

Cross's problems stem, not from racial or economic
isolation, but from his desire to master his relationship to
himself. Cross constantly tells his buddies, "There're some
things a man must do alone" (p. 8). The most significant of
these tasks is the creation of himself and his world. The
Outsider opens on a man whose world is in need of re-crea-
tion. Like Big Boy, Bigger and Jake, Cross is in the
company of three friends, but alone. He asks one of his
buddies if he can rest on him as they walk down the frigid
Chicago street. Booker replies, "Hell, naw! Stand on your
own two big flat feet, Cross!" (p. 1). Joe and Pink, the
other two friends, answer that they too are tired, so Cross
will have to carry himself. Cross is a morbidly introspec-
tive figure (nicknamed Mr. Death in the opening scene) on
the verge of alcoholism. He drinks, Cross tells his friends,

Wright calls our attention to similarities between
Cross and the central figure of his early story through the
dialogue:

"We can't hold your hand, Big Boy. And you're a
big boy, you know."
"Yes, I'm a big boy," Cross smiled bitterly (p. 8).
to feel less, not to feel better. "I was looking for something," Cross quietly tells his friends when they ask him about the big books he used to read. "I've put away childish things," he answers simply in the words of the Scriptures, when they ask why he no longer reads. In less than ten pages, Wright presents a thoroughly alienated man.

Cross Damon is alone, unable to find what he searches for among his friends or in the written records of his culture. "Now more than ever he knew that he was alone and that his problem was one of the relationship of himself to himself" (p. 8).

Like Jake of Lawd Today, Cross feels dead. He craves the retreat he once found in sleep and dreams. Cross is unable to sleep now, because Dot, his young mistress, is upset. She is pregnant with his child and is trying to control him through his guilt. Cross cannot understand her attitude. "Do you think you can make people do things they don't want to do? he asked her earnestly" (p. 11). His obligatory phone call has only deepened his depression. Reviewing his life, Cross recalls dropping out of college and marrying. The whole of his life leaves him "choked with self-hate," yet Cross is unable to use the gun he keeps as "his final protection against the world as well as against himself" (p. 13). Cross wants to live. He believes man should be free to live as he wants. He does not want to look too deeply inside to find the meaning that will
determine how he should live, however. He fears what he might find there.

Unable to have her way, Dot goes to see Cross's mother. She believes the older woman can help her force Cross to marry her. Cross's mother is the first source of his dread. Along with life, she has given him the capacity for alienation, "anchored in a knowledge that offended him" (p. 21). This former school teacher named her son Cross after the cross of Jesus, she reminds him. The name fits. Cross Damon staggers under a burden of guilt, his humanity, and his awareness of being totally alone. Cross is occasionally sustained by the hope that somewhere in the world men who had thought their way through the illusions around them existed. Maybe with these similarly rejected men he could one day feel at home. No such kinsman exists for him now, however.

Following his mother's advice, Cross goes to see if he can pacify Dot. Her girl friend and a doctor are there when Cross arrives at Dot's door. Unlike Bigger who was unaware of his feelings when others discussed him in his presence, Cross feels deprived of his humanity. He soon learns that Dot is not yet sixteen years old, though she has told him she was seventeen, and that her lawyer has told her she can threaten Cross with rape. Conviction would mean possible imprisonment from one year to life. Dot has never really known Cross. Now she has created an invisible wall that
looms between them with her threats.

Using the imagery of Native Son, Wright has Cross tramp through snow-carpeted sidewalks rubbing his hands over his eyes as he leaves Dot's apartment. He prepares to meet his estranged wife, Gladys, by retreating into dreams of the past. Cross remembers when he was a philosophy major at the University of Chicago by day and a postal clerk at night. He recalls attracting the young registered nurse with talk of man's need to create himself when he finds himself unaccepted and undefined by others. "Her consciousness of being an outcast made him feel close to her," Cross recalls about his wife. Throughout the years, unfortunately, Cross has come to realize that he never loved Gladys. He is now haunted by the need to make her hate him. Ironically, alienation brought the two together and now Cross struggles to find a way to return them to separate states of isolation. He seeks to "cure her of her love for him" and to set them both free. Cross devises a bizarre plan to feign insanity by creating his own reality and forcing Gladys to leave him in fear of her life and their sons' safety. Returning to the present, Cross recalls that he must now return to meet the demands for security from Gladys added to the impending threats of Dot. He needs to make a new life for himself. A fortuitous subway accident gives Cross just that opportunity.
When a shabbily dressed black about his own color and build is mistakenly identified as Cross Damon, he seizes upon his miraculous reprieve from the tangled mess that had been his lot and sets out to try again. "There was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, any man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it" (p. 86). To escape detection in a run-down hotel where Cross is masquerading as Charles Webb for a few days, he commits his first murder. He kills Joe Thomas, ironically a pall bearer at Cross's "funeral." Recalling the viciousness of removing the dead man's head from his path to escape by bashing the skull with his gun butt, we are prepared for more violence if freedom is at stake. The as yet uncreated protagonist finds himself "alone at the center of the world of the laws of his own feelings" (p. 117). More clearly, Cross is alienated even from himself, as book one closes.

As "Dream," the second book, opens, Cross is on a train from his native Chicago to the anonymity of New York. Like Big Boy, he leaves home following a violent act to seek a land offering him full humanity. Cross meets District Attorney Ely Houston, ironically a fellow rebel, on the

11Cross crashes a bottle down on Joe's head, as Bigger batters Bessie's head with a brick—to escape detection. Countless similarities in action lead to a comparison between the two characters. Margolies succinctly expresses the relationship by calling Cross an "intellectualized Bigger." The phrase seems apt. The Art of Richard Wright, p. 122 and passim.
train. Like Cross, Houston has lived both inside and outside of contemporary American culture, because he is a hunchback, (not because of his race). Cross has earlier expressed a need for just such companionship. Like Cross, Houston believes man has to become human before he can successfully mingle in society. Cross intuitively fears this man, who is so like himself. It is part of the aesthetic weakness of the novel that Cross and Houston's paths so often meet in the maze of events that follow. Together they pursue the theme of an impulsive criminal who, in his desire to become a god, must find a way to protect himself from himself.

Cross also meets Bob Hunter, a black pullman porter, on the train to New York. Bob thinks their color links him to Cross. As if in a dream, Cross gives Bob a phony name (Addison Jordan) and address, when an accident occurs while Bob is serving food. A customer causes Bob to spill hot coffee on her, and Cross instinctively keeps her from hitting the waiter with a pitcher. Cross allows Bob to think he can call on him if the woman tries to press charges. Cross vows to break out of this dream. He is making promises he cannot keep to Bob just as he had done to Gladys and Dot and his sons.

Once more speaking with the hunchback, Cross reflects on the metaphor of life as survival in a jungle. Maybe man only tries to hide life with order to escape its terror,
Cross suggests. "Maybe the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization is simply man's frantic attempt to hide himself from himself?" (p. 135). Wright's theme is out in the open. After a thirteen year period of thought and travel, Wright is articulating the theme he was testing in *Native Son*. Man is horrifying alone. He looks to society as a shield from himself, but he cannot escape his fundamental isolation. Man is afraid of himself, because he cannot explain his complexity. Cross continues:

Man's heart, his spirit is the deadliest thing in creation. Aren't all cultures and civilizations just screens which men have used to divide themselves, to put between that part of themselves which they are afraid of and that part of themselves which they want to preserve? Aren't all of man's efforts at order an attempt to still man's fear of himself? (p. 135).

This explicit analysis frightens Cross. He tries to deny his words by asserting that "Maybe man is nothing in particular." He wonders if maybe man tries to hide this realization from himself. Houston is excited by Cross's words, and leaves his card for a later chat once they get to New York. Alone, Cross reflects on his new nothingness and on the enviable position Houston has. The District Attorney can protect himself from himself by hunting down others. The question of accountability is now part of Cross's definition of man as a free, alienated, self-created being.

Wright's plot is a disturbingly complex one. Through dissimulation, exploited prejudices and arson, Cross assumes the identity of the deceased Lionel Lane, whose name he
selected from a headstone. Cross secures a corroborating birth certificate and draft card as well. Appearing suddenly at the house of Bob Hunter, the porter he had promised to help on the train, Cross (now Lionel) learns that Bob has been fired and that Bob now works for the Communist Party. Cross identifies himself as Lane, and allows Bob to think him guilty of some act of "racial heroism" against whites. He learns that Bob was an organizer in Trinidad who has been an illegal alien in the States for ten years. Cross promises to return to meet some of Bob's Communist friends.

Back at Bob's flat, Cross meets Sarah, whom he strangely pities (Bob's wife) and Gil Blount, whom he dislikes on sight. "He acts like a God who is about to create a man" (p. 174). Learning from Gil that the Communists do not admit any subjectivity in human life, Cross seethes with resentment. In Gil, Cross feels he has met a man who has tried to turn himself into a rock. When Jack Hilton, the Party organizer, comes in, Bob learns that his orders to form a Dining Car Waiters' Union have been cancelled. Cross witnesses the naked force of the Communist Party with disdain. He is beginning to awaken into a new and different self, Cross concludes after that evening.

In "Descent," the next book of the novel, Cross prepares to enter a life of compound duplicities. Believing them capable of "revealing the content of human life on
earth," Cross decides to join Blount and Hilton, despite his aversion to their manner and his indifference to their ends. There is no end to alienation in Cross's motives for joining the Party. On the contrary, Cross recognizes his strong differences from the others. "Gil'd want to kill me if he knew how I felt," Cross muses. He is merely responding to an emotional compulsion to "feel and weigh the worth of himself," in his decision to join. The Party seems "the one thing on earth that could transform his sense of dread, shape it, objectify it, and make it real and rational for him" (p. 188).12

Communism does not achieve this end for Cross. As Lionel Lane, he is drawn into a confrontation that leaves Langley Herndon, the Fascist landlord and Gil Blount, the Communist leader dead. Viewing her art work and reading her diary, Cross learns that Eva Blount is a kindred spirit. She is also a loner and has been exploited by the Party. As "Descent" ends, Cross has killed "two little gods," and he finds himself claimed by the contagion of their lawlessness.

In "Despair," Cross comforts the widowed Eva. She touches him when she cries out, "Isn't there any way to be human anymore?" He reflects on the similarities between Hilton and Gil and himself. Cross allows Eva to fall in

12Cross Damon's expectations about the Communist Party correspond almost exactly with Wright's summary of his own reasons for joining the Party in The God That Failed.
love with him. He also succeeds, for the moment, in hiding his guilt from the District Attorney, who is surprised at their eerie reunion. Houston and Cross rather incredibly theorize about the dead bodies the hunchback has come to investigate. They conclude that a mythical killer, himself an outsider, might have killed Gil and Herndon. Wright allows these two intellectuals to define such a killer as "a bleak and tragic man... the twentieth century writ small" (p. 183). Such a definition of the killer is accepted by Cross, as he considers Eva's growing love for him and bemoans his lost humanity. By accepting his total alienation and taking on the role of a god, Cross feels he has surrendered his humanity and jeopardized his ability to return Eva's love.

The plot is further entangled when Hilton discovers evidence incriminating Cross in the two murders. Though he swears to protect Cross's secret, Hilton has been instrumental in Bob Hunter's deportation to certain death in Trinidad. When Hilton answers Cross's questions about Bob, "So what? There are a million Bob Hunters," Cross knows that he can never trust the Communist. Following an incredible discussion of life and man's ability to create his own reality, Cross commits his fourth murder of the novel.

There is a great deal of theorizing in book four. Wright was anxious to present some of the results of his years of reflection. A full statement of Wright's conclusions, stated as clearly as in his later nonfiction, appears
in Houston's summary of the theoretical killer of Blount, Herndon and Hilton. The killer is seen as:

a man living in our modern industrial cities, but he is devoid of all the moral influences of Christianity. He has all the unique advantages of being privy to our knowledge, but he has either rejected it or has somehow escaped its influence. That he's an atheist goes without saying, but he'd be something even more than an atheist. He'd be something like a pagan, but a pagan who feels no need to worship.... Modern man sleeps in the myths of the Greeks and the Jews. Those myths are now dying in his head and in his heart. They can no longer serve him. When they are really gone, those myths, man returns. Ancient man ... And what's there to guide him? Nothing at all but his own desires, which would be his only values (p. 316).

Therein lies Wright's full expression of the challenge facing twentieth-century man. Alienation, an apparent fact of life, may lead to man's unguided efforts at self-creation. Such unchecked movement means chaos for human existence.

Modern man has to find a way to cope with his alienation or surrender his humanity.

Before the novel is over, Cross confesses all to Eva, allegedly to protect her from him. He predicts the world is going back to "something earlier, maybe better, maybe worse, maybe more terrifyingly human!" (p. 366). Houston, the hunchback, cuts through the maze of Cross's identity to announce the death of Cross's mother back in Chicago. He says she died from shock when she learned of her son's duplicity. Houston also forces Cross to deny his future self, the three sons Houston has had brought in from Chicago to trap Cross. Eva jumps to her death, the fifth crushed skull Cross is responsible for in the novel. Sarah, Bob's wife,
surrenders to the Catholicism of her youth in response to the chain of murders. And Houston deduces Cross's guilt, but leaves him alone, since the District Attorney has no real evidence to convict him of anything. The hunchback quips, "Didn't you know that gods were lonely?" as he leaves Cross to bear his humanity alone. Cross is sure he is not god-like, but nothing. 13

The Outsider concludes with Cross dying from the bullet wounds of Party assassins who fear his alienation. He agrees with Houston, called in to question him before he dies, that being free means being alone. He knows now that man's search for the meaning of his life cannot be done alone, Cross concludes. "Alone a man is nothing," Cross weakly asserts. Cross pleads for man to bridge his alienation with others, since "Man's all we've got" (p. 439). He reveals that his own life, when he renounced the myths and became his own god, was horrible. Cross dies trying to impress Houston of the horror of unrelieved alienation.

Recent reconsiderations of The Outsider have looked more closely at Wright's philosophical premises and found that the novel proves not Wright's existentialism, but his final rejection of existentialism. 14 Cross had explained

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13This was Reverend Taylor's conclusion in Wright's earlier story, "Fire and Cloud" (Uncle Tom's Children). Taylor goes from this conclusion to a union of his Christianity and Communism, however. Cross dies with no answer.

14For example, see Russell Carl Brignano, Richard
quite clearly to Blimin, the Communist sent to uncover his true identity and purposes, that he believed industrialization had done great harm to mankind. Deprived of his myths by science and industry, man roams aimlessly and fearfully through the cities haunting the movie houses, gambling, or drinking to distraction. Cross believes. The "Jealous Rebels," who are beyond myth and desirous of power, take advantage of modern man's need for an absolute and work to keep public consciousness low. Only those outside of the myths are truly free to see this power struggle and to assert their own meaning. Yet alone, man is in a waking nightmare devoid of his humanity. Paradoxically, alienation seems to be an inevitable part of and a definite threat to humanity.

While awaiting the publication of The Outsider (March, 1953), Wright started on yet another novel, Savage Holiday, in December of 1952. In one month, he sent the first version of the work to his agent along with a statement about his misgivings that the public might resent his writing about "just folks, white folks." Wright's misgivings were justified. Harper's and Pyramid Books rejected the work before Avon Paperbacks offered Wright a $2000 advance.

Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works (U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 163. Brignano contends that Wright works beyond existential tenets to a "humanistic, reformist attitude."
Inspired by the Clinton Brewer case and by *Dark Legend*, psychiatrist Frederic Wertham's Freudian analysis of matricide, Wright set out to study the nightmarish subconscious that accounts for violent crime. In his conclusion that cultural and religious restraints have not redeemed man from his disordered internal life, Wright is supplementing *The Outsider*. His theme here too is man's fear of his isolation from himself. It is Fowler's failure to go beyond the myths of his culture to a confrontation with himself that leads Wright's newest protagonist to murder.

In his extended nonfiction of this period, *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956) and *Pagan Spain* (1956), Wright continued his exploration of alienation as a part of the human condition. He is insistent on this theme because he feared that unrelieved alienation forces man to jeopardize his humanity by violently asserting his independence.

In autumn of 1940, Wright received a letter from an elderly reader of *Native Son* introducing him to Clinton Brewer, a prisoner who had already served eighteen years of a life sentence. Brewer had murdered the mother of two who refused to marry him. Wright visited him in prison, and on March 30, 1941, wrote the governor of New Jersey, Thomas A. Edison, Jr., requesting Brewer's parole. Brewer was released on July 8, 1941, and three months later stabbed another young woman under similar circumstances. Wright and Dr. Wertham intervened to save Brewer from execution on this second murder charge. *Savage Holiday* is dedicated to Clinton Brewer.

Fabre discusses the complementary nature of *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday*. He suggests the latter was a repudiation of Wright's psychoanalytical past as *The Outsider* had been of his ideological past. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, pp. 378-79.
Wright believed that man's isolation from others and his profound fear of himself threatened the very existence of human life as we know it. Though The Outsider and Savage Holiday are more directly concerned with the criminal mind and with deviant human psychology, Wright has not abandoned his alienation theme or totally relegated it to his non-fiction. In Savage Holiday, Wright's theme is again the threat unrelieved alienation poses to the human personality.

As the novel opens Fowler, who has spent thirty of his forty-three years at Longevity Life Insurance Company, has been prematurely retired to make room for the president's son. Young Robert Warren has been promised Fowler's district manager position as a wedding present. While an insurance executive, a Mason, a Rotarian, a Sunday school superintendent, and a comfortable bachelor, Fowler had felt that he belonged. His $40,000 bank balance and large security holdings had assured him of this. Now at the banquet announcing his retirement, "He felt lost, abandoned; he was alone amidst it all. Time was flowing pitilessly on; Longevity Life would keep marching, and he was on the outside of it all, standing on the sidelines, rejected, refused...." (p. 18.) Fowler cannot bear the deception of the banquet. He has been forced to pretend that the

retirement is his idea, but his work has meant too much to him. "Work had not only given Erskine his livelihood and conferred upon him the approval of his fellowmen; but, above all, it made him a stranger to a part of himself that he feared and wanted never to know" (p. 30). When Longevity's president, Warren, forced Fowler to accept his retirement graciously, he was asking him to become an outcast, to surrender his "longevity," to confront himself. Fowler leaves the banquet hall overcome by "anxiety" (Wright's title for the first book).

Reminiscent of the newly reprieved Cross Damon after the subway train wreck, Wright's retired insurance executive, Erskine Fowler, is "trapped in freedom." When a sudden breeze closes his apartment door while he steps out of the shower to retrieve the Sunday paper, Fowler is left naked and cowering. Fowler is wild with fear that the tenants of his New York apartment building might stumble upon him in his awkward nakedness. His fear causes Fowler to frighten five-year old Tony Blake into falling to his death. To protect himself, Fowler chooses to read the boy's fall from the balcony as moral retribution for his mother's alleged immorality. Tony, the five-year old who lived with his shapely widowed mother next door to Fowler's luxury Manhattan apartment, reminded Fowler of his own neglected youth. Now that his nakedness has caused Tony's death, Fowler "felt alone, abandoned in the world--abandoned and
guilty" (p. 72). He has "killed" the little boy who looked to him for the father he never knew.

The Freudian developments of Fowler's repressed hostility towards his mother and of Mrs. Blake's identification with his mother in Fowler's mind need not be discussed here. The novel's psychoanalytic accuracy adds little to the artistic value of the work. The novel is heavy-handed and overstated, but intensely serious about the damage man does to himself and others when he agrees with the social and religious myth-makers to hide his inner conflicts and repress his desires. Fowler is the other side of Wright's usual alienated men. He has not given up the myths. He is not outside of his culture. Initially, with his membership in the bank, pension, and material comforts, Fowler seems unlike Cross Damon or Bigger Thomas. In fact, Wright proves that he is worse off. Being in the society, he has missed the outsider's objectivity and emotional independence. When his position is later taken, he has no defenses against "man's heart, his spirit ... the deadliest thing in creation."18

Building defenses against society and his sense of guilt, Fowler tries to make amends to Mrs. Blake, as "Ambush" opens. He befriends her against the gossip of their neighbors. He arranges for Tony's funeral service and burial.

18 The Outsider, p. 135.
Fowler talks with Mrs. Blake and learns that she had seen a pair of men's naked feet on the balcony immediately before the accident. When an anonymous caller claims to know what actually happened, Fowler decides impulsively to marry Mrs. Blake. Like Cross Damon who sees the isolation of his future wife that he cannot bear to confront in himself, Fowler contemplates marriage as a compensation for his guilt and his utter loneliness. Fowler's problem is that Mabel Blake does not begin to understand him or his problems. His sudden interest in her surprises her, though she welcomes his aid. Her behavior confuses Fowler. Mrs. Blake continues to see other men. She does not mention her son's death to callers or to the co-workers she associates with at the night club. Fowler finds Mabel increasingly cold and irritable as his possessiveness of her grows. He has worked himself into an even greater trap trying to escape his aloneness.

In the final book of this brief novel, Fowler writes Mabel of his change of heart. He realizes he can never marry this strange, unfeeling woman. He senses her isolation from him. Totally confused now, Mabel breaks down before Fowler. She confesses her true lack of regard for her deceased son. She has never wanted him, she tells Fowler. His birth was a mistake. Fowler is driven to tell all too. He reveals his part in little Tony's death, his reasons for remaining silent until now, and his original motive for the
proposal of marriage. Fowler's confession is a mistake. After a violent argument with Mrs. Blake, Fowler kills Mabel, a surrogate for the mother he loved and hated. As the novel ends, Fowler appears at the police station, calmly confessing his guilt to a puzzled officer. The crime was deeply rooted in his past, we learn (as Dr. Wertham had concluded about Wright's model, Clinton Brewer). Mabel's murder was a vicarious matricide. Alienation, unacknowledged and unchecked, has cost society three victims. Cross Damon's fears about the unexamined human have been proven justifiable.

*Savage Holiday* is structurally weak, but Wright's focus is clear. As the opening quotation from the Book of Job suggests,\(^{19}\) man has a capacity for awesome destruction if driven to face the horror of himself. Fowler's surrender confirms Cross's dying words that the search for meaning cannot be successfully undertaken alone, since "Alone a man is nothing."

Building defenses against society and one's own humanity does not seem to be an answer for Wright either. In his next novel, Tyree Tucker, the prosperous, middle-class

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\(^{19}\)The inscription reads: "And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house . . ." (Job 1:19). Again Wright relates Job to man in his inherent condition of isolation. The emphasis here is on the possible destructiveness of such aloneness, rather than on the anguish of the man who experiences this alienation.
funeral director, warns his son, "Dream, Fish. But be careful what you dream. Dream only what can happen ...." Limiting the scope of his reality seems to be a cautious approach that minimizes the dangers of the human spirit. It is an approach Fishbelly Tucker cannot accept. Despite his father's protective love and sincere advice, Wright's young protagonist finds his quest for manhood and self-esteem impossible in his native Clintonville, Mississippi. The twenty-five thousand inhabitants (40% of them black) have structured a world for him in which Fish's dream of manhood cannot exist. The Long Dream presents "an unwilling victim, a man on the prowl to regain self-hood," as Wright's next alienated man.

Those who argue that Wright's stay in Europe diminished his art like to point to the shortcomings of The Long Dream. "The Fishbelly of that book was Big Boy of 'Big Boy Leaves Home'; he was the preacher's son of 'Fire and Cloud'; and he was Bigger Thomas of Native Son--except that now he was an anachronism," says Saunders Redding. Redding's belief that Wright was unable to write creatively because he needed


to return to America has already been challenged, but his observation about The Long Dream is helpful. The characters above are not identical, as Redding would have us believe, but they are all illustrations of black youths brutally initiated into a world that denies them full growth. They are all alienated youths trying to find and assert their manhood. Unlike the other works, The Long Dream allows us the opportunity of watching this stunted psychological and social growth over a period of time. Fabre is correct in his conclusion that "the great triumph of the novel is the characterization of the relationship between father and son." The relationship is well developed and is important to the meaning of the novel. As The Long Dream progresses, we watch Fishbelly grow more and more like that father until he must seek his freedom in flight to avoid the end his father meets--violent death in a repressive society.

In "Daydreams and Nighdreams," Fishbelly Tucker learns the strangeness of the white world where blacks are considered lucky by superstitious gamblers. He is confused by the intraracial superiority his parents insist is his. Fish suffers the loneliness of feeling "lower than a snake's in Gibson, Five Black Writers, p. 10.

23Fabre, p. 469. He further contends that Tyree is the best incarnation of fatherhood in all of Wright's works, possibly the father Wright would have liked for himself. Reverend Taylor of "Fire and Cloud" is another possible contender, I would desire to add to such a theory.
belly' because he is a misfit. Confused by his friends' debate over returning to Africa, Fish is told, "Nigger, you dreaming! ... You ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing!" (p. 32). His alienation broadens beyond the racial or national when Fishbelly realizes that he and his playmates treat Aggie, the suspected homosexual, just as the whites treat blacks. Isolation is not a question of race, Fish begins to suspect. Sex is perhaps the most frightening area of Fishbelly's early initiation, since forbidden mingling with a white prostitute cost Chris, the boys' idol and a black bellhop at the local West End Hotel, his life. From Chris's death and vicious mutilation, Fish learns how whites see black people, "and what he saw evoked in him a sense of distance between him and his people that baffled and worried him" (p. 62). Fish is not sustained by the values and attitudes of the black community. He does not feel at home there. Perhaps his parents were right to insist that he remain aloof, he wonders.

Although Tyree assures Fish that his forty thousand dollars' worth of rental property will keep them above the fear that engulfs other blacks, that property ironically ruins them. Tyree and the black Dr. Bruce own a dance hall that is a center for prostitution. For ten years, they have given Gerald Cantley, the white Chief of Police, monthly checks to operate the illicit center. On the Fourth of
July, fire claims forty-two black lives in the dance hall, and the town looks to Tyree for a scape-goat. He tries to use his accumulated cancelled checks to force Cantley to help him, when the criminal negligence charges come to court. Instead Tyree loses his life. He has been wrong to assume a kinship based on common guilt with the Chief of Police. All the while, Tyree had actually been alone.

That fateful holiday brought Fishbelly an independence he was not prepared for. It "freed" him from his faithful devotion to light-skinned Gladys, his girl who dies in the fire and whom Fish had called his "dream in the daytime." The fire "freed" him from the stirrings of sympathy he had occasionally felt for his black brothers. Now he is prompted to agree with his father's words, "... when you have to do wrong to live, wrong is right." A man must create his own reality. And more importantly, as a result of the Fourth of July fire, Fish is "free" from the father whose dissimulation had earlier fooled and shamed him. At age sixteen, in a "Waking Dream" (the title of the second part of the novel), Fish is now free to become the mirror image of his murdered father. First he finds himself in conflict with both the black world he despises and the white world he fears. Wright's plot confirms Fish's perceived isolation.

Police Chief Cantley seeks to control Fish as he had Tyree before the fire. When the youth refuses to produce
the incriminating cancelled checks, he is falsely charged with attempted rape of a white girl. For more than six months, Fish is imprisoned awaiting the plaintiff's alleged recovery from a nervous collapse. After attacking an informer sent to his cell to uncover information about the checks, Fish is sentenced to serve a year and a half. One week shy of Fishbelly's eighteenth birthday, Cantley releases the boy. Fish immediately makes plans to leave Mississippi for the Paris his servicemen friends have raved about in their letters. On the plane, he meets a young Italian whose father had always called America "My Wonderful Romance." The irony is clear. Like Bigger, Fish is a "native son" in America, yet it has never been his "wonderful romance." As the novel ends, Fish mails McWilliams, his former attorney who has vowed to get to the truth of Tyree's death and Fish's unjust imprisonment, his father's cancelled checks. Fish deliberately severs all links to his horrible past. "He has fled a world that had emotionally crucified him" and is now looking for his own "wonderful romance."

The weaknesses of Wright's novel are many, but critics were too quick to cite a dated theme, ignorance of recent American race relationships, and redundancy among them. The 1955 lynching of Chicagoan Emmet Till,24

24Young Till had allegedly whistled at a white woman. Webb tells of Wright's and William Faulkner's statements to
vacationing in Money, Mississippi proved Wright's story "true" to contemporary American race relations. Wright has given flight as his protagonist's answer to the question of his rejection before, but Fishbelly's flight has new significance. With the introduction of the Italian on the plane, Wright presents flight as a further proof of the denied black's Americanism. Fish leaves to start a new life in Paris just as the original settlers left Europe to create lives free of the intolerable situations they found at home. Not national allegiance but full humanity is at issue. Fish is not crushed by exile but renewed by the human possibilities he believes now open to him in his new destination. Wright is not merely redundant, since Fish does not succumb to his isolation (as Cross Damon and Erskine Fowler do). Fish hopes to correct his isolation abroad.

Wright's work was a moderate success. Hélène Bokanowski translated The Long Dream (entitled Fishbelly) into French. Rights to the work were sold in Israel. Yet American reviewers were often harsh. A ten scene Broadway production, adapted by Ketti Frings, was killed by the critics after only five performances. Wright's theme had the French press calling the death a "legal lynching." She also cites a letter Wright sent to his Dutch translator to show the degree of his involvement with the incident. Webb, pp. 364-65.

again angered Americans, who saw only its racial significance. Again Wright's own alienation from his homeland had been strengthened by his insistence on writing the truth.

The Long Dream ends with Fishbelly literally "up in the air"; that is, aboard a plane for Paris. Despite Wright's continued efforts to move Fish into Parisian life, he had been unable to finish the book. Island of Hallucination was another attempt to make that transition. Wright had completed 514 pages of this work before he died. The story begins with Fishbelly's flight to Paris, follows him as French crooks steal half his fortune, and continues picaresque-style through a long series of adventures. Only five episodes have thus far been published, but the summaries of the other episodes given by Wright's biographers, Fabre and Webb, show that Wright meant to explore some of the intrigues of black expatriates in Paris. No doubt he meant to draw on the store of figures and events he had gained there himself. Wright's abandonment of his anti-hero to focus on a variety of figures results in "third-rate protagonists ... who deserved to live in the cowardly universe of the fifties." Not the "wonderful romance" of the pioneer, but a continual life "at best like a daydream and at

26Webb relates six attempts at a different conclusion before Wright finally settled on Aswell's suggestion that he write a sequel to The Long Dream. Webb, pp. 361-62.

27Fabre, p. 480.
the worst like an obsessive nightmare" is Fishbelly's fate in the Paris of this unpublished novel.

All of the works dealing with Fishbelly's progress are weak. A central problem is Wright's lack of tragic figures able to explore the serious concerns of human destiny and modern life. The young girls Fish meets and seduces are not fully drawn. The lawyer, Ned Harrison, is more successful as Fish's mentor and as Wright's spokesman. He often detracts from the central character's development, however, much as Max does in Native Son. Mechanical, the homosexual grandson of a hangman, is a curious figure. He is scarred by smallpox, and is a failure. Even his attempt to commit suicide by throwing himself from the top of Notre Dame is thwarted. The Fishbelly of volume two, Island of Hallucinations, turns out to be a rather unsuccessful hustler, not an alienated expatriate able to broaden Wright's theme beyond his native locale.

In his third projected volume on Fishbelly, Wright apparently planned to return Fish to Africa, marry him to Yvette, one of the French girls he met in Paris, and allow him to father a son who would have the choice of remaining in Europe or risking dehumanization in America. Wright raises the possibility of America's ability to nourish men capable of overcoming their natural isolation. He seems to defer to the future for an answer. The question of an American accepting his cultural heritage and still retaining
his humanity is left unanswered. Fishbelly's son (representative of future man) may choose to remain in Paris or go to Africa or return to America. His fate may be destructive or he may join with others seeking the meaning of a truly human life and reach a satisfying answer. Wright's minor novels had not led him to a conclusion that resolved the challenge alienation poses to modern man. Until his death, Wright seems to have wanted to believe that the alienated American could some day find that "wonderful romance" he sought at home. For Richard Wright himself, alienation seemed inevitable, no matter where he resided.
CHAPTER VII

WRIGHT'S FICTION: CONCLUSION

In the years immediately preceding his death when many of Wright's efforts were directed toward vindicating his voluntary exile in Paris and clarifying his relationship with America, Wright worked on a new collection of stories. In August, 1959 he initially planned for "Ten Men," but settled on *Eight Men.* Wright worked on an introduction that would explain the genesis of each story and give the collection a common theme. After writing eight typewritten pages on the association of ideas in his works and five manuscript pages on the genesis of "The Man Who Killed A Shadow," Wright abandoned the project. We can only look to the tales themselves for Wright's themes and purposes in this final collection of his fiction. *Eight Men* is a curious amalgam of stories and radio scripts spanning nearly twenty-five years of composition and set in three different continents. Wright dedicated his book to the Bokanowskis, "whose

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1The deleted stories were the unfinished study of the psychology of a nascent criminal, "Leader Man," and the text of *Savage Holiday,* under the title "Man and Boy." *Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright,* p. 503.
kindness has made me feel at home in an alien land."² The collection is thus valuable for some clearer understanding of Wright's controversial exile, as an indicator of the direction his fiction was taking as he died, and for a continued study of alienation in Wright's fiction.

Wright's relationship to his homeland was always a strange mixture of love and hate, pride and disappointment. In the years before his death, Wright tried to clarify his stance. Fabre tells us that Wright answers the question of his precise relationship to America in an unpublished piece, probably written in the late fifties for delivery to a French audience. Wright's reply takes the form of eighty-six answers to the question of why he is an American. Each statement begins, "I am an American, but ...." One such response continues his view of self-reliance as a value that the alienated man holds above social acceptance. Wright answers,

I am an American, but perhaps of the kind you have forgotten, self-reliant, irritated with authority, full of praise for those who stand alone, respecting the sacredness that I feel resides in the human personality.³

²Maurice Bokanowski became Minister of Communications in the De Gaulle cabinet. His wife, Hélène, was a co-translator of Native Son into French, translated The Long Dream into French, and briefly served as Ellen Wright's partner in her literary agency. Both were faithful friends who allowed the Wrights use of their country home in Normandy and lent them money on occasion. Fabre, p. 412 and Webb, Richard Wright, p. 351.

³Michel Fabre, "Wright's Exile," in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, p. 137.
This response prepares us for Wright's unique definition of what it means to be an American: "I feel that the real end and aim of being an American is to be able to live as a man anywhere." The meaning of human life and the quality of the world civilization, not a specific national citizenship, comprise Wright's definition of Americanism and his explanation for his isolation. Continuing, Wright asserts, "I am an American, but I could not dream of corrupting the human spirit by offering dollars as inducements for others following my way of life." Personal freedom and alienation remain together in Wright's definition of man, as he neared death. Eight Men, prepared by Wright before his death and issued posthumously, is a collection of stories about men like Wright who "desire a world where race, dollars, and status are not the final definitions of human life." By sharing this dream with Wright, his eight protagonists often share with him the role of an outsider yet the dignity of a man.


4 Ibid., p. 138. 5 Ibid. 6 Ibid.

revised tale focuses on the conflict an individual often has with socially defined restrictions. The original title of the story called attention to the protagonist's immaturity. He was not yet a man. The amended title suggests that in his alienation and in his insistence that he be treated like a man, seventeen year old Dave actually acquires full humanity. He is a man, though not legally "of age."

As Wright's story opens, Dave Saunders is disturbed as he walks across the fields toward home. He is black, but Dave feels out of place among the other blacks who work on Jim Hawkins' plantation. They have apparently adjusted to their constricted positions, and "can't understand nothing." Dave longs for a gun to prove his maturity, and goes to Joe's store to fantasize over the guns in the Sears Roebuck catalogue. Finding Joe eager to sell a pistol for a mere two dollars, Dave rushes home to wheedle the money from his mother. Dave's mother cannot understand why he wants a gun. She gives him the two dollars in exchange for his promise to bring the gun home for the exclusive use of his father. Instead, Dave experiences a sense of power and avoids surrendering the gun to his parents by running off to his field work the next morning at sunrise. Trying to fire the old gun, Dave accidentally shoots Jenny, Mr. Hawkins' mule, and fearfully stands by as she bleeds to death. Head down, Dave walks across the field towards home again, as he did in the opening scene. Now he is even more alone. Dave is
prepared to stand alone in a lie about the dead mule he realizes no one will believe.

Hours later, ridiculed by the crowd gathered about the dead Jenny and insulted by his parents' decision that he should pay two dollars a month for the next two years for the animal, Dave realizes a kinship with the mule. He too has been worked and beaten. Perhaps one day he would also be "accidentally" shot. "Something hot seemed to turn over inside him each time he remembered how they had laughed" (p. 20). Rather than accept Jenny's fate, "like a hungry dog snatching for a bone," Dave digs up the buried pistol. He conquers his fear of the weapon "in fields filled with silence and moonlight." Dave stiffens and forces himself to empty the gun, growing more confident with each shot. Triumphant now, Dave stands overlooking the Hawkins' house, longing for one more bullet to frighten the owner of the big white house, "... Jusa enough t let 'im know Dave Saunders is a man" (p. 21). The story ends, like Black Boy, "Big Boy Leaves Home," and The Long Dream, with the youth's flight to "somewhere where he could be a man" (p. 21). Dave's personal dignity makes him a man, though his limited experiences and achievement define his manhood as nascent, Wright's initially confusing title explains.

As the story ends, Dave convinces himself to leave his home by asserting, "Ah betcha Bill wouldn't do it!" (p. 21). Wright's ending is somewhat marred by this remark. Is
"Bill" one of the fellow blacks Dave resents as the story opens? Actually the confusion stems from the story's origin in Wright's unpublished novel, *Tarbaby's Dawn*. The hero of that work is fifteen-year old David Morrison, a worker on Jim Hawkins' plantation. Dave has a sexually experienced friend named Bill who urges him to affirm his virility. Bill's taunting causes Dave to impregnate a childhood friend, Mary, and forces him into a socially dictated marriage that destroys Dave's dream of becoming a boxing champion. To compensate for his disappointment, Dave buys a gun. In the original story, Dave escapes an unwanted wife and child as well as the debt for Jenny and laughter of the crowd when he heads North. So in referring to Bill in the conclusion, Dave is vindicating his earlier weaknesses and asserting his independence. He feels triumphant over the poverty and responsibilities that had shackled him to another man's land for life. Wright was wise to simplify his plot. Dave's "manhood" would be suspect if purchased at the cost of abandoning a wife and child. Wright's reference to Bill seems an unfortunate oversight.

Wright's story is still a successful treatment of alienation, however. It clearly moves beyond the apparent theme of racial isolation, since Dave cannot relate to the other black workers and is aloof from his father and mother. There is nothing at home to hold him. Since Dave desires to
be treated like a man, he must go off alone. His estrangement from the rural existence, his family, and the co-workers of his childhood is the price Dave must pay for that dignity. Here is Wright's recurring theme. To be a man, Dave must be alone. Alienation is part of the human condition.

The world of "The Man Who Lived Underground" seems far removed from Dave's rural South, but the protagonists are alike in their exclusion from their societies and in their insistence on their full humanity. This story is the second part of a novel rejected by Harper's, Cosmopolitan, McCall's Magazine, and the Atlantic Monthly in the early 1940's. When Edwin Seaver used Wright's story in his anthology, Cross Sections (1944), his deletion of the realistic portions of the novel that lead to Fred Daniel's underground existence produced a tale distinctly different from the original. Wright's story, reprinted in Eight Men, presents a man trapped in a sewer beneath a world devoid of meaning. His individual personality and the possibility of communication with others are denied the central figure. The story lays the groundwork for Wright's novel, The Outsider, by presenting observations on the invisibility of modern man, the irrationality of modern society, and the futility of communication. "The Man Who Lived Underground" is another study of man's alienation.
As the story opens, Wright's central figure (named Fred Daniels in the unpublished novel; anonymous in the story, except for an inconspicuous incident where he types his name on a typewriter) has eluded the police. After succumbing to police brutality and signing a false confession for the murder of his employer's neighbor, Mrs. Peabody, he has found refuge under the city. Like the protagonist of "The Man Who Was Almost A Man," he is forced to choose between escape and total surrender. Once inside the sewer, he is an outsider, beyond the limitations of race and status, capable of universal observations about meaning in the world and self-identity. On periodic trips from his seclusion to the "real world," the protagonist steals money, diamonds, tools, appliances, a typewriter, a gun and cartridge belt, and a radio. Daniels sees himself tied to the injustice of human society when a young boy is beaten and a night watchman commits suicide for his thefts. Anxious to relieve his guilt, exercise his responsibility, and "go somewhere and say something to somebody," the underground man looks for the policemen who had tortured him into confession. Wright's pessimistic conclusion shows the impossibility of any real communication. Unwilling to accept his underground experiences and unable to understand his motives for returning, the arresting police officers, Lawson, Murphy and Johnson, kill him. Man is "a whirling object ... alone in the darkness, veering, tossing lost in the heart of the earth" as
Wright's story ends (p. 74). The underground man's need to explain himself has proven self-destructive. His efforts to break out of his isolation dictate his death. The policemen who kill him explain that he would have "wrecked things."

Clearly in "The Man Who Lived Underground" Wright is concerned with questions larger than racial alienation. His underground man seeks the nature of his existence, an explanation for his strange sense of guilt, a remedy for his invisible participation in the meaningless whole around him. Until the moment of his death, he is confident that he can share his experiences. He is amazed that the policemen respond to him with a bullet. Wright presents this search in a skillful mixture of realism and surrealism. Dreamlike to the end, the action is resolved by the underground man's return to the racing underground world he had sought to escape. His journey into the "cruel sunshine" has thrust him back underground. It is not his death, but the solitude and silence of that watery world he is forced back to that make his end seem so tragic. Man's need to belong and to be understood cannot be satisfied, Wright says in this tale. His mind, body and feelings are never successfully unified, Wright suggests. Man remains an alien to the rest of society--and to himself.

Writing his agent about the hero of this story, Wright said, "It is the first time I've really tried to step beyond
the straight black-white stuff ...." Wright's unpublished novel began as an adventure story about an average black, but developed into a metaphysical commentary on human life. He has stepped a great deal beyond the racial question.

Wright's underground man is pained by the sight of those black people he watches at a church service "groveling and begging for something they could never get" (p. 26). He considers this racial and religious scene "abysmally obscene." The underground man later watches a crowd in a movie theater "laughing at their lives" pictured on the screen, and concludes, "Yes, these people were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying" (p. 31).

During his adventures underground, the outsider feels himself closer to the "dim meaning" and "marginal relationship" that draw him to the dead baby and nude corpse he encounters than to the social gatherings he spies on. When he is compelled to leave his hide-out and return to the "cruel sunshine," the underground man feels trapped. The confused

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9 On October 27, 1942 Wright sent a letter to the governor of California requesting information on Herbert C. Wright, a thief who had entered various Hollywood stores by digging a tunnel connected to the basements and backs of the stores. Wright had read of this San Quentin prisoner, convicted on three charges of robbery, in True Detective. The story about an actual man who shared Wright's surname but was not related to him, rather than Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, seems to have been Wright's primary source for inspiration.
policemen, trying to protect themselves, burn his confession and pronounce him free. Wright's story leads us to conclude that man, relieved of the limitations of his specific culture, existing on a plane outside of race and religion, is never free of the demand to accept his humanity and its incumbent alienation.

The next story of the collection was conceived while Wright was on tour lecturing in Scandinavia in 1956. The tale was never published before its appearance in *Eight Men*. It is not a significant achievement, overall. Wright is not studying the nature of man here. Wright's shift from stern seriousness to ironic humor in this story is significant, however. Perhaps this new tone signalled a new attitude toward man's isolation in Wright's fiction. Again the man of the title is black and misunderstood, but Wright makes no real effort to present his full humanity. The entire story turns on a misunderstanding fostered by racial stereotyping and a sense of personal inadequacy. It lacks the depth of Wright's usual alienation theme.

As the story opens, Olaf Jensen approaches his sixtieth birthday satisfied with his wife, Karen, his home, his gardens, and his job as a night porter in a Copenhagen hotel. Olaf speaks eight languages, has spent ten years in New York, and feels good about the tenants whom he considers his children. He has a special fondness for sailors, whose simplicity and directness in their desires for women and
whisky remind him of Olaf's own youth. Although he believes himself beyond racial prejudice, Olaf is perplexed when a man "too big, too black, too loud, too direct, and probably too violent to boot" comes into the hotel one night seeking a room. The man's size and color insult and confuse Olaf. He feels strangely ashamed of his weakness when he fearfully agrees to rent the black American sailor a room. Olaf is further incensed when the sailor matter-of-factly gives him $2,600 to keep for him and asks for a bottle of whisky and a woman. Irrationally, Olaf finds himself unable to accept the humanity of this big, black man. "God oughtn't to make men as black and big as that," Olaf concludes (p. 80).

Olaf's intense reactions to the sailor are all the more painful because he cannot share them. Despite his opening assessment of the acquisitions and achievements of his sixty years, Olaf has not overcome his isolation in the world. Lena, the white prostitute he calls for the black man, is indignant at Olaf's sudden interest in the intimacies of the arrangement. She has four small children to feed and clothe. The sailor's size and color are as incidental to her as Olaf's fears are insignificant. The owner of the hotel, Olaf's employer, is not interested in his feelings. Her only concern is that Olaf secure the rent from her clients, he angrily recalls. Olaf's wife is no comfort now. He has deliberately kept Karen ignorant of the sordid realities of his job. Olaf is alone to deal with his confusion
about the new tenant. The confidence and ease of the man's speech lead Olaf to conclude, "He thinks he's God," and to feel his own masculinity threatened. On his final night at the hotel, when the roomer orders Olaf to stand up and lifts his hands to the porter's throat, Olaf believes himself "trapped in a nightmare." Instead of the death he fears, Olaf finds a shaming release in the giant's mocking assurance, "I wouldn't hurt you, boy. So long" (p. 84).

A year of self-recrimination and vengeful fantasies passes before the black sailor again appears at Olaf's desk and reaches for his throat again. He grabs the porter before Olaf can reach for the gun in his desk drawer. When Olaf finds that the hands circling his throat are simply double-checking the old man's neck measurements and that the seaman has brought him six nylon shirts to repay the "kindnesses" rendered a year ago, Olaf is drained of emotion. He weakly announces the seaman a "big black good man," and is told in return, "Daddy-O, you're crazy."

The irony of Wright's story is clear if unimpressive. Olaf's hidden prejudices cause him shame, fear for his life, a diminished self-image, and unwarranted dread. Though he has always considered his roomers his children, the black American shows us Olaf's childish fears and naive notions about humanity. Despite the age and color differences, it is Olaf who is referred to as "boy" throughout the story.
There are problems in Wright's story. The unidenti­fied seaman is presented from Olaf's point of view, so we know him only as a "black giant." The "big black cloud of a man" looms over Olaf's life for a year as frighteningly as white clouds so often loom over Wright's black fictional characters. Expecting the worst, we are as prepared as Olaf to attribute some unprovoked hostility and violence to this massive figure. Instead, his disclosure that he and Lena have corresponded during the past year, his unexpected--and unwarranted--gifts to Olaf, and his habit of calling Olaf "Daddy-O" are as confusing to us as they are to the Dane. The common humanity of the two is asserted but never demonstrated in the story. Only the irrationality of Olaf's de­humanizing the seaman on the basis of his size and color is clear. Wright misses the chance to explore the nature of their shared humanity.

A major weakness of the story is echoed in Wright's title, "Big Black Good Man." The "goodness" of the sailor is not proven in his gift of nylon shirts to Olaf or in his alleged relationship with the prostitute, Lena. The seaman tells the surprised Olaf that he too is a good man. That the old porter is "good" remains to be proven--if indeed it matters. Wright is assuming a basic worth in the porter that his encounter with the sailor reveals, but the black man's success is only assumed. The sailor has achieved the fearful respect the first young hero of Eight Men, Dave
Saunders, wanted from his plantation owner, but he achieves no more communication with Olaf than Wright's underground man finds with the policemen. The seaman has apparently achieved full humanity without that acceptance and communication Wright's outsiders relentlessly seek. His success is a suspicious one, given Wright's usual premises about man's natural alienation. Perhaps the key to the weaknesses of Wright's story is in his failure to go deeply enough into Olaf and the sailor.

Barely more successful is the next story of the collection, "The Man Who Saw The Flood," written in 1936-37 as "Silt." Wright's story of a black sharecropper ruined by a sudden flood first appeared in an August 24, 1937, issue of New Masses. The tale of a man left with the prospect of starting over from nothing, though already deeply in debt to the white landowner, is simple and poignant. Wright's intent is more challenging. The problem is that Tom's passive acceptance of his hopelessness, his poverty, and his daughter's hunger is so vivid that he both engages our sympathies and inspires our incisive criticism of Tom's behavior. Just as the pressure of Tom's shoulder is needed before the mud-caked front opens; just as the pump is still until Tom throws his weight on it; some active response is needed to change his pitiful fate, Wright seems to imply. Tom is not at all like Mann, Wright's courageous flood victim in "Down by the Riverside," and the comparison seems to be an
indictment. Realizing that Burgess, the white landlord, will soon own him and his family "body n soul" and that others have at least tried to leave the flood-stricken area to make a new start, Tom still allows himself to sink further into the surrounding silt. Perhaps Wright's vignette simply points to the pathetic plight of the Southern sharecroppers he once knew. Caught between natural and man-made forces beyond their powers, they were pitiful figures Wright never forgot. We must wonder, however, if a "man" would accept as inevitable a "flood" he sees approaching and does nothing to thwart. Tom's preparations for the hard work ahead are ennobling, perhaps, but his strength and endurance seem tragically misdirected. Wright seems as uncomfortable with this character as he was in life with the sharecroppers, like his own father, he knew but never felt close to. None of them seemed real or very important to Wright. It may well be that Wright simply wants us to see the surrendered freedom and pitiful existence of Tom as a warning to modern man of the dangers of surrendering to dehumanization. The tale is moving, but not entirely successful.

The next two stories in Eight Men are surprising examples of Wright's final efforts at fiction primarily because of his intended use for the tales. According to Wright's friend, journalist and cartoonist, Ollie
Harrington, the stories were written for a German radio network.\textsuperscript{10} Apparently this fact escaped many of Wright's critics. James Baldwin praised the new direction he presumed Wright was taking, when he reviewed the stories.\textsuperscript{11} Margolies questions Wright's exclusive use of the dialogue form and qualifies the degree of success Wright achieved because of it.\textsuperscript{12} Realizing their intended presentation over the air, we need spend no time puzzling over Wright's dialogue form. We can evaluate the characterizations and plot instead.

The first of the two scripts, "Man Of All Work," does indeed have a tone unlike that of most Wright fiction. The tale has been compared to British Restoration comedy,\textsuperscript{13} and the comparison seems apt. Wright's often strident response

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\textsuperscript{10}Ollie Harrington, "The Last Days of Richard Wright," Ebony, XV (February 1961), 94.
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\textsuperscript{11}James Baldwin says that "Man Of All Work" is a masterpiece proving that Wright "was acquiring a new tone, and a less uncertain esthetic distance, and a new depth" in his fiction as he neared death. He is similarly pleased with "Man, God Ain't Like That." Notes of a Native Son, p. 31 and Nobody Knows My Name, pp. 182-83.
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\textsuperscript{12}Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, p. 83. Like Baldwin, apparently ignorant of Wright's purposes in writing the scripts, Margolies suggests that Wright may have been trying to copy Gertrude Stein's style in his reliance on the dialogue form. He bemoans our loss of Wright's "vibrant rhythms and vivid lyric imagery." His conclusion is that the stories are "only occasionally successful."
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to the demoralization suffered by the black family in America here takes on the muted tone of ironic humor. There is a comedy of situation in the action. The black protagonist, Carl, is not Wright's usually alienated man, but a loving though desperate family man with a young son, bedridden wife and one-week old infant daughter. As the story opens, Carl and his wife share the miracle of a new life with their son, Henry. Their hearts are heavy with the imminent loss of their home, though they are only two payments from owning it, however. Unlike Tom who watches the flood and prepares to accept defeat in "The Man Who Saw The Flood," Carl vows somehow to keep his home. His boss has closed the restaurant where Carl had worked as a cook, and the want ads are full of domestic jobs for women but nothing for a cook. So Carl considers answering an ad for a cook and housekeeper in his wife's clothing. Fearing his imprisonment, Lucy pleads with her husband to forget his crazy scheme. Unable to succumb to his wife's fears, Carl goes off to answer the ad.

With admirable subtlety Wright has succeeded in presenting society's role in the fragmentation of the black family. Carl and Lucy are a loving couple. They have a warm relationship with their children. Carl's potentially useless training as a cook, the black man's invisibility in American society, and the durability of racial stereotypes are the real threats to their marriage and family life.
At the home of the Fairchilds, only the young daughter, Lily, sees Carl's strength and admires him because of it. He is right to presume that his disguise as his wife would work. Mrs. Fairchild sees only a barely human domestic before whom she unashamedly displays her nakedness, reveals her petty vanity, and discusses her husband's moral weakness, when she looks at Carl. Dave Fairchild sees only another presumably promiscuous servant to be used for his diversion. Like the Daltons of Native Son, the Fairchilds do not even see the black man in their midst. They certainly do not acknowledge any common humanity that presumes respect for and acceptance of Carl.

Within hours of his arrival to answer their ad, Carl (still disguised as his wife, Lucy) realizes that he is expected to do even more than clean, babysit, do the laundry, and prepare meals for his fifty dollars a week. After futile attempts at tact, evasion, feigned innocence, and threats of physical retaliation, Carl succeeds in stalling his employer's advances only to find the enraged Anne Fairchild standing before him and her husband with a loaded gun. Frustrated with Dave's continued infidelity, Anne shoots the new maid. Masterfully Wright underscores the Fairchilds' inhumanity to the wounded domestic by presenting their guilt-ridden, panic-stricken actions in sympathetic detail. Anne and Dave berate themselves and each other. They scheme to protect themselves from scandal. Finally they agree to
call in their friend, Dr. Stallman, also Anne's brother-in-law. Never once do the Fairchilds think to see how badly Carl has been hurt. They do nothing to alleviate "her" pain. When Dr. Stallman arrives and diagnoses the injury as a minor flesh wound to the thigh, complicated only by the needless loss of blood the Fairchilds have occasioned, Wright's point of their inhumanity is clear.

Dr. Stallman learns of Carl's sex when he examines the gunshot wound. He arranges for a deal to save the Fairchild name. In return for the two hundred dollars needed to save his house and for payment of Carl's medical bills, Carl signs a release that saves Anne from prosecution and bad publicity. When Carl returns home injured but triumphant that he has managed to save the house by his "day's work," Wright's ironic themes emerge well developed. The Fairchilds' home, infected as it is by guilt, fear of scandal, recriminations and corruption, has been demonstrated far inferior to the black home filled with love and concern. Though tormented and brutalized, Carl and Lucy have shown themselves more "human" than Carl's brief employers. Since even the fair-minded Dr. Stallman still calls Carl "boy" as the story ends, the black family has not really "won" their fight for acceptance. Carl gives tearful testimony to the strength needed to be a woman in this society. Obviously his day shows it is no easy job for a man, either. Wright's tale discloses the total loss all suffer when another's humanity is ignored.
Wright's story touches upon the alienation theme only briefly. Most of Wright's emphasis is on racial inequality. Still, the Fairchilds, unable to treat blacks as equals and pitifully unaware of their prejudices and fears, are tragically alienated from their own humanity. Although they have material wealth and physical comforts, their life is not an enviable one. This fate is the one Wright often warns modern man of in his writings. Ironically, the Fairchilds are "free" from social reprisal, free to wallow together in their own corruption, free to enjoy the status of Dave's bank position, but not free to be truly human. The family of the black cook dissolves into tears of joy mixed with tears of frustration over the difficulty of being truly free as "Man Of All Work" ends.

The next story in Wright's final collection of fiction, "Man, God Ain't Like That," is even more ambitious. Wright extends his new comic irony to an international scene and into the heated area of religious exploitation. The scene is now Africa. The theme is the culturally destructive effects of missionary Christianity and the ultimate retribution demanded when Western society asserts its sense of superiority over other cultures. The story opens as John Franklin, an American painter driving along the wet, slippery paths of the jungle, accidentally runs down a native. Convinced that, "You can't hurt these baboons," John and his wife stop to help the young native. The Franklins are not
really worried about the young man. They simply wish to avoid legal difficulties with a foreign government. Babu, the injured native, is indeed hurt. After ten stitches have been taken to close a scalp wound suffered in the auto accident, Babu is easily convinced to stay on with the Franklins. They are eager to escape reporting the incident to the authorities. Babu is homeless and in need of a job. Thus the arrangement seems to have been a stroke of good luck for all. The Franklins' motives for retaining Babu are damaging, however. John is in Africa with his wife only because she wants to protect their relationship from another woman. The two are temporarily united in their superior attitude toward Babu. They are frank in their enjoyment of Babu's primitive religion, guileless faith in a partially assimilated Christianity, and total loyalty to them.

Inspired by the beauty of Africa, John produces forty paintings and prepares to return to Paris for an exhibition of his new work. John is amused that Babu prayerfully accepts his offer to return to Paris with them. John favors the idea because he considers his "jungle pet" a good conversation piece and useful as an inexpensive servant. During the confusion of moving their belongings and paintings to Paris, Babu becomes lost. The situation seems important only days later, when the human bones of the young native's father are discovered in Babu's suitcase. Finally, Babu returns to the Franklins' dressed in Western attire and
announcing his conversion to Christianity. He frightens John with his discovery of a picture John had once posed for dressed to represent Jesus Christ. Babu is adamant that he has found the real God in John and that he now understands that he must pass the test before God will reward his black people with the comforts He has given the white man. "Babu want to wash in the blood of the lamb and be whiter than snow," we hear as the native begins the gruesome beheading of John that Babu believes will produce salvation for his people (p. 154).

Not alienation, but the black man's ironic repudiation of his forced isolation is Wright's theme in this story. Although the Parisian police never believe Babu's confession and five years later are still theorizing that Franklin's spurned mistress should be apprehended, they are correct when they remark, "By God, it's never too late to bring a guilty person to justice" (p. 156). Earlier in the story, John had laughingly remarked, "We've got the white man's burden" (p. 136). Wright's story presents this burden as one heavy enough to demand John's life for full retribution. He dies before he can reap any benefits from his exploitation of Africa. John dies barely mindful of the cost he has had to pay for encouraging Babu to believe him a god. The suffering of John's wife, mistress, and the general society is commensurate with the degree of their complicity in the exploitation. Babu, on the other hand, cannot believe that a
true, just God means for his people to live so poorly in a world of immense wealth. Theorizing that the mockery and pain he suffers at the Franklins' was somehow his own fault, Babu returns confident that he is a man now, capable of passing any test needed to determine his own and his people's ultimate worth. Babu's eagerness to reject his own culture and his pride in being a Christian seem deliberately pathetic, but the native's final stance is ironically triumphant. In his insistence on self-determination, Babu has vindicated his humanity. He has killed his exploiter without moral or legal repercussions. Babu is no longer a homeless wanderer but a purposeful leader of his people back in Africa, when the story closes five years after the beheading.

"Man, God Ain't Like That" contains some striking parallels with Native Son and The Outsider. The assumption of the protagonist's inability to commit the murder, the bestial imagery insisted upon whenever he is described, the vindication of self through murder Babu achieves, and the nefarious influences of Christianity are all common to the three works of fiction. In his nonfiction as well, Wright continued this study of the debilitating effects of colonization on both the oppressed and the assumed conquerors.

14Fabre's account of Wright's reading of French psychiatrist, Octave Mannoni's Prospero and Caliban, a study of the psychology of oppressed people, and of Wright's review of this work for The Nation suggests interesting links between this story, The Outsider and White Man, Listen! as well. Wright's theory of the "tragic elites" is common to all. Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, pp. 434-35.
Thus this story links an apparently new approach in fiction to Wright's persistent concerns for man's growing loss of his humanity in modern civilization. It further proves that Wright's concern with alienation as he approached his death had broadened and deepened from the American racial question he exposes in his most popular works to a global concern for the quality of human life.

"The Man Who Killed A Shadow," first published in 1946 as L'homme qui tua une ombre, is like much of Wright's violent, defiant fiction of the decade that produced Native Son. Alienation is central to the story this time. The protagonist, Saul Saunders, was born in a Southern town near the nation's capital, we learn as the story opens. He is introduced as a boy "used, in a fearful sort of way, to living with shadows" (p. 157). Yet, like Bigger Thomas and Wright himself, Saul was "a million miles removed" from America's white world, when he was a boy. Saul's parents, five brothers, two sisters, and grandmother died or are otherwise estranged from him. He is alone. Although a conformist who likes being accepted, Saul has difficulties accepting the inferior image of himself most blacks expect. He lives motivated by fear and often escapes into a dream world. After dismissal for asserting himself from past jobs as a chauffeur-butler and an exterminator, Saul finds work in the National Cathedral, a church and religious institution. Ironically, it is here that the sexual fantasies of a
forty-year old virgin librarian, a "strange little shadow woman," cause Saul to brutally murder her. As in Native Son, a dream-like aura pervades the story from the murder scene to the conclusion. Saul never intends to kill the librarian. There has been no sexual assault, Wright cleverly tells us in the postscript that ends the tale. Instead, Saul's reaction to the woman's sexual effrontery and verbal abuse is apparently the result of years of suppression. Earlier at the exterminating job, Saul had enjoyed killing with the sanction of society. Now, faced with this strange little woman, Saul kills instinctively.

Saul's early retreat into "an incomprehensible nothingness" to escape his aloneness is intact after the murder. Despite the opening narration which says that he has lived to kill one of the shadows of his constant fears, there is never any real triumph in Wright's story. No attempt is made to vindicate Saul's wasted life, as Wright does in Native Son in Bigger's flawed rebirth. Instead Saul surrenders to the world of shadows and finds a surprising degree of peace in that surrender. He is scheduled to die for Maybelle Eva Houseman's death, but we can feel neither anger nor sorrow, as the tale ends. Without purpose and self-knowledge, Saul has never lived. He cannot really be put to death, then. He merely merges into his "shadow world," leaving a vague warning behind to those who deny a man the right to full existence and cause him to suppress his anger.
Wright's story is a comment on the danger unrelieved alienation poses. This warning is better stated in *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday*.

Wright's last collection of fiction ends with "The Man Who Went To Chicago," published earlier as "Early Days in Chicago." This final piece is a composite of autobiographical sketches showing the alienation of the young Richard Wright. His experiences with the Jewish storekeepers underscore his sense of being an alien, although a citizen by birth. He questions the foreigners' ability to own a store and earn a living in a neighborhood where he cannot even live. In a memorable passage, the narrator reflects on the human loss racial discrimination occasions:

> And when I contemplated the area of No Man's Land into which the Negro mind in America had been shunted I wondered if there had ever been in all human history a more corroding and devastating attack upon the personalities of men than the idea of racial discrimination... I would have agreed to live under a system of feudal oppression... because I felt that feudalism made use of a limited part of a man, defined man.... I would have consented to live under the most rigid type of dictatorship, for I felt that dictatorships, too, defined the use of men, however degrading that use might be (p. 173).

His conclusion is that the kind of life that violates humanity by ignoring and isolating man is the most despicable.

The young man in Chicago considers the isolation from self that social restrictions occasion. He begins to see a pattern of isolation and rebellion that Wright would one day extend to 20th-century man. Next the young man takes on a job as a dishwasher in a North Side cafe. Here he
struggles with himself and joins with the Negro girl hired to make salads to report Tillie, the Finnish cook they discover spitting into the food. He wonders later, after Tillie has been fired, if "a Negro who did not smile and grin was as morally loathsome to whites as a cook who spat into the food" (p. 184). Such incidents make the young man assume alienation is his fate as a black man in America. He is inclined to believe that the answer is not so simple, from the beginning, however. The young white girls at the cafe try to treat him as an equal. It is their shallow lives not his color that estrange him from them. "They lived on the surface of their days; their smiles were surface smiles, and their tears were surface tears" (p. 179). His isolation seems tied to his insistence on a full, deep level of existence. His alienation goes beyond his racial identity, he concludes. "I knew that not race alone, not color alone, but the daily values that gave meaning to life stood between me and those white girls with whom I worked" (p. 180).

Selling insurance policies to ignorant blacks the following summer reminds him that race alone is no assurance of acceptance or kinship. The fearful, broken lives he touches only further convince him that his own life means nothing in the scheme of things. His tortured affair with a black girl who asked only that he pay her ten-cent premium each week and one day take her to a circus reinforces the young man's
questions about the meaning of life. In another incident, he recalls his days at the relief station. He is struck by the collective strength potentially present in the united oppressed. The relief officials seem unaware of the men whose lives they manipulate and unappreciative of their potential. The young man is convinced that America's future is somehow tied to the reactions of such trapped men to their fate.

"The Man Who Went To Chicago" ends with the incident of the ruined research experiment that the black hospital worker witnesses but does not report. To protect their jobs at the hospital, the four black workers agree to replace the test animals using pure guesswork. Since the switched animals are never detected, the young orderly rationalizes that his alien status puts him under no obligation to the hospital. "Though we worked in the institute, we were as remote from the meaning of the experiments as if we lived in the moon" (p. 201). Eight Men closes on this frightening note. The alienation experienced by the young man may well have been costly to all of society. Throughout the final incidents of the collection, the responses of the alienated figure are damaging to others as well as to himself. The damage felt by those responsible for his

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15This is the same incident narrated in "What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You," Harper's Magazine, No. 186 (December, 1942), 58-61. Wright's title ironically makes his point.
oppression or denial, those who fail to alleviate his isolation to the extent that society can help, or those who fail to acknowledge any meaning in his life is at least as great as his own. In this last work, Chicago (and Chicagoans) has failed miserably at fulfilling the hopes of the Southern migrant. More than ever in the North, he feels unwanted and isolated. Always his dehumanization diminishes the quality of human life for all involved, whether they are aware of it or not.

*Eight Men* is a fitting conclusion to the artistry and power of Richard Wright's fictional efforts. His characters can be vague and undeveloped, like young Dave, "...Who Was Almost A Man," or strong and vibrant like Carl, the "Man Of All Work." Wright's settings are the familiar South of his youth, the squalid North of his early adulthood, the exotic jungles of his unremembered past, or the Europe of his cultural heritage. With brutal realism or haunting surrealism, Wright portrays men in search of their dignity and life's meaning. Perhaps the ironic humor found in Wright's radio scripts suggests Wright's growing ability to penetrate man's weaknesses and frustrations with less personal agony as he neared death. Perhaps they point to a detachment gained from having found some of the answers to life's meaning for himself that his characters still sought.

We have been denied the fiction of an older, hopefully more tranquil Richard Wright. We will never know if the
stridency and passion of his earlier fiction would have given way to the irony and humor of his last works. Perhaps Wright would have continued to create figures whose struggles against their world and their own need to be accepted in a complex, confused society seem continually futile. Perhaps he would have moved to a comforting Christianity, unlike the oppressive Adventism of his childhood, that promises final resolution of man's isolation without demanding self-hatred. We do know that the world events since Wright's death have proved his fears for mankind correct; occasionally, even understated. We have not yet resolved the dilemma of preserving the individual while pursuing global ends. America has not yet found comfortable ways to fulfill her pledge of liberty and justice for all. Societies have not yet learned to truly accept cultures different from their own. Modern man is still alone, fearful of his destructive power, yet hopeful of his creative potential. The fiction of Richard Wright speaks clearly to those of us who believe these challenges possible; these goals crucial to future humanity.
In *Native Son* Wright introduces subjects that he explores in his nonfiction: the Negro in America as a metaphor for modern man, the psychology of the oppressed, the future survival of the world. These subjects are all complicated by the alienation Wright believed inherent in humanity. Wright's first extended work of nonfiction, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), develops the theme of the black American viewed as a metaphor for modern man. When he agreed to write the commentary for Edwin Rosskam's illustrated work on black Americans, Wright had just decided to put *Native Son* on the stage. His energies were committed to that project, and he envisioned this new idea as a relatively brief and simple task. On the contrary, Wright's "folk history of Negro Americans" led him to Chicago and Washington for materials, and took him to sociologist, Louis Wirth and to Horace Cayton (then working on his study of Chicago's South Side, *Black Metropolis* [1945]) for consultation.

Wright's fully researched, broadly Marxist account of Negro-American history moves from the early slave period to the Southern rural experience to the vast migrations to the industrialized North during and after World War I. In poetic prose indicative of admirable control, Wright uses the present tense and a first-person plural point of view to demonstrate the possibilities outlined in his earlier essay,
"Blueprint for Negro Writing." Wright had said that his plan would allow black writers to feel "the meaning of the history of their race as though they in one time had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries." Wright's selected point of view thus seems to be intended as an aid to the artist in overcoming his sense of isolation.

Although not really starting with Marxism to expose the skeleton of society and then "planting flesh upon those bones out of his will to live," as his "Blueprint" demanded, Wright is following his own dictates to black writers when he traces the black man's three-hundred-year history in America and presents the metaphor to the country as an object lesson. However, he starts instead with the racial schism in this country. Thus Wright presents the black race's alienation as a more complex phenomenon than a simple class struggle involving economic exploitation. Wright's efforts to probe into the isolation of his race allowed him to see beyond color, beyond the Marxist explanations to the human issues facing modern man. Million Black Voices is Wright's last extended work favorably using Marxist materials. Like Lawd Today and Native Son before it, the book reveals Wright's political-philosophical dilemma. He wanted

3 Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," New Challenge, II (Fall, 1937), 53-65.

4 Ibid., p. 63.
to use the tenets of the Party that offered him refuge from his own isolation, but Wright's instincts caused him to see the black American's problems as a specifically racial, then a social concern. The class struggle outlined by the strict Marxist dialectic did not seem to accommodate the racial experience of Wright's own life. The problem would not get any easier for Wright. Already in the early '40's, his position in the Party was on the verge of collapse. Soon he would have reason to doubt that his shared experience of rejection and isolation was a racial question any more than he could perceive of it as a class struggle. Soon he would have to admit that Communism could not shelter him from his own alienation.

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright's text completes the moving photographs selected from the files of the Farm Security Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture. The pictures are striking and pathetic. Often a lone figure stands trance-like eclipsed by a decaying landscape. Hopelessness and unconsciousness dominate even the youngest faces. It is to Wright's credit that he uses his commentary with such restraint, allowing the pictures to speak eloquently for themselves.

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5Wright was responsible for a photograph showing a "For Rent" sign in the window of a Chicago slum building, Fabre adds. All the others were Rosskam's selections. Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest*, p. 234.
The book opens with a section entitled "Our Strange Birth." Here the early history of the slave trade and Wright’s view of the black man’s strangeness begins. Mysteriously Wright begins, "... our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem." Wright cites man’s interest in overcoming nature and controlling natural resources in his description of European enslavers escaping from "fetid medieval dens, ... doffing the buried sheets of feudal religion, and flushed with a new and noble concept of life, of its inherent dignity, of its unlimited possibilities." Thus Wright depicts the motives of the slave holders as an effort originally intended to fulfill their human potential. Merely suggesting the inhumanity of their methods, Wright moves away from the early slave holders into the eighteenth century and beyond. Wright discusses America’s division into a world of machines and a world of slaves. This division results in a hierarchy where the "Bosses of the Buildings" (bankers and owners of industry) and the "Lords of the Land" (operators of the plantations who held the political and financial power of the Old South) govern the poor dispossessed white and black workers. Rosskam’s photographs and Wright’s sparse commentary emphasize the isolation and exploitation suffered by these poor labor groups in part two, "Inheritors of Slavery."

Wright moves on to trace the South's movement from a feudal society into a capitalistic one. The Southern rural experience depicted here in vivid photographs and emotional prose is not at all unlike that feudal by-product society given fictional representation in "Silt" or "Long Black Song." Wright moves on to the massive Negro migrations up to the industrialized North. "From 1890 to 1920 more than 2,000,000 left the land," Wright explains (p. 89). Perhaps recalling his own attitudes about fleeing the rejection of the South, he cites a popular jingle chanted by black migrants. "We'd rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the President of Dixie" (p. 88).

As Wright demonstrates in Lawd Today and Native Son, the black man did not find this desired freedom from isolation in the urban North. Instead, part three reveals "Death on the City Pavements." The same living death experienced by Jake Johnson, Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon, and their young creator himself is vividly presented in this part of Wright's work. To extend the focus beyond the racial conflict to the theme of all American's vulnerability before capitalistic dehumanization, Wright uses metaphors of violence and warfare. After battling to "invade" a white neighborhood in the North, Wright relates, "... we black folk gain a precarious foothold in the industries of the North.... Life for us is constant warfare and... we live hard, like soldiers... our kitchenettes comprise our
barracks; the color of our skin constitutes our uniforms; the streets of our cities are our trenches; a job is a pill box to be captured and held" (pp. 122-23). Since "The Bosses of the Buildings are the generals who decree the advance or retreat" and since "the majority of black and white... live under the spell wrought by the Bosses of the Buildings," Wright's battle metaphor describes the whole urban society. Modern man, not merely black Americans, is endangered by capitalism and its resulting dehumanization. Although the work ends with "Men in the Making," a testimony to some progress blacks have made towards a future of struggle to remain whole and fully human, *12 Million Black Voices* is another ominous warning to modern society by the creator of the frightening Bigger Thomas, only recently introduced to the American mind.

Whether history, sociology, literature or propaganda, *12 Million Black Voices* is a notable achievement. Wright's beautifully lyrical prose reminds us of his poetic efforts at the beginning and end of his life. His work with sociologists and with economic data helps to militate against attacks that his brutal realism is exaggerated or is an uncontrolled response to his own miserable youth. Wright's Marxist orientation is neither overwhelming nor deleterious to his insights. His presentation of the psychology of the oppressed, peasant or urban dweller, foreshadows his later interest in oppressed people around the world, a common
concern of Wright's nonfiction. Still *Million Black
Voices* is not entirely successful in its exploration of the
common dilemma black and white Americans share in their
fight against personal and social alienation. Race loomed
too heavy in Wright's mind in 1941.

Throughout the '40's and early '50's Wright's fiction
shows us his tendency to perceive man's alienation in racial
terms. He was never quite convinced that race was the cru-
cial area of human life it seemed to be in America, we re-
call. Since his friend, George Padmore, political adviser
to Kwame Nkrumah, constantly encouraged it, Wright began to
think seriously of an "exploration" to the continent of his
racial past. The dialogue he gives to his young characters
in *The Long Dream* may well reflect some of Wright's own mis-
givings about his proposed visit to the African Gold Coast
in the summer of 1953.

"Fish, you want to go to Africa?"
"Hunh? To Africa?" Fish asked, "What for?" ...
"Now, just stand there and tell me what is you?" ...
"I'm black and I live in America and my folks came from
Africa," Fishbelly summed up his background. "That's
all I know."7

Determined to know more than his fictional character,
Wright decided to take his friend's advice. The West Afri-
can colony under Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party
was in the midst of securing political independence when
Wright set sail. In "Apropos Prepossessions," Wright's

introductory chapter to Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos, he tells us of his goals in this first travel book. Wright published his account to expose the African view of the "hard and inhuman face" of the West and to allow Westerners insight into Africa's future, Wright says. Yet traveling through the bush country between Takoradi, Accra and Kumasi as a Western man from Mississippi, Chicago, New York and Paris, Wright experienced the frustrations of his fictional young black nationalist:

You can't live like no American, 'cause you ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing! Just Nothing!\footnote{The Long Dream, p. 32.}

From the extremely personal perspective of a search for his own identity, Wright tries to record the challenge to both British oppressor and African oppressed he finds in the Gold Coast's impending independence.

Unfortunately Wright's search for his identity only increased the burden of his Western faith in rationality that he carried to Africa with him. Added to these personal weights was the massive array of 1500 photographs, the suitcase of books, the newspapers and the government documents he returned with some ten weeks later. The result is a work of divergent purposes and conclusions. Wright's sources

were equally varied. His impressions came from visits and speaking engagements with Prime Minister Nkrumah himself, tours of the streets of Accra and the surrounding villages, interviews with native Africans and tribal chieftains, conversations with Nkrumah's opponents among the black intelligentsia, and from Wright's dealings with British missionaries and officials. Wright's method of recounting his journey varies as well. He paints pictures of his observations. He uses dialogue to record conversations. He offers statistical charts. He draws upon the texts he brought with him for historical data. The resulting account is a fascinating if financially unsuccessful study of alienation in the context of the emerging nation of Ghana.

Wright is highly critical of the poverty, enslaved religiosity, filth, and primitive behavior he found on the Gold Coast. He is angered by the black bourgeoisie and the minor officials who identify with their British oppressor. No doubt Wright was thinking of these figures, similar to the black middle class in America, when he had Sam, the youngster in The Long Dream who criticizes the racial attitudes of the protagonist, say bitingly, "A nigger's a black man who doesn't know who he is" (p. 30). Perhaps this imitator of the governing class was still in Wright's mind when he had the native of his radio script exclaim, "Babu no wear African clothes now. Babu Christian." 10 Wright objected

10 Wright, "Man, God Ain't Like That," Eight Men, p. 149.
to the oppressed's attempt to escape their isolation by retreating into the culture of the oppressor. He feared such a retreat might cause an even more dangerous estrangement--alienation from oneself. He preferred to think man must fight for the freedom to be different. Paradoxically, Wright does not allow these natives that freedom.

The detribalized natives, living in cities and villages, caught somewhere between their tribal pasts and their present environment, yet excluded from Western advances and promises for the future, are only too familiar to Wright. Ashamed of their past, confused by missionary Christianity, yet tied to primitive religion and to backward practices, these men are aliens in their own land. The psychological fragmentation of these outsiders and the possibilities that exist for allowing them psychological unity is Wright's underlying concern in Black Power.

Wright had originally planned to reorganize his daily journal of the customs, superstitions, and activities of the Gold Coast dwellers into a book to be called "O, My People!" but he discovered that a shared skin color and a bond of white oppression was not enough to make the Africans his people. Africa turned out to be a foreign continent, whose customs and emotions disconcerted, even further

Fabre tells us of an August 25, 1953 letter Wright sent to his agent, Paul Reynolds, with this information. Fabre, p. 399.
estranged Wright. He found out that he was incurably American and Western. In a real sense, this frightening and painful experience cost Wright his life, since his fatal heart attack was complicated, perhaps initiated, by the recurring amoebic dysentery Wright contracted on his trip to the Gold Coast.

Leaving Africa for Europe, Wright wrote a public letter to Prime Minister Nkrumah (Black Power, pp. 342-49) revealing his optimism about the future of black African nationalism and his perception of Africans as alienated men. He cautions Nkrumah to demand freedom of thought. "You've got to find your own paths, your own values.... Above all, feel free to improvise!" Having published The Outsider just months before the trip, Wright is distrustful of those who aspire to power. Wright asks the Prime Minister to take care that he militarize African life for the right reasons: "not for war, but for peace; not for destruction, but for service; not for aggression, but for production; not for despotism, but to free minds from mumbo-jumbo." Wright is hopeful that Nkrumah and the Gold Coast natives can achieve

12In Takoradi, the industrial capital of the country, Wright was nearly stabbed by a drunk while photographing a funeral procession. According to his biographer, Wright experienced several other incidents during his brief stay in Africa supporting his fear of the pagan practices he grew to disdain. Fabre, p. 398. Wright's consistent resistance to religious restraints was increased by the strangeness of a foreign habit of thought and new myths.
these humanitarian goals. He warns them not to trust the West or Russia, but to rely only on themselves and to accept their aloneness in the fight for independence.

Neither poor sales, the hostility of certain magazines,¹³ nor the scathing remarks of the American press should be allowed to minimize the importance of Black Power. Other publications resulted from the trip.¹⁴ Wright gave lectures on his Gold Coast travels.¹⁵ The American public had not yet become interested in Africa, but the book was translated into Dutch, French, German, and Italian. To a student interested in Wright's larger concerns for his own identity, the psychological results of oppression, and modern man's alienation from his roots, his homeland and himself, Black Power is an extraordinary volume.

¹³ Time, Newsweek and the daily Times ignored Wright's book. The New York Times Book Review carried a violent denunciation of Wright's alleged "hidden or sublimated desires for racial revenge," written by Michael Clark. Most of the reviews seem to have been ultimately complimentary, though mixed. See Fabre, pp. 404-405 for more critical responses to Black Power.


¹⁵ A notable speaking engagement on this subject was Wright's requested speech before a group of foreign diplomats at the International Quaker Center of Paris on April 12, 1954. The other lectures took place in Europe, most often in Paris, as well. In addition to the apathy towards the subject, there was still too much resentment among
Equally valuable for a study of the oppressed in terms of Wright's own sense of human alienation is *Pagan Spain*. Margolies' summary of this volume could have been written about *Black Power* as accurately. "Ultimately, perhaps *Pagan Spain* is as much a personal document as it is an objective analysis—a record of the search for roots in a strange and alien world."

By 1954 Fabre tells us that Wright was committed to nonfiction, namely to journalism and lecturing, as the most direct route of access to the widest possible audience. He explained his position to his agent:

I'm inclined to feel that I ought not to work right now on a novel. This does not mean that I'm giving up writing fiction, but, really, there are so many more exciting and interesting things happening now in the world that I feel sort of dodging them if I don't say something about them.

Discarding the suggestions to visit Sweden, Israel, the Belgian Congo, Yugoslavia, and Germany for a variety of reasons, Wright decided to look into some of this world excitement by visiting Spain. Starting in August, 1954, Wright traveled through the major cities of Spain, covering close to 4,000 miles in the first three weeks. Returning to Paris blacks and whites back home towards Wright's stay in Paris for his opinions on a foreign nation to be either sought or deemed credible when offered to an American audience.

16 Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright*, p. 44.

after this preliminary trip, Wright left with Gunnar Myrdal, who was passing through Paris, for Geneva. In Switzerland, Wright found up-to-date figures on Spain's economy from the United Nations Library. He consulted nineteenth-century travelogues, read historical studies, and ordered Americo Castro's *Structure of Spanish History* from the United States to supplement his reading. He also studied Spanish, hoping to use personal conversations and first-hand observations as well.

Interrupted by his attendance at the Bandung conference, which he treats in *The Color Curtain* (1956), Wright did not finally start writing *Pagan Spain* until February, 1956. By March 12, 1956 Wright's 537 page manuscript was complete. Wright's journalistic probing of the Spanish psychology appears in five chapters. "Life After Death" contains a review of the political, social and economic attitudes of the Spaniard after the death of the Republic. "Death and Exaltation" offers Wright's conclusions that the bullring and the Catholic Church celebrate the Spaniard's repressed obsession with violence, death, and sex. In "The Underground Christ," Wright suggests an analogy between Spanish Protestants and American blacks. In "Sex, Flamenco, and Prostitution," Wright makes a case for sex as Spain's major preoccupation, prostitution as the major industry, and the cult of the Virgin as the Church's contribution to these
realities.  

"The World of Pagan Power" is the final chapter, summarizing Wright's belief that the pre-rational, pre-Christian Spanish mind is best expressed and preserved in the Spanish Catholic Church.

Using a sort of political catechism (Formacion politica para Los Flechas), Wright contrasts the Spain depicted by Franco's Falange Party with that of his observations and conversations. By his visits to shrines, villages, bullfights, urban churches, taverns, gypsy quarters, and other sites offering a cross-section of the Spanish people, Wright gathered enough material to conduct a resounding critical report on the psychological and religious forces acting to keep Spaniards alienated from their most basic instincts and from their Western heritage. Wright dedicates the work to Alva and Gunnar Myrdal who share his abhorrence for "the degradation of human life in Spain."

Wright despised the repressive impact he saw in the Church of Spain as strongly as he had despised his grandmother's stern Adventism. Yet he seems compassionate rather than harshly critical in his depiction of the Spanish

17 Wright also wrote "Spanish Snapshots," Two Cities, No. 2 (July 15, 1959), 25-34, two sketches on prostitutes and youthful pimps. This material is from an unpublished section of Pagan Spain offering observations made about Granada and Seville. Sex struck Wright as the source of Spanish conflicts.

18 Also called the "little green book," this text treats the aims and principles of the Franco regime for study by young aspirants to government positions.
Catholic's psychological imprisonment. This essentially pagan view of life, as Wright describes it, combined "a love of ritual and ceremony; a delight in color and movement and sound ... an extolling of sheer emotion ... a deification of tradition ... a continuous lisping about greatness, honor, glory, bravery" and an assumption of superiority over the morally and spiritually inferior that Wright resented. It is not surprising that his most powerful descriptions, adamant protest, and mounting outrage can be seen in Pagan Spain as in his strongest fiction. Wright did not feel at home among the Spaniards; but declaring alienation basic to their psyches, Wright depicted them as fellow seekers, however dormant the impulse in their consciousness, of individual freedom.

Wright spent more time in Spain than he had in the Gold Coast. He saw most of the major cities, including Barcelona, Madrid, Seville, Granada, Toledo, and he went on to Gibraltar and Tangier. Much of the local color gained by these visits was lost in the extensive cutting demanded by Wright's new editor at Harper's. The reproduction of local scenes and customs was not really Wright's goal, however. In Pagan Spain Wright is most impressive when he probes beneath the accidents of geography, race, or political allegiance to the psychology beneath. The focus of his

analysis is the role of the Church in Spanish life.

Wright blames the Spanish Church for uniting Spaniards on the issue of their unhealthy attitude towards sex. He searches for the threads that join the inhibited sexuality, open prostitution, excessive regard for feminine virginity, and religious fervor in the Spanish mind. Secular events like the bullfight are mere outgrowths of the Church's influence, in Wright's analysis. The matador is a priest; the bull is the Spaniard's bestial instincts; thus his death is demanded. The bull's death "must serve as a secular baptism of emotion to wash the heart clean of its illegal dirt," Wright observes.20 Concluding "all was religion in Spain,"21 Wright restates his key objections against the Spanish Church. He believes it tyrannically deprives Spaniards of their freedom and increases their alienation from their own basic instincts. Discussing the Spanish civil war in the same way, Wright concludes that the "barbarity" of Spain is a result of its paganism, a state nurtured by Spanish Catholicism. Those who acknowledge their barbarity are a bit more civilized than those Spaniards estranged from their contorted psyches. Apparently the degree of unconsciousness about their inner conflicts (or the degree of alienation from self) is directly related to the degree of barbarity Wright attributes to the Spanish. Although

20Pagan Spain, p. 99. 21Ibid., pp. 192-93.
Wright's account seems overstated and probably oversimplified too,\textsuperscript{22} it clearly points to Wright's persistent concern for modern man's alienation. Just three years before his death, Wright looked to religion as he had to race to explain the confusion and isolation experienced by specific cultures. In both instances he found the common condition of alienation from others and from self the greatest threat to mankind.

At the beginning of 1955, a conference of twenty-nine African and Asian nations to be held in the spring was announced. Wright immediately planned to attend. On April 10, 1955 he flew from Madrid (where he was gathering materials for \textit{Pagan Spain}). He arrived in Djarkarta eager to record his impressions of Indonesia and the conference of Third World nations. Wright's published account of his trip to Bandung is the subject of his next work, \textit{The Color Curtain}. His two hundred pages of notes provided Wright with a rich source from which to extract the familiar themes of race, religion, and color—the subjects comprising the three main chapters of the work.

The first half of the report recounts Wright's travels from Paris to Madrid by train, from Madrid to Jakarta by plane, and his short stops at Cairo, Karachi, Calcutta, and

\textsuperscript{22}Gunnar Myrdal told Wright that the book was "only a preamble to the serious, penetrating and revealing analysis of the country which [Wright] ought someday to write." Letter, Myrdal to Wright, April 16, 1957. Quoted in Fabre, p. 416.
Bangkok. Wright thus establishes the background of the conference through interviews, historical background, and comments about the changing scenery. Once he has set the physical stage for the conference, Wright can begin his report of the meeting.

The Color Curtain is filled with excerpts of official speeches and interviews, such as that Wright had with the late Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Wright focuses on the Easterner's sense of isolation from the West. He alleges that the East's preference for collective action over individual achievement is significant of the way the thoughts of the two parts of the world vary. According to Wright, "... all the fervid adjurations of Washington, London, or Paris to strive for individual glory left him [the African-Asian man] cold and suspicious" (p. 74).23 Thus Wright applauds Chou En-lai's concentration on African-Asian unity rather than on East-West conflicts. Just as he had his fictional characters Reverend Taylor ("Fire and Cloud") and Cross Damon (The Outsider) lament man's inability to achieve when he acts alone, Wright concurs with Chou En-lai in his call for unity among rejected and oppressed people.

From his position as an exiled American and an anti-Communist, Wright finds himself in a perilous situation. He

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23 The work was originally published in French. All quotations are from the English publication (New York and Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1956).
encourages the new African-Asian nations towards freedom from the United States, Soviet Russia, and Communist China (pp. 216-17). So if East-West conflict ever comes to a head, Wright seems to have realized that he would be considered an enemy, not an ally because of his race or color. Despite his sympathies for their efforts at self-determination, Wright does not imagine that in Indonesia he has found his place. Race and color and political sympathy do not erase cultural barriers. The unity of the Third World nations could only remind Wright of his separateness.

Wright endorses the same preference for pragmatic policies mentioned in his open letter to Nkrumah in *Black Power* in this report. He draws an analogy between the American colonists and England and the new African-Asian nations and the West to encourage the West to respect the human dignity and freedom being demanded by the Third World. Fearful of self-defeating inclinations toward limitation of the racist behavior of their colonizers, Wright calls all forms of racism deplorable and "loathsome." Wright's concern here, as it is in *Black Power*²⁴ is that the hope for future civilization that Wright saw in the nations at the Bandung conference allow individual men to work through their isolation for a world where men could live at peace with themselves,

free and self-determined.

In July, Preuves published "Vers Bandung via Séville," the account of Wright's last days in Spain and arrival in Indonesia. In August, Preuves also published "Le congrès des hommes de couleur," an account of the conference itself. In September, "Le monde occidental à Bandung," Wright's attack on colonialism and appeal to the conscience of the West came out in the same publication. Back home, Harper's rejected the Bandung manuscript. Wright was not surprised. He said,

I've no illusions about how people in America feel about straight reporting like this. But I just can't white-wash the Western world when the whole issue about that world is the role it has played during the past 500 years. So you are going to have trouble with this book....

For once Wright's pessimism about his reception back home was not totally correct. World Publishing Co. agreed to publish The Color Curtain without the option on his future work Wright had feared. The March 19, 1956, publication in the United States was better received than Black Power had been. Wright had written of the challenge facing the


26A hasty French translation, Bandoeng: 1,500,000,000 hommes, eagerly welcomed by the Paris papers in December, 1955, was the first publication of Wright's Bandung report.

27An interesting review of The Color Curtain comes from West Africa, XVI (October 20, 1956), 822. Reminiscent of Wright's fictional criticism, the reviewer laments, "If only he [Wright] would break loose of his theorizing and
West to acknowledge the strivings towards freedom of alienated men seeking a better world civilization, and many readers and fellow observers at the conference agreed with his report.

Wright's final publication of extended nonfiction is a collection of lectures delivered in Europe over the last decade of his life. Wright's subjects range throughout the already demonstrated concerns of his later writing: international race relations, global politics, the survival of humanity in the future, the challenge facing the West. His collection bears the urgent title, White Man, Listen! Added to the title's urgent tone is Wright's preoccupation with a view of himself that clearly reinforces the alienation theme seen in both the fiction and the nonfiction of Richard Wright.

Alienation is highlighted in the dedication Wright gives to his work. The book is dedicated to Eric Williams, identified as the Chief Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the Leader of the People's National Movement, whom Wright calls "my friend." The book is also significantly dedicated to:

THE WESTERNIZED AND TRAGIC ELITE OF ASIA, AFRICA, AND THE WEST INDIES—the lonely outsiders who exist precariously on the clifflike margins of many cultures—men who are distrusted, misunderstood, maligned, criticized by Left and Right, Christian and pagan—men who carry on their frail but indefatigable shoulders the best of two worlds—and who, amidst confusion and stagnation, seek desperately for a home for their hearts: a home which, if found, could be a home for the hearts of all men.29

This conspicuously long dedication is a full statement of Wright's theory of the role sensitive but rejected men have in the future of the world. In his theory of the "tragic elites," Wright seems finally to have found a place for himself that offers both vindication for him and hope for a free future civilization.

In his brief introduction to White Man, Listen! Wright offers brave words that nevertheless fail to minimize the desperate tone of his dedication. He asks the reader to believe him:

29These "tragic elites" seem to possess the "double vision" discussed throughout The Outsider. Apparently Wright has shaken the pessimism that forced Cross Damon to say such a life alone was horrible, and is ready to see the potential of such a stance.
... a rootless man, but I'm neither psychologically distraught nor in any wise particularly perturbed because of it. Personally, I do not hanker after, and seem not to need, as many emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances as most people. I declare unabashedly that I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness; it does not bother me; indeed, to me it seems the natural, inevitable condition of man, and I welcome it (pp. xvi-xvii).

So Wright has finally said it! He has learned to accept his endless search for meaning by defining alienation as the natural state of abandonment and aloneness inevitable to human life. He joins with the "tragic elites" of the world in an enthusiastic acceptance of their freedom from cultural control that he feels necessary for truly free, truly human societies. As his fiction has shown us, Wright grew to perceive unity among isolated individuals insistent on their freedom as the only answer to the inevitable exclusion and loneliness. Wright seems ambivalent, however, since he acknowledges the origin of this mental stance in his personal experiences. If alienation is inevitable and he welcomes it as part of his humanity, why must he "confess" that his experiences have granted him this inheritance? He says he once answered a lady, "My dear, I do not deal in happiness; I deal in meaning" (p. xvii). Why then claim to "cherish" and "welcome" isolation? It is unlikely that Wright believed alienation "natural" to the tragic elites of the world. He resists it as necessary, but acknowledges it as a fact of existence at this stage of world history. Wright seems to have worked out a theory that allows him to live
with his alienation from the culture he still prefers by abandoning its pursuit of happiness and insisting only on the rationality and freedom he was taught to value. Common to the four lectures that comprise *White Man, Listen!* is Wright's belief that man must find ways and means for remaining human and free, if he must still remain alone.

"The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed Peoples" shows Wright's interest in the emotions shared by enslaved people. Giving a catalogue of reactions, Wright discusses: "Frog Perspectives," a phrase Wright explains he borrowed from Nietzsche to describe someone looking from below upward, the "whiteness" that relates many separate national states in an assumed racial identity, the non-Western sense of "time," the double-edged meaning tribal man gives to "savage," the "Post-Mortem Terror" newly freed colonists experience, and a long list of other psychological reactions. Rejecting the Marxist answer of economics and the non-Marxist answer of Christianity, Wright says the main impact of the West upon Asia and Africa was to create a spiritual void or a sense of meaninglessness. This void leaves the elite without vocabulary, history, or emotional moderation. The void also explains the Third World's view of population as a protective weapon (a mystique of numbers, Wright calls the view).

Wright's first lecture concludes on the note that these psychological reactions are "human, all too human."
(p. 42). In a passage recalling Wright's best fiction, he pictures Europe as a sleepwalker who has "blundered into the house of mankind..." (p. 42). Wright challenges the West to accept this revolution among the oppressed or surrender the future to Communism, a clear threat to human survival as seen in Wright's later writings. Insistence on conformity to the "white man's conception of existence" will both attack the body of mankind and sacrifice the humanity of the West itself.

Wright moves from the psychological freedom of the heart and mind to the external reality of society in "Tradition and Industrialization." Wright begins by taking his own passions, illusions, time and circumstances into account as he challenges his audience to do. Using the terminology of The Outsider, Wright speaks of his "double vision," gained by being a Negro in a white Western Christian society. This "double vision" makes him ahead of the present, dominant outlook of the West, Wright explains. Tracing the growth of Christianity and its domination over Asian-African cultures, Wright points to the irony of white Europeans allowing for a more deep and sudden revolution in Asia and Africa than the Europeans had ever obtained in Europe. He

30This essay, the text of a paper given at the First Congress of Black Artists and Intellectuals in Paris, September 1956, was also published as "Tradition and Industrialization: the Plight of the Tragic Elite in Africa," Présence Africaine, No. 8-10 (June-November, 1956), 347-60.
quotes a hypothetical black, brown, or yellow man saying, "Thank you, Mr. White Man, for freeing me from the rot of my irrational traditions and customs, though you are still the victim of your own irrational customs and traditions" (p. 60). Such a remark would prove that the speaker was a knowing man, Wright insists, showing no assumed superiority by the outcast. His superiority lies only in the greater self-awareness his outsider position has allowed him.

Wright is now ready to define the Western educated elite as a tragic, lonely, misunderstood man, but the "freest man in the world today" (p. 63). Wright challenges the West to permit Africa and Asia this freedom or risk losing its own. Over and over, Wright reminds us that "the problem is freedom from a dead past. And freedom to build a rational future" (p. 68). He concludes with the resounding cry, "FREEDOM IS INDIVISIBLE" (Ibid.).

The third lecture of the collection seems to be a digression, but "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" is also about freedom and alienation. Wright opens in a roundabout way by relating his stay in French Quebec. His point is to contrast the union of the social and sacred he found there with the lack of unity between church and state in America. Here "... each individual lives in his own world" (p. 70). Wright is now ready to lead us to his starting point, using words he had given to his "marginal
"The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small" (pp. 71-72). Wright is now ready for his familiar assertion: "The Negro is America's metaphor" (p. 72).

The lecture now moves into the subject of Negro writing promised in the title. Starting with a passage from Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Wright arranges Negro writers along an imaginary line between a feudal European culture and a modern industrial American culture. Dumas (like Cross Damon, who uses these exact words) writes of kings and battles, Wright theorizes, because "being a Negro was the least important thing about him" (p. 73).

Wright says that only one American Negro has ever written like Dumas or like Pushkin--Phyllis Wheatley. Received by Washington at his military quarters, influenced by Pope (the reigning English poet of her era), accepted in the Wheatley family despite her color, Phyllis Wheatley was one with her culture. Through biographical sketches and quoted passages from their works, Wright discusses the "tradition of lament that rolled down the decades" from the pens of black writers.

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31Cf. Houston's words: "Now, let's get back to our third man .... He feels toward those two as those two men feel toward the masses of people.... That man who kills like that is a bleak and tragic man. He is the twentieth-century writ small ...." (The Outsider, p. 283).

Wright's point is the same. These apparent outsiders share a common destiny with all of mankind.
from 1761 to 1900, as they became more and more alienated from their American culture.

At the turn of the century, Wright sees two dominant tendencies in black expression that prevailed for a quarter of a century. He chooses to call them "the Narcissistic Level" and "the Forms of Things Unknown" (including folk utterances, spirituals, blues, work songs, and folklore). In the first group, Wright places middle-class blacks like Du-Bois and Washington who ironically fought for gains that only stressed their separateness (e.g., Negro hospitals, schools and the like). In the second category, Wright accounts for the great majority of American Negro expression. In this section, Wright gives some delightful examples of blues, work songs, and of the form called "The Dirty Dozens." 32

Wright traces a continuous note of hopelessness in black expression to World War I, when he alleges color consciousness was replaced by class consciousness, and a new black identity began to grow. Going back to an opening premise, Wright repeats his assertion that the American Negro is representative of the oppressed anywhere in the present world. Concluding rapidly, Wright reports that a new list

32Wright defines this obscure label, known but undefined in the black community, as songs of obscure origin meant to jeer at life and at all that is considered decent, holy, just, wise, straight, right, and uplifting (White Man, Listen, p. 89). Modern usage reflects the same attitude but is extended to all types of verbal expression, not merely to songs in the black community.
of names and themes entered Negro writing after World War II. The shame and self-consciousness America felt since her racial problem became exposed to the world led to a new relationship with their country perceived by this post-World War II group of black writers. Wright closes with an optimistic prediction that, "At long last, maybe a merging of Negro expression with American expression will take place" (pp. 104-5). If that should happen, Wright sees "a gain in humaneness for us all" (p. 105).

Wright's essay is worthy of closer study. His selection of authors and of works (all poems) makes good reading. His thesis that the author's sense of isolation from his culture influences the tone, imagery, and themes of his writing is not at all new, but is an interesting way to explain the increasing strength and depth of the so-called "New Black Poets" of the sixties. The same ambivalence noted in Wright's introduction to the collection appears in this third lecture. He cites the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley and presents her work as the result of her oneness with her culture, a desired goal for Wright. He concludes with the hope that Negro literature as such might one day disappear as we all gain in humaneness. It is doubtful, however, that Wright seriously means for us to prefer the sample of Miss Wheatley's poetry to the "almost religious heights of expression" he attributes to W. E. B. DuBois or even to the semi-literate "Forms of Things Unseen." Although the
critics who denounced Wright’s later fiction were often working from unfair prejudices about his residency in Europe, they were speaking to the point of this lecture when they concluded that Wright’s human gain was our aesthetic loss. Would a black writer who is one with his culture and who is no longer conscious of his natural alienation be able to write with the power and emotional depth Wright so admired? The samples Wright presents suggest not. Wright’s own literary career suggests not. This was a dilemma Wright never solved.

So Wright’s essay on Negro literature is not at all a digression. His subject is still the isolated man whose outsider stance allows him the freedom to explore his humanity; whose ultimate triumph is a gain for all humanity. Wright’s final lecture makes the same point. Opening as if about to present a drama, Wright begins the final lecture of the collection by referring to “a phase of the prime, central and historical drama of the twentieth century, the most common and exciting drama that we know” (p. 106). White Man, Listen! concludes with a story Wright entitles “The Miracle of Nationalism in the African Gold Coast.” Using a narrative style, Wright begins on a hot night in 1948 with six black men, members of the United Gold Coast Convention, a group aimed at self-government. This is the story of the “tragic elite” to whom Wright dedicated the collection. These are men cast outside of the West and of their own
societies who share a not yet clearly defined point of view, but an all too clear demand for freedom from Great Britain. Calling themselves The Secret Circle, the six men swear a solemn oath to secure their country's freedom, arrange for a boycott of European businesses, and then they set out to secure that freedom. In March of 1957, the Gold Coast assumed independent status under the leadership of Nkrumah (one of the six "outsiders"), and became Ghana. Wright presents the tale as a "perversion of the energies of human life" that deprived the world of "life-furthering gains" that could have been made if the Africans had not had to prove their humanity. Wright closes White Man, Listen!, as he does in Black Power and in The Color Curtain, with the warning that the "miracle" can become a nightmare if the West fails to help Africa and Asia escape the racism that mars Western history. Again, Wright links the outsider, the "tragic

33 Wright injects a footnote at this point of the essay explaining why no member of this political cell appears in Black Power. He explains his fear that reactionaries would suppress Africa's bid for freedom out of a misguided fear that identified the African nationalists with Russian Communism. White Man, Listen, p. 120.

34 Wright's attitude here recalls his story of the overturned cages in Michael Reese hospital. There too the denial of the black workers' humanity may have deprived the world of life-furthering gains. Wright's point is clearly that the common humanity of mankind is more important than variables such as race, class, or religion. From his partially fictionalized article of 1942 ("What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You") to his speeches of another decade, Wright's focus has remained the quality of human life shared by all.
elite," the "Marginal man" to all human society trying to effect the reality "of man as we dream of him and want him to be" (p. 137).

Wright's final collection of nonfiction is more successful than his final collection of fiction. *White Man, Listen!* was well received by the black press. The Establishment press again tried to ignore Wright's words. Some reviewers accused him of encouraging a nationalism as heinous as the racism he warns against. Yet Wright's collection, though small and unfortunately unknown by most American readers, contains some of Wright's strongest, most lucid work. It is a decisive rebuttal to the suggestion that Wright was losing his creativity because of his distance from home. On the contrary, that distance allowed Wright to come to grips with his own alienation. Living abroad helped Wright to see his deep and important kinship with the Africans and Asians whose human fate he shared but whose homelands were never considered a substitute for his own. Wright's years away from America helped him to identify his own problems with the universal struggles all men make for respect and self-determination, struggles that assure future generations of a quality of human life demanded by the educated Western mind.

*White Man, Listen!* is an appropriate collection with which to conclude this brief study of the nonfiction of Richard Wright. Though his efforts in nonfiction are not
generally read today, they are necessary for a fair assessment of the man and his more familiar fiction. Many of the articles, essays, lectures, book reviews, prefaces and introductions that fill even a selected bibliography of Wright's works have been treated elsewhere in this study because they shed light on Wright's life, his intellectual development, his changing sense of himself, his evaluation of his artistic achievement, and his persistent concern with alienation. Some of these writings are stilted, simplistic, naive. Wright was forced to turn out a number of articles for the Communist press that he did not consider important. Occasionally he would review a book for a friend or because of financial need. But a great many examples of Wright's expository writing reinforce our awareness of the concern for mankind, the personal anguish, and the deep courage possessed by the author of Black Boy and Native Son. At his best in his nonfiction (as Wright was in much of White Man, Listen!), Wright's position as an outsider, aware of his own complexity, insistent on his own worth and admiring of the courage of fellow outcasts, is the tragic stance of the alienated man. Ever challenging to the culture of his homeland and in search for the essence of human existence, this man was an image Wright could not forsake. His outsiders are haunting, whether on the pages of his novels or in the lectures he delivered following his travels. The man alone
who fights for his freedom and clings to his truths does
strike us as the only man worthy of our hopes for the fu-
ture. If we have not succumbed to the corruption, despair,
and complexity around us, Wright's alienated man does appear
to be a disturbingly familiar mirror-image.
CHAPTER IX

POETIC EFFORTS

When *Native Son* exploded onto the literary scene, Americans wanted to know all about its unknown creator. This novel was not Wright's literary debut, however. He had already published eighteen poems before his fiction became known. The problem was that Wright's literary career began in the narrow realm of the Leftist magazines of short duration and small circulation sponsored by the John Reed Club of Chicago. So the poetic efforts of the young Richard Wright were, and still are, veritably unknown. Nevertheless Wright's poetry should not be ignored merely because much of it is undeveloped and unfamiliar. A fair assessment of Wright's work demands a consideration of his total evolution. Wright's literary, ideological, and personal growth is clearly reflected in his poetry.

We have already seen Wright's enthusiasm for the John Reed Club that opened in Chicago in August, 1932. In "I Tried to Be a Communist," Wright convinces us of his eagerness to settle among these aspiring writers, painters, and socialists. Wright was particularly interested in the small literary magazine started in June, 1933 to encourage beginning writers, *Left Front*. Leaving an editorial-board
meeting with some recent issues of New Masses and International Literature, Wright tells us that "the revolutionary words leaped from the printed page and struck me with tremendous force." ¹ In response to these revolutionary words, Wright tells us how,

...feeling for the first time that I could speak for listening ears, I wrote a wild, crude poem in free verse, coining images of black hands.... I felt that in a clumsy way it linked white life with black life, merged two streams of common experience.²

So Wright's poetic efforts began as an attempt to find an answer to his personal experiences of isolation. Wright refers to his earliest poems, written in 1933, as his "crude poems." Yet, even these works contain the theme that was to lead to Wright's strongest writing.

Wright's first published poem, dated June 26, 1934, is "I Have Seen Black Hands."³ One of the first poems Wright submitted at the John Reed Club meetings, this one was sent to the Party organ, New Masses, which normally published only established authors. It is clearly the best of this

¹The God That Failed, p. 118. Fabre claims that the true genesis of the poems probably differs from this account, however. He cites a conversation Wright had with Edwin Seaver and an unsigned article in which Wright boasted that he could write as well as the authors of poems in New Masses and set out to prove it. Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, pp. 540-41.


early group of propaganda pieces. "I Have Seen Black Hands" is a statement in poetic form of Wright's hopes for his communist experience. It opens with a baby's hands reaching "hungrily for life," and then traces the child's growth from his "childish grips of possession" to his "palms spotted and smeared with ink" to the age where his hands hold "dice and cards and half-pint flasks." In a memorable progression that has been compared to Shakespeare's soliloquy on the "Seven Ages of Man," Wright considers the black American's various stages of growth by focusing on the activities of his hands. As a worker, the man's hands are "caught in the fast-moving belts of machines." When he is a soldier, the black hands "grabbed guns." After the war when the man is no longer needed, the black hands "grew soft and got weak and bony from unemployment and starvation." In a rapid succession of scenes, Wright continues this fresco of the black experience in America by showing how black hands "struggled in vain at the noose that tightened about the black throat."

Thus far Wright's poem follows the techniques he would pursue in 12 Million Black Voices, Wright's folk history of black Americans. His verbal portraits are nearly as graphic as Rosskam's photographs in that later work. The poem now moves to the Marxist position that recalls Wright's short story, "Fire and Cloud." Just as Reverend Taylor concludes

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4Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, pp. 99-100.
that all real strength belongs to the people and joins his black congregation to the poor whites and Communists, the black hands of the poem leave the streets and the jails to join with raised white hands in a show of joint force. As the poem ends, the hands have merged with millions of others "on some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon."

As a key line in the poem reveals, this view of a future in which the black man is a part of his culture sustained the young Wright and increased his commitment to the Chicago club. For a time, the Chicago John Reed Club and their acceptance of his poetry offered Wright the acceptance he craved. This poem celebrates the triumph over natural and racial alienation that Wright believed Communism made possible.

The other early poems offered to the literary group were less memorable, but they too were accepted and published because of Wright's adherence to Marxist themes and positions. The very titles attest to the revolutionary tone welcomed by the communist press, which was eager for new black recruits. The subjects follow the regular Party lines. "Rest for the Weary" is addressed to the "panic-stricken guardians of gold" who oppress the workers. "A Red Love Note" is another early work addressed to a "lovely bloated one" and again points to the failure of capitalism to

5These two poems appear together in Left Front, No. 3 (Jan.–Feb., 1934), p. 3.
respond to the needs of the workers. This is a creative work in which Wright joins the language of a harshly impersonal eviction notice with the predictable phrases of a love letter. Another surprising mixture in these poems denouncing capitalism is Wright's biblical imagery and political theory. Reminiscent of the fervor of a black preacher like his own Reverend Taylor, Wright pictures the capitalists as greedy Pharisees guarding the temple of Mammon but destined to be devoured along with their "bargain counters of justice."

In "Strength," Wright reasserts his faith in communal efforts for social reform. The individual's revolt is only a "gentle breeze," while the union of oppressed works produces "a raging hurricane vast and powerful/wrenching and dredging by the roots the rottening husks of the trees of greed." Wright refers to the power and magnitude of physical nature to describe the extent and strength of the revolution needed to correct the social ills he knew only too well. Again borrowing images of power and destruction from nature, as he also did in his early fiction, Wright forecasts "Everywhere Burning Waters Rise." Joint effort here too results in the elimination of exploitation of the workers. The poem moves to a passionate conclusion, reminiscent


of the impact of Wright's best fiction, with an apostrophe to the "red stream of anger" that sweeps over capitalism. All the force of the flood waters presented in the stories "Silt" and "Down by the Riverside" is suggested in the economic purgation promised by this poem. "Everywhere Burning Waters Rise" is a good example of the early poetic efforts in which Wright's desperation to overcome his isolation resulted in a passion and an intensity that allow the works at least a measure of artistic achievement. "Child of the Dead and Forgotten Gods" \(^8\) is another of this group of early propaganda poems. Here Wright focuses his criticism of capitalism on the violence allowed to the club-swinging policemen and on the naivete of liberal Christians who think economic oppression can be talked or wished away. The criticisms are intended to justify the revolution that the poem announces as imminent.

Even in the '30's as his fiction and work with the John Reed Club proves, Wright believed that his race was only part of the reason for his sense of alienation from American life. In "Ah Feels It in Mah Bones," \(^9\) as in Uncle Tom's Children, Wright uses the dialect of an uneducated black to link a revolutionary consciousness to purely human

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impulses. The Marxist tenets are here, but they are less obtrusive than in much of Wright's early poetry. The narrator senses an impending change and expresses a realistic acceptance of "whatever wind's in the sky." It is this wind of social change that the speaker feels in his bones. The expectant tone of the poem is the same one Wright uses a few months later in a journalistic piece called "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite." As his title suggests, Wright felt that the black solidarity experienced in this symbolic refutation of black inferiority was a powerful source of revolutionary zeal. Wright never felt at home in the black community of his day, but he was hopeful that his fellow men had much to contribute to a renewed society. He ends the journalist report on the fight with an apostrophe to his comrades to heed "the wild river that's got to be harnessed and directed."

Likewise "Ah Feels It in Mah Bones" asserts that the sense of alienation felt by black Americans was a powerful human source of energy that could be used to great advantage by a Party that recognized the black man's humanity and need for freedom.

Wright's use of the uneducated black persona in this poem is interesting for another reason. His praise of the peasant's sensitivity to social change and the suggestion

that this uneducated man has something of value for those interested in a better society is strong evidence against later critics of Wright. Those criticizing Wright's move to Paris and his ideological growth often claimed that he was motivated by his hatred of his own race. Baldwin, for example, wrote in "Alas, Poor Richard" that Wright deliberately avoided America and the changing fate of black Americans:

And one of the reasons that he [Wright] did not want to know [the present problem in America] was that his real impulse toward American Negroes, individually, was to despise them.11

"Ah Feels It in Mah Bones" and the portraits of Uncle Tom's Children are early illustrations from his works that refute such a claim. Wright was alienated from the passive, fearful blacks of his childhood and the imitative, superficial blacks of his urban migration. Wright had an interest in his art and his freedom that was uncommon for a man of his race. Still there is little in Wright's writings to warrant the assertion that he despised blacks, individually or collectively. Wright despised only the forces that work to keep a man of any color isolated from his culture and from himself.

By 1934 Wright was totally committed to revolutionary poetry and to the John Reed Club that published his work. Left Front grew to become the official John Reed Club publication of the Midwest before its collapse after the January,

Although a member of the magazine's editorial board, Wright's reputation did not fall with the publication. On the contrary, in March of that year Wright went to the Indianapolis John Reed Club to speak on the topic "Black Revolutionary Poetry," a subject he was to favor well into the forties. So when the Party finally demanded Wright's membership if he wished to retain his position in the Chicago literary club, he became a Communist.

As he helped to organize the Chicago club, Wright worked on his fiction and continued to write poetry. In February of 1935 the Indianapolis Club started a new magazine, *Midland Left*. Its first issue contained "Rise and Live" and "Obsession" by Richard Wright. The first of these works reminds us of *Lawd Today* or *The Outsider* in its insistence on man suffering a living death and escaping into dreams. The question "Is this living?" recurs with a haunting though unspoken reply made nearly audible by Wright's verses. Phrases like "idle living," "lost living," "empty hands," and "dread drone of our days" reinforce the idea of the "slow sweep of time" that consumes the life of man "every so often crawling to plead for a handout." The alliteration and repetition are effective in depicting such a living death.

The other poem, "Obsession," introduces Wright's concern with lynching. The vivid imagery and realistic detail

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12Both poems are found in *Midland Left*, No. 2 February, 1935), pp. 13-14.
that is characteristic of Wright's fiction appear here in "the dreadful frame that will not die," which Wright identifies as "the dragon of my dreams." This lynched corpse will reappear in another, more memorable poem from Wright's early period, "Between the World and Me," but its appearance here forecasts Wright's success with realistic detail in other genres. His use of the refrain "How long" demonstrates a lyricism often suggestive of the blues in many of Wright's early poems.

Wright's early poetry reflects his continued devotion to the Marxist principles of the Party. In "I Am a Red Slogan,"13 Wright acknowledges the role of the Marxist poet. He defines himself in the title of the work and explains that his function is to facilitate the rapid unification of oppressed peoples. Often in the thirties (e.g., in Uncle Tom's Children and in his journalism) Wright re-defines his place in the Party. Wright sees the task of joining isolated individuals into the powerful social force needed for revolution as the opportunity open to the artist, especially the writer. His contribution to The God That Failed clearly defines this goal. Although the poem is full of vehement propaganda in its calls for "Death to Lynchers! Self-Determination for Minority Peoples!" and in its conclusion, "All Power to the Soviets!," the work is helpful for a clear

picture of Wright's loyalty to communism as a function of his role as an artist. In Red Leaves of "Red Leaves of Red Books," Wright pictures a world of blacks and whites, young and old, men and women prepared for social revolution by reading the "printed hope" of the Marxist poem. Likewise, "Spread Your Sunrise!" hails the appearance of a "giant child" (communism) who has come out of Russia to paint the world red with hope. Neither poem is significant art. The color symbolism and themes are obviously Marxist. Still the personal anger of the first poems is now better controlled. Comforted by his membership in the Communist Party and his key position in its literary unit, Wright is now free to develop his artistry.

A powerful poem that Wright seems to have liked is "Between the World and Me." It is one of his most impressive works from this period. The poem opens with the persona walking through the woods. In a first-person narrative,


16Wright, "Between the World and Me," Partisan Review, No. 2 (July-Aug., 1935), pp. 18-19. Wright cites the poem in full in his lecture on black writing as an example of a work depicting the daily horror of black Americans in White Man, Listen, pp. 94-95. See Appendix A for the text of this poem.

17It was after reading this poem and "I Have Seen Black Hands" that Ellison asked Langston Hughes to introduce him to Wright. Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, p. 145.
he recalls stumbling upon "the thing." It is the sooty details of this early morning scene that the narrator says thrust themselves "between the world and me." In graphic detail, unlike the sketch merely outlined in "Obsession," Wright paints the scene of a lynching. He shows us "a vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with blood." The details are masterfully presented to suggest the action of the night before. The owner of these items is deliberately ignored for the moment. Next the persona recalls the trampled grass, cigar and cigarette butts, peanut shells, "a whore's lipstick" and other discarded evidence that characterizes the crowd that witnessed the horrible scene. Amidst the traces of tar, arrays of feathers and the lingering smell of gasoline, the narrator startles us with a stony skull into whose eye sockets "the sun poured yellow surprise." The corpse seems to come to life because of this emphasis on its eyes and this attack by physical nature. His total isolation both before and after death is the suggested fate of the lynched man.

Imperceptibly the narrator moves into the scene. The dry bones melt into his own; the gray ashes form into his

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18 As *Native Son* opens, we recall Bigger rubs his eyes against the sunlight flooding the room. The "yellow surprise" poured into the skull is an ironic attack, since the sun is usually associated with warmth and illumination. Often the alienation of Wright's solitary figures is intensified by natural forces that render them blind, otherwise handicapped, and aware of this estrangement from other men and from nature:
own black flesh, crying faces angrily clamoring for his life come into view. Taking us with him, the persona relives the lynching. He is bound to a sapling, tarred, feathered, and "cooled by a baptism of gasoline."\(^{19}\) After panting, begging and clutching "childlike" to "the hot sides of death," the helpless victim who was once the mere observer of the scene becomes the dry bones and stony skull—"the thing"—he originally stumbled upon in the woods. No longer is Wright content merely to assert the unity of the oppressed. In images as stark and effective as any in his realistic fiction, Wright has demonstrated that unity. He was convinced that the Marxist unification of the worker class was a means toward relieving the horror of black life, his announced theme in the later *Native Son*. Already "Between the World and Me" attests to the isolation that drove Wright deeper and deeper into the Communist Party hoping to combat this horror.

There are other early poems worthy of note, though Wright's artistic achievement varies in these works. By far

\(^{19}\) In "Fire and Cloud," written a few months later, Wright has Reverend Taylor experience a similar baptism of fire when he is viciously beaten by his kidnappers. The heat of the torture and the coldness of his torturers in that story, like the heat of the human torch and the coldness of the spectators in this poem prepare us for the hot/cold, black/white symbolism of *Native Son* and later fiction.

Another area of similarity between this excellent poem and later fiction is Wright's decision to filter the action through the consciousness of a lone figure, and thus to stress action and description over characterization.
the most ambitious poem of Wright's early career is the six-page "Transcontinental," also the longest poem he ever wrote. The work is dedicated to Louis Aragon, publisher of International Literature. In this long poem Wright pictures a red automobile crossing the countryside heralding the triumph of socialism. The poem gives a rambling series of images and moods using prose passages, lyrical sections, political clichés, effective onomatopoeia, and a style reminiscent of the classical epic that has been aptly described as symphonic. "Transcontinental" demonstrates the progress Wright made in his poetic efforts from his early propaganda pieces to his exclusive interest in fiction. Here he successfully convinces us of the speed and actual physical movement of a cross-country journey through the sights and sounds depicted. Wright also convinces us of his pervading sense of isolation. There are bitter cries made against the rich and against whites in the poem. Essentially political, the poem offers the usual vindication of a

20 Wright, "Transcontinental," International Literature, No. 5 (Jan., 1936), pp. 52-57.

21 For example, the same radio announcements found in Lawd Today appear in the poem.

22 Fabre, "The Poetry of Richard Wright," Studies in Black Literature, I (Autumn, 1970), p. 12 and Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 131. In its length, emphasis on action, seriousness of purpose and loftiness of tone, the poem is epic-like. Since Wright emphasized the artist's use of the black oral tradition, especially the blues, "symphonic" is also attractive as a description of the form used here.
promised revolution that is considered necessary to level social stratification. Again united effort of solitary individuals is offered as the answer to the alienation felt by the black and the poor worker. The recurring shout, "UNITED-FRONT--SSSTRIKE," suggests the force of this joint action that Wright believed the poet should encourage.

An interesting work summarizing the major themes of Wright's early poems by using newspaper headlines is "Hearst Headline Blues."23 The poem is again political. It focuses on the unemployment, breadlines, evictions, and the other social ills that made headlines during the thirties. Wright's point is that these headlines ironically expose the solutions to the Depression offered by the government as illusory. He uses the materials of the man Wright considered a reactionary newspaper magnate for this condemnation of the government and as a reaffirmation of Marxist economic solutions as a logical substitute. Wright's use of the Hearst press reminds us of his own journalistic work for the Communists. When Wright left Chicago for New York, he had hopes of rising above the restrictions of political reporting and covering the demonstrations and topical concerns favored by the Party. He wrote hundreds of articles of this type, however. From this dreary work, Wright acquired an eye for detail and a control over his materials that was to strengthen

his natural ability to tell a story. The techniques used in "Hearst Headline Blues" corroborate recent evidence that Wright's newspaper accounts in *Native Son* were only slightly fictionalized accounts of an actual case, though Wright was soundly criticized for melodrama years later. "Hearst Headline Blues" also suggests Wright's interest in experimentation and poetic effect as well as the mere propaganda of some of these early verses.

Further proof of Wright's interest in his art lies in "Old Habit and New Love." Here Wright's subject is the fate of modern technological man. Using the language of the machine age, Wright alludes to "hope" and "dawn" as symbols of the social change that the new era promises. The Marxist poets are pictured "holding in our hands the world's tools, drafting the hope-prints of our vision on canvases of green earth" as the poem ends. Far less strident than "I Am A Red Slogan," this poem demonstrates some development in his creations while Wright retained his strong sense of mission as a Party writer and his comforting hope for a social revolution that would eliminate his separation from his American culture. A harmonious world, where physical nature complements technical advances and where "first-shift dawn finds us on equal ground" is Wright's final vision in this poem of the middle thirties.

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As the decade ended, Wright published "We of the Streets" and "Red Clay Blues." The first of these poems, like the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, glorifies the strength and the will to live of the poor and the urban working class. Once again Wright tries to escape loneliness by identifying himself with these triumphant loners. Later that year, Wright joined with Langston Hughes to write a short poem continuing his interest in the blues. "Red Clay Blues" also points to Wright's growing interest in the potential of the narrative form for expressing deep emotion. The poem describes the efforts of a black Georgia immigrant to accustom his sensitive feet to the hard city pavements. Like Wright and the millions of blacks who had fled the terrors of the South seeking salvation, the immigrant of the poem is disillusioned by the harshness and loneliness of the North. In a plaintive account recalling "Death on the City Pavements" from *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright captures the persona's sense of alienation.


27 When Huddie Ledbetter, famous black blues singer, gave a recital in August, Wright decided to do a feature story on him for the communist press. Wright's conversations with Leadbelly, as he was called, supplemented his knowledge of the blues form. "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist Sings Songs of Scottsboro and His People" appeared in *The Daily Worker*, August 12, 1937. Other articles on black culture focus on the blues form, suggesting Wright's sustained interest in the subject.
From 1934-39 Wright published eighteen poems for the Communist press. First in Chicago and after May, 1937 in New York, Wright worked to realize his dream of being part of a group of progressive writers. Both the Communist Party and the poetic form that promised to fulfill that dream disappointed him. Wright's skills in reporting and his preference for realistic detail and character analysis led him to prefer the narrative form. Before he left Chicago, Wright had started work on his story about an adolescent growing up in the black ghetto. This tale was to earn Wright a lasting place in literary history. Part of his motive for the move to New York seems to have been a desire to escape from the growing restrictions of the political and cultural surroundings that had welcomed Wright but now seemed to be stifling him. Wright wanted to write and the Party demanded that he organize. Soon Wright would be forced to abandon both the Party and the poetic form in the best interest of his artistic growth.

Wright never returned to the poetic form as an instrument for social change. He never returned to the Communist Party at all. Wright did renew his interest in poetry during the solitude and withdrawal of his final months, however. After the summer of 1959 when his hopes for a stage adaptation of *The Long Dream* and his plans to move to London were thwarted, Wright fought exhaustion and recurring illness by writing poetry. His biographer tells us that a
young South African introduced Wright to the Japanese form of poetry called haiku during a casual conversation. Fascinated by his discovery that the form had an interesting history and complex rules for composition, Wright borrowed the four volumes his friend had by R. H. Blyth on the art of haiku and systematically studied the form. This Japanese verse form linking the subject of nature to some emotional tone or symbolic meaning was a welcome challenge to Wright. He learned of it during a time when his fiction, nonfiction, politics, and general reputation were under attack. Wright wrote some four thousand of these little poems between August, 1959 and his death the next year.

As his letters to Margrit de Sabloniere, his Dutch translator and confidante who corresponded with him almost daily, show, Wright was ambivalent about his new artistic interest. The haiku writing sustained him during a period of intense disappointment and sickness, yet Wright was unsure of the artistic merit of these poems. Wright confessed,

28 In thirteenth century Japan, competing poets at the Heian courts wrote the first tercet of the tanka, a fixed stanza of thirty-one syllables, to enter the contest. The poet considered the most clever improviser was declared the winner. Eventually this opening stanza became a poem of its own, consisting of seventeen syllables and three lines. The haiku evolved from the light, witty tone of the contest entries to the philosophic, serious works of later centuries.

29 Wright also read Tanogushi Buson, a painter who accented impressionism, and the poet Issa, who stressed the picturesque realism of the form. By going to these sources rather than imitating the modern European and American writers who adapted the form, Wright learned to use the exact form and practice of the original Japanese poem.
Never was I so sensitive as when my intestines were raw. So along came that Japanese poetry and harnessed this nervous energy. Maybe I'm all wrong about them. Maybe they have no value, but I'll see.  

By mid-April Wright had selected 811 examples from his thousands of efforts. He spent another month rearranging the sequence of seasons and moods depicted in the lines, before he finally mailed his eighty-page manuscript to William Targ for editorial comment on June 8, 1960. Wright answered his agent at that time that he was not abandoning fiction:

These poems are the result of my being in bed a great deal and it is likely that they are bad. I don't know. But don't get worried that I'm going daft. I'm turning back to fiction now.

Understandably cautious, Wright sorely missed the encouragement that he received from the John Reed Club when he first tried his hand at poetry. The poems had proven their worth to Wright over the months of his physical discomfort and mental turmoil, but his life-long sense of alienation made him doubtful that such a departure would meet with much commercial or critical approval. Still Wright dismissed his fears and sent his haiku out for perusal.

The verdict is not yet in. Wright's fears have not yet been resolved. The collection was rejected, and only a few of Wright's haiku have ever been published. Only the


32 These poems have appeared in Ollie Harrington, "The
Frenchman, Michel Fabre, who gained the confidence of Mrs. Wright and the access to his private papers needed for a final judgment, has published even a cursory study of these works. Still the few published haiku do allow us a glimpse at the form that helped Wright bear his long illness and deep depression. The poems are proof that the political activity, ideological development, and personal anguish of the intervening years had not diminished the sensitivity Wright showed in his earlier poetry. A delicacy of treatment and an admirable restraint characterize those haiku that continue the theme of alienation that runs throughout Wright's work. These few available examples of Wright's Japanese poetry deserve close attention.

The 5-syllable, 7-syllable, 5-syllable tercet pattern of the haiku is clear in:

I am nobody
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away

The melancholy tone and symbolic reference to the dying season work together to deepen the isolation of the speaker.

Like the outsiders in Wright's fiction and nonfiction, the

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See Appendix B for additional samples of these works.

33Published in Fabre, "The Poetry of Richard Wright," p. 20 and in The Unfinished Quest, p. 506.
persona stands alone, bereft of his identity and deprived of a sustaining harmony with physical nature as well. Wright's first-person point of view increases the irony of the announced anonymity and allows us immediate identification with the speaker.

The color and nature symbolism of white snow, familiar to readers of Wright's fiction, seems reversed in another haiku:

\[
\text{In the falling snow} \\
\text{A laughing boy holds out his palms} \\
\text{Until they are white}^{34}
\]

The snow does not threaten the boy with its looming accumulation, as the white clouds and white mountains of Native Son threaten Bigger. It is in the process of falling, and the boy welcomes the snow. The conclusion is surprising, however. Wright suggests that the boy means to whiten his palms with the falling snow. If he is black and the act is intended to purge him of his despised color, then the snow is as ominous as it is in Wright's fiction. It threatens because it encourages alienation from self.\(^{35}\)

Another haiku also contains Wright's ironically symbolic reference to snow. Again the first-person narrator speaks:

\[\text{...}\]

\(^{34}\)Published in Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, Ibid.

\(^{35}\)For this reading I am indebted to Fabre. Recalling the white clouds, shadows and dreams that his characters so often retreat into to escape their blackness and its stigma, I am inclined to read the boy's laughter as an attempt to retreat into the color of the dominant race. Often Wright's
Standing in the field
I hear the whispering of
Snowflake to snowflake

The snow does not menace the persona, it excludes him. As in Wright's fiction, the character is most isolated when his presence is not even acknowledged. Here individual flakes, despite their fragility, threaten the speaker because they whisper to each other in an apparent conspiracy. Man's exclusion from the harmony of nature is a recurrent theme in Wright's works. It is the theme of another published haiku as well:

A balmy spring wind
Reminding me of something
I cannot recall

In this poem the season is spring. There is no whiteness to oppress the speaker, yet he suffers a twinge of the same isolation. The wind stirs him to remember (his oneness with the universe? the meaning of his life?), but he cannot. The alienation that causes a man to lose touch with himself and that threatens the quality of future human life seems to be the affliction of the speaker in this poem.

In another haiku, separateness is experienced by other forms of life as well as man:

black youths suffer for attempting to ignore or deny their race. Of course, the poem does not specify the race of the boy.

36 Published in Webb, Richard Wright, p. 394.

37 Webb, p. 393. Also reprinted in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, p. 117.
The crow flew so fast
That he left his lonely caw
Behind in the fields\(^{38}\)

In this poem Wright pictures a bird alone, in flight, separated from the fields he has passed through but only fleetingly impressed. The speed of his flight seems to contribute to his subsequent loneliness. Perhaps by extension, Wright is still talking about modern man. The plight of urban, technological man is often that he is overlooked in the complexity and speed of modern society, in Wright's works. This note of the fleeting impression an individual life makes on the total scheme of things is well presented in the image of the lonely crow.

This same theme is even better presented in a poem that proved poignantly prophetic:

An empty sickbed
An indented white pillow
In weak winter sun\(^{39}\)

This haiku might be taken as a testimonial to the lonely death of its creator. The poem accurately describes the Parisian hospital room where Richard Wright surrendered to death on November 28, 1960. In those long, discouraging days, Wright might have believed that his lifetime of trying to find meaning and self-vindication in his writing would result in a pitiful "indented white pillow" on a "weak winter sun." He has left a far greater impression on the literate

\(^{38}\)Published in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, Ibid.

\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 118.
world than this little poem suggests.

The somber, discouraged tone of that sickbed scene is reminiscent of a haiku written the year before on Wright's 51st birthday:

It is September
The month in which I was born
And I have no thoughts

Wright's haiku poems, like most of his writing, reveal the search for meaning and the resistance to alienation that dominated his life. The poem written on his last birthday attests to the difficulty of his struggles, but a full human life was the challenge Wright never let himself ignore.

From his early days in Chicago, poetry had been an outlet for the intuitive belief in the possibility of universal harmony and for the appreciation of the beauty and wonder of life that Wright firmly acknowledged. Only months before his surprising death, Wright defined the personal value he had found in his writing:

... I'm pounding on the machine morning and night. It makes me feel much better. You know I think that writing with me must be a kind of therapeutic measure.... Maybe writing with me is like being psychoanalyzed. I feel all the poison being drained out....

Poetry certainly served this therapeutic function for Wright. As he lay in bed fighting the intestinal infection

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that drained him of his strength, Wright tried to drain the poison from his system three lines of poetry at a time.

Poetry had always served this function, however. Wright's first poetic efforts allowed him to embrace the "spiritual family" that was to shelter him from his isolation and from the limitations of his poverty and color. By moving through the Leftist writers and Communist officials who initially accepted him and his writing, Wright worked his way to a new level of isolation. To his intense disappointment, this new family became as stifling as his natural family had been. Wright began to realize that his alienation was not the result of his race or his limited resources, but was somehow tied up with his need for personal freedom. The early poems had done much for the Party, but they also launched Wright on a literary career that gave him the means for working out his sense of separateness. Though he left the Party with a deep sense of loss, Wright did not find that he had been merely exploited and left with nothing. The early poems he produced for the Party nourished his life-long ambition to be a writer. Through his poetic efforts, Wright developed his literary talents and moved on to the genre he would find even more helpful in his search for meaning and personal freedom. As he fought more debilitating weaknesses than race or poverty, his illness and suspicions of betrayal, Wright once again sought relief in poetic expression. Wright was fearful of a loss of
creativity during the long days of his illness, but he need not have feared this newest artistic venture.

World Publishers refused to publish Wright's haiku, but even the meager examples published since his death vindicate the dying energies that produced these poems. Wright's sensitivity to beauty and his awareness of man's isolation are communicated with a striking simplicity in these tiny pieces. A subtlety unexpected from the author of brutally realistic narrative and passionately vehement prose is conveyed. Wright's theme in some of his haiku is still the question of alienation and isolation that he often extends beyond man to other forms of life. Excluded from the secrets exchanged by the snowflakes and prompted by the wind to recall something he cannot remember, man is often no better off than the lonely caw or:

The dog's violent sneeze [that]
Fails to rouse a single fly
On his mangy back

Wright died as he lived, believing that man's separateness threatens to result in his meaninglessness. Man is naturally alone, Wright concluded, but he must continually resist the exclusion that renders him incapable of rousing a single fly on his mangy back. Man must discover his identity, realize his alienation, assert his freedom, or surrender into nothingness.

Published in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, p. 118.
Near the beginning and at the end of his life, Wright was more challenged by alienation than at any other time. By considering his poetic efforts, we discover that he lived by the principles he outlined in the rest of his works. When he believed the best social organization required isolated individuals to join with other outsiders, Wright committed his time and energies to the Communist Party. When he realized that Marxist theories would not eliminate his isolation, he worked to perfect his art and tried to learn to live alone. When he was near death and totally estranged from his American culture, Wright reached back to the thirteenth century and found a Japanese art form that helped him channel his energy and work through his depression. Poetry never eliminated Wright's feelings of isolation. Poetry did not make Wright rich, though for a time and within a limited circle it did make him famous. The poetic efforts of Richard Wright do show us that he died vigorously pursuing the goal of a free, self-directed, thus fully human life. As a result, the poetry of Wright must be considered important.
CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

Novelist, playwright, poet, Marxist, journalist, self-styled sociologist, humanist,... the labels describing Richard Wright go on and on. None of them explains the absorption on the faces of a literature class eagerly following Bigger in "Flight," however. No labels account for the surprise a black youth expresses when he reads Wright's descriptions of gang activity and then notes the date of Wright's works. None of these labels explains the vehemence of a shy student intent on defending Bigger against the charges of unwarranted violence. No label explains the insistence of an elderly white student reading "Fear" that Mary Dalton occasions her own death in Wright's best known novel. These experiences while teaching Native Son to university undergraduates led me to a wider reading of the works of Richard Wright than the criticism even suggests is in existence. Since the scholarship does not explain the power and persistent appeal of Wright's works, I reasoned that the texts themselves might provide the answer. This extensive reading revealed a curious conclusion.

Although the characters of his short stories and novels are usually black and the focus of Wright's nonfiction
and journalism is usually black life, Wright is not primarily concerned with race. His characters fight for their lives, for their land, for their humble possessions, but more often they struggle for the freedom to live as men in a society promising unlimited possibilities. The quality common to the haunting, solitary figures of Wright's works that first draws us to them and then takes us inside of them is their alienation. The extent and meaning of alienation in the life and works of Richard Wright is a key to a fair and needed reassessment of his works.

Wright and alienation have often been linked together. Some of the aesthetic failures of his fiction, such as his early preference for uneducated, inarticulate characters, are often explained in terms of the alienation theme Wright presents. The outsider theme embodied in his theory of the "tragic elites" is often referred to as proof of Wright's political naivete in his nonfiction. Wright's own tortured childhood is often related to his zeal in promoting communism and the resulting failure of his early poetry, lectures, and Marxist-oriented fiction. Alienation is a factor in Wright's artistic achievement, but too often the scope of his subject is reduced to racial alienation. Being a black man in America both motivated and severely restricted Wright's art, it is assumed. The arguments flow meaninglessly back and forth, because no one has ever traced the theme of alienation, so obvious in Wright's familiar
fiction, throughout the body of his published and unpublished works. More persuasive than a critical assertion supported by a few of Wright's familiar passages is a sustained textual analysis of the whole of Wright's works. Such a study proves that alienation was a complex, pervasive concern throughout the fifty-one years of Wright's life. This analysis proves too Wright's efforts to preserve the humanity of modern man.

Wright struggled "desperately for a home for his heart," just as the "tragic elite" of his dedication to White Man, Listen struggle. From a sharecropper's farm in Mississippi to a clinic mortuary in Paris; from a teenager doing odd jobs in Memphis to an established world traveler and writer; from a childhood spent in a variety of cities with a variety of relatives to an adulthood as an adored husband and father; Wright moved on and on in search for a home, a time, a place. Wright's focus on alienation began as a personal search. Wright knew fear, hunger, desertion, and repression at an early age. He saw race, religion and social restraints threaten to violate his sense of life. Wright never felt that he belonged to so restrictive a setting, and he vowed to become a writer to escape it. Wright was always alone. Even his writing did not eliminate his estrangement. His race and background militated against his chosen career, so Wright was drawn outside of his environment to the Communist Party. Communism allowed Wright to pursue his writing, made him feel that his isolation was a
fate shared by others and subject to correction, but ultimately left him again alone. Wright came to define alienation as an expansive reality inherent in humanity.

His life and his writing led to the conclusion that man is naturally and inevitably alone. Thus alienation seemed part of the challenge of remaining human in an increasingly mechanized, frighteningly complex world. The racial strife, feminist movement, consumer interest, and environmental debates of recent years prove Wright's intuitive concerns for modern life prophetic. Wright was afraid that the loneliness and helplessness of the individual might lead to the corrosion of modern life and the denial of the human spirit. So his writings both assert the isolation of the independent personality and explore possible solutions that allow man to cope with his alienation. The best solution Wright could offer is that isolated individuals join with others who share this painful separateness, since alone man is nothing.

Wright was too sensitive and too honest to remain for long within any kind of tradition. Thus approaching Wright's works with biographical or ideological assumptions is dangerous. Even Michel Fabre, the French scholar at the Sorbonne who spent twelve years researching Wright and whose acquaintance with Mrs. Ellen Wright allowed him access to unpublished manuscripts, notes, correspondence and other
papers not yet available to the academic community,\(^1\) admits that it is possible to support conflicting theories about Wright's thought and actions from his writings. So I remain convinced that a thematic study centering on the works and minimizing the significance of possible influences or critical opinion is the best approach to an assessment of Richard Wright. His own alienation seems to demand a movement from the works outward to the man and his reputation, rather than the reverse. Little textual analysis exists for the apprentice works, the minor novels, the collected stories, or the poetry. Most of the remarks on *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are attempts to justify certain assumptions about Wright. No study tracing the extent and significance of alienation in Wright's works has ever been attempted. Thus this study is a valuable investigation.

My research has both filled this gap and provided an explanation for the continuing appeal Wright holds for modern readers. His belief that literature and politics work hand-in-hand for social improvement sometimes threatened his art. Wright's eagerness to visit Third World countries may have hampered his observations when he judged them as a

\(^1\)Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, p. ix. It is his exclusive access to "several hundred pounds of documents designated as 'Wright's Personal Papers'" throughout his biography that explains my frequent reference to this text throughout this study. Fabre's efforts to present an unbiased account of these complex materials increases his usefulness.
Westerner and from an assumed superiority. Yet the dialogue, point of view, imagery and action of his fiction prove that Wright's subject was not the black man, the poor man—but man. The variety and focus of his journalism and early poetry suggest that Wright was interested in political man, but again his true subject is man. Too often to ignore, Wright's works lead to an exploration, even a definition of what it means to be fully human. His conclusions point to a need for recognition, an insistence on individual freedom, and to ultimate, inevitable alienation as the elements crucial to humanity.

It is this paradox of modern humanity that colors both Wright's life and his literary career. Wright was alone and misunderstood by his family, friends, fellow writers, and by his countrymen. He had reason to believe man was naturally alone. Yet Wright's sense of life rejected the view that human life is meaningless and man is helpless. Wright defined the challenge of future human society as man's fight for personal freedom. Wright urged individuals to merge their solitary efforts in joint protest against all that threatens to dehumanize man. For himself, this challenge meant writing and striving to reach as wide an audience as possible. To this effect, Wright wrote poems, newspaper articles, plays, travel reports, speeches, and radio scripts, as well as the familiar short stories and novels. A protest writer, propagandist, bitter expatriate or self-style...
intellectual may gather a faithful following around him for a time. Wright's appeal has outlived the popularity of these labels and the reputations of his critics. On the contrary, Wright's full achievement is only now becoming clear when we realize that his major subject is man. Wright originally wrote in defense of his own humanity. He continues to speak to us all in our own. He believed in an inescapable alienation, but he assures us that man need not remain simply alone and misanthropic. Such a deep, expansive concern written about with compassion and artistry assures Richard Wright a lasting place in world literature.
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"Between the World and Me"

And one morning while in the woods I suddenly stumbled upon the thing.
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms.
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me ...

There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of gray ashes.
There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky.
There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and a scorched coil of greasy hemp;
A vacant show, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.
And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches, butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore’s lipstick;
Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering smell of gasoline.
And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise into the eye sockets of a stony skull ...

And while I stood there my mind was frozen with a cold pity for the life that was gone.
The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled with icy walls of fear --
The sun fled in the sky; a night wind muttered in the grass and fumbled with leaves in the trees; the woods poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the witnesses rose and lived:
The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones.
The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh.
The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth; cigars and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red upon her lips.
And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that my life be burned ...
And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.
My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as they bound me to the sapling.
And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from me in patches,
And the down and the quills of the white feathers sank into my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.
Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a baptism of gasoline.
And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling my limbs.
Panting, begging, I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot sides of death.
Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun ...
APPENDIX B

HAIKU POEMS

of

Richard Wright

With a twitching nose
A dog reads a telegram
On a wet tree-trunk

Coming from the woods
A bull has a sprig of lilac
Dangling from a horn

The green cockleburs
Caught in the thick wooly hair
Of the black boy's head

Winter rain at night
Sweetening the taste of bread
And spicing the soup

Make up your mind snail!
You are half inside your house
And halfway out

The spring lingers on
In the scent of a damp log
Rotting in the sun

Keep straight down this block
Then turn right where you will find
A peach tree blooming
Just enough of rain
To bring the smell of silk
From the umbrellas

Why is the hail so wild
Bouncing so frighteningly
Only to lie so still

I would like a bell
Tolling this soft twilight
Over willow trees

Whose town did you leave
O wild and drowning spring rain
And where do you go?
The dissertation submitted by Theresa Drew Haymon has been read and approved by the following Committee:

Dr. Agnes Donohue, Chairman
Professor, English, Loyola

Dr. Thomas R. Gorman
Associate Professor and
Director of Graduate Program in English, Loyola

Dr. Eileen Baldeshwiler
Professor, English, Loyola

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Date: 5/7/76

Director's Signature