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Richard Wright's Depiction of the Black Experience: A Study in Stereotypes

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RICHARD WRIGHT'S DEPICTION OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE:
A STUDY IN STEREOTYPES

by
Charles Evans

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of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
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VITA

The author, Charles J. Evans, is the son of West and Cleo (Frazier) Evans, both deceased. He was born March 16, 1920, in Greenville, Kentucky.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. LAWD TODAY</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. NATIVE SON</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. 12 MILLION BLACK VOICES, BLACK BOY AND AMERICAN HUNGER</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE OUTSIDER</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. THE LONG DREAM</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. EIGHT MEN</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation intends to demonstrate that Richard Wright's fiction contributes significantly to the conventional literary distortions of Black life. It will show that Wright's depiction of the Black experience strengthens, supports and perpetuates the stereotypes that have filled much of American literature from its inception to the present time. It will show that the stereotypical rendition of the Black experience in Wright's fiction results in works that are lacking in versimilitude, with implausible action, defective plots, one-dimensional characters and superficial thought.

This judgment is contrary to the prevailing criticism on Wright and was arrived at with extreme reluctance. Wright's work has not entirely escaped negative scrutiny, but most such criticism has concentrated on defects not related to the object of this research. In terms of Wright's depiction of the Black experience, he has been hailed by many critics as being without parallel. The following two quotations referring to Wright's most famous work are illustrative: "Now the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America is unquestionably Richard Wright's Native
Son.\textsuperscript{1} The fact that the author of this statement is a famous Black author somewhat critical of Wright, even in this same essay, makes it more significant.\textsuperscript{2} "The day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever,"\textsuperscript{3} writes the second critic. The few contrary views, expressed mostly by Blacks, have focused on faults that were isolated and incidental. In general, critics have failed to notice that Wright's depictions of Black life in most of his works form a pattern that fits almost perfectly the traditional literary stereotypes of Black life. Two examples provide interesting illustrations. One critic condemns Native Son for its distortion of the Black experience, but praises Lawd Today as a masterpiece.\textsuperscript{4} The other critic thinks so highly of Wright's works, in general, but so negatively of Lawd Today that he is reluctant to concede that it is even Wright's work. He writes: "Unlike Wright's known work, it contains practically every offensive Negro

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2Baldwin sharply criticizes Wright also in the essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," which first appeared in Zero, I (Spring, 1949), 54-58.
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stereotype known to American literature. . . . If it really is Wright's work, it is doubtful that he ever intended it to see the light of day."5 [Emphasis added.]

Both critics see the same flaws but in different works and both apparently fail to see that the pattern persists in virtually all of Wright's fiction and much of his non-fiction as well. The word "virtually" is deliberately used here to qualify this charge because attempts will not be made to suggest that there are no exceptions, no isolated instances or single short works that present contrary views. It is precisely the point, however, that these contrary views, when found, are exceptions. They must be duly noted but must not be allowed to conceal the fact that Richard Wright's depiction of the Black experience is, on the whole, a distortion, a stereotype, bordering in many instances on caricature.

What is stereotype? Literature abounds with examples of stereotypes of various people at various times.6 But since this work is about a Black author who wrote primarily about Black people, it will confine itself to the


6Lewis Carlson and George Colburn, eds., In Their Place: White America Defines Her Minorities, 1850-1950 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972), has extensive discussions of stereotypes on a number of minorities. Tree of Hate by Philip W. Powell (Basic Books, Inc., 1971) is an exhaustive study of anti-Hispanic propaganda and prejudices.
Black stereotype. A White critic, writing in the early seventies, put it this way:

The main elements in the Negro stereotype are generally familiar to the American public. The Negro is pictured as simple, childlike, lazy, dependent, often clever but never ambitious, content with his life and with the innocent or amoral merrymaking in which he indulges. . . . He is often comical because he is often a buffoon. His common sense makes him wary of too much education but he has the wisdom of simple creatures. . . . 7

A Black critic, nearly a quarter century earlier, in writing of the plantation tradition's depiction of Black life, used almost identical words when he wrote: "In general, however, the Negro is presented as a simple, contented, comic, credulous, picturesque and sometimes philosophical character." 8

Earlier still, the same year that Wright published his "Blueprint for Negro Writing," another Black scholar commented on stereotype with these words:

When slavery was being attacked, for instance, Southern authors countered with the contented slave; when cruelties were mentioned, they dragged forward the comical and happy hearted Negro. . . . Slavery was represented as a boon for Negroes on theological, biological and psychological warrant. . . . A corollary was the wretched freedman, a fish out of water. 9

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Brown comments further on stereotypes by noting that "Many authors who are not hostile to the Negro and some who profess friendship still stress a 'peculiar endowment' at the expense of the Negro's basic humanity." 10

Equally cogent was Brown's observation that

Since there is no stereotype without some basis in actuality, it goes without saying that individuals could be found resembling Page's loyal Uncle Billy or Stark Young's William Veal or Dixon's brutal Gus. . . . But when, as is frequent, generalizations are drawn from these about a race or a section, the author oversteps his bounds as a novelist, and becomes an amateur social scientist whose guesses are valueless, and even dangerous. Fiction, especially on so controversial a subject as the American Negro, is still subjective, and novelists would do well to recognize that they are recording a few characters in a confined social segment, often from a prejudiced point of view.11 [Emphasis added.]

The fact that Wright was Black does not preclude the possibility that he looked at Black life from a "prejudiced point of view." As Brown has pointed out, one need not feel hostility per se to Blacks to demean their humanity, and certainly not to present them as stereotypes. The following quotation is illustrative:

What bitter irony it is that the false stereotypes of Black labor, a stereotype which still plagues Blacks today, was fashioned not primarily by the oppressors who strove to keep their chattel wrapped in the chains of bondage, but by the most ardent opponents of slavery, by those who worked most diligently to destroy the chains of slavery.12

10 Ibid. 
11 Ibid., p. 3. 
Nonetheless, the question of Wright's self-hatred because of his Blackness cannot entirely be ignored. Margaret Walker, an outstanding Black author in her own right, and an early personal friend of Wright's, makes this observation:

He loved white. I think Wright had a kind of hatred of himself as a Black man and that he could not conceive of a Black man in terms of greatness and heroism. . . . Think of the novels. . . . Can you think of one in which the Black man is a whole man?  

Margaret Walker could well have added that there is also no novel by Wright in which there is a whole Black woman or even in which there is a whole Black child. Self-hatred, of course, may not account entirely for the warped vision that afflicts Wright when viewing his own people. A different explanation may be found in Wright's own words. In discussing "The Problem of Perspective," he writes:

Perspective is that part of a poem, novel or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.  

Whether Wright stood too close or too far away, his vision was generally blurred, distorted, almost perverted.

Distance, however, may not be the only question involved.

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here. To use a phrase repeated by Wright himself, the decisive factor may have been the "angle of vision."\textsuperscript{15} Dealing with a similar problem concerning Paul Laurence Dunbar, one critic wrote that Dunbar restricts himself to Black material, but sees his material through the mask of white preconceptions. . . . Dunbar wrote about the Black man but he pictured him as the white man wanted to see him—as some kind of quaint, subhuman oddity; . . .\textsuperscript{16} [Emphasis added.]

One does not have to agree with this assessment to see its possible application to Wright.\textsuperscript{17} A statement by Roger Rosenblatt illuminates this possibility. He writes:

For a black character to be acceptable within a white framework, ordinarily the only framework available to him, he must to a certain extent be brutalized. To become respectable within that framework is to become subhuman, and if one is judged to be subhuman, it follows that his capabilities and aspirations will be treated as subhuman as well.\textsuperscript{18} [Emphasis added.]

This extended exploration on possible explanations for

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{17}Darwin Turner points out in A Singer in the Dawn, ed. by Jay Martin (New York: Dodd Mead & Co., 1975), p. 70, that "Blacks themselves have disagreed about the authenticity of Dunbar's interpretations. Some obviously enjoy the characterizations. . . . Others, however, argue that Dunbar did not know Southern Blacks and was contemptuous of them. These readers insist that Dunbar merely perpetuated the stereotypes of Blacks as shiftless, lazy, easily satisfied. People concerned with nothing except eating, sleeping and making love."

Wright's stereotypical presentation of Black life was not intended to arrive at any definitive conclusion, but simply to provide some rational basis for attempting to understand what Wright did, by speculating on why he did it. "To understand a literary work," write Scholes and Kellogg, "we must first attempt to bring our own reality into as close an alignment as possible with the prevailing view in the time of the work's composition."^{19} Sterling Brown's observation that stereotypes have some basis in actuality may also help explain the use that Wright has made of them. Selective perception and projection on the part of both writer and reader are harmoniously joined. Even the victims, looking down on the stereotypes, can now take some satisfaction in knowing that "they may be my people, but they are not my kind." This fact lends authenticity to the stereotypes and makes them more insidious but provides no literary justification. Fiction may be an imitation of life, a slice of life, or something else, but it is not life itself. Henry James wrote that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."^{20} One may argue with this statement but


hardly claim that literature can supplant life. Aristotle, over two thousand years ago, approached this question with these words: "... it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity."21 Walter Bate, in his book, Criticism: The Major Text, makes Aristotle's meaning clear:

Probability as Aristotle uses the term does not mean a narrow, realistic verisimilitude, nor does it mean "ordinary"... Probability applies to inner coherence and structure, the ordered interconnection and working out of a plot. As opposed to mere chance—however possible that chance may be,—probability implies that the culmination of what happens arises naturally and inevitably, by causal interrelation, out of what precedes it.22

It may be argued that the canons of literary criticism developed by Aristotle are not applicable to contemporary Black literature. Some, perhaps, are not, but the dictum that human beings in fiction act like human beings is as valid to Black literature today as to any other literature at any time. This has never been in question. What really has been questioned is the humanity of Blacks. "Whether the Negro was human was one of the problems that racked the brains of the cultured old South," writes Brown. "The finally begrudged admission that perhaps he was has re-


remained largely nominal in letters as in life. Complete, complex humanity has been denied to him." 23 This was done not only by Southern writers but by Northern writers as well. The authors of Race and the American Romantics indicate how deeply infected were many Northern writers, including our poet of Democracy, Walt Whitman. 24

In 1926, John H. Nelson, in the first major study of the Negro in American literature, dismissed the authors of slave narratives with these words:

None of them [the authors of the slave narratives] were quite representative of the happy-go-lucky, ignorant, coon-hunting, fun-loving field hands who more than any other class of slaves, typified the great mass of black men throughout the South. 25 [Emphasis added.]

A Black critic, over forty years later, inveighed against that kind of thinking as follows:

A nation incapable of recognizing Negroes as other than inferior beings . . . has been unable to transcend the myths used to buttress the arguments of slaveholders and modern-day segregationists. Even so gifted a writer and liberal thinker as Norman Mailer can today be found parroting the most popular of such myths: . . . "the Negro . . . could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival, the art of the primitive; he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the plea-

23 Sterling Brown, Negro in American Fiction, p. 3.
Nelson M. Blake, drawing his conclusions from Wright's own words, says that Wright could see how other Negroes adapted; how they acted out roles that the White race had mapped for them. "These Negroes found an outlet for their frustration in gambling, drinking and wenching," but, according to Blake, "Wright could not settle for these shabby substitutes for achievement." The theory explaining Black behavior has shifted from a biological to a sociological base; the Sambo thesis is embellished and transferred from history to literature. It is in these

26 Addison Gayle, Jr., ed. Black Expression (New York: Weybright & Tally, 1969), pp. xviii-xix. Addison Gayle in The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America (New York: Anchor, Doubleday, 1976) points out how closely Mailer's image of the Black man parallels the popular image of the twenties. As an example, he quotes from Nigger Heaven, a 1926 novel by Carl Van Vechten, as follows: "Hated from the outside and therefore hating himself, the Negro was forced into the position of exploring all those moral wilderness of civilized life which the square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or moribund or self-destructive or corrupt. . . . But the Negro, not being privileged to gratify his self-esteem with the heady satisfactions of categorical condemnation, chose to move instead in that other direction where all situations are equally valid, and in the worst of perversion, promiscuity, pimpery, drug addiction, rape, razor slash bottle break, what have you, the Negro discovered and elaborated a morality of the bottom," p. 278-79.


28 Fogel and Engerman in Time on the Cross, date this shift during World War II: "Now however, the explana-
disguises that we encounter Wright's stereotypes, streamlined and brought up-to-date. This makes it necessary to scrutinize his works from a broader spectrum than that afforded by the art for art's sake school. This makes the subject, it seems, no less worthy of literary investigation, however, unless one assumes that the idea of form or structure is the sole criterion for measuring the worth of a work of art. Whatever value the idea of form or structure may have, it clearly is inadequate as a single measuring rod for evaluating Black literature with socio-economic implications.

Nick Aaron Ford, in an article in *College English* entitled "Black Literature and the Problem of Evaluation," deals extensively with this question. He writes as follows:

First, the overwhelming insistence upon aestheticism as the major criterion for literary evaluation must be repudiated. . . .

In a significant sense the emphasis on aestheticism is an emphasis on the formal, the non-human, the determination not to become involved in the sordid aspect of the human condition, the preoccupation with contemplating the stars while bogged down in the muck and mire of the terrestrial terrain. It may be more than a coincidence that aestheticism enjoyed its greatest veneration in a period when the unimaginable horrors of the atomic bomb were inflicted upon the unsuspecting civilians of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. . . . At its worst, the glorification of aestheticism can mean the false belief that literature exist in a vacuum or is

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tion was not biological inferiority but unfortunate socio-logical circumstances," p. 259.
the special property of aristocrats with extraordinary sensibilities.29

This is not to argue that the examination of form and structure has no place in the evaluation of Black literature but merely that a preoccupation with belles-lettres alone is not the only perspective from which Wright's depiction of the Black experience can be viewed.

Peter Nazareth makes an interesting comment when he writes:

Previously, when I read literature, I asked how good is this work? What does it mean? What moral values emerge from it? Now, I started asking, in addition, what does the work reveal about the society the writer is dealing with? Does it reveal any thing about my society directly or is it irrelevant to my society? How powerful is the writer's vision and how central to me and my society are the issues he raises and the way in which he raises these issues?30

This does not mean that an author must be a propagandist or a sociologist. As Wright himself put it:

His vision need not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple. The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence should be there.31


Wright never retreated from this theoretical position but, in his own works, he rarely measured up to its requirements. What a writer means to say in a given work and what he actually says is not always synonymous. "Literature," as Rene Wellek and Austin Warren write, "is a social institution using as its medium, language--a social creation."\(^{32}\) "If fiction has no meaning," says Max Westbrook, "except that assigned by the individual writer, then it cannot be said to mean at all or to have any coherent status."\(^{33}\) Finally, as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg observed: "Meaning in a work of narrative art is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the "real" world, the apprehendable universe."\(^{34}\) The fictional world created by Wright bears little relationship to the "real" world, the apprehendable universe, but there is a close correspondence between it and the world of stereotypes so familiar to American literature. There may be slight variations, inconsistencies and even contradictions between Wright's creations and traditional literary stereotypes, but the substance remains the same. Contradictions and inconsis-


\(^{34}\) Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative, p. 82.
tencies have always been a part of the literary convention. One critic put it in these words:

Blacks have been pictured as senselessly violent and dangerous even while they were also depicted as docile, passive and obedient. . . . Similarly, Negroes have been pictured at one and the same time as compliant, brute-like workers and idle, easy going hedonists. Antithetical aphorisms such as "to work like a nigger" and "lazy as a nigger" had them conforming to a stereotype if they worked hard or if they did not.\(^\text{35}\)

Despite contradictions, inconsistencies and the necessity to "see characters and incidents within context," a fairly clear composite picture of the Black stereotype emerges. Rather than cite specific instances in literature illustrative of the stereotype, it has been considered more representative to call on disinterested scholarship, that is, authorities who in discussing stereotypes did not have Richard Wright's works directly in mind. In this vein, one final reference will serve to recapitulate what generally has previously been stated. The source again is Marden and Meyer. They pose this question: "What, if any such traits characterize American Negroes, in general, which differentiate them from whites?"\(^\text{36}\) They continue as follows:

If one seeks the answer from stereotypes of Negroes held generally by most twentieth-century white Americans, it runs about as follows: The Negro is lazy, won't work unless he has to, and doesn't know what to do with his money when he gets it. He is dirty, smelly,


\(^\text{36}\)Ibid.
careless in appearance, yet given to flashy dressing. He is much more "sexy" than the white man, and exercises little restraint in sexual expression. He has low mental ability, incapable of anything but menial labor. He is naturally religious, but his religion is mostly emotion and superstition.37

The authors add that obviously by this time an increasing number of White Americans no longer hold this image of the Negro. Whether the optimism of the last statement was deserved or not in 1968 does not bear crucially upon the main question. One also does not have to necessarily agree that these stereotypes were generally held by most twentieth century White Americans earlier. What is germane is the fact that the stereotype did abound in our literature38 and in many other aspects of our culture as well. Henry T. Sampson, notes, for instance, that although movies did not invent the American Black stereotype for stupidity, submissiveness, irresponsibility, laziness, and cowardice, they have contributed mightily to reenforcing and enhancing this stereotype all over the world.39

37 Ibid.

38 The stereotype was the predominant image, at least during the thirties, on the stage, on the radio, and in films. Sambo, Rastus, Buckwheat, Amos n Andy, Stepin-Fetch-it, Farina and Aunt Jemima were among the most popular purveyors of this image. Among the special studies on this subject are the following: From Sambo to Superspade by Daniel J. Leab; Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks by Donald Bogle, 1973; The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942 by Thomas Gripps, 1977; and Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures by Gary Null, 1975.

In the course of his study, Mr. Sampson quotes Stephen F. Zito, *The Black Film Experience*, as follows:

Their importance [Black films produced by Blacks between 1910 and 1950] is that at a time when white audiences thought the role of Stepin-Fetch-it was a realistic interpretation of Negro character, there were films that attempted to represent (not misrepresent) all kinds and degrees of Negro character—good and bad, and all shades in between.\(^{40}\)

It is not the purpose of this work to attempt to demolish this image or to argue with Wright's view of the Black experience, but simply to show that his view of Black life, as reflected in his fiction, corresponds, in almost every particular, to the traditional racial stereotype.

The approach to this task will be chronological. It will be based on the date of publication except where the date of composition clearly establishes a significantly earlier date and except in instances of short stories published separately and later collected. In that case, the date of publication of the collected volume will govern.\(^{40}\)

\(^{40}\) *Ibid.*, p. 82.
CHAPTER I

LAWD TODAY

"Fiction" writes one critic, "is the literary genre that permits the widest latitude for the full expression of contemporary perceptions and values." 1 Whatever else may be said about Wright's fiction, one can hardly deny that it deals with contemporary perceptions and values. Wright also states that "the artist owes it to himself and to those who live and breathe with him to render unto reality that which is reality's." 2 One does not have to subscribe completely to these pronouncements to use them as a frame of reference in contrast with Wright's stereotypes. Lawd Today is an excellent novel to begin with not only because it was the first one that Wright completed, 3 yet the last published, 4 but also because it foreshadows all that he produced in between.


4 Since the Posthumous publication of Lawd Today in
The introductory chapter was intended to establish, in broad outline, what constitutes the Black stereotype or stereotypic view of Black life. An analysis of Lawd Today will show to what extent it reflects, perpetuates, modifies or departs from the conventional literary stereotypes of the past. By dealing with the major characters, then selected scenes and episodes, the significant aspects of the novel can be covered. The main characters are Jake Jackson, the protagonist; his fellow postal workers, Bob, Al, Slim, and Lil, Jake's wife. Wright introduces Jake to his readers as follows: "A pair of piggish eyes blinked at sunlight. Low growls escaped his half-parted lips"\(^5\) (p. 10). This description could easily fit an animal, but Wright soon makes the association to Black people clear. He writes:

In an oily expanse of blackness were set two cunning eyes under which hung flabby pouches. A broad nose squatted fat and soft, its two holes gaping militantly frontward like the barrels of a shotgun. His lips were full, moist and drooped loosely, trembling as he walked (p. 13). [Emphasis added.]

One of the characteristics of the racial stereotype is the exaggeration of the physical features of its victim. It is difficult to imagine a Black American with lips that

\(^5\)Page numbers hereafter citing Wright's own works will be given within the text and refer to the edition listed in the bibliography.
hang so loosely that they tremble merely from walking. It is also amazing, considering the history of Blacks in this country and judging from their description in our literature, how many in Wright's fiction remain without any admixture of European blood. This emphasis on the Blackness of a character's complexion, certainly through the thirties, was intended as a negative characteristic and was generally accompanied with an exaggeration of other physical features such as lolling white eyes, big mouth and usually red lips. Bob, the first of Jake's co-workers that we meet is as black as Jake and has a running venereal disease (p. 73) but Jake says that the disease "ain't no worse'n a bad cold. . . . A man ain't a man unless he done had it" (pp. 75-76). Al is the next member to be introduced and we see him as a fat Black, wearing a yellow chinchilla and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds (p. 79). When asked what he had for breakfast, Al gives the following answer:

Let's see now. . . . I ate a half loaf of bread, all toasted golden brown and buttered. I reckon I ain't sure now, but I reckon I ate about ten scrambled eggs, it might have been more. And a pound of bacon dripping with good old grease. And a pot of coffee. And some plum preserves. I had a apple on my way here, and I'm hungry now (p. 80).

Wright tells us very little about Slim, the last of Jake's cohorts to join the circle. One learns only that he has brown skin, an advanced case of tuberculosis and an insatiable lust for women. Taking the four as a collective, the finished product is the same old stereotype: sex-lust,
venereal disease, exaggerated "Negroid" features, excessive appetites, and love of flashy clothes. Before leaving home that morning, the hardest decision Jake had to make was deciding on the suit he was going to wear. Wright takes a whole page to discuss this problem and describe Jake's wardrobe (pp. 30-31).

Lil, in terms of her own action, hardly deserves the label of a major character, but she assumes importance in terms of the action that she generates and what is revealed through this action. She is deeply involved in religion of the tractarian sort, self-effacing, inept and foolish. It is noteworthy that two other references touching on the church or religion were to Father Divine (p. 81) and to the fact that Slim's first conquest was with a preacher's wife. Slim was thirteen (p. 189). Lil has been ill for the past seven years as a result of a botched abortion that Jake had tricked her into having.

In almost the first scene in the book, Lil and Jake are arguing over Lil's "attention" to the milkman. It is obvious that this is merely a pretext and had it not been convenient, Jake would have invented another excuse to attack her. The quarrel soon becomes violent:

"I am asking you for the last time to shut up." Lil knew she was risking danger, but she could not resist. "Make me." She dodged but too late. Jake's open palm caught her square on her cheek, sounding like a pistol shot. She spun around from the force of the blow, falling weakly against the wall screaming, "Don't you hit me no more! Don't you hit me no more" (p. 21).
Jake did hit her again and again; he gave her arm a six-inch twist and kicked her too. The scene ends with these lines: "'Put something to eat on my table before I give you some more.' Sniffing and blinded by tears, she fumbled for the handle of the coffee pot" (p. 22). Two hundred pages later, near the very end of the novel, we get this scene:

"Don't beat me! Don't beat me Jake!" He grabbed for her throat and she gave a lunge; he went backward and pulled her with him. . . . He ripped her gown half open. . . . I'm going to see how sick you is! . . . "Naw, naw." She spoke in a breath softer than a whisper with her eyes fixed in horror upon his face (p. 223).

Lil finally gets the best of Jake, thanks to his intoxicated condition and a handy piece of thick glass. The author writes:

Lil dropped the piece of glass; its edges were stained from cuts on her hand. She stood over Jake a moment, watched his drunken sleep. . . . "Lawd I wished I was dead," she sobbed softly. Outside an icy wind swept around the corner of the building, whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit (p. 225).

With these lines Lawd Today comes to a close. Between the first and final scenes Wright shows the reader many glimpses of Black life throughout the Black community, but Wright shows us very little that does not conform to the traditional stereotype of Black people. Wright does not explicitly state that his picture of Black life is the only possible view or even a total view, but Wright's depiction is such that one is almost forced to deduce that it
is at least typical. This may not be what Wright intended; it is what the book does. Northrop Frye, in an essay entitled "Literary Criticism," discusses the question of "intentional fallacy" and notes that critics often ask what an author means when the real question is, What does the text say? Another critic, in an article that can be considered, on the whole, quite favorable to Wright, notes the following:

With Jake Jackson in Lawd Today Wright had proceeded with a controlled naturalism to present in unrelieved contempt a portrait of a Black Chicago worker. The man is created in terms of every popular cliche of Negro home-life, tastes in food and clothing, attitude toward work and play, his uses of being a Negro, his utter emptiness of value. [Emphasis added.]

This is an accurate assessment of Lawd Today and it must be remembered that Jake Jackson and his cohorts are not derelicts, not the hard-core unemployed or even the underpaid menial laborers. They are postal workers, and postal workers, certainly in the Black community during the thirties, were representative of the "better" segment of the Black community. Jake acknowledges that the post office is a good job when he says: "This is about the best job a black man can get and they don't even want us here"


7 Harold McCarthy, "Richard Wright, the Expatriate as Native Son," American Literature, XLIV (March, 1972), 102.
(p. 137). So Wright has chosen characters from the Black community considerably above the average and transformed them into stereotypes.

One might accept Wright's delineation of Jake's character as the objective rendition of someone that he knew, directly or indirectly, or as the artistic creation of someone that he imagined of a certain type. It would then follow that Jake's cronies would be much like Jake himself. It may also follow that their action might closely resemble the activities that Wright portrays. This, however, cannot be a rationalization for these images because Wright gives us a much broader spectrum of the Black community than the antics of these four; yet the picture never changes. Wright, indeed, casts a wide net into the sea of Black humanity, but he rarely manages to pull forth anything but dregs. Peter Nazareth makes an interesting analogy that applies in Wright's case. He says that "A writer can be compared to a fisherman. The amount and kind of fish the fisherman catches depends not only on where and how far he throws his net, but also on the kind of net he possesses." No matter where Wright looks at Black life, he sees only shallowness, superficiality or worse. Fabre tells us that Wright

... hoped to write something with the South Side as a setting and the Blacks who lived there as characters.

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To this end, he practiced recording their speech and describing their customs, referring to available sociology books in order to characterize different types of black people. . . . Richard observed what went on at the post office in order to write the novel whose broad outlines were already those of Lawd Today.9 [Emphasis added.]

Fabre does not record the exact sociology books that Wright consulted, but Wright apparently did not learn from these much about Black life, not even Black life of the common people. Fabre's assertion that since Wright in Lawd Today "had chosen to portray ordinary life, his adolescent penchant for the imaginary and the supernatural gave way to versimilitude" is questionable.10 If versimilitude means true to life in any significant sense rather than mere surface similarity, Lawd Today is as lacking in this quality as were Wright's earlier stories "The Voodoo of Hells Half Acre" and "Superstition."

"For the first time," says Fabre, Wright "was trying to transform, via dialogue and description, both his rudimentary sociological knowledge and his own experience."11 Wright's own predisposition to view Black life as bleak and barren combined with only "rudimentary sociological knowledge" might well have contributed to the failure of Lawd Today. Wright might have benefited from a familiarity with the best social thinking of the thirties but

9Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 86.
10Ibid.
11Ibid.
being unguided, he may very well have stumbled on to the worst. A typical example of the latter is a book by Robert Bean, *The Races of Man*, reprinted the same year that Wright was working on *Laud Today*. The following quotation is illustrative:

... The psychic activities of the Black Race are a careless jolly vivacity, emotions and passions of a short duration, and a strong and somewhat irrational egoism. Idealism, ambition, and co-operative faculties are weak. They love amusement and sport, but they have little initiative and adventurous spirit. ... Their worst diseases come from sexual promiscuity. ... 12

The shortcomings of the Black race as detailed here coincide almost point for point with the traditional literary stereotype except that Bean makes implicit a biological explanation. It also coincides with Wright's representation of Black characters except that in Wright there is an implied sociological reason. In *Laud Today* the sociological explanation, if it exists at all, is extremely weak. Since the book did not write itself and since the author had a wide range of possibilities from which to choose, even at the bottom of the scale, the responsibility for the final product can only be Wright's. This idea may be summed up as follows:

The choice of one word rather than any other is entirely subjective. Words form sentences and ultimately paragraphs which in spite of the author's best efforts will always reflect his perceptions, even his interpre-

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tations and prejudices. Nor is the camera more oblig­ing; they say it does not lie, but its truth is what the photographer chose to see and how he chose to see it.13

These lines were found in an author's note to a book written about the debasement and stench that con­fronted a number of women in a community in Italy. The picture that emerges, however, is not only one of squalor but strength as well, not only degredation but the dignity also that resides in the human spirit no matter what the race or socio-economic status. Wright's panoramic view of Black life presents not only Jake Jackson and his cronies but Black life in general, in "unrelieved contempt," to re­peat Harold McCarthy's phrase. He can take the most com­monplace act and make it seem repulsive. An example of this is in the scene just before the final scene in the book. Jake and his buddies are beaten up and thrown out of Rosie's, an after hours' joint. Jake had "jumped bad" when he discovered his pockets had been picked, presumably by one of the prostitutes. In the street, Jake coughs, but since no indication has been given of him having a cold, the reader must assume that this is a simple cough like anyone else's. But note the graphic details:

He coughed and a string of phlem swung from his lips. He bent over and shook, it still swung. He caught the string between his fingers and flung it to the snow.

... One hundred dollars gone in one night! ...
Goddamn that whore! He straightened, smiled, and yelled to the top of his voice: "But when I was flying I was a Flying Fool!" (p. 219)

The last statement is supposed to typify something about the Black man's psyche; it is repeated by Ralph Ellison\(^\text{14}\) and by William Grier and Price Cobb\(^\text{15}\) without any reference to Wright. It is difficult to see what the scene subsequent to the first fight with Lil typifies, however, except the stereotype. Although Jake has stated several times that he must get a hair cut that morning, he saturates his hair with grease, stout beeswax no less, just before going to the barber shop. Though his barber shop is a well-known neighborhood hang-out, not far from Jake's home, Jake seems almost lost in trying to find his way there. He is not drunk and it is broad daylight. Jake "looked at the storefront to see where he was. Doc's place is along here somewhere. Yeah, there it is, down the street a bit" (p. 61). No notice of the beeswax is apparently taken by the barber. But Jake noticed this scene before entering:

The shop was crowded with a mass of waving arms flashing teeth and twisted black faces . . . everybody was screaming at once. . . . In the center of the crowd five black faces were yelling at each other. He caught a glimpse of Doc Higgins, his small, fat mouth opening


and shutting rapidly, his head bobbing back and forth as though his neck were made of rubber (p. 61).

Perhaps not much variety in the types of characters could be expected at the betting parlor or the house of prostitution. Wright does mention that the women in the latter are of all different complexions. There is a focus on the blackness and colorful regalia of the leaders in a parade the foursome passes but this might be expected since it is an apparent allusion to the Garveyites. One would expect, however, that the people watching the parade to be quite representative of crowds. But Wright, not Jake, focuses on a "Young, brown-skinned high school girl with dirty stockings and rundown heels" (p. 109) [Emphasis added]. He describes a Black woman "with three teeth missing" and a Black woman whom the "contrast between the overdose of white powder and the natural color of her skin was so sharp that she looked like two people instead of one" (p. 113).

In the Post Office, there is a Black named Howard whom Jake considers an Uncle Tom, but we see no evidence for this contention. He is on the Postal Review Board, before which Jake appears. There are references to a group of Black women as well as a group of White women and the contrast is interesting. The Whites are presented primarily through Jake; the Blacks are pictured directly.

To his left Jake saw a party of six young white girls coming down the aisle. . . . He heard murmurs of laugh-
ter, light, silvery. Through lowered eyes he glimpsed the flash of a flesh-colored ankle (pp. 147-48).

This is the essence of the scene involving the White girls; the Black scene follows: "A group of about fifteen Negro women was checking at the Detail Station. Most of them were beyond thirty. . . . They were round-shouldered and dumpy-looking, . . . " (p. 143).

A more significant contrast between Black and White is given in the following paragraphs:

The white clerks got their hats and coats and hurried up the stairs. Many of them carried their books under their arms; most of them were young students who regarded their job in the Post Office as something temporary to tide them through the University. Jake scowled as he watched their tense eager faces. "Them white boys are always in a hurry to get somewhere. And as soon's they get out of school they's going to be big shots, but a nigger just stays a nigger." He turned and looked toward the tables; many of the Negro clerks had remained to play bridge. . . . (pp. 121-22).

"White folks sure is funny," Jake said to Slim. "How's that?" "They don't never set down and take things easy." "Hell naw," said Al. "They figgering on how to get up in the world." "They rush about like bees." "Yeah but ain't no use of a black man rushing." "Naw cause we ain't going nowhere."

When a black man gets a job in the Post Office he's done reached the top. We just as well take it easy and have some fun cause the white folks got us hog tied. . . . (p. 122).

While some of the above is simply a reflection of Jake's ideas, much of it is clearly objectified. The White clerks do go off somewhere with books under their arms and many of the Black clerks do remain to play bridge. The last lines of the paragraph are supposed to be the explanation for the difference in the behavior of the two groups
but they are more of an excuse than an explanation.

Michel Fabre writes that Lawd Today is heavily autobiographical. It is true that Wright worked in the Post Office for a short time, but where is the character in the book that remotely resembles him? Fabre writes: "Work ended either at 12:30 in the afternoon, 8:30 in the evening or 4:30 in the morning, and Wright would immediately go home to sleep a little before starting to write."¹⁶ Jake Jackson cannot wait, after quitting work, to get to the whorehouse and who can imagine him or any other Black character in the novel writing a book? Fabre says that "Many white students, for instance, worked there to support themselves" and we see them in the book. But we do not see the Black students, though Fabre gives the following information: "Among the Blacks, too, were some who hoped to change their jobs and pursue a career. . . . Among the Blacks were Dan Burley who was determined to become a newspaper reporter."¹⁷ Lawd Today does make a passing reference to college students whom we may assume are Black; but they are seen only in the whorehouse. He writes:

There were gamblers, pimps, petty thieves, dope peddlers, small fry politicians, grafters, racketeers of various shades, athletes, high school and college students in search of "life," and hordes of sex-eager youngsters (p. 199). [Emphasis added.]

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¹⁶ Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 79.
¹⁷ Ibid.
Dan Burley went on to become an outstanding newspaper reporter, but he never managed to find his way in any of Wright's novels. But, then, Wright, the intelligent, determined moralist, never found his way in any of his novels either, certainly not in Lawd Today. Margaret Walker asserts that Wright himself considered Lawd Today one of his worst works but this did not stop Wright from repeatedly trying to get it published. This version finally published posthumously in 1963, according to Fabre, is very close to the second or third draft completed by Wright in 1936. Commonplace was the first title for Lawd Today; a later title was Cesspool.

19 Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 136.
20 Ibid., p. 105.
21 Ibid., p. 135.
CHAPTER II

UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN

After Lawd Today, Uncle Tom's Children comes as a welcome relief. It was first published by Harper in 1938 but contained only "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," "Long Black Song," and "Fire and Cloud." The edition of Uncle Tom's Children used in this study was published in 1940 and also included "Bright and Morning Star." which first appeared in New Masses, No. 27, May 10, 1938, and "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," an autobiographical sketch, which was first printed in American Stuff, a Federal writer's project anthology in 1937. With some modification, it was incorporated in Black Boy, 1945, and will be studied in connection with that volume.¹

Prior to the publication of Uncle Tom's Children, Wright had published two earlier stories that do not appear in this volume: "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre" and "Superstition." The first story appeared in Southern

¹Documentation for these bibliographical details appear in several places including the Selected Bibliography of The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, ed. by Michel Fabre (New York: William Marrow Co., 1973) and Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, by Russell C. Brignano (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1970).
Register, a local Black weekly, of Jackson, Mississippi, in 1924; and the latter was published in Abbott's Monthly Magazine, No. 2, April, 1931, a Chicago Defender supplement. No complete version of "Hell's Half Acre" is available, but Wright contributes the following details:

I wrote of an Indian maiden, beautiful and reserved, who sat alone upon the bank of a still stream, surrounded by eternal twilight and ancient trees, waiting. . . . The girl was keeping some vow which I could not describe, and not knowing how to develop the story, I resolved that the girl had to die. She rose slowly and walked toward the dark stream, her face stately and cold; she entered the water and walked on until the water reached her shoulders, her chin; then it covered her. Not a murmur or a gasp came from her, even in dying.2

Without the story itself, not much can be done in terms of assessment; but since the author was not quite sixteen, perhaps not much should be expected. The plot according to one critic, is about a villain who wanted a widow's home. Wright considered the story "crudely atmospheric, emotional, intuitively psychological."3 We can take Wright's word for that and still recognize the significance of the fact that Wright's first story included the word voodooism in its title and his second story was called "Superstition."

2Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper & Row, 1945), pp. 132-33. Further references to Black Boy and to Uncle Tom's Children will include the page numbers within the text.

3Brignano, Richard Wright, p. 185. This information is also found in Black Boy, p. 182.
"Superstition" fortunately has been preserved on microfilm and is available in the Harsh collection of the Carter G. Woodson Library, 95th and Halsted Streets in Chicago. Unfortunately, one gains little from reading the story that cannot be deduced from the title itself. Michel Fabre states that Wright's "impressionistic and superficial portrayal of the characters turns them into puppets. . . . The tale's major faults, though, are the meaningless repetitions and abundant cliches." 4 Fabre's most cogent observation in reference to "Superstition," however, is his assertion that the author wrote it "exclusively for money." 5

In writing Uncle Tom's Children, according to Constance Webb, Wright was moved by nobler impulses. She states the following:

In his first work of short stories, Uncle Tom's Children, he set himself a conscious problem: what quality of will must the Negro possess to live and die in a country which denies his humanity? If one could not understand this fundamental, then one could not begin to understand any Negro in the United States. This was the reality of life for a black man in America. 6

Whether Wright succeeded in representing this "Quality of Will" in his first volume of short stories may be debated. It seems safe to conclude that he came nearer to accomplish-

4 Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 83.

5 Ibid., p. 82.

ing this goal in certain of these stories than he did in others.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Bright and Morning Star," which coincidentally are the first and last stories respectively in the volume, seem, in the light of Wright's declared intentions, to be the most successful. By the same criterion, "Down by the Riverside" and "Long Black Song" are seriously flawed while "Fire and Cloud," though less defective, is far inferior to his two best stories. Constance Webb states that:

When Richard wrote the final sentence to "Big Boy leaves Home," he felt both immense pleasure and immense dissatisfaction. The pleasure came because it was a story well told and the dissatisfaction came because somewhere in the material or in the character of Big Boy lurked still more vital things to be expressed.⁷

"Big Boy Leaves Home" may be summarized as follows: Four Black youths play hookey from school and eventually decide to go swimming. Unfortunately, the creek runs through land owned by Mr. Harvey, a White, well-known for his hostility to Blacks. The boys ignore the "No Trespassing" sign on the fence, despite knowing that Harvey shot at a Black just the year before for swimming there (p. 24). While frolicking in the water, the youths see a White woman on the edge of the bank directly between them and the place where they have left their clothes. The scene that follows is crucial:

⁷Ibid., p. 159.
They stared, their hands instinctively covering their groins. Then they scrambled to their feet. The white woman backed slowly out of sight. They stood for a moment, looking at one another.

"Les get outta here!" Big Boy whispered.
"Wait till she goes erway."
"Les run, they'll ketch us here naked like this!"
"Mabbe there's a man wid her."
"Cmon, les git our clos," said Big Boy.
"What t hell! Ahma git mah cloes," said Big Boy (p. 27).

After some hesitation, Big Boy's buddies—Bobo, Buck and Lester—follow him. This is a fatal error.

The woman, despite Bobo's attempts to tell her that he only wants his clothes, screams at the sight of him. The woman's companion, who turns out to be old man Harvey's son on leave from the army, immediately appears from among the trees. He kills Lester and Buck with his army rifle; but while fighting Bobo and Big Boy, he is killed (p. 30).

With the help of family friends in the Black community, arrangements are made for Bobo and Big Boy to escape to the North. Big Boy, after a dramatic encounter with a dog and a snake, makes his escape; but not before he witnesses the death of Bobo. The lynch scene follows:

Big Boy saw the mob fall back, leaving a small knot of men about the fire. Then for the first time he saw Bobo. A black body flashes in the light. Bobo was struggling, twisting; they were binding his arms and legs.

When he saw them tilt the barrel, he stiffened. A scream quivered. He knew the tar was on Bobo. The mob fell back. He saw a tar-drenched body glistening and turning. . . .

The flames leaped tall as the trees. The scream came again. Big Boy trembled and looked. The mob was running down the slopes, leaving the fire clear. Then he saw a writhing white mass cradled in yellow flames,
and heard screams, one on top of the other, each shriller and shorter than the last. . . . (p. 48)

"Big Boy Leaves Home" is an exciting story written with sufficient literary craftsmanship to bear the burden of the message Wright intends for it. Its social perspective is adequate enough to give a basically positive multidimensional picture of the Black experience. The diction is appropriate for the circumstances of the characters, and the characters themselves are creditable. The action of the story is quite plausible, arising, as it does, out of a sequence of events that conforms to the laws of probability in every way. The story reflects the climate of the anti-Black violence that was so characteristic of the deep, rural South of the post World War I period. Since three of the four major Black characters meet violent death at the hands of Whites, it is debatable whether Wright has satisfactorily answered the question that Constance Webb says he posed: "What quality of will must the Negro possess to live and die in a country which denies his humanity?"8

The question is complicated also by the fact that the initial action is galvanized by the decision of the Black youths to play truant rather than go to school, and further to ignore the "No Trespassing" warning despite their knowledge of the anti-Black hostility of the owner. None of this, of course, can extenuate the horrible deeds

8Ibid., p. 157.
that these decisions provoked. Nor is the action of the young people so inconsistent with the attitude of youth, including Black youth in the South, as to destroy the verisimilitude of the story.

"Down by the Riverside," the second story in *Uncle Tom's Children*, has less to recommend it. A Black family with an expectant mother, due to deliver any day, is caught in a flood. A kinsman, being unable to buy a boat, steals one. Mann, who is the head of the family, attempts to row his wife to the hospital; but is discovered by the White family that owns the boat and in an exchange of gunfire kills the father. After a perilous trip against the current, Mann reaches the hospital but is too late to save his wife or the baby. His mother-in-law and Peewee, his son of perhaps five or six, who had accompanied him, are sent to the safety of the hills; but Mann is conscripted into the emergency labor force. Under the direction of a White officer, he assists in the evacuation of the hospital. He is then sent in a motor boat with a single driver, a Black named Brinkley, to rescue a stranded family. Before actually embarking on this mission, Mann discovers that the family in distress is the Heartfield's, the one from whom his brother stole the boat. There is considerable vacillation, but Mann participates in the rescue, only to be exposed to the authorities when the family reaches safety. The following extracts summarize the end of the story.
"Take im out!"
"White folks have mercy! Ah didn't mean to kill im!
Ah swear fo Awmighty Gowd, ah didn't. He shot at me!
Ah wuz takin my wife 't the hospital. . . ."
"Take im out!"
He fell to the ground, crying.
"Ah didn't mean to kill im! Ah didn't. . . ."
"When shall it be, General?"
"Take im out now! Whos next?"
They dragged him from the tent. He rolled in the mud. A soldier kicked him (pp. 100-1).

All ellipses were included in the original, and the author continues in a similar vein for another page.
Finally, Mann seems to control his hysteria, and we get this paragraph:

His fear subsided into cold numbness. Yes, now! Yes, through the trees? Right thu them trees! Gawd! They were going to kill him. Yes, now, he would die! He would die before he would let them kill him. Ahll die fo they kill me! Ahll die. . . . He ran straight to the right, through the trees, in the direction of the water. He heard a shot (p. 102).

How successful his flight was in deciding his manner of death is shown clearly in the story's concluding lines:

One of the soldiers stooped and pushed the butt of his rifle under the body and lifted it over. It rolled heavily down the wet slope and stopped about a foot from the water's edge; one black palm sprawled limply outward and upward, trailing in the brown current. . . . (p. 102)

"Down by the Riverside" is confused as a social commentary and flawed as a work of art almost in direct proportion to its failure to deal creatively with the social milieu it purports to depict. Characterization throughout is weak and the action, decisive to the plot, is highly
improbable. This is true of the story in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end.

As the story opens, we read that each step Mann took made the old house creak as though the earth beneath the foundations were soggy. He wondered how long the logs which supported the house could stand against the water. But what really worried him were the steps; they might wash away at any moment, and then they would be trapped. . . . It was about six feet deep and still rising, it had risen two feet that day. He squinted at a tiny ridge of white foam where the yellow current stuck at a side of the barn and veered sharply. For three days he had been watching that tiny ridge of white foam. When it shortened he had hopes of seeing the ground soon; but when it lengthened he knew that the current was flowing strong again. All the seeds for spring planting were wet now. "They gonna rot;" he thought with despair (p. 54).

At this point the reader might assume that we are going to get a story about man against the forces of nature, a hapless victim against the rampaging river. But this anticipation is not justified by further reading. Mann is Black, surrounded apparently by unfriendly Whites. The reader might then expect the theme of the story to be the Black man's struggle to survive against White hostility. Again, the reader would be disappointed because Wright does not pursue this theme either. Mann appears to be a person knowledgeable in these circumstances. He speaks with experience, and we later learn that there have been floods before. But where is his prudence or at least caution?

The morning before he has seen his only cow, Sally, pushing through three feet of water for the hills. It was then that Sister Jeff had said that a man who would
not follow a cow was a fool. Well, he had not figured
it that way. This was his home. But now he would have
to leave, for the water was rising and there was no
telling when it would stop (p. 54).

How had he figured it? This is more than foolish-
ness; it is idiocy for "worst of all there was Lulu flat on
her back these four days, sick with a child. She could not
deliver" (p. 55). Elder Murray, who stopped by on his way
to the hills, is astonished to learn that Sister Lulu
hasn't had the baby yet and is told by Mann himself that
"she too little to have it without a doctah, Elder" (p. 61).
Sister Jeff had explained to Mann earlier that she
was scared because Lulu would "never have tha baby widout
a docter. Her hips is jus too little" (p. 57). Yet Mann
had made no provisions for a boat until two days before
when he "had told Bob to take the old mule to Bowman's
plantation and sell it, or swap it for a boat, any kind of
boat" (p. 55). Of course, by then, as Bob later explains,
boats were scarce. "Ah coudnt buy a boat nowheres so ah
ups n steals a boat when nobody was looking" (p. 59). All
this could have been avoided had Mann acted with the re-
sponsibility that the situation so obviously called for.
The life of a grandmother, a child, a mother past due, not
to mention his own life were jeopardized solely because
"He had figured that the water would soon go down. He had
thought if he stayed, he would be the first to get back to
the fields and start Spring plowing" (p. 55). Let us sup-
pose that he had not miscalculated. Would being the first to start Spring plowing have made the harvest more bountiful? Apparently no one else thought so or was willing to take such risks. Elder Murray stated that his folks were already in the hills (p. 63). And Mann himself admits that "in a way all of this was his own fault. He had a chance to get away and he acted like a fool and had not taken it. . . . Yes, he should have cleared out when the Government offered him the boat" (p. 55). [Emphasis added.]

A second error in judgment, almost as serious and equally inexcusable, was Mann's failure to ask Bob, who is his own brother or his brother-in-law, for help in getting Lulu to the hospital. When Elder Murray offers to take two or three more to the hills, Mann suggests that Bob and Sister Jeff go. (Perhaps some argument can be made for Grandma accompanying Mann, instead of Sister Jeff, although Sister Jeff appears to be a midwife; but what logic can justify taking little Peewee on such an obviously dangerous mission?)

Mann's encounter with the White boat owner and Heartfield's death can hardly be viewed as "free choice" in the same manner as Mann's earlier decisions, but his later rescue of the remaining Heartfields cannot be so easily dismissed.

First, it must be clearly understood that Mann knew that he was being sent to rescue the Heartfields. His
decision to follow through with the mission was not based on any scruples about saving the family of the man that he had killed; his only source of doubt seemed fear.

To attempt to escape, considering the certain consequences of his failure to do so, hardly required superhuman courage, as the following dialogue shows:

"That's the address of a woman with two children who called in for help," said the Colonel. "If you and that boy think you can save 'em then do what you can. If you can't, then try to make it to the hills. . . ." (p. 87)

Wright appears aware of the possibility that this situation poses but seems unwilling to let the story unfold according to its logic. Mann ruminates as follows:

He ought to tell Brinkley. Ahm black like he is. He oughta be willin to hep me fo he would them. . . . He tried to look into Brinkley's face; the boy was bent forward. . . . Lawd, ah got to tell im! The boat lurched and dodged something. Its mah life ergin theirs! Mann swallowed; then he felt that there would not be any use of his telling; he had waited too long. Even if he spoke now Brinkley would not turn back; they had come too far. Wild-eyed, he gazed around in the watery darkness, hearing the white boy yell, you nig- ger! You bastard! Naw Lawd! Ah got to tell im! (p. 89)

But he did not tell him, nor did Mann take advantage of the opportunity to steer Brinkley away from the house when Brinkley, himself, expressed doubt. "The watah's got em, said Brinkley . . . you reckon you kin make it? Reckon we can save em?" asked Brinkley. "Mann did not answer" (p. 91).

After seeing Mann pass up several chances to escape,
the following scene is not very convincing. Mann enters the Heartfield house and finds an ax:

Mann gripped the axe. He crouched, staring at the boy, holding the axe stiffly in his right fist. Something hard began to press against the back of his head and he saw it all in a flash while staring at the white boy and hearing him scream "It's the nigger!" Yes, now, if he could swing that axe they would never tell on him and the black waters of the flood would cover them forever and he could tell Brinkley he had not been able to find them and the whites would never know he had killed a white man. . . . His body grew taut with indecision. Yes, now, he would swing that axe and they would never tell and he had his gun and if Brinkley found out he would point the gun at Brinkley's head. He saw himself in the boat with Brinkley; he saw himself pointing the gun at Brinkley's head; he saw himself in the boat going away; he saw himself in the boat alone, going away. . . . (p. 92)

But, of course, none of this happens. The Heartfield house tilts and Mann is flung face downward, stunned. When he recovered, "Mann saw the axe but seemed not to realize that he had been about to use it" (p. 93). Instead, he rescues the boy and ends up taking orders from him.

The boy stared; then he seemed to understand. "Get my mother. . . ." Like a child, Mann obeyed and dragged Mrs. Heartfield to the window. He saw white hands helping. "Get my Sister!" He brought the little girl next. Then the boy went, Mann climbed through last. (p. 93)

Mann's belated effort to escape from the soldiers, apparently in order to commit suicide by drowning, would at least have determined the manner of his death. But in this too he miscalculates.

"Long Black Song," the third story in Uncle Tom's
Children, is only half as poor as "Down by the Riverside" simply because it is only half as long. The basic weakness of the story can be stated in one word—implausibility. Equally important to the negative quality of the story are the implications that may be drawn from the improbable action. The story may be summarized as follows: A White salesman stops at the remote farmhouse of a Black family in an attempt to sell a combination clock and graphophone. The husband, Silas, has gone to town to sell their crop, leaving his wife, Sarah, and the baby alone for almost a week. The salesman is unsuccessful in obtaining a down payment on the graphophone, but he leaves it anyway. On the other hand, he is quite successful in seducing the Black woman. He promises to return the next morning to try to talk the husband into buying the graphophone with ten dollars down. Meanwhile, the husband returns, discovers his wife's infidelity, determines to horsewhip her, and then wait for the salesman's return. The wife escapes and spends the night in the hills.

After a nightmarish dream, the wife realizes what her husband intends to do. It is too late, however, for her to intervene. When the salesman comes by the next morning, accompanied by his partner, the fight that ensues leaves one of the White men dying and the other fleeing for help. Meanwhile, the Black woman returns to her husband and begs him to run away with her and the child; he refuses.
"Go way for what?"
"They'll kill you. . . ."
"It don't make no difference. . . . Fer ten years ah slaved mah life out to git mah farm free. . . . Now, its all gone, gone. . . . It don't make no difference which way ah go. Gawd! Gawd, ah wish all them white folks wuz dead! Dead ah tell you! Ah wish Gawd would kill en all! . . . (p. 124)

"The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothin in you whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom. They take you women! N then they take you life! . . . N then I gets stabbed in the back by mah own blood! When my eyes is on white folks to keep em from killin me, mah own blood trips me up! (p. 125)

At this point, the husband kneels in the dust and sobs but resolves to stay there and fight to the death. He forces his wife to take the baby and cut across the back fields to their Black neighbor's place. Wright tell us that

She stopped, closed her eyes and tried to stem a flood of sorrow that drenched her. Yes, killing of white men by black men and killing of black men by white men went on in spite of the hope of bright days and the desire of dark black nights and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer and the deep dream of sleepy grey skies in winter. And when killing started it went on, like a river flowing. Oh, she felt sorry for Silas! Silas. . . . He was following that long river of blood (p. 126).

Just what this equation of Black killing Whites and Whites killing Blacks means, the author leaves to the reader's deduction; but in a previous scene, he included an additional, though still unsatisfactory, element. Through the wife's imagination, Wright projects the following:

Dimly she saw in her mind a picture of men killing and being killed, white men killed the black and black men killed the white. White men killed the black men be-
cause they could, and the black men killed the white men to keep from being killed. And the killing was blood (p. 120).

While these ideas are drawn from the mind of Sarah, they must bear the argument of the story if not of the author. The only contrary ideas touching on interracial violence are expressed by Silas. He charges that Whites never gave him or any Black man a chance but the objective "facts" of the story contradict him. The problem with this explanation is that it fails to explain anything. To say that Whites kill Blacks because they can is to so over-simplify the explanation as to make it meaningless. Even the explanation of Blacks killing Whites to keep from being killed is inapplicable to this story. The Black man in "Long Black Song" does not kill his first White man to keep from being killed. Nor does he kill the other White men in the expectation of escaping his own certain death.

As a matter of fact, unclear motivation permeates the entire story. One may accept, as given, the general sociological frame of reference that the system of White oppression was a powerful element in the reality of Southern Black rural life of the thirties. But "Long Black Song" is a short story focusing on the lives of individual Blacks. The action of these characters, then, even when senseless, must lend itself to some sort of sensible interpretation. This is especially necessary concerning action central to the plot. The Black woman's infidelity is the
action that generates everything else. But if we dismiss
the stereotype of the promiscuous Black female, the episode
is curious, to say the least. The Black farm wife is alone
and does not know exactly when her husband will return from
selling the cotton; she does know that he should be home at
any time now. Yet, in less than thirty minutes after the
salesman arrives, the wife is in bed with him. There was
no bribery, no intimidation, and little conversation. The
salesman is not noticeably attractive as a man. In fact,
the wife, on three consecutive pages, notes that he is just
like a little boy. "She looked at him; she saw he was
looking at her breasts. Hes jus lika lil boy. Acts like he
can't understand nothin!" (p. 108). "She smiled. The
white man was just like a lil boy: jus like a chile" (p.
109). "She saw him rub his palms over his forehead. Hes
jus lika lil boy" (p. 110). Yet there is nothing to sug-
gest that little boys attract her sexually. And even if
they did, the salesman's address to her as "Aunty" should
have brought her to her senses.

Brignano asserts the following:

What intrigues Sarah is a material and superficial ob-
ject of the new industrial and bourgeois age, a Gramo-
phone. The music emanating from the white man's device
creates a dream mood between Sarah's consciousness and
subconsciousness that leads to her submission to the
white salesman's sexual advances.\(^9\)

If this is so, it is one of the weakest excuses in

\(^9\)Brignano, Richard Wright, p. 61.
literature for committing adultery. Sarah's reminiscing about Tom, her former boyfriend, is a better but still unsatisfactory explanation for her behavior. The important lines follow: "Tom had gone to war. His leaving had left an empty black hole in her heart, a black hole that Silas had come in and filled. But not quite. Silas had not quite filled that hole" (p. 106). Besides, when reflecting on her act with the salesman, she admits that

She was sorry for what she had done. Silas was as good to her as any black man could be to a black woman. Most of the black women worked in the fields as crop-pers. But Silas had given her her own home, and that was more than many others had done for their women (p. 121).

While this paragraph contains some ambiguity, so far as Black images are concerned, nothing in it contributes to our acceptance of the wife's act of infidelity and this act is central to the story. But even if one does not question her committing adultery, the major problem remains the manner of her husband's discovery of the act itself. It reads as follows:

A match flared in yellow flame; Silas' face was caught in a circle of light. He was looking downward, staring intently as a white wad of cloth balled in his hand. . . . She looked closer; she saw that the white cloth was a man's handkerchief. Silas' fingers loosened; she heard the handkerchief hit the floor softly, damply. The match went out (p. 118).

So the wife not only committed adultery with a White stranger within an hour of their meeting, but she did it in her bedroom though her husband was expected home
momentarily. She compounds this stupidity by failing to remove the man's straw hat from her bedroom and even failing to remove his filthy handkerchief from her bed. There are no literary excuses for these errors; and sociological factors, even if they mattered, only magnify the mistakes. Wright injects race in the story where it is totally irrelevant and ignores it where it should be seriously considered. When ruminating about how her husband felt, for instance, Sarah recalls that Silas had "always said that he was as good as any white man. He had worked hard and saved his money and bought a farm so he could grow his own crops like white men. Silas hates white folks! Lawd, he sho hates em!" [Emphasis added.]

Tillers of the soil for centuries have dreamed of owning a little piece of land that they could call their own. They have worked and saved to make their dream come true, but there is no evidence to show that the desire of Blacks to grow their own crops is related to Whites at all.

As for Silas' hatred of White folk, considering the time and place the story occurs, this should come as no surprise. What is surprising is how little the story reveals of the grounds for this hatred. Silas sold his cotton for two hundred and fifty dollars, which appears from the story to be a fair price. In any case, this enables Silas to buy ten more acres of land by putting down one hundred and fifty dollars. He intends to pay off the whole
debt in one year. This expansion will make the farm too large for one person to handle alone; and Silas, quite naturally, says he intends to get a man to help him. Now this seems simple enough, but Sarah blurts out, "You mean hire somebody?" Just what else Sarah thinks he might have meant is not made clear. Instead of having Silas give her an answer consistent with his character or typical of a Southern Black farmer or illustrative of a man beginning to pull himself up by his bootstraps, we get the following: "Sho hire somebody! Whut you think? Ain that the way the white folks do? Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs gotta do just like they do" (p. 115).

In spite of all its flaws, "Long Black Song" can be said to have at least one redeeming feature—its climax. By showing a Black man fighting and dying like a man, the story achieves extraordinary novelty. It unfolds through the eyes of Sarah:

The white men shot again, sending a hail of bullets into furious pillars of smoke. . . . There was a loud crash; the roof caved in. . . . Flames roared and black smoke billowed, hiding the house. The white men stood up, no longer afraid. Again she waited for Silas, waited to see him fight his way out, waited to hear his call. Then she breathed a long slow breath emptying her lungs. She knew now. Silas had killed as many as he could and stayed on to burn, had stayed without a murmur (p. 128).

The fourth story in Uncle Tom's children, "Fire and Cloud," is a deliberate effort to present in fiction the concept of unity and struggle of Black and White workers.
The White characters, however, tend to be cardboard stereotypes, but the Black characters reflect variety and even some development. The main character is Reverend Taylor, a Black minister, who changes from an obsequious, compromiser to a dignified minister. Jimmy, his son, is an impatient youth, who acts as a goad to his father. May, the Reverend's wife, unfortunately conforms to the traditional Black female literary figure and remains essentially the same throughout the story. There is an Uncle Tom named Deacon Smith who acts as a foil for Taylor, but Smith is counterbalanced by other Black churchmen. Two Communists, one Black and one White, play prominent roles but are not particularly attractive characters.

Three other identifiable White characters are the Mayor, the Chief of Police, and the Head of the Industrial Squad. Reverend Taylor and several other Blacks are brutally beaten by White gangs in separate incidents. The complicity of the White officials, though not by their direct participations, is clearly indicated. The story reaches its climax on a triumphant note, however, with Black and White marchers joining forces to demonstrate for food:

They sang as they marched; more joined along the way. When they reached the park that separated the white district from the black, the poor whites were waiting. Taylor trembled when he saw them join, swelling the mass that moved toward the town. He looked ahead and saw black and white marching; he looked behind and saw black and white marching. And still they sang! (p. 178)
The Mayor accosts Taylor and orders him to tell his people not to make trouble. He also promises food for the people if Taylor will tell them to go home peacefully. The Reverend assures the Mayor that there will be no trouble but insists that the Mayor, himself, tell the people that they will get food. The story ends as follows:

They looked at each other for a moment. Then the mayor turned and walked back. Taylor saw him mount the rear seat of an auto and lift his trembling hands high above the crowd, asking for silence, his face a pasty white. A baptism of clean joy swept over Taylor. He kept his eyes on the sea of black and white faces. The song swelled louder, and vibrated through him. This is the way!, he thought, Gawd ain no lie. He ain no lie. His eyes grew wet with tears blurring his vision: the sky trembled; the buildings wavered as if about to topple; and the earth shook. . . . He mumbled out loud, exulting. . . . "Freedom belongs to the strong" [Wright's emphasis] (pp. 179-80).

"Fire and Cloud" does not fully answer the question of the "quality of will" needed by Blacks to survive, but it does suggest that unity of struggle of Black and White is a step in the right direction.

Because of the generally positive tone of the story, one may be inclined to overlook minor deficiencies. But, when the defects assume a pattern suggestive of the general weaknesses that characterize Wright's work, they must be more critically examined. There are several examples. One is the scene in the Church where the question of the demonstration is being debated. This is a representative gathering of the Black community, and with the exception of Deacon Smith, the people are resolved to march. Before
Reverend Taylor can get Deacon Smith to at least pledge himself to secrecy, the Reverend is called out of the meeting by his son. This is the point in the story where Taylor is kidnapped by a carload of Whites, taken to the woods, and beaten unmercifully. When he finally staggers back to his home, we get the following dialogue: "Everybody was astin where you wuz," said Jimmy. "Nobody knowed, so they tol em you run out. N Brother Smith had the Deacon Board t' vote you outta the church. . . ." "Vote me out?" "They said they didn't wan yuh for pastah no mo. . . ."

(p. 170)

The dialogue eventually degenerates into whimpering; but at no point does the father ask the son why he did not report what he knew about the car of strange Whites. And even without this knowledge, it is odd that no one, considering the climate of violence that prevailed, suspected that the Reverend had met with foul play.

Another minor flaw appears in the encounter between Reverend Taylor and the White policeman, whom he meets in a White neighborhood. It is past midnight. The policeman initiates the dialogue:

"Put your hands up, nigger."
"Yessuh."
He lifted his arms. The policeman patted his hips, his sides. His back blazed but he bit his lips and held still.
"Who you work for?"
"Ahrna preacher suh."
"A preacher?"
"Yessuh."
"What you doing here this time of night?"
"I wuz visitin a sick man, a janitah, suh, whut comes t
man church. He works for Miz Harvey. . . ."
"Who?"
"Miz Harvey, suh."
"Never heard of her, and I've been on this beat for ten
years."
"She lives back there, suh," he said half turning and
pointing.
"Well, you look all right. You can go on. But keep
out of here at night" (pp. 167-68).

In the first place, the minister, having been
beaten nearly to death only a few hours earlier, could
hardly have looked "all right." In the second place, this
Southern town of 25,000 including 10,000 Blacks, facing a
5,000 strong demonstration, would be so tense that the en-
tire police force would be on double alert. In the third
place, since the policeman had been on this same beat for
ten years and never heard of "Miz Harvey," he would surely
have evinced more suspicion that Wright allows.

In both narrative and dialogue Wright's choice of
words frequently reveals his blurred perspective. The most
conspicuous Black female character beyond the preacher's
wife, for instance, is described as a "fat black woman"
(p. 175). We see her in action when "The fat black sister
slapped Deacon Smith straight across his face" (p. 176).
Taken alone, this may seem trivial, but its significance
arises out of the pattern it helps to form, a pattern of
depicting Black life in as negative a fashion as possible.
There were similar examples earlier. For instance, the
word "wag" is most customarily used in referring to ani-
mals. Yet, Wright tells the reader that Reverend Taylor "wagged his head and his lips broke into a sick smile" (p. 130) and "He wagged his head musing, 'Lawd, them was the good old days'" (p. 131). Equally strange is to hear Jimmy cursing in the Rectory without chastisement from his father. One must remember that this is the rural South of the thirties and that the son has exhibited no attributes to suggest he would use such language in his father's presence.

These defects diminish but do not destroy the overall merits of the story. Compared to the other stories in the volume, "Fire and Cloud" falls right in the middle—better than the worst but not as good as the best.

"What quality of will must the Negro possess to live and die in a country which denies his humanity?"
This question, which, according to Webb, Wright set out to delineate in his series of stories remained unanswered with his first edition of Uncle Tom's Children. With the addition of "Bright and Morning Star" to the second edition, Wright came as close as he ever got to an answer. But since the two Black characters in the story die, albeit heroically, the issue is not fully resolved. Of course, the possibility is not precluded that dying may also teach us how to live. In any event, Wright, it seems, had altered the question somewhat. Constance Webb writes as follows:
For the fourth time he had written a story he liked and disliked because Wright's aim was not merely to write a good story but a story that answered a question about Negro life. Within a few days he decided to pose an ultimate question: What must a Negro do if he is to find his freedom, if he is to win a place for himself in American life along with others?  

"Fire and Cloud" implied the answer that "Bright and Morning Star" makes explicit: the solution is to unite Black and White in a common struggle against their common oppressors. Theoretically, this presents no difficulty, but a careful reading of the story discloses that considerable ambiguity still persists. It is unmistakable that Wright intended "Bright and Morning Star" to be a Marxist statement on the race question in the South. Having chosen the fictive mode as the vehicle for the propagation of his ideas, it is excusable that there be some confusion in the story. This confusion should exist in the minds of the characters, however, and not in the mind of the author. In "Bright and Morning Star," just the contrary is true. The thoughts of the characters are quite clear, in error perhaps, but clear even when their emotions are in conflict. It is the author, himself, who seems irresolute.

The story may be summarized as follows: An Sue, the Black heroine, has a son, Sug, in prison for Communist activities and another son, Johnny Boy, who, at great risk, still continues Party work. Their father is dead. Reva, a

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White Communist, is in love with Johnny Boy, but they are never shown together. The story revolves around the attempt of the Sheriff to obtain the names of Party members. The mother, although deeply religious, embraces the Party more out of love for her sons than faith in the Party per se. And although conviction grew with experience, it never completely obliterated her deep religious feelings. Two passages will illustrate this point:

And 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. The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the cross; . . . . (p. 185)

The sheriff brutally beats An Sue in an attempt to get her to divulge the names of the Party members, but to no avail. She does give the names to a White "Communist" who comes by her house after the sheriff leaves. She does not entirely trust this White Communist but is hardly able to think clearly after the sheriff's attack. She also feels that somebody has to warn the other Party members. But after the betrayal by Booker, the White stool pigeon, we get these lines:

Something tightened in her as she remembered and understood the fit of fear she had felt on coming to herself in the dark hallway. A part of her life she thought she had done away with forever had hold of her then. She had thought that it did not mean much when now she sang: "He's the Lily of the Valley, the Bright Morning Star" (p. 206).

The basic conflict between mother and son, however,
is rooted in race, not religion. This conflict manifests itself when mother and son discover that the Party has been betrayed.

"But ain nona our folks tol, Johnny Boy," she said. "Anybody mighta tol," he said. "It wuznt nona our folks," she said again. . . . "Our folks, Ma, who in Gawds name is our folks?" "The folks we wuz born n raised wid, son. The folks we know." "We cant make the party grow that way, Ma." "It mighta been Booker," she said. "Yuh don know." "... er Blattberg. . . ." "Fer Christsakes . . . son, ah knows ever black man n woman in this parta the county," she said, standing too. . . . "There ain none of em that coulda tol . . . son it was some of them whitefolks! You, just mark mah word n wait n see!" "Why is it gotta be white folks?" he asked. "Ef they tol, then theys just Judases, thats all." "Son look at whuts before yuh." He shook his head and sighed. "Ma, ah done tol you a hundred times. Ah cant see white n ah cant see black," he said. "Ah sees rich man n ah sees po men" (pp. 191-92).

This position, as articulated by Johnny Boy, is no doubt the Marxist position as Wright conceives it, but the climax of the story demonstrates that it is the mother's position that prevails. Booker, a new White recruit to the Party, turns out to be the Judas. The mother's confiding in him, though understandable considering her circumstances, turns out to be the direct cause of her death. She had to sacrifice herself to prevent Booker from revealing to the law the Party names which she, herself, had given him. The following passage is pertinent:

She felt warm tears on her cheeks. She longed to shoot Johnny Boy and let him go. But if she did that they
would take the gun from her, and Booker would tell who the others were. Lawd, hep me! ... The crowd parted and she saw Booker hurrying forward. "Ah know em all, Shreiff," he cried.

He came full into the muddy clearing where Johnny Boy lay. "You mean yuh got the names?"
"Sho! The ol nigger. . . ." She saw his lips open and silent when he saw her. She stepped forward and raised the sheet. "Whut. . . ." She fired once; then without pausing, she turned, hearing them yell. She aimed at Johnny Boy, but they had their arms around her (p. 213).

The Sheriff, already having split Johnny Boy's eardrums just as he had once split a Jew's eardrums, orders the gang to shoot mother and son. They shot Johnny Boy first so An Sue would "know her nigger son's dead!" (p. 214) Then Pete, one of the Sheriff's mob, killed her because "It was my pal she shot!" The Sheriff felt "That's fair ernuff!" (p. 214) The mother, however, dies triumphantly.

She felt the beat of her own blood warming her cold, wet back. She yearned suddenly to talk. "Yuh didn't git what yuh wanted! N you ain gonna nevah git it. Yuh didn't kill me; ah come here by mahsef. . . . Her lips moved soundlessly. "Yuh didn't git yuh didn't yuh didn't. . . ." (p. 215).

Michel Fabre, commenting on the story, writes as follows:

The inconsistent character of Reva does not convince the reader that the oppressed of both races have united. Furthermore, Sue's heroic character dominates the plot at the expense of the communists. Thus, when she gives her life to save her son's comrades, her primary motive seems to be because they belong to her race. This fundamental hesitation between the ethnic and the Marxist perspectives certainly reflects Wright's own ambivalence
at the time of composition, in spite of his firm propa-
gandist intention.\textsuperscript{11} \textsuperscript{[Emphasis added.]} 

This analysis, it seems, is quite sound except that the reference to "The inconsistent character of Reva" is not supported by the story. In one instance only can her action be construed as highly improbable, not inconsistent, but improbable. It occurs in the scene where Reva returns to An Sue's at her father's suggestion to spend the night. The father has correctly assumed that Johnny Boy would be out attempting to warn the comrades about the betrayal. Reva finds that An Sue has been beaten by the Sheriff, and she ministers to An Sue. As An Sue recovers, we get the following dialogue: "Oh, say, ah forgot," said Reva, measuring out a spoonful of coffee. "Pa tol me t tell yuh t watch out fer that Booker man. Hes a stool" (p. 204). It is highly improbable that Reva would forget such an important message but considering the horrible scene that she encounters on her arrival at An Sue's house, it is not entirely unbelievable. It certainly does not warrant labeling Reva as an inconsistent character.

Fabre is quite correct, however, in noting Wright's "ambivalence at the time of composition of "Bright and Morning Star." This is all there is to it, and it cannot support the charge of inconsistency.

It may be that Fabre, a French author, misinter-

\textsuperscript{11}Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 164.
preted some nuances in the story, but this is mere specula-
tion, speculation that is indulged in only because Fabre is
so perceptive in his analysis. No such excuse can be made
for certain other critics. Their errors seem entirely the
result of carelessness. Two examples are illustrative:
Brignano, referring to "Down by the Riverside," says that
"Wright has created in Mann a central character whose vio-
lent revenge upon the white man is mitigated by his humane
solutions to the various dilemmas he must face."12 To call
Mann's killing of Heartfield in an exchange of gunfire ini-
tiated by Hearfield a "violent revenge upon the white man"
is to change the meaning of the word revenge. The second
example is much better or much worse. It is taken from
Webb's biography of Wright. Referring to Silas in "Long
Black Song," she writes: "But when he begins to make love
to his wife he finds the white man's sperm-wet handkerchief
in bed."13 He, indeed found the White man's sperm-wet
handkerchief; but if he had begun to make love to his wife,
it is one of the strangest cases in fiction. The scene
follows Silas' discovery of the salesman's hat in their
bedroom and his yellow pencil on the bed. He threatens to
horsewhip her but finally orders her back to bed. He then
places the lamp on the mantel and blows out the light.

The shucks rustled from Silas' weight as he sat on the edge of the bed. She was still, breathing softly. Silas was mumbling. She felt sorry for him. In the darkness it seemed that she could see the hurt look on his black face. The crow of a rooster came from far away, came so faintly that it seemed she had not heard it. The bed sank and the shucks cried out in dry whispers; she knew Silas had stretched out. She heard him sigh. Then she jumped because he jumped (p. 118).

He had jumped, of course, because his body had come in contact with the sperm-soiled handkerchief of the salesman, but nothing suggests that they were making love or about to make love. This digression has been pursued because it tends to suggest that much of the criticism of Wright's works seems superficial and shallow in contrast to the high quality of scholarship that generally prevails in the field of literary criticism. Even Fabre makes such an unsupported statement as the following: "Silas was guilty of neglecting his wife in order to get rich and equal the whites, thus partially justifying her infidelity." He cites no lines because there are none to cite, not even an inference.

Equally disturbing is the failure of Wright criticism to deal with questions that are bound to intrigue the reader pertaining to Wright's use of his sources. For instance, "Fire and Cloud" is based on, or at least loosely related to, the demonstration led by Angelo Herndon. If Wright, indeed, did base his story on the Herndon experi-

14 Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 159.
ence, he has committed a gross travesty on the material available to him. Fortunately, the Herndon story can be read first-hand in his autobiography.\textsuperscript{15} The right of an author to modify the raw material of real life into a work of art is not in question here. It is worthy of note, however, when the transmutation consistently results in diluting the material and reducing figures of heroic proportion to pathetic victims. Even the heroic An Sue was reduced in her final act to one-fourth her proportion in real life. It will be remembered that in "Bright and Morning Star" the heroine was able to kill only Booker, but let us look at Wright's source. It is taken from Black Boy, Wright's autobiography.

One evening I heard a tale that rendered me sleepless for nights. It was of a Negro woman whose husband had been seized and killed by a mob. It was claimed that the woman vowed she would avenge her husband's death and she took a shotgun, wrapped it in a sheet, and went humbly to the whites, pleading that she be allowed to take her husband's body for burial. It seemed that she was granted permission to come to the side of her dead husband while the whites, silent and armed, looked on. The woman, so went the story, knelt and prayed, then proceeded to unwrap the sheet; and before the white men realized what was happening, she had slain four of them, shooting at them from her knees (p. 83). [Emphasis added.]

In addition to the change in the number killed, two other details are modified, but they may have some artistic justification. First, the idea of bringing a sheet origi-\textsuperscript{15} Angelo Herndon, \textit{Let Me Live} (New York: Random House, 1937).
mates with the Sheriff, and secondly she comes to save her son instead of her husband. The final example of this sort is somewhat different inasmuch as the source is not related to the Black experience. It differs also in the particular that the source provides not the material on which the story is based but only the idea.

Webb states that Wright told her the following:

One day he sat reading Burrow's Social Basis of Consciousness when a footnote caught his eye. It described how a woman had run out into a lake in Switzerland in the foolish hope of saving a man who was drowning. Burrow pointed out that this showed a group or social consciousness was stronger than individual consciousness. That was enough. The two vague ideas—the image of water; a lake in faraway Switzerland, and the image of a woman forgetting her personal safety to save others—simply sprang up at once in full bloom. From the moment Richard formed an image of Mann in "Down by the Riverside" standing in his shack above the rushing waters of the flood, the story wrote itself. carried forward by its own logic and momentum.¹⁶

The story may have written itself, but it has nothing in common with the footnote cited as its ideational source. Moreover, there is nothing in the entire book that remotely suggests the action or ideas in "Down by the Riverside." It is virtually impossible to disprove Wright's assertion, though it appears to be mere name dropping. It is possible to demonstrate factually that the two have no similarity. Despite these observations and the rather severe criticism that this writer has made against Uncle

¹⁶Webb, Richard Wright, p. 159.
Tom's Children, the volume represents the very best fiction that Wright ever produced.
CHAPTER III

NATIVE SON

He kept pencil and paper in his pocket to jot down their colorful figures of speech. Out of the anger of those Negro boys and out of his own anger, Richard Wright wrote Native Son.¹

"We can recognize," says one critic, "the greatness of a work of art by the way its fame spreads over national boundaries. Native Son is popular in many countries."²

Dr. Wertham, the author of the quotation, is a psychiatrist whose psychoanalysis of Wright presumably uncovered an unconscious element in Native Son. This element will be examined later, but it is sufficient to note here that Wright's popularity persists even to the present time.³

¹Blake, Novelist America, p. 234.

²Frederick Wertham, "An Unconscious Determinant in Native Son," Journal of Clinical Psychopathology and Psychotherapy, VI (July, 1944), 111.

Popularity _per se_ may not provide positive proof of the greatness in a work of art, but when a novel is greeted with the extravagant praise at publication that was showered on _Native Son_ and when forty years later, it is still receiving encomiums, prudence, itself, dictates that criticism proceed with great caution. This is particularly important when that acclaim flows from a wide diversity of public opinion as is the case with _Native Son_. The following references are illustrative: James W. Ivy, writing in the _Crisis_ (April, 1940), official organ of the NAACP, declares that "_Native Son_ is undoubtedly the greatest novel ever written by an American Negro. In fact, it is one of the best American novels and Mr. Wright is one of the greatest novelists of this generation."^4_ Opportunity_, the official organ of the National Urban League, states in its April issue, 1940, that Mr. Wright has "a touch of genius."^5_ An article in _Phylon_ by Joseph Jenkins, Jr., declares that "Wright has such keen insight, such sound judgment, such a great spirit as enabled him to produce what is perhaps the best book on the race problem so far written."^6_ Margaret Wallace states in _The New York Sun_ (March 5, 1940) that:

Richard Wright's cruel and absorbing story of a Negro boy from Chicago's Black Belt leaves one with the feel-

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^4_ Abcarian, _Wright's Native Son_, p. 66.

^5_ Quoted in Reilly, _The Critical Reception_, p. 97.

^6_ Abcarian, _Wright's Native Son_, p. 61
ing that never before in fiction has anything honest or important been written about the American Negro. Beyond question, Native Son is the finest novel yet written by an American Negro.\footnote{Reilly, The Critical Reception, p. 60.} [Emphasis added.]

An unsigned article in Time Magazine (March 4, 1940) entitled "Bad Nigger" says that "only a Negro could have written it, but until now no Negro has possessed either the talent or the daring to write it."\footnote{Ibid, p. 57.} Samuel Sillen in New Masses (March 5, 1940), a Marxist journal, states the following: "There is no writer in America whom one can say more confidently: He is the creator of our better world and our art."\footnote{Abcarian, Wright's Native Son, p. 49.} Benjamin Davis, a high Black functionary in the Communist Party, expressed some reservations in the New York Sunday Worker about certain aspects of Native Son, but concluded that "Wright has done a brilliant and courageous job with bold initiative."\footnote{Ibid., p. 68.} Earl Browder, the highest ranking officer in the Communist Party at the time of the publication of Native Son, is reputed to have said that he saw nothing wrong with the book.\footnote{Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 184.} Charles Poore, in the New York Times (March 1, 1940), writes that:

Few other novels have been preceded by more advance critical acclamation or lived up to the expectations
they aroused as well. . . . Only a Negro could have written Native Son. Mr. Wright is a champion of a race, not a defender of an individual wrong-doer.  

Such were the glowing tributes lavished on Native Son shortly after its publication and continuing during subsequent decades. Several examples from the late sixties are illustrative: "No white man," repeats Dan McCall, "could have written Native Son. The extraordinary quality of the book is its 'niggerness.'"  

This effusion of praise should not be construed to mean that the critics accepted Native Son as perfect in all particulars but that they considered it praiseworthy in its most important aspects. Many, no doubt, would have agreed with George Kent's assessment that "It is a part of the greatness of Native Son that it survives a plethora of flaws."  

This summary of the critical responses to Native Son, although highly selective, is quite representative. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that there were no outright condemnations of Native Son. They were a distinct minority and two such articles can indicate the gen-

12 Abcarian, Wright's Native Son, p. 41


14 George Kent, "Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture," CLA Journal, XII (June, 1969) reprinted in Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 94.
eral tone. Burton Roscoe is the first example. He wrote in *American Mercury* (May, 1940) as follows:

Concerning no novel in recent times, with the possible exception of *The Grapes of Wrath* have the reviewers in general displayed a more utterly juvenile confusion of values than they have shown in their ecstatic appraisal of Richard Wright's *Native Son* . . . .

Sanely considered, it is impossible for me to conceive of a novel being worse in the most important respects than *Native Son* . . . . the moral in *Native Son* is utterly loathsome and utterly insupportable as a "message."\(^{15}\)

Unfortunately, Roscoe's article does not deal in depth very specifically with the novel and bears little relationship to the direction of this paper. Several of his observations may have general validity but they have limited application to the Black condition as presented in *Native Son*. One does not have to agree with Richard Wright's treatment of the race problem to recognize that one exists. Burton Roscoe's statement that he can't see that Bigger Thomas had anything more to contend with in childhood and youth than he (Roscoe) had or dozens of his friends\(^{16}\) reveals a blindness surpassing that even of the characters in the book.

David Cohn, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* (May, 1940), is an even harsher critic of *Native Son*. He follows the novel more closely in his analysis but only superficially. His errors, however, are similar to Roscoe's.

\(^{15}\) Abcarian, *Wright's Native Son*, p. 86.

For instance, he writes as follows:

In all of the non-Southern states, Negroes have complete political rights. . . . Nowhere in America save in the most benighted sections of the South, or in times of passion arising from the committing of atrocious crimes, is the Negro denied equal protection of the law. If he is sometimes put in jail for no reason at all in Memphis, so too are whites put in jail for no reason at all in Pittsburgh.17

This was written in 1940 when the official policy of the United States Government was still "separate but equal," which in reality always meant separate but rarely equal. Cohn, himself, concedes that "It is beyond doubt that Negroes labor under grave difficulties in America; that economic and social discrimination is practiced against them; that opportunities open to whites are closed to blacks."18

It takes a narrow definition of politics to assume political equality under such conditions. Wright's response to Cohn,19 like his response to Roscoe,20 was sufficient to demolish Cohn's arguments, at least the non-literary points, but was insufficient to sustain a sociological or literary defense of the book itself. This may be due to a fact observed by David Daiches in his article

17 Ibid., p. 78. 18 Ibid., p. 79.
19 Richard Wright, "I Bite the Hand that Feeds Me," Atlantic Monthly, CLXV (June, 1940), reprinted in Abcarian, Wright's Native Son, p. 81.
20 Richard Wright, "Roscoe Baiting," American Mercury, L (June, 1940), 89
in the *Partisan Review* (May-June, 1940). He notes that "Mr. Wright is trying to prove a normal thesis by an abnormal case." In any event, Sterling Brown's review in *Opportunity* (June, 1940) is much too optimistic. He states:

Native Son should silence many of the self-appointed white interpreters of the Negro, who, writing from a vantage point above and outside of the race, reveal the Negro as one peculiarly endowed to bear the burden and suffer the shame without rancor, without bitterness and without essential humanity.

Brown's prophecy remains unfulfilled precisely because *Native Son* concedes the validity of the racist slander against Blacks. Wright then attempts to construct a rationalization and an apology for Black deficiencies by blaming White oppression. His plea is Guilty as Charged: Blacks are subhuman, but Whites made them so. The entire novel is an argument for this thesis and where Wright has difficulty in using the inarticulate Bigger to sustain this point, by his own admission, he expresses his ideas (which is this idea) "in the guise of the lawyer's speech." The following quotation from the lawyer's defense plea is illustrative.

> But did Bigger Thomas really murder? . . . The truth is this boy did not kill! Oh, yes; Mary Dalton is dead. Bigger Thomas smothered her to death. Bessie Mears is dead. Bigger Thomas battered her with a brick in an

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22 Abcarian, *Wright's Native Son*, p. 90.

23 "How Bigger was Born," *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, p. 44.
abandoned building. But did he murder? Did he kill? Listen; what Bigger Thomas did . . . was but a tiny aspect of what he had been doing all his life long! He was living, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one's eye. It was an act of Creation. [Wright's emphasis.]

This was Wright's plea, but as Theophilus Lewis, in *International Review* (April 13, 1940), writes:

The plea does not impress the court nor is it likely to impress the reader who has advanced beyond the belief that racial friction is a comparatively simple problem. Indeed, even the naive reader is likely to remember the gruesome murders and the exciting chase long after he has forgotten the evils of prejudice to which the author attributes the crime, while those who believe Negro character is essentially primitive will feel that the book confirms their opinion.

That some contemporaries of Wright thought of Blacks as primitive is reflected in the following quotation answered by James Reed, a Chicago Defender scribe:

"The black man in the South, 90% of them at least, belong to a primitive race barely removed from savagery."

Charles Leavell, a Chicago reporter, has an article on Robert Nixon, a remote prototype for Bigger, which contains this language: "Brick slayer is likened to Jungle

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24 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 366. Originally published by Harper and Brothers in 1940. All citations of *Native Son* will be to the 1966 edition and pagination will be included within the text.


26 James Reed, *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1938, p. 5.
beast; Ferocity reflected in his features."  

27 And a scholar of no less international renown than Carl Jung wrote the following in 1930:

Now what is more contagious than to live side by side with a rather primitive people? . . . . The Negro, generally speaking, would give anything to change his skin. . . .

It would be difficult not to see that the Negro, with his primitive mobility, his expressive emotionality, his child-like immediacy, his sense of music and rhythm, his funny picturesque language, has infected American behavior.  

28 It is within this cultural milieu that both the writing and the reception of Native Son must be viewed. Indeed, a small minority of criticism of Native Son has reflected this approach, but because it has generally been piecemeal, without a coherent thrust, its impact has been minimized or ignored. One critic, however, has more or less synthesized the general arguments. He condemns Wright's depiction of the Black experience as distorted; he attempts to explain why Wright represented Black life as he did and finally why Wright has been so acclaimed. Since this article bears directly on the theme of this thesis, it will be quoted at length.

... but let me hasten to add that, as a chronic black reader of literature, I have felt in reading Wright's books, a strange uneasiness, not about the subhuman puppets dangled before me, but about the man control-


ling these puppets—who is really Booker T. Washington of American letters...

To reject Wright's art is not to reject protest, it is to reject negative protest, to reject the white man's concept of protest, which is that of a raging, ferocious, uncool, demoralized black boy banging on the door of White Society...

... it was his definition of "Negro writer" that led him to select from his own vast and rich experience those horrifying scrapes from which emerged a dozen unbelievably dumb Negroes...

One does not have to embrace every idea enumerated in this argument to accept the need to take a second look at Wright's depiction of Black life. Close scrutiny of the novel supports Brown's basic charges. First, an examination of the characters, individually and collectively, will prove their affinity to the traditional literary stereotypes; secondly, the incidents and episodes will show that they support and perpetuate these stereotypes, and finally, the explicit and implicit ideas in the novel will be analyzed to demonstrate that they conform to the stereotypical view of the Black experience. Obviously, these elements are too interrelated to be treated as separate entities.

The story opens with the clanging of an alarm clock. It is followed by the protagonist's mother's voice, which "sang out impatiently: 'Bigger shut that thing off!'" (p. 7). Her next command to the protagonist is to "Turn on the lights," then she speaks to her younger son: "Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today

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and I want you all out of here" (p. 7).

The entire Bigger Thomas' family lives in a single room in a kitchenette apartment so Mrs. Thomas must now ask her boys to turn their heads until she can get dressed. Mrs. Thomas' dominance yields to Bigger at the sight of a big rat. Bigger kills the rat, then uses it to terrify his sister, Vera, until she faints. In scolding him, the mother says that he acts the biggest fool she ever saw and wonders why she "birthed" him. Bigger's response is more sass and it is clear that the mother can do nothing about him but complain. Her choice of words as she complains is interesting: "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you," she says to Bigger and then turns to Vera and explains that "Bigger is just plain dumb, black crazy" (p. 12). Turning directly on Bigger, she comes to the heart of the matter. "All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you. Bigger, honest you the most no count-est man I ever seen in all my life!" (p. 12)

Mrs. Thomas here is performing the castration function which is a stereotypical role frequently ascribed to the Black mother in conventional literature. The fact that subsequent events confirm the mother's judgment does not negate this function. It does, however, establish the stereotype of a selfish, lazy, pleasure-seeker. This image
of the Black male goes back as far as Thomas Jefferson, as the following shows: "A black after hard labor through the day will be induced by the slightest amusement to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning."\(^{30}\)

Jefferson's reference to "hard labor" does not contradict the mother's second charge; namely, that Bigger will work only to keep from starving since Jefferson was referring to slaves who were forced to work. So far as Blacks who have a choice in the matter, no less a man of the enlightenment than Benjamin Franklin is reputed to have said the following: "The Negro is an animal that eats as much as possible to work as little as possible."\(^{31}\)

Bigger, himself, later, after reviving the subject of robbing Blum's department store to his three cronies, admits to one of them the following: "You know, I'd just as soon go to jail as take that damn relief job" (p. 32).

With a son like Bigger, there is little wonder that life soon wears Mrs. Thomas down. So instead of the stereotype of the super-strong Black matriarch, we get its counterpart—the woebegone, simplistic religious, doormat type. Even Bigger, in observing his mother, noted:


... how soft and shapeless she was. Her eyes were
tired and sunken and darkly singed from a long lack of
rest. She moved about slowly, touching objects with
her fingers as she passed them, using them for support.
Her feet dragged over the wooden floor and her face
held an expression of tense effort (p. 103).

When Mrs. Thomas visits Bigger in Jail, she speaks
as follows:

I'm praying for you, son. That's all I can do now.
... The Lord knows I did all I could for you and your
sister and brother. I scrubbed and washed and ironed
from morning to night, day in and day out, as long as I
had strength in my old body. ... When I heard the
news of what happened, I got on my knees and turned my
eyes to God and asked Him if I had raised you wrong. I
asked Him to let me bear your burden if I did wrong by
you. Honey, your poor ma can't do nothing now. I'm
old and this is too much for me. I'm at the end of my
rope (p. 277).

Bigger's sister is simply a younger replica of his
mother. One critic described her as "the tragic kid Vera,
sensitive, gentle-hearted and doomed."32 "Bigger felt that
even though her face was smaller and smoother than his
mother's, the beginning of the same tiredness was already
there" (p. 104). As for Bessie, "What his mother has was
Bessie's whiskey and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's re-
ligion" (p. 226). Stealing and sex were added ingredients
but essentially a reflection of the same forces. Again, we
view Bessie through Bigger's eyes:

He felt the narrow orbit of her life; from her room to
the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she
ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours,

32Sterling A. Brown, reprinted in Abcarian,
Wright's Native Son, p. 91. Originally appeared in Oppor-
tunity.
seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led. . . . Most nights she was too tired to go out; she only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her. . . . He knew why she liked him; he gave her money for drinks" (pp. 131-32).

While all of this is filtered through Bigger's consciousness, just as the picture of Bigger was partly given through the mother's eyes, both cases are in conformity with the evidence of the story and there are no other characters to contrast with them. Bigger's three cronies are cut from the same cloth and Buddy seems "aimless, lost with no sharp or hard edges, like a chubby puppy" (p. 101). The minor Black characters add nothing of significance to the argument. Reverend Hammond, the pastor of Bigger's mother's church, typifies the folk preacher, and Doc, the poolroom keeper, is true to type. Two Black characters argue over the merit of turning Bigger in if the chance arises and one swears that he would die first. The other would do it in a minute because Bigger would not have run, in his opinion, had Bigger been innocent. Mrs. Dalton, the blind employer for whom Bigger works, tells him that Mr. Green, a Black man who used to work for the Daltons, "went to night school and got an education" (p. 62). Green's only complaint, according to Peggy, the White housekeeper, was that the Daltons "starved him on Sunday" (p. 116). An educated Black character in Wright's work would be a wonder to behold but Mr. Green is only talked about; he is never seen.
One "educated" Black does appear in the novel later and he is a wonder to behold. His antics occupy nearly three pages and occur in a jail cell. The passages read as follows:

He went off his nut from studying too much at the university. He was writing a book on how colored people live and he says somebody stole all the facts he'd found. He says he's got to the bottom of why colored folks are treated bad and he's going to tell the president and have things changed. . . . He swears that his university professor had him locked up. The cops picked him up this morning in his underwear; he was in the lobby of the Post Office building waiting to speak to the president (p. 318).

This information was provided by a White character, but it can be confirmed by direct observation.

"You are afraid of me!" the man shouted. "That's why you put me in here! But I'll tell the president anyhow! I'll tell 'em you make us live in such crowded conditions on the South Side that one out of every ten of us is insane! I'll tell 'em that you dump all the stale foods into the Black Belt and sell them for more than you can get anywhere else. . . . I'll tell 'em the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts. I'll tell 'em you hire us last and fire us first. . . . (p. 318)

The function of this scene is not comic relief because it is not funny. If it is to be taken seriously, however, should the reader swallow it whole? It is a fact that the Black Belt was overcrowded. Was it also a fact that one out of ten Blacks was insane because of that? It is true that the schools were overcrowded but is it also true that this caused them to breed perverts? In any event, Wright has chosen to focus on the singular, the off-beat, the odd.
This completes the cast of Black characters and clearly they conform individually and collectively to the typical literary stereotype. Bigger Thomas, however, as the major character, deserves closer analysis. We have already seen him as a lazy, irresponsible pleasure-seeker; we must now see him as a brute and a coward. The cruel beating that he inflicts on Gus (P. 40) reveals Bigger as both simultaneously. His brute-like attack, the author makes plain, is a thin veil to cover up his cowardice, his fear of robbing a White man. Wright tells us that Bigger's "confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun" (p. 44).

This is not only stereotypical but also typical of Wright's misuse of social psychology. If Blacks during the thirties were too afraid to stick-up stores in their community simply because they were owned by Whites, robbery would have gone out of style. Bigger conceded as much when he said that "Almost all businesses in the Black Belt were owned by Jews, Italians and Greeks. Most Negro businesses were funeral parlors, . . ." (p. 234) and these are the last places stick-up men go. Bigger's naming of Jews, Italians and Greeks may reflect ethnic bias, but White ownership of business in the Black communities during the thirties was usual.

Bigger's murder of his girl friend, Bessie Mears,
in her sleep and his hacking off of the head of his White victim, Mary Dalton, and burning her body were also brutal and cowardly. But in making Bigger totally without feeling for Bessie, except sexual passion, and by making him unable to restrain his lust for the White female, Wright dredges the sewer for the most shameful stereotype of all. Again, this is a calumny against the Black male given credence as far back as colonial days. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, wrote that the Black male's preference for White females was "as uniformly as is the preference of the orangutan for the Black women over those of his own species."  

Jefferson points out further that Black men are "more ardent after their females; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire than a tender, delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation."  

Jefferson's charge is important not only because of his own stature but also because of the influence that his ideas have exercised. As Jean Yellin states, "Modern literary portraits of Black people have been shaped by the Black figures which were outlined by Thomas Jefferson in the late eighteenth century." Throughout the novel, one

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33 Pedan, Notes on the State of Virginia, p. 138.
34 Ibid., p. 139.
finds nothing to counteract Jefferson's views; there is, however, much to sustain them. For instance, Max, Bigger's lawyer, tells the court that Bigger "had but two outlets for his emotions: work and sex--and he knew these in their most vicious and degrading form" (p. 139).

Later Max elaborates on this subject. Still speaking to the court of Bigger, Max says:

He had to have a girl so he had Bessie. But he did not love her. . . . Love is not based upon sex alone, and that is all he had with Bessie. He wanted more but the circumstances of his life and her life would not allow it. . . . There existed between them fitful splurges of physical elation; that's all" (p. 368).

But that is not all that Wright offers that embellishes the stereotype. One reason for Bigger taking the job was his fantasy about White women. His imagination had been stimulated by the movie that he and his cohort, Jack, had seen earlier. Speaking about the show, Jack tells Bigger that "Them rich chicks will do anything." Bigger agrees, "Yeah, and she's a hot looking number all right. . . . Say maybe, I'll be working for folks like that if I take that relief job." Jack then assures Bigger that "... them rich white women 'el go to bed with anybody from a poodle on up. Shucks, they even have their chauffeurs" (p. 33).

In this frame of mind, Bigger takes the job and on his first night drives Mary, the boss's daughter, and her lover, Jan, around the city. Jan leaves Mary highly in-
toxicated to get home alone with Bigger. As Bigger helps her to her bedroom, she passes out. In spite of his paralyzing fear of White people and Mary's state of complete drunkenness, Bigger finds her irresistible. "Mary, then," according to one critic, "clearly embodies Bigger's fantasies about rich white women as sexual partners." 36

Another critic dealt with the scene this way:

Once Bigger has closed the door to Mary's room, his die is cast, but has not stopped rolling. The life that has began stirring anew in Bigger is presented by Wright in sexual terms: Bigger is on the verge of realizing the fantasy of life that had come to him earlier in the day through the instrumentality of the movie—"Making Love to a Rich White Woman." 37

Wright's presentation of the scene is as follows:

His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. She was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer. . . . He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and lips touched his, like something he had imagined. He stood her on her feet and she swayed against him.

He lifted her and laid her on the bed. Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited, looking at her face in the dim light, not wanting to take his hands from her breasts. She tossed and mumbled sleepily. He tightened his fingers on her breast, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now, his lips trembled. The door behind him had creaked (p. 84).

Bigger obviously intends rape. The author's projection of this intention serves no literary function ex-


37 Eugene Miller, "Voodoo Parallels in Native Son," CLA Journal, XVI (September-June, 1972-73), 87.
cept to strengthen the image of the stereotype of the Black male as sex fiend. The fact that the rape is not consummated does not lessen this charge. "It could be argued," opined one critic, "that Wright had Bigger kill the girl rather than make love to her because, to his contemporaries, interracial violence was more acceptable than interracial intimacy." Whatever the reason, the scene incontestably strengthens and supports the perverted image of Black lasciviousness, even in the specific form of the rape of White women. The euphemistic phraseology employed by some of the critics dealing with this scene does not dilute its substance in any way. We have seen that Miller used the expression "making love" but did enclose it in quotation marks presumably to indicate the phrase was being used in a special sense. Reed speaks of "interracial intimacy" and Nathan A. Scott says that Bigger "contemplates taking her sexually." The critics whose formulations seem most baffling, however, are Diane Hoeveler and Henry S. Canby. Hoeveler writes that "Until the blind Mrs. Dalton entered the room, Bigger's intentions were amorous rather than murderous" [Emphasis added]. Henry S. Canby states that had

40 Hoeveler, "Oedipus Agonists," p. 66.
Mrs. Dalton "not entered the room at the fatal moment, the
girl would have slept off her drunkenness and Bigger would
never have gone beyond petty crimes." 41 Unless rape is an
amorous, petty crime these critics have missed the mark.

In an Afterword to the edition of Native Son used
in this study, John Reilly states the following:

Richard Wright inverts the pitiful and familiar story
of the Black man as victim, making the Negro the vio­
 lent attacker and seems thereby to confirm the white
man's fantasies of assault and rape. The victims of
Bigger Thomas' violence are a white woman with liberal
feelings on the Negro question and Bigger's own lover.
The story is thus calculated to show Bigger Thomas as a
man brutalized and depraved beyond ordinary humanity
(p. 393). [Emphasis added.]

This is precisely what Wright succeeds in doing. By pre­
senting Bigger as the inevitable product of environmental
forces, he also prepares the reader to see Blacks in gen­
eral through the same lenses. Even casual incidental char­
acters are denuded of normal sensibilities. For example,
at one point in Bigger's flight from the police, Wright
paints this picture:

Directly below him, one floor away, through a window
without shades, he saw a room in which were two small
iron beds with sheets dirty and crumpled. In one bed
sat three naked black children looking across the room
to the other bed on which lay a man and a woman, both
naked and black in the sunlight. There were quick
jerky movements on the bed on which the man and woman
lay, and the three children were watching. It was
familiar; he had seen things like that when he as a
little boy sleeping five in a room. Many a morning

41 Henry S. Canby, Book of the Month Club News
(February, 1940), reprinted in Abcarian, Richard Wright's
Native Son, p. 39.
he had awakened and watched his father and mother (p. 231).

The implications of this scene are clear: The inhuman overcrowded conditions under which Blacks are forced to live so strip them of their sense of humanness that they copulate before their children much as dogs do before their whelps. It should be noted that the Black parents do not put anything up at the windows to provide themselves with privacy, do not hang anything from the ceiling to block their bed from their children's view, do not attempt to conceal themselves under their "dirty sheets," do not send the children out to play, and apparently cannot wait until the children are asleep at night. They simply respond to their conditions like animals. Yet, Elridge Cleaver, a Black revolutionary of the sixties and a born again Christian of the seventies, says that "Richard Wright reigns supreme for his profound, political, economic and social reference. . . . With him, sex, being not a spectator sport or a panacea but the sacred vehicle of life and love, is itself sacred." 42

In an introduction to the first edition of Native Son, Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote as follows:

How to produce neuroses in sheep and psychopathic upsets in rats and other animals has been known to research psychologists for so long that accounts of these experiments have filtered out to us, the general public,

42 Elridge Cleaver, "Notes on a Native Son," in Abcarian, Wright's Native Son, p. 237.
through books and periodicals. The process seems to be a simple one: the animal is trained to react in certain ways to certain stimuli and then is placed in a situation in which these reactions are impossible. After making a number of attempts to go on reacting as he has been trained to, each attempt blocked, the frustration produces a nervous breakdown.43

Ms. Fisher explained that the animals act abnormal. The sheep, generally gregarious, become morose and solitary and "The rat continues madly to dash his head against the locked door until bruised and bleeding, he has battered himself to exhaustion, almost to death."44

Ms. Fisher then cites a study of the American Youth Commission that suggests Black youths were subjected by American society to conditions analogous to the animals in the experiments. She wrote as follows:

Our society put Negro Youth in the situation of the animal in which a neurosis is to be caused, by making it impossible for him to live up to those never-to-be-questioned national ideals as other young Americans. Native Son is the first report in fiction we have had of those who succumb. . . .45

Ms. Fisher reminds the reader, however, of the following:

Bigger's mother and sister, although subjected to exactly the same psychological cross currents as he, are submissive, all-enduring, religious, affront swallowing, yes-massing Negroes so heartily approved by white people looking for cheap help to do their work for them. . . . There is no sounder stroke of realism than the portrait of Bigger's sweet-natured, infinitely patient, unrebellng, doormat of a mother.46

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43 Ibid., p. 39.  
44 Ibid., p. 40.  
45 Ibid.  
46 Ibid., p. 41.
Ms. Fisher, in implying that the reactions manifested by Bigger and Bigger's mother exhaust the possible responses of Black people to their oppression, ignores the significant distinction between animals and human beings. This is the error that apparently permeates Wright's literary philosophy. His Black characters are virtually all Biggers in one guise or another or they are a variety of doormats. Wright states that oppression spawned among Black people "a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright rebellion to a sweet, other worldly submissiveness," but his fiction depicts only the two extremes. "I can tell you," Wright says, "That I lived the first seventeen years of my life in the South without so much as hearing of or seeing one act of rebellion from any Negro, save the Bigger Thomases."

Wright says that "Never for a second" was he in doubt "as to what kind of social reality or dramatic situation" that he would put Bigger in, what kind of "test tube life" he would "set up to evoke his deepest reactions." The test tube analogy that Wright applies to Bigger he applies by extension to Blacks generally. Bigger's "deepest reaction" is little different from the rat to which he is frequently compared. Jonathan Daniels writes in the Satur-

48 Ibid., p. 27.  
49 Ibid., p. 40
day Review of Literature (March 2, 1940) that though he doubts if "Bigger Thomas proves any more about the Negro than he does about the world," he considers Native Son "authentic, powerful writing about a young Negro driven by his cramped destiny to crime. . . . The story of Bigger Thomas," he says, "is the story of a rat." 50 Mary Carter Roberts, writing in the Washington Star (March 3, 1940), says that "there can be no doubt that Mr. Wright considers this boy typical of the vast Negro population." 51 She cites Max's statement to support her position. And Henry S. Canby declares in Book of the Month Club News (February, 1940) that "Native Son is a novel only a Negro could have written, whose theme is the mind of the Negro we see everyday." 52 [Emphasis added.] According to Malcolm Cowley in the New Republic (March 18, 1940), Richard Wright seems to be saying over and over: "Listen you white folks. . . . I want to tell you about all the Negroes in America. I want to tell you how they live and how they feel." 53

This is an ambitious task even for Wright; it is too great to be pursued in this paper. However, it should be interesting to examine the real life Biggers that Wright claims were his inspiration for the Bigger Thomas of Native Son. In "How Biggers Was Born," Wright numbers five Big-
gers whom he personally knew, then he refers incidentally to even more Biggers. What is remarkable about these Biggers is that none resemble the Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* except in name. In the novel, the central element in Bigger's character is fear of White folk. The very thought, for instance, of robbing a White man drives him into a frenzy. When Bigger does kill, his victims are women—one Black and one White. Bigger was on the verge of raping the White woman, who was too drunk to resist, just before he accidently smothered her. The Black woman was sleeping when Bigger smashed her face in with a brick. He had raped her earlier. He stuffs the body of the White woman in a furnace and he dumps the body of the Black woman down an airshaft. Yet Bigger, in his jail cell, ends up like a whipped cur, whimpering that what he killed for "must've been good" (p. 392), and one critic assures us that Bigger "went to his death proud of his accomplishment."  

What Bigger accomplished seems best summed up by a famous Black critic who writes as follows:

>The murder of Bessie Mears is the weakest incident in the novel. To murder this woman of color and race means that Bigger severs all ties with the Universe, becomes a man completely alone. For a Black to murder

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54 Fabre, in the *Unfinished Quest*, p. 49, says that the name Bigger Thomas was taken from a childhood neighbor who was named James Thomas and called Bigger and Biggy.

another is to commit the most heinous of crimes. 56

Be that as it may, there seems to be no attribute of the real life Biggers to suggest that they go around raping and murdering women, Black or White. As for their fear of White men, Wright presents Bigger as follows:

Even though Bigger had asked Gus to be with him in the robbery, the fear that Gus would really go made the muscles of Bigger's stomach tighten; he was hot all over. He felt as if he wanted to sneeze and could not; only it was more nervous than wanting to sneeze. He grew hotter, tighter; his nerves were taut and his teeth were on edge. He felt that something would soon snap within him (p. 27).

Contrast this with the unnumbered Bigger who told a White man that was trying to impose on him: "I'll kill you and go to hell and pay for it." 57 Bigger Number 5 is typical of the numbered Biggers. A glance at him is illuminating. Earlier in the same article, Wright declared:

Then there was Bigger Number 5, who always rode the Jim Crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased. I remember one morning his getting into a streetcar ... and sitting in the white section. The conductor went to him and said: "Come on, nigger, move over where you belong. Can't you read?" Bigger answered: "Naw I can't read." The conductor flared up: "Get out of that seat!" Bigger took out his knife, opened it, held it nonchalantly in his hand, and replied, "Make me." The conductor turned red, blinked, clenched his fists, and walked away, stammering: "The goddamn scum of the earth!" ... . The Negroes experienced an intense flash of pride and the streetcar moved


57 Wright, "How Bigger was Born," in Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 31.
on its journey without incident. I don't know what happened to Bigger No. 5. But I can guess.\textsuperscript{58}

One thing is certain: he is not included in the pages of \textit{Native Son}, nor is a single scene included that can cause Blacks to experience "an intense flash of pride." It is true that \textit{Native Son} is set in the North and the Biggers whom Wright cites are all Southerners. This, however, cannot explain their absence from the novel, for Wright, himself, explains: "The urban environment of Chicago, affording a more stimulating life, made the Negro Bigger Thomas react more violently than even in the South."\textsuperscript{59}

There is violence enough in \textit{Native Son} but it is senseless violence of Black on Black or senseless violence against women, sleeping and dead. In the melodramatic flight across the rooftops on the South side, Bigger fires his gun but misses three straight times (p. 249). Later, we read that again "He wanted to shoot, but remembered that he had but three bullets left. He would shoot when they were closer and he would save one bullet for himself. They would not take him alive" (p. 250). They did take him alive and we see Bigger in jail: "He was alone, profoundly, unescapably. He \textit{rolled on the floor and sobbed}, wondering what it was that had hold of him, why he was here" (p. 288).

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 24. \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 29.}
So Wright transforms his real-life Biggers into something unrecognizable or recognizable only as caricature.

There is, however, another real-life model that presumably influenced the final portrait of Bigger Thomas. Wright says that when he "was half-way through the first draft of Native Son a case paralleling Bigger's flared forth in the newspapers of Chicago (many of the newspaper items and some of the incidents in Native Son are but fictionalized versions of the Robert Nixon Case)." 60 The word "presumably" was used above deliberately because, as Fabre points out, Wright "In fact . . . only borrowed a few minor details from the case of Robert Nixon." 61 Equally important as this information is Fabre's statement that "Wright took an interest in Nixon's case more out of a desire to study the behavior of whites once they turned against a black man than out of curiosity about the psychology and motivation of the murderer himself." 62 [Emphasis added.]

This interest is not reflected in the novel nor are the significant parallels. It is the responsibility of the artist, not the critic, to select from the raw materials of life those experiences that the artist may choose to trans-
mute into a work of art. But if the exercise of this op-
tion manifests itself in a specifically significant pat-
tern, it is the duty of the critic to identify it. It will
be posited, then, that Wright's use of the Nixon Case will
be in the direction of supporting White stereotypes of
Black life. Consider the following facts:

(1) At least two newspapers gave coverage to the
Nixon Case: The Chicago Defender and The Chicago Tribune.
One paper was Black and gave Nixon the benefit of the
doubt; the other paper was White and damned Nixon from the
start. Wright drew only on the Tribune and one would never
know from reading his fiction or his non-fiction that any
other source on the Nixon Case existed. The Defender
gave the case by far the most coverage.

(2) Two organizations, the International Labor De-
fense and the National Negro Congress, involved themselves
in the defense of Nixon. Both organizations were Left-
leaning and to some extent under the influence of Communist
leadership. But as Keneth Kinnammon has observed: "In the
Nixon Case the role of the International Labor Defense and

Information on the Nixon Case appeared in the
Chicago Defender on all the following dates, and others:
May 28, 1938, p. 22; June 18, 1938, p. 1; July 11, 1938, p.
1; July 23, 1938, p. 7; July 30, 1938, p. 1; August 6, 1938,
p. 1; August 13, 1938, p. 1; August 20, 1938, p. 1; Septem-
ber 7, 1938, p. 5; October 15, 1938, p. 6; October 29, 1938,
p. 1; November 5, 1938, p. 1; November 12, 1938, p. 4; Nov-
ember 19, 1938, p. 1; December 10, 1938, p. 1; April 1,
1939, p. 1; April 8, 1939, p. 1; April 15, 1939, p. 1;
April 22, 1939, p. 1.
its representative, Attorney Joseph Roth, was small and initiatory; it was soon replaced by the National Negro Congress." Yet, in the novel, Wright chooses to fictionalize the role of the International Labor Defense under the name of Labor Defenders and to ignore the existence of the National Negro Congress.

(3) Wright has Bigger defended by a lone White lawyer, whereas Nixon was defended by a team of Black lawyers headed by Attorney Joseph Clayton and Charles Evins.  

(4) In the novel, Reverend Hammond, Bigger's mother's minister, is quite unsophisticated, rather ineffectual, down-home type, not distinctly an Uncle Tom, but a distant cousin. In the Nixon Case, among the ministers involved were Bishop W. L. Sledge, the Race Chaplain at Cook and Oak Forest Hospital, and Bishop William McGee, to name just two.  

(5) In the novel, the Black community is mentioned only as "victim" of police raids but in the Nixon Case it is a vital part of his defense. A committee backed by over one hundred citizens sought the Governor's aid. The committee declared the death sentence was imposed "in spite of

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65 Chicago Defender, July 23, 1938, p. 7.

66 Ibid., October 15, 1938, p. 6.
grave doubts as to his guilt ... because he was a member of the Race and his victim white and because the police department needed a victim upon whom to fasten a number of unsolved crimes." 

(6) In the novel, the only violence directed at Bigger is from the crowd, the masses. In the Nixon Case, we read the following: "Despite his previous confession, Nixon declared his innocence when placed on the witness stand. He charged that he admitted the slaying only because he wanted to escape constant abuse by the police." 

Earl Hicks, Nixon's alleged accomplice, pleaded guilty and was given a seventeen-year prison term, "Hicks later confided in his attorney Ulysses S. Keys that this testimony [implicating Nixon] was false but that it was the only way of saving himself from the chair." 

The real difference between Bigger and Nixon, however, appears to be something intangible, something bordering on spirit or soul or perhaps simple humanity. This is difficult by its nature to define but some hint may be gained from looking at how the two face death. This is Bigger's farewell scene:

"I didn't want to kill, but what I killed for I am. It 

67 Ibid., November 5, 1938, p. 5.
68 Ibid., July 23, 1938, p. 2.
69 Ibid., August 13, 1938, p. 1.
must have been pretty deep in me to make me kill, I must have felt it awful hard to murder. . . ."

Max lifted his hand to touch Bigger, but did not. "No, no, no, . . . Bigger, not that," Max pleaded de-
spairingly.

"What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something. I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. . . . It's the truth, Mr. Max, I can say it now, cause I'm going to die. I know what I am saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way. . . ." Max's eyes were full of horror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still.

"I'm all right, Mr. Max. Just go and tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn't crying none (pp. 391-92). [All ellipses are Wright's.]

As Max leaves, Bigger asks him to "Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . Tell Jan hello. . . ." "He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut" (p. 392).

Bigger earlier had said that he really had "never wanted to hurt anybody" (p. 388) but does he really show remorse? Does he show any comprehension of the enormous crimes that he has committed, not merely against the dead women, but against the living, his mother first of all, and his entire family? Does he ever say "I was wrong!" The fault at least is partly mine! No, until the very end he is saying:

"I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to; thats all. They were crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me room. Lots of times, I tried to forget 'em, but I couldn't.
They wouldn't let me. . . ." Bigger's eyes were wide and unseeing, his voice rushed on (p. 388).

But there is no need to follow him further for as the author states, "Bigger's eyes were wide and unseeing." A direct comparison between Bigger and Nixon presents immediate difficulties; Bigger was definitely guilty whereas Nixon, though convicted, may have been innocent. Certainly, what is written about the case does not constitute conclusive proof of guilt beyond all reasonable doubt. A shadow of suspicion during the forties loomed over virtually every case where the accused was Black and the victim White. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright explained why:

A crime wave is sweeping a city and citizens are clamoring for police action. Squad cars cruise the Black Belt and grab the first Negro boy who seems to be unattached and homeless. He is held for perhaps a week without charge or bail, without the privilege of communicating with anyone, including his own relatives. After a few days this boy "confesses" any thing that he is asked to confess, any crime that handily happens to be unsolved and on the calendar. Why does he confess? After the boy has been grilled night and day, hunged up by his thumbs, dangled by his feet out of twenty-story windows, and beaten (in places that leave no scars--cops have been found to do that), he signs the papers before him, papers which are usually accompanied by a verbal promise to the boy that he will not be sent to the electric chair. Of course, he ends up by being executed or sentenced to life. If you think I'm telling tall tales, get chummy with some white cop who works in a Black Belt district and ask him for the lowdown.70

One cannot prove the accuracy of this observation, but allowing for possible exaggeration of this or that detail, it appears to approximate the truth. At least, it is

70 Baker, Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 41.
Wright's perception of the truth. In view of this, it is a loss that Wright took no interest in Nixon as a person, but only in how White people reacted to him. This, one could have gotten from the Chicago Tribune, the only paper that Wright chose to use. And even here, Wright's selection was more than literary. He ignored the fact, for instance, that Nixon asked for a Bible, although it appeared in the Tribune article also. 71

The Chicago Defender reported that Nixon showed "no sign of breaking" 72 even when he was scheduled to die within three hours. He was later granted a reprieve. The Chicago Defender on April 1, 1939, reports that

when interviewed, Nixon, who had already spent one birthday in the shadow of the electric chair, appeared unworried and inclined to be lighthearted. . . . Nixon had corresponded with Father Divine but expressed little hope of the Messiah's ability to help him.

On being told that his final appeal had been denied and that he was scheduled to be electrocuted on June 16, 1939, Nixon "became momentarily crestfallen, but promptly brightened up and remarked 'well if there is anything that can still be done, I'll bet you Mr. Clayton will do it.'" 73

Having won seven stays of execution, there was apparently nothing else that Mr. Clayton could do.

71 Chicago Tribune, June 3, 1938, p. 1.
72 Chicago Defender, November 19, 1938, p. 4.
73 Ibid., April 22, 1939, p. 1.
On June 17, 1939, the Chicago Defender ran on Page 1, the following headline in bold type: "Nixon Dies in Chair." The column recapitulated the struggle to save him, carried his picture along with the article and printed the following as Nixon's last words: "I am dying for a bum rap the cops pinned on me. Regardless of what they say, I didn't kill that woman and they know it."

One cannot say merely from reading the newspaper reports whether Nixon was innocent or guilty, but one can say with certainty that he is far more human than the Bigger with whom he is compared.74

Another real-life connection to Native Son is reflected in the courtroom scene. Wright says that Max's defense of Bigger Thomas is modeled on Clarence Darrow's famous defense of Leopold and Loeb.75 On the surface the two defense pleas are strikingly alike, but this is only on the surface. The profundity, conviction, and sincerity in the Darrow plea simply do not come through in Max's speech, despite the similarity of language. This may be due to the fundamental difference on which the pleas are based. Max, for instance, speaks as follows: "The state has sought to create the impression that I am going to say that this boy

74 Fabre in Unfinished Quest, p. 356, says that "Nixon was executed in August, 1939." The source of his error is not clear.

75 Ibid., p. 172.
is insane. That is not true (p. 348). [Wright's emphasis.]

Clarence Darrow's defense in the Loeb-Leopold Case, on the other hand, states:

There is no question that these boys were mentally diseased. . . .

I do not believe that there is a man who knows this case, who does not know that it can be accounted for only on the theory of the mental disease of these two lads. . . . 76 There is not a single act in this case that is not the act of a diseased mind, not one. 77

Darrow's pleas saved his clients' lives; Max's did not. Whether it would have in real life is sheer conjecture, does not concern our arguments and needs to be pursued no further. However, there is one additional source 78 that has already been alluded to which must now be explored. It is the unconscious element discussed by Wright's psychiatrist and friend, 79 Dr. Wertham. "Since Freud," according to Wertham, "it has been inferred that in every literary creation there are unconscious elements." 80 In an article, "How Bigger Was Born," purporting to explain how


77 Ibid., p. 25.


79 Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 292.

he wrote the novel, Wright observes that "one can account for just so much of life and then no more. At least, not yet." But what Wright accounted for or failed to account for becomes clear when we see the result of this collaboration with his psychiatrist. It reads as follows:

Wright had given a sincere account of how he wrote his book in an autobiographical study: "How Bigger Was Born."

Our experimental study showed, however, that the emotional experiences related to the key scene of the novel had been completely forgotten by him for eighteen years and were not available to his consciousness at the time he wrote the novel. The conscious account he gave before the experiment was partly an unconscious rationalization.

Whether this "rationalization" was conscious or unconscious is not absolutely clear. In the article reporting on the experiment, itself, for instance, Wertham states that "comparison of long forgotten memories presented in this study with the self-explanation of Native Son in "How Bigger Was Born" show the latter is a conscious rationalization." [Emphasis added.] Fabre points out that "the desire to approximate reality did not lead Wright to modify the basic structure of Native Son in the slightest, perhaps

81 Baker, Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 45.
because the novel was so close to his own emotional experience." \[84\] (Emphasis added.)

What, then, is this "emotional experience" that Wright guards so jealously? Is it the "emotional experience related to the key scenes of the novel that had been forgotten by him for eighteen years" but revived by Wertham? What is the key scene of the novel? Wertham believes that the "key scene in Native Son is when Bigger Thomas unintentionally kills Mary Dalton in the presence of her blind mother." \[85\]

The real life incident which Wright, after his memory has been pricked through psychoanalysis, admits "was the soil out of which Native Son came" \[86\] is presented by Wertham as follows:

As an adolescent of fifteen, Wright went to public school and worked morning and evenings for a white family. The lady of the house was young and pretty. She lived with her husband and her mother. . . . The daughter, the lady of the house, was friendly to young Richard and he felt this a second home to him. . . .

In the early morning Young Richard would carry scuttles of coal and wood into the house. On one such morning when he was carrying out his usual routine, he opened the door and came suddenly upon the lady of the house before she was dressed. She reprimanded him severely and told him he should always knock before entering. These recollections had great emotional power.

\[84\] Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 44.


\[86\] Ibid., p. 113.
They were related to much earlier emotional experience.\footnote{87}

But if this is the true soil out of which Native Son came, the true model for Bigger Thomas is Wright himself. And this is precisely the conclusion that Wertham reached: He says "That there is an identification between Bigger Thomas and his creator is evident."\footnote{88} It is also evident that the scene in question can best be explained by considering this emotional source. In an unpublished dissertation dealing with the theme of the alienation of Wright's life and work, the following observation is made:

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; . . .\footnote{89}

The answer to these questions appears to be connected with Wright's unwillingness to allow Bigger to act consistent with his literary nature, even the debased nature of a stereotype. Wertham speaks of "fantasies and daydreams" from the real-life episode that lead to the "key

\footnote{87}{Ibid.} \footnote{88}{Ibid., p. 112.} \footnote{89}{Theresa Lenora Drew Haymon, "Alienation in the Life and Works of Richard Wright" (Ph.D. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1976), p. 159.}
scene and its setting in the novel." Wertham admitted that he was "handicapped in writing openly about Native Son by the fact that Richard Wright was still alive at the time." But one does not require the aid of a psychiatrist to imagine what these "fantasies and daydreams" involved. These fantasies and daydreams, however, must coexist with the memories of the severe reprimand to which he had been subjected. They must also coexist with "much earlier emotional experience" as Wertham suggests. This conflict created an ambivalence that Wright as an author could not fully resolve. Add to this the fact that "closer to the center of what Wright tries to do in Native Son are certain sociological concepts which Wright may have drawn from the University of Chicago school of sociology," and all become clear. Wright's grotesque caricature of Black life reflects his poorly assimilated sociological theories, the emotional experiences rooted in his childhood, and his personal frustration from being Black. Moreover, Wright's pettiness intruded in his literary work, further distorting his characters. An example of this was Wright's insistence upon naming Bigger's victim, Mary Dalton, because it had been the "nom de guerre" of a New York

91 Ibid., p. 47.
communist sent to Chicago as a Party official in 1934. Without knowing her very well, Wright had heartily disliked the girl, . . . 93

Fabre was given this information second-hand 94 and it seemed to conflict with the opinion that Dalton was chosen because of its derivative—Daltonism. 95 As a matter of fact, a Southern Communist activist appears under the name of Mary Dalton in Angelo Herndon's autobiography, 96 a work with which Wright was thoroughly familiar. 97 Whether this was one and the same person is uncertain, but Fabre's source was the reliable Jane Newton, 98 who worked closely with Wright on various drafts of Native Son. 99 Considering the source of Wright's "fantasies and daydreams" his rejection of one of Newton's suggestions is illuminating. The pertinent information given by Fabre follows:

The novel was well along when, one June afternoon, Wright declared that he was now forced to get rid of

93 Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 170.
94 Ibid., p. 536
95 Among the critics holding this position are Frederick Wertham in "An Unconscious Determinant of Native Son," p. 114, and Kenneth Kinnamon, "Native Son: The Personal, Social and Political Background," in Phylon, XXX ( ), 66.
96 Herndon, Let Me Live, p. 108.
97 Fabre, in Unfinished Quest, p. 135, says that "In a sense, 'Fire and Cloud' was in Wright's eyes a fictional treatment of the theme of 'The Way of Angelo Herndon,'" the article that New Masses had rejected.
98 Ibid., p. 556. 99 Ibid., p. 170.
Bigger's friend, Bessie. Jane begged Wright to spare the girl, since she considered the murder both unnecessary for the development of the plot and insufficiently motivated. Although Wright recognized the logic of Jane's remarks, a deep-seated conviction prevented him from yielding on this point. Since Jane knew the South Side as well as Richard she was able to suggest the exact location of the capture, but she was still arguing for Bessie's life at the time. Richard just cried out, "But I have to get rid of her. She must die." ¹⁰⁰

But why? Fabre assumes that Wright's inspiration was drawn from a combination of two literary traditions: realism and existentialism. ¹⁰¹ Perhaps. These sources, however, at best provide Wright with possibilities but he acts out of compulsion. Bessie had to die. The deeply buried longing in Wright's psyche for the friendly Southern lady whom he saw naked in her bedroom is transmuted into Bigger's lust for the drunken Mary Dalton in her bedroom in Native Son. The shame, the hurt and fear suffered by Wright becomes Bigger's rage partly expressed in hatred for Whites but primarily turned inward into self hatred of Black people, especially Black women. Bessie, then, is raped and murdered for personal, psycho-social reasons, not literary ones. As one critic observed: "In noting the violence and race hatred which Wright had to master, and did successfully in his best work, we must not neglect the self-hatred and contempt for other Negroes which so often accompany this. ¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 171.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Stanley E. Hyman, The Critics Credentials:
Wright may have successfully mastered his hatred of Whites, which was in reality an inverted form of love, but he was less successful in overcoming his self-hatred and hatred of Black people. How closely conjoined this love of Whites and self-loathing are in Wright can be seen in a single note written after his psychoanalysis. It reads:

This thing of imagining myself a devil, one with a tail -- my adoration of Mrs. Wall and her mother. Did I invent these people? When did I tell people that my mother used to send me in Arkansas to the shit [house] to eat? If this is the soil out of which Native Son came, the grotesque charicature of Black life is less surprising, but no less real. Warren French states the following:

Although books such as Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage demonstrate that a novelist can write a memorable story without having first-hand experience of his subject, readers expect the writer who seeks to expose the evils of contemporary society to be able to say with Walt Whitman "I am the man, I suffered, I was there." There is no doubt that Wright had "first-hand experience of his subject" and that he could say that he had suffered, he had been there. The question is his perception of that experience and his transformation of it into literature. Stephen Crane, alluded to above, is also


103 Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 590.

quoted as saying the following: "I understand that a man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes and he is not at all responsible for his vision—he is merely responsible for his quality of personal honesty."\(^{105}\) And Nathan Scott writes that "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."\(^{106}\) Whether this is due to Wright's defective vision or a lack of personal honesty need not be decided at this point, but a fuller understanding of Wright's own life should prove illuminating. Wright's "folk" history of Black people and his autobiographical works are sources that must now be examined.


CHAPTER IV

12 MILLION BLACK VOICES, BLACK BOY
AND AMERICAN HUNGER

The primary purpose of this chapter is to examine a significant portion of Wright's nonfiction to see what relationship, if any, it bears to Wright's depiction of the Black Experience in his fictional works. *12 Million Black Voices* has as its subtitle: *A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. It was prepared in collaboration with photographer Edwin Rosskam and published by Viking Press in 1941. The full text, with some of the original pictures used in the 1941 edition deleted, has been reprinted in the *Richard Wright Reader*¹ published in 1978.

*Black Boy*,² published as a complete volume in 1945, has as its subtitle: *A Record of Childhood and Youth*. Portions of this book, slightly modified, had been published earlier. Perennial Classics republished it in 1966 with an introductory note by Dorothy Canfield Fisher and an

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"Afterword" by John M. Reilly. The publisher's note to American Hunger reads as follows:

The book published here was originally included by Richard Wright as the second part of an autobiography entitled American Hunger. Its working title was "The Horror and the Glory."

The two parts were separated prior to publication and the first part was published in 1945 as Black Boy. The second apparently being intended for publication at a later date. Portions of the second section saw scattered publication in the 1940s, but with this volume it now appears intact for the first time.

Citations of these three volumes will refer to the editions above and page numbers will be incorporated into the text.

12 Million Black Voices was well received by a wide sector of the reading public, especially for a work of non-fiction. A representative sampling of newspaper and periodical reviews has been compiled by John M. Reilly and will be drawn on for this thesis because of its ready accessibility. The Sunday Worker, a Communist publication, contains an unsigned article (November 9, 1941) which begins as follows: "The combination of Richard Wright's devastating pen and the vivid, skillfully selected pictures of Mr. RossKam hits the reader with terrific impact." The New York World Telegram (November 11, 1941) states that "The message is a serious one, and the text commonplace. Indeed, the name of Richard Wright guarantees sincerity,

4 Reilly, Richard Wright.
earnestness, and a degree of power. He has written as if he were interpreting the experience of the race."  

Horace R. Cayton, writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* (November 15, 1941), says that "12 Million Black Voices is more than just description; it is a philosophy of the history of the Negro in America. . . ."  

Ernestine Rose, in the *Library Journal* on the same day, writes that the book is "much more a documentary film than a history. . . ."  

Ralph Thompson, in the *New York Times* (November 18, 1941), writes that "A more eloquent and belligerent statement of its kind could hardly have been devised. Mr. Wright's text . . . is a stinging indictment of American attitudes toward the Negro over a period of 300 years."  

In the *New York Times Book Review*, William Meachem states that

All this story has been factually told at encyclopedic length in the histories and learned journals of the social sciences, but it has needed a more poignant recital in the voice of the folk themselves, Richard Wright has become this voice. . . .

"The voice," says Samuel Sillen in *New Masses* (November 25, 1941), "is that of 12,000,000 Negroes whose manifold individual experiences has a basic identity. . . . A nation is speaking, with dignity and passion and pride."  

There is no need to say that the book is propaganda, for it is. But

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9 *Ibid.*.  
what is not? And why should we not have good propaganda, after four centuries of vicious propaganda to make life easy for white folks who have bled and exploited black folks?" 12 asks George Streator in Commonweal (November 28, 1941). "Richard Wright's text, though not an historian's summary, is the most poetic prose statement of the folk history of the Negro in this land yet published," writes L. D. Reddick in The Jewish Survey, 1942, 13 and John F. Mulholland, in the Christian Century (February 18, 1942), writes that 12 Million Black Voices is a photographic study of the finest and a distinct contribution to the sociology of the American Negro.

To all of these encomiums, one can easily assent. Here and there some of the confusion that characterizes Wright's conception of Black people in his fiction intrudes but, by and large, Wright is faithful to Black history. 12 Million Black Voices is a little less than one hundred pages long, including pictures. It will be used in this paper as a frame of reference for Wright's fiction and autobiography and therefore will not be exhaustively scrutinized.

One way of approaching the reality of Black life through folk history is to examine selected institutions common to all societies. The family is one such institution, and

12 Ibid., p. 111. 13 Ibid., p. 114.
Wright makes the following observation: "For the most part our delicate families are held together by love, sympathy, pity, and the goading knowledge that we must work together to make a crop" (p. 184).

This is rarely reflected in Wright's fiction and, as we shall see, rarer still in his autobiography. This bond holds not only the nuclear family together but applies to the extended family as well. Wright declares:

We reckon kin not as others do, but down to the ninth and tenth cousin. And for a reason we cannot explain we are mighty proud when we meet a man, woman, or child who, in talking to us, reveals that the blood of our brood has somehow entered his veins (p. 184).

The chief function of the family is procreation and the protection of the issue. What does Wright tell us about Black children? In his fiction, very little; in his autobiography, as we shall see, his own childhood was like a horror story, but in this fairly objective folk history we get the following:

Like black buttercups, our children spring up on the red soil of the plantations. When a new one arrives, neighbors from miles around come and look at it, speculating upon which parent it resembles. A child is a glad thing in the bleak stretches of the cotton country, and our gold is in the hearts of the people we love, in the veins that carry our blood, upon those faces where we catch furtive glimpses of the shape of our humble souls (p. 183).

Despite this family security and affection, external factors and human frailty sometimes cause Black youth to stray; but, according to Wright, this causes no diminution of parental love. He explains it in this manner:
Because our eyes are not blinded by the hunger for possessions, we are a tolerant folk. A black mother who stands in the sagging door of her gingerbread shack may weep as she sees her children straying off into the unknown world, but no matter what they do, no matter what happens to them, no matter what crime they may commit, no matter what the world may think of them, that mother always welcomes them back with an irreducibly human feeling that stands above the claims of law or property (pp. 184-85).

Education, or the training of the young in one form or another, is an element common to all human societies. Wright comments on this subject, too.

The schoolhouse is usually far away; at times our children must travel distances varying from one to six miles. Busses are furnished for white children but rarely for ours. The distances we walk are so legendary that often the measure of a black man's desire to obtain an education is gauged by the number of miles he declares he walked to school when a child (p. 189).

After depicting the nature of Jim Crow education and the difficulty that Blacks often encountered to obtain even that, Wright notes:

Yet, in a vague, sentimental sort of way we love books inordinately, even though we do not know how to read them, for we know that books are the gateway to a forbidden world. Any black man who can read a book is a hero to us. And we are joyful when we hear a black man speak like a book (p. 187).

This stands in stark contrast to Wright's presentation of Black attitudes towards books in his fiction and in his autobiography. As a matter of fact, it is, exempting himself, of course, the direct opposite.

In virtually all human societies, religion plays a significant part. In the history of Black life, it has been of paramount importance. However, in Wright's fiction
and autobiography, the image of the church and religion is virtually always negative. Yet, in his folk history, even when discussing the Black church in the Northern ghettos, we get this positive, almost poetic description:

Despite our new worldliness... we keep our churches alive. In fact we have built more of them than ever here on the city pavements, for it is only when we are within the walls of churches that we are wholly ourselves, that we keep alive a sense of our personalities in relation to the total world in which we live, that we maintain a quiet and constant communion with all that is deepest in us. Our going to church on a Sunday is like placing one's ear to another's chest to hear the unquenchable murmur of the human heart... Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death from the Bosses of the Buildings (p. 230).

Finally, Wright gives a graphic account of the oppression that Blacks have endured for centuries and the various forms that the resistance to this oppression have taken. He tells of the debauchery born during the dreadful middle passage and its persistence on the plantation for years afterward. The following is illustrative:

The slave ships, equipped for long voyages, were floating brothels for the slave traders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bound by heavy chains, we gazed impassively upon the lecherous crew members as they vented the pent-up bestiality of their starved sex lives upon our sisters and wives. This was a peculiar practice which, as the years flowed past, grew into a clandestine but well-established institution which the owners of cotton and tobacco plantations upheld (p. 149).

Wright tells of slaves going on hunger strikes and sometimes leaping into the sea (p. 151). The slavers not
only fiendishly crushed all resistance but attempted to ex-
tirpate the idea of freedom itself. He writes:

To quench all desire for mutiny in us, they would some-
times decapitate a few of us and impale our black heads
upon the tips of the spears, just as years later they
impaled our heads upon the tips of pine trees for miles
along the dusty highways of Dixie to frighten us into
obedience (p. 151).

The lesson, however painfully taught, was never fully
learned, for even during the Depression, Wright states
that:

Organized into groups, we black folk smashed the mar-
shals' locks, picked up the paltry sticks of furniture,
and replaced the evicted families. Having hurdled
fears' first barrier, we found that many white workers
were eager to have us in their organizations and we
were proud to feel that at least our strength was suf-
cient to awaken in others a desire to work with us
(p. 238).

Through the long torment of slavery and the subse-
quent nightmare of pseudo-freedom, Wright asserts that
Blacks had the "faculty of keeping alive this spark of hap-
piness under adversity. . . .", because of "the courage and
faith in simple living that enabled us to maintain this
reservoir of human feeling, for we know that there will
come a day when we shall pour out our hearts over this
land" (p. 193).

Wright concludes his remarkable history with these
words:

We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads.
We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry ur-
gent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking,
men are moving. And we shall be with them. . . (p.
241). [Wright's ellipsis.]
12 Million Black Voices clearly establishes the fact that Wright, when he worked on Black Boy, had adequate knowledge of Black history and Black culture to present a well-rounded picture of Black life. Even if one rejected the record of Black life in 12 Million Black Voices, this rejection would not negate the fact that 12 million Black voices is the record Wright claims to believe is true. Black Boy, then, becomes a book of contradictions, and distortions, if not outright lies.

Ronald T. Takaki, in Violence in the Black Imagination, states that "Historians have in many cases been able to see blacks only as they wished to see them—only as servile, lazy, and happy or only as defiant, discontented and rebellious."¹⁴ This two-dimensional syndrome seems to affect Wright conversely, since he is perfectly capable of a multifaceted historical rendition of the Black experience but utterly limited in his perspective in fiction and personal biography. A close scrutiny of the text will support this assertion, but the key to understanding Black Boy and Wright's perversity in general is found in two paragraphs of the autobiography. They read as follows:

After I had outlived the shocks of Childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our

joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passioned an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.

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 (p. 45).

With this as a guiding philosophy, Wright's final product could be anticipated. The story opens with Wright as a four-year-old; his mother has been scolding him all morning, attempting to keep him quiet because of the illness of his grandmother. Wright had a "vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow" and he was afraid (p. 9). Wright's brother, a year younger, was "playing placidly upon the floor with a toy" (p. 9). By the end of the next page, the four-year-old, despite the warning of his younger brother, has set the house on fire. This leads to the earliest trauma that Wright remembers. He states the following:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away. ... My body seemed on fire and I could not sleep. Packs of
Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me (p. 13).

Shortly after this incident, his mother told him that the family was moving to Memphis. Richard was disappointed when he "saw a tiny, dirty boat that was not like the boat that he had imagined" (p. 16). However, solace came to him when he "wandered about the boat and gazed at Negroes throwing dice, drinking whiskey, playing cards, lolling on boxes, eating, talking and singing" (p. 16).

This is the first group scene that we see of Blacks; none was working. In Memphis, Richard's father works as a night porter but the focus is on the father's negative qualities apropos Richard's description:

I stared at him with awe as he gulped his beer from a tin bucket, as he ate long and heavily, sighed, belched, closed his eyes to nod on a stuffed belly. He was quite fat and his bloated stomach always lapped over his belt. He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote (p. 17).

It is clear that Richard resents and rejects his father's authority although, at this period in his life, there is no apparent reason for this. When the father's sleep is disturbed by the meowing of a stray cat, he tells the boys to "kill the damn thing. . . . Do anything, but get it away from here." This gives Richard his excuse to strike back at his father. These are his words:

He had said to kill the cat and I would kill it! I knew that he had not really meant for me to kill the
kitten, but my deep hate of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word (p. 22). [Emphasis added.]

Richard kills the cat and, when taken before his father, feigns innocence. Since the father recognizes that he may have used the words that Richard claims, he feels that he cannot punish Richard for misconstruing their meaning. Later, Richard gloats over his victory:

I had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at last found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. . . . I had made him know that I felt he was cruel and I had done it without his punishing me (p. 19).

As Richard points out, his mother, being more imaginative, retaliated in a way that taught him the "moral horror involved in taking a life" (p. 19). Many days after this incident, Richard learns another lesson. When he complains of being hungry, his mother asks him where was his father. He was baffled as the following shows:

I stared in bewilderment. Yes, it was true that my father had not come home to sleep for many days now and I could make as much noise as I wanted. Though I had not known why he was absent, I had been glad that he was not there to shout his restrictions at me. But it had never occurred to me that his absence would mean that there would be no food (p. 22). [Emphasis added.]

But there is another lesson here. Judging from Richard's reaction to hunger and from the mother's remarks, the father had apparently been a good provider, at least of food. The kitchenette apartment where they lived was, no doubt, wretchedly overcrowded but on a porter's wage this
was evidently all the family could afford. The father's rebuke of the son seems reasonable within the context of their circumstances; yet Richard betrays his early deep-seated hostility for his father. The father's abandonment of the family, then, may have intensified this antipathy but it did not create it. It does show the direct cause of their subsequent hardship as resulting, not from White oppression, which is presumably Wright's thesis, but from the irresponsibility of the Black man, himself.

The next problem that Richard has occurred shortly after the hunger episode and also can be directly attributed to other Blacks. The incident involves his being beaten and robbed by a gang of young Blacks when his mother sends him to the store. When he tells his mother, she simply sends him back to be beaten again by the same boys. As he returned home this time, his mother meets him at the door. The following scene ensues:

"They b beat m me" I gasped. "They took the m money." "Don't you come in here," my mother warned me. I froze in my tracks and stared at her. "But they are coming after me." I said. "You just stay right where you are," she said in a deadly tone. "I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself." "Take this money, this note and this stick," she said. "Go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, then fight." I was baffled. My mother was telling me to fight, a thing that she had never done before. "But I'm scared," I said. "Don't you come into this house until you've gotten those groceries," she said. "They'll beat me; they'll beat me," I said. "Then stay in the street; don't come back here!"
The mother does not inquire as to the number of boys in the gang, their sizes or names, and it is night. Left with little choice, the indomitable Richard not only whips the whole gang, but when "the parents of the boys rush into the streets and threaten" him, he challenges them too (p. 25). Richard in only six but, to let him tell it, that night he "won the right to the streets of Memphis" (p. 25).

Again, to let Richard tell it, during his sixth year he became an alcoholic. It happened like this:

One summer afternoon . . . while peering under the swinging doors of the neighborhood saloon, a black man caught hold of my arm and dragged me into its smoking and noisy depths. . . . "Make him drunk and he'll stop peeping in here," somebody said. "Let's buy him drinks," somebody said. Some of my fright left as I stared about. Whiskey was set before me. "Drink it boy," somebody said. . . . "Drink it; it'll make you feel good. . . ." (p. 27, 29)

To beg drinks in the saloon became an obsession. . . . My mother protested tearfully to the proprietor of the saloon, who ordered me to keep out of his place. But the men--reluctant to surrender their sport--would buy me drinks anyway, letting me drink out of their flask on the streets, urging me to repeat obscenities (p. 29).

This is the second glimpse that Wright gives us of the Black masses besides his own family. These are not derelicts but what appear to be ordinary patrons in a neighborhood saloon. Women frequent the place but show no greater concern for the boy's welfare than the men. The proprietor acts only on the mother's complaint. No one seems too disturbed about the morality of the action nor
does the possibility of the child becoming ill seem to
deter them. They do not know whose child Richard is or
they do not care. Finally, Mrs. Wright places Richard and
his "brother in the keeping of an old black woman" who
watched him every moment to keep him from running to the
"doors of the saloons to beg whiskey" (p. 27). Richard ap-
parently frequented many saloons. We do not know where his
younger brother was all this time nor why it took the
mother so long to do what most mothers would have done at
once; namely, leave the children with older folk. Mrs.
Wright was not the only negligent parent, however, since
Richard tells us that "with a gang of children," he had
"roamed the streets begging pennies from passersby, haunt-
ing the doors of saloons, . . . (p. 29). [Emphasis added.]
Earlier he had related this scene:

Of a summer morning, when my mother had gone to work, I
would follow a crowd of black children--abandoned for
the day by their working parents--to the bottom of a
sloping hill whose top held a long row of ramshackle,
wooden outdoor privies whose opened rear end provided a
raw and startling view. We would crouch at the foot of
the slope and look up--a distance of twenty-five feet
or more--at the secret, fantastic anatomies of black,
brown, yellow and ivory men and women. For hours we
would laugh, point, whisper, joke, and identify our
neighbors by the signs of their physiological oddities,
commenting upon the difficulty or projectile force of
their excretion. Finally, some grown-up would see us
and drive us away with disgusted shouts. Occasionally
children of two and three years of age would emerge
from behind the hill with their faces smeared and their
breath reeking. At last a white policeman was sta-
tioned behind the privies to keep the children away and
our course in human anatomy was postponed (pp. 25, 26).

So Black parents forced to work out of the home
would abandon their children for the day as young as two and three years old who presumably ate human excrement. When grownups saw them they apparently confined their action to driving them away with "disgusted shouts." Of all the possible solutions to this problem, none occurred to the Black adults unless the stationing of a white policeman behind the privies was their idea.

Richard eventually started to school at a later age than was usual because his mother had not been able to buy him the necessary clothes (p. 32). He says that when he reached the edge of the school grounds he "became terrified" and wanted to return home. Once inside the school he was "frightened speechless." Yet at noon on the playground, he attached himself to a group of older boys. During that hour he "learned all the four-letter words describing physiological and sex functions" and discovered that he had known them before from his saloon days (p. 32). Why so timid a boy would gravitate to older boys is not made clear but Richard immediately put his revived knowledge to work. He printed on window after window all his "newly acquired four-letter words" (p. 32).

Now, Richard either knew or sensed that these words were vulgar or he did not. In either case, what would possess a little boy to write words on windows of other people's houses? Most boys of seven or eight will hardly venture on the porch of a neighbor's home unless other
little children live there. Where were the other little children? Where, for that matter, were the adults? Richard says that he had "written on nearly all the windows in the neighborhood when a woman" stopped him and drove him home. That night the woman told his mother what he had done (p. 32). The mother made the punishment fit the crime.

The next half dozen adults that Richard encounters have a strange consistency. His mother takes the father to court for child support but this is denied. The father is presented as something despicable. When the mother takes Richard to see the father to ask him personally for help, the father, who is living with a strange woman, is even more loathsome. Richard and his brother had been put in an orphanage run by a tall, gaunt mulatto who appears to be almost as bad as Richard's father. Though she took a fancy to Richard, he soon ran away from the orphanage. One might conclude that Richard had lost the capacity for trust but this would be premature. He encounters three policemen, all white, and all kindly portrayed (pp. 39-40). The following is indicative:

Finally, I was taken to the police station where I was fed. I felt better. I sat in a big chair where I was surrounded by "white" policemen, but they seemed to ignore me. Through the window I could see that night had completely fallen. . . . I grew sleepy and dozed. My shoulder was shaken slightly and I opened my eyes and looked into a "white" face of another policeman who was sitting beside me. He asked me questions in a quiet, confidential tone, and quite before I knew it he was not "white" anymore. I told him that I had run
away from an orphan home and that Miss Simon ran it (p. 40). [Quotes around "white" are Wright's.]

So Richard is not totally bereft but twenty-five years will pass before he sees his father again. The scene is as follows:

That day a quarter of a century later when I visited him on the plantation—he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes dazed with dim recollection, his fearsome aspect of twenty-five years ago gone forever... I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body... (pp. 42-43).

And in the moment of recognition what great truth does Wright discover? What understanding of his father's life? What insight into the riddle to explain his father's lack of loyalty, devotion to the most elementary bonds that human beings can know—the tie of flesh and blood? Why, all becomes plain as Wright explains in the words that follow:

From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was unknown to him as was despair. As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope (p. 43).

Fortunately for Richard, his mother never gave up hope. Her stubborn will to survive and save her family led her from one place to another. Shortly after the orphanage episode, Mrs. Wright takes the children to live with her and her sister at Elaine, Arkansas. On the way, they stop
to visit with Granny, who has moved from Natchez to Jackson, Mississippi. During the short stay at Granny's two incidents of importance occurred. One involved his introduction to books. Ella, a colored school teacher, who boarded with the grandmother, once yielded to Richard's pleas about books to the extent of telling him a story. She was caught by the grandmother and ordered to leave the house. This incident emphasizes the anti-book attitude of the grandmother but has little to do with Seventh Day Adventist, the grandmother's religion, and even less to do with Black people generally. It is surprising, however, that a young Southern Black school teacher rooming in the home of an old woman whose warped views she must have fully known would allow a brat like Richard to tempt her into such a situation. If she consented to tell him a story at all, she might have thought of something better than *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*.

The second incident at Granny's occurred when she was bathing Richard.

"Bend over," she ordered.

I stooped and she scrubbed my anus. My mind was in a sort of daze, midway between daydreaming and thinking. Then before I knew it, words--words whose meaning I did not fully know--had slipped out of my mouth.

"When you get through, kiss back there," I said, the words rolling softly but unpremeditatedly" (p. 49).

Richard was eight years old and again proved to be his own worst enemy. What possible purpose is served by Wright's inclusion of this scene except to besmirch Black
life? The event may have occurred, but so did hundreds of other events that Wright forgot to remember. Shortly after this incident, Mrs. Wright joined her sister in Elaine, Arkansas. Aunt Maggie was married to a saloon keeper who apparently did quite well. For the first time in a long while there was ample food. It was a short season, however, because soon afterward Aunt Maggie's husband was "killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business. Mrs. Wright, now joined by her sister Maggie, returned to Granny's" (p. 64).

Richard "was nearly nine years of age . . . , had not had a single unbroken year of school," and "was not conscious of it" (p. 64). Richard sees a company of men in uniform with rifles but does not know what a soldier is. This may not be surprising in a nine year old but when he sees some Black men on the chain gang in prison uniform and mistakes them for elephants this strains credulity (p. 67). Even more incredible is Wright's statement that he saw a Jew for the first time in his life and that:

All of us black people who lived in the neighborhood hated Jews, not because they exploited us, but because we had been taught at home and in Sunday school that Jews were "Christ killers." With the Jews thus singled out for us, we made them fair game for ridicule" (p. 70). [Emphasis added.]

Wright gives nearly a page of anti-Semitic ditties that were supposedly sung in front of the Jewish store by Black children of seven, eight and nine. He then explains:
There were many more folk ditties, some mean, others filthy, all of them cruel. No one ever thought of questioning our right to do this; our mothers and parents generally approved, either actively or passively. To hold an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward Jews was bred in us from childhood; it was not merely racial prejudice, it was a part of our cultural heritage (p. 71).

This was the first hint that Wright has given that Blacks have a "cultural heritage." The only element of the culture thus far revealed, however, is anti-Semitism. One must remember that Black Boy was published while the war against Hitler's Holocaust was still raging. Yet, despite "the cultural barrenness of black life," Blacks manage to breed anti-Semitism in their offsprings from childhood. Wright offers no proof of these assertions, nor does he reveal a single instance in the entire book to support his claim.

Immediately following this incident is the whorehouse scene in which Richard is caught as a peeping-Tom. The passage reads:

"You scared my customers," she said.
"Customers?" I repeated vaguely.
"You little snot," she blazed. I got a good mind to beat you.
"Naw, you won't!" I said.
"I'm gonna make your folks move outta here," she railed. "I got to make a living and you go and spoil my Saturday for me."
"I--I was just looking..."
"Look...?" She smiled suddenly, relenting a little. Why don't you come on over like the rest and spend a quarter?"
"I don't want to go to your old house," I told her with my nine-year old indignation (p. 73). [Emphasis added.]

This scene recalls the saloon episode where Richard became
an alcoholic at six. Has this women no fear that involving a nine-year-old boy in her business may lead to her ruin? Is there not a risk that the mother, who works, in all probability, for white people might enlist their aid? since her business is thriving and Richard could not possibly have many quarters, would she run the risk?

As a result of this incident the family moves but is hardly settled in its new home before trouble calls. Aunt Maggie's friend gets involved in some sort of crime and she flees North with him. Richard's description of him follows:

He wore a high, snow-white collar and rimless eyeglasses. His lips were thin and his eyelids seemed never to blink. I felt something cold and remote in him and when he called me I would not go to him (p. 75).

Contrast this description with the quite neutral picture of the white policeman that visits their home. Aunt Maggie's "friend" had clearly committed murder.

"The house is on fire," 'Uncle' said. "And when they see it, they'll know who did it."
"Did you set the house afire?" my mother asked. "There was nothing else to do," 'Uncle" said impatiently. "I took the money. I had hit her. She was unconscious. If they found her, she'd tell, I'd be lost. So I set the fire" (p. 73).

Yet the officer investigating the case is entirely professional. Richard's description follows:

A few days later a tall white man with a gleaming star on his chest and a gun on his hip came to the house. He talked with my mother a long time and all I could hear was my mother's voice: "I don't know what you are talking about. Search the house if you like."
The tall white man looked at me and my brother, but he said nothing to us (p. 78).

Richard is growing up fast; he joins the Black boys in their fight with White boys. Once Richard is hurt and his mother finds out. After the doctor stitched Richard's scalp, she takes him home and beats him. That is her warning to him to never fight White boys, just the opposite of the advice she gave him at six concerning Blacks.

Mrs. Wright becomes ill and Richard does odd jobs to help support the family. On one of his jobs he was able to listen "to Negro men boast of their sex lives" (p. 94). Mrs. Wright's health continues to deteriorate and the family clan assembles. The meeting resulted in Richard and his brother being separated. He went to live with his Uncle Clark while his brother was taken to Detroit. The Clarks provided a wholesome experience but the arrangement was short-lived. Returning to his Grandmother's, where Mrs. Wright had remained still paralyzed, Richard was enrolled in a religious school. His Aunt Addie, who was almost as devout as the grandmother, taught there and Richard was soon in trouble. Aunt Addie whipped him before the class for something that he did not do, but when she attempted to repeat the punishment at home, he fought her. He threatened to kill her with a knife (p. 120). Later in a confrontation with his Uncle Thomas, he has a razor in both hands (p. 175).
At puberty, a new dimension was added to Richard's life, but he fails to deal with it in his autobiography in any large measure. He writes as follows:

I survived my twelfth year on a diet that would have starved an average-sized dog, and my glands began to diffuse through my blood, like sap rising upward in trees in spring, those strange chemicals that made me look curiously at girls and women. The elder's wife sang in the choir and I fell in love with her as only a twelve-year old can worship a distant and unattainable woman. . . . I felt no qualms about my first lust for the flesh being born on holy ground; . . . . (p. 124)

It may not be unusual for an adolescent to experience such adoration for an older woman; it does seem unusual for this to be the sole interest in sex throughout the adolescent period. There was one further manifestation of sexual arousal but of such peculiar circumstances that it hardly falls in the same category. The incident occurred on Richard's first night in Memphis, where he had fled alone, in hopes of finding a better future for his family. He is looking for a room and sees a sign in the window of a big frame house advertising for roomers. He hesitates because he thinks it is a house of prostitution. The action of the landlady, who has seen him from her window, hardly allays his suspicions. She dashes to the door, calls him, almost commands him, to enter. Richard states that he is a stranger in the city, and we get this response:

"Lord, and don't I know it!" She dropped heavily into a chair and went into a gale of laughter that made her big bosom shake as though it were going to fly off.
"Anybody could tell that." She gasped, giggled and grew quiet (p. 229).

What brought on the giggling is not clear, but one can assume that some unspoken question in Wright's manner caused the following statement:

"Boy, Lord, this ain't no whorehouse," she said at last. "Folks get the craziest notion about Beale Street. I own this place; this is my home. I'm a church member. I got a daughter seventeen years old, and by God, I sure make her walk a straight chalk line. Sit down son, you in safe hands here (p. 229).

How safe Richard was depends on one's point of view but he, at least, soon felt safe. Richard accepted the room and paid $2.50. As she showed him the room, they continued to talk. We have already seen that Mrs. Moss is a church goer and property owner. Richard now says what a fine person she is:

I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at her in amazement. It was on reputedly disreputable Beale street in Memphis that I had met the warmest, friendliest person I had ever known, that I discovered that all human beings were not mean and driving, were not bigots like the members of my family.

"You can eat dinner with us when we come from church," she said.
"Thank you, I'd like to."
"Maybe you want to come to church with us?"
"Well . . ." I hedged.
"Naw, you're tired," she said closing the door (p. 230).

This scene suggests that Richard at last has had the experience of meeting an average Black family, perhaps a little above average; someone certainly to counter some of the negative images previously presented. Richard is euphoric. He says: "I lay on the bed and reveled in the
138
delightful sensation of living out a long sought dream"
(p. 231).

The initial impression of Mrs. Moss's eccentricities are forgotten in the light of this positive anticipa-
tion. But by now one should hardly expect a sustained wholesome presentation of Black life by Wright unless he is discussing himself. The following scene seems at first to confirm the Moss experience as an exception but this is only at first. Richard gives us this information:

Late that afternoon Mrs. Moss called me for dinner and introduced me to her daughter, Bess, whom I liked at once. She was young, simple, sweet, and brown. Mrs. Moss apologized for her husband, who was still at work. Why was she treating me so kindly? (p. 231)

A few minutes later, Richard learns the answer from Mrs. Moss herself:

"Bess's going to be married soon," she announced. "Congratulations!" I said. "Who's the lucky man?"
"Oh, I ain't got nobody yet," Bess said. I was puzzled. Mrs. Moss laughed and nudged me.
"I say gals oughta marry young," she said. "Now, if Bess found a nice young man like you, Richard. . . ."
"Mama!" Bess wailed, hiding her face in the dishcloth.
"I mean it," Mrs. Moss Said. "Richard's a heap bet­ter'n them old ignorant nigger boys you been running after at school. . . ."
"I'm going up front," Bess said giggling, burying her face in her hands, and running out. Mrs. Moss came to me and spoke confidently. "A gal's a funny thing," she said laughing.
"They has to be tamed, just like wild animals. . . ." "You like Bess, Richard?" Mrs. Moss asked me suddenly. I stared at her, doubting my ears. "I've been in the house only a couple of hours," I said hesitantly. "She's a fine girl."
"Naw. I mean do you like her? Could you love her," she asked insistently (p. 233).
I stared at Mrs. Moss, wondering if something was wrong with Bess. "What kind of people were these?"
Richard goes out looking for a job and is lucky to find one on his first day. Mrs. Moss is impressed and at the first opportunity Bess tries to get Richard to go to bed with her. But Richard says that "The prize of the house did not tempt me." After she kissed him, however, he thought he would have it out with her. He says: "I kissed and petted her. She was warm, eager, childish, pliable. She threw her arms and legs about me and hugged me fiercely. I began to wonder how old she was" (p. 239).

Bess had already told him that she was seventeen (p. 233) and Richard has already wondered "if she were demented" (p. 234) so this last wonder is probably a rationalization; possibly nearer the truth is Richard's own ambivalence about Blacks. He seeks to avoid such intimacy and he succeeds, as one can see from the following:

I disengaged my hand from hers. I looked at her and wanted either to laugh or to slap her. I was about to hurt her and I did not want to. I rose. Oh, hell.

. . . This girl's crazy. . . . I heard her crying and I bent to her.

"Look," I whispered, "You don't know me. Let's get to know each other better" (p. 240). [Wright's ellipses.]

Yet, after these scenes, bordering on surrealism, Richard ruminates as follows:

Had I met Bess upon a Mississippi plantation, I would have expected her to act as she had. But in Memphis, on Beale Street, how could there be such hope, belief, faith in others? I wanted to go to Bess and talk to her, but I knew no words to say to her (p. 240).

After the Moss episode, Richard meets a teenage Black boy who tricks him into handling some bootleg liquor.
The boy works with a white man but no harm befalls Richard. He soon sought a job in an optical company. He says that he "rode up in the elevator with a fat, round, yellow Negro of about five feet in height" (p. 244). He got the job, despite having to be told to take his hat off in the office. Mrs. Moss was surprised that Richard had changed jobs but she was still patiently scheming to match him with Bess. She even attempted to get Richard "to try Bess" and see if he liked her. "Ain't no harm in that" (p. 246) she assured him. Here aggressiveness ceased only when Richard threatened to leave. Richard had apparently always found harm in anything that suggested a close relation to Black people. Despite his boast that the girls he "had known had been hard and calculating, those who had worked at the hotel and those whom he had met in school," (p. 238) it is clear that he avoided Black girls like the plague. Nothing in the autobiography suggests that Richard's relationship to the girls at school or at the hotel where he worked was anything more than distantly cordial. As early as Richard's departure from the orphanage, his quality of detachment from people is pronounced, as the following shows:

The moment I had learned that I was to leave, my feelings had recoiled so sharply and quickly from the home that the children simply did not exist for me any more. Their faces possessed the power of evoking in me a million memories that I longed to forget, and instead of my leaving drawing me to them in communion, it had flung me forever beyond them (p. 44).

This is a plausible explanation but one not even
offered by Richard for a similar action when he finishes school. It is his graduation night and he has just given the valedictory address:

When my voice stopped there was some applause. I did not care if they liked it or not; I was through. Immediately, even before I left the platform, I tried to shunt all memory of the event from me. A few of my classmates managed to shake my hand as I pushed toward the door, seeking the street. Somebody invited me to a party and I did not accept. I did not want to see any of them again. I walked home, saying to myself: The hell with it! With almost seventeen years of baffled living behind me, I faced the world in 1925 (p. 197).

Not one girl, not one boy, not a single teacher, not a solitary citizen of the community can evoke in Richard sentiments sufficiently strong to make him want to say "thank you" or at least "goodbye." This is the bleak, barren landscape that Wright posits as encompassing Black life. But in reality it reveals the shallowness of his own spirit that blinded him to the richness of the life that abounded everywhere around him. A closer look at these years will support this point of view. Richard's school experience is a good place to begin. Wright paints a dismal picture of his experience, but careful scrutiny discloses a brighter side. Mr. Crane of the optical company, for instance, in Richard's words, "Seemed pleased when I told him that I had two years of algebra" (p. 206). Not many students in Northern schools, Black or White, who only go through the ninth grade, can say that. Moreover, if he were as non-conforming as he claims, how did he get to be
valedictorian in the first place? With his record of irregularities, he hardly had the highest cumulative average in his class. Of course, if his aunt, who was a teacher, his Uncle Thomas and his mother, who were both ex-teachers, provided him with a richer background than he wishes to acknowledge, all becomes clear. It even helps explain the following:

 Luckily the studies in the ninth--my last year of school--were light; and during a part of the term the teacher turned over the class to my supervision, an honor that helped me emotionally and made me hope faintly. It was even hinted that, if I kept my grades high, it would be possible for me to teach in the city school system (p. 192).

Richard presents his situation as something unique when he generalizes, but casual details that almost go unnoticed contradict this. The following is illustrative: "Most of my schoolmates worked mornings, evenings and Saturdays; they earned enough to buy their clothes and books, and they had money in their pockets at school" (p. 139).

Richard could have done likewise, so far as the White world was concerned. If he suffered, then, because he was not allowed to work on Saturdays, this was entirely a fault of his family, of Black folk. Fortunately, one of Richard's classmates detected his plaguing hunger and suggested to him a way to earn money. The boy is described as follows:
A tall, black, rebellious boy who was bright in his studies and yet bitterly fearless in his assertion of himself; he could break the morale of the class at any moment with his clowning and the teacher never found an adequate way of handling him (p. 140).

Yet even in this incident Richard manages to drag in the idea that it is not just his family that hates books, but other Blacks also, as the following dialogue suggests:

"You can't sit in school all day and not eat," he said.
"What am I going to eat," I asked.
"Why don't you like me?"
"What do you do?"
"I sell papers."
"I tried to get a paper route, but they're all full," I said. "I'd like to sell papers because I could read them. I can't find things to read."
"You too?" he asked laughing.
"What do you mean?" I asked.
"That's why I sell papers. I like to read 'em and that's the only way I can get hold of 'em," he explained.
"Do your parents object to your reading?" I asked, "Yeah, my old man's a damn crackpot," he said.

One should remember that this is the South during the mid-twenties. For a different point of view one need only to refer to the works of Blacks who have preceded Wright. For example, the hunger of Black people for education was expressed by Booker T. Washington in 1901 with these words:

Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form an exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education. As I have stated, it was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young and none too old, to make the attempt to learn. As fast as any kind of teacher could be secured, not only were day-schools filled, but night-schools as well.15

Black hunger for education, at least through the thirties, was a conspicuous element in the heritage of Black people. Frederick Douglass tells of his valiant effort to learn to write in these words. "With playmates for my teachers, fences and pavements for my copybooks, and chalk for my pen and ink, I learned to write."\(^{16}\) And the Reverend J. W. C. Pennington, who endured unimaginable hardships, wrote about them in his autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1850). He singles out the unpardonable sin of slavery with these words: "There is one sin that slavery committed against me which I can never forgive. It robbed me of my education; the injury is irreparable."\(^{17}\) Surely this love of learning so deeply enmeshed in the history of Black people could not have been so quickly lost. Wright's own words published just four years before *Black Boy* in *12 Million Black Voices* can bear repeating: "Any Black man who can read is a hero to us" (p. 186).

Wright's contradictions flow from his disparate attempt to debase Black people yet make his own personality


shine the brighter. In this newspaper episode, he would ask the reader to believe that he and his buddy, both bright and voracious readers, could distribute a Klan paper for weeks and be unaware of its contents. Richard states the following:

I was happy and would have continued to sell the newspaper and its magazine supplement indefinitely had it not been for the racial pride of a friend of the family. He was a tall, quiet, sober, soft-spoken black man, a carpenter by trade. . . . "You know, son," he said, "I sure like to see you make a little money each week." "Thank you sir," I said. "But tell me, who told you to sell these papers?" he asked. "Nobody." "Do you ever read them?" "Sure. I read the stories in the magazine supplement," I explained. "But I never read the newspaper. . . ." "Well just look at that. Take your time and tell me what you think," he said. "It was the previous week's issue and I looked at the picture of a huge black man with a greasy, sweaty face, thick lips, flat nose, golden teeth, sitting at a polished, wide-topped desk in a swivel chair" (pp. 143-44). [All emphasis added.]

This caricature extends for another dozen lines and includes references to yellow shoes, red-dotted tie, red suspenders, striped silk shirt, huge diamond rings, a gold chain and a rabbit's foot. The spittoon nearby was "overflowing with mucus." Richard's sharp eyes and the keen eyes of his rebellious friend had missed all this. His only explanation is that he "read the magazine, but . . . never read the paper" (p. 145). His friend discovered the nature of the paper independently of Richard. How?

The father of the boy who had urged me to sell the papers also found out their propagandistic nature and
forbade his son to sell them. But the boy and I never discussed the subject; we were too ashamed of ourselves (p. 147).

Perhaps the boy's father was not such a "damn crackpot" after all. Perhaps the Black community was not as barren and bleak as Wright remembered it. For the same man tells Richard:

A lot of folks wanted to speak to you about those papers, but they were scared. They thought you were mixed up with some white Ku Kluxers and if they told you to stop, you would put the Kluxers on them (p. 146).

The clause expressing fear that a Black Boy is mixed up with the Klan, even as a stoolie, seems like a Wright addition to dilute even this little evidence of positive Black life. Wright certainly has a tendency for this, as can be seen in an earlier statement. It reads:

The papers arrived and I scoured the Negro area slowly building up a string of customers who bought the papers more because they knew me than from any desire to read (p. 142). [Emphasis added.]

Wright is compelled to recognize the fact that Blacks would sacrifice themselves to aid and encourage a younger Black so he has to speak slightingly of their desire to read. It is amazing how consistent he is on this point. Earlier he tells about a Black man who delivered some coal to his house that his mother had ordered. The man "made a fire, then sat and smoked." When he found out that Richard could not even count change, he stayed at Richard's house and taught him (p. 30). Richard does not attach any meaning to this, draws no lessons about Black
life from this simple incident. In fact, he slips over it so smoothly that the point is almost missed. He seems over-joyed at his acquisition of knowledge but gives no sign, not even a thank you to the coal man, and though he "insisted" that his mother, when she returned home from work, "stand still and listen" while he counted to one hundred, he didn't bother to tell her who had taught him (p. 30).

The edition of the Southern Register, a Black weekly that printed Wright's first published story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre," rendered Wright a service which apparently never registered on Wright's mind. In spite of the editor's frank words, Wright is dubious.

"I'm going to offer you something more valuable than money," he said. "I'll give you a chance to learn to write." I was pleased, but I still thought he was taking advantage of me (p. 183).

Wright uses even this incident to show how wide is the gulf between him and his peers. He writes as follows:

My schoolmates could not understand why anyone would want to write a story, and above all, they could not understand why I had called it The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre. The mood out of which a story was written was the most alien thing to them. They looked at me with new eyes, and a distance, a suspiciousness came between us (p. 184).

Again, we see that Wright's biggest trouble is with his own family and other Blacks. White oppression is only an indirect source, if at all. Wright does mention a lynching that occurred about the time of his sixteenth year. The victim was the brother of one of his classmates. "They
said he was fooling with a white prostitute there in the hotel, Ned said" (p. 190). Richard continues:

I had heard whispers, tales of black boys having sex relations with white prostitutes in the hotels in town, but I never paid any close attention to them; now those tales came home to me in the form of the death of a man I knew (p. 190).

Protecting the purity of white women, prostitutes included, was the excuse used for decades to justify lynching. The fact that most lynchings were totally unrelated to interracial sexual contact has not diminished the strength of the sexual myth. There were 147 lynchings in Wright's home state of Mississippi between 1909 and 1927, \[18\] roughly the period of his autobiography, yet this is the one he chooses to relate.

Wright graduated from the ninth grade in Jackson in 1925 at the age of seventeen. After a few menial jobs he moves to Memphis where he manages to save enough money to come to Chicago. He leaves for Chicago in December, 1927, at the age of nineteen and this ends the first period of his autobiography.

During these two years, Wright is engaged more directly in conflict with the White world, but he still sees Black life only through jaundiced eyes. In his first job

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\[18\] Walter White, Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch, 1927. Reprinted with a preface by Roy Wilkins (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 256. In this study, the author states that "Lynching has always been the means for protection, not of white women, but of profits" (p. 83). [Author's emphasis.]
after graduation, he tells of the brutal beating by his boss and his boss's son of a Black woman because she got behind in her credit (p. 199). In "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," in Uncle Tom's Children, Wright gives a fuller version of this incident. The following lines are omitted in the Black Boy version.

That day at noon, while eating in a hamburger joint, I told my fellow Negro porters what happened. No one seemed surprised. One fellow, after swallowing a huge bite, turned to me and asked: "Huh! Is tha' all they did t' her?" "Yeah. Wasn't tha' enough?" I asked. "Shucks! Man, she's a lucky bitch!" he said, burying his lips deep into a juicy hamburger. "Hell, it's a wonder they didn't lay her when they got through" (p. 9).

It is difficult to imagine a more contemptible picture of Black men being drawn than this one. Yet Wright presents it as a typical occurrence. What persuaded him to omit these lines from Black Boy is uncertain, but does not change Wright's overall pattern. The next Black worth mentioning in Black Boy "was a pale-yellow boy who had gonorrhea and was proud of it" (p. 216). Black women fare no better, as can be seen in the incident where the White watchman pats one on the behind. Wright, as expected, is outraged. He managed, however, to repress his anger until he was safely out of the watchman's hearing; then we read:

"God how could you let them do that," I exploded.
"It don't matter. They do that all the time," she said.
"I wanted to do something," I said.
"You woulda been a fool if you had," she said.
"But how must you feel?"
"They never get any further with us than that, if we don't want 'em to," she said dryly.
"Yes, I would've been a fool," I said, but she did not catch the point (p. 218).

To be sure that the reader catches the point, Wright paints scene after scene, each more debasing of Black life than the last. The following are illustrative:

All about me, Negroes were stealing (p. 218). I knew that boys in the hotel filched whatever they could. I knew that Greggs, my friend, who worked in the Capitol Street jewelry store was stealing regularly and successfully. I knew that a black neighbor of mine was stealing bags of grain from a wholesale house where he worked though he was a staunch deacon in his church and prayed and sang on Sundays. I knew that the black girls who worked in white homes stole food daily to supplement their scanty wages.

No Negroes in my environment had ever thought of organizing. . . . The very thought would have been terrifying to them, . . . . (p. 219)

Richard soon joins in the stealing and amassed enough money to go to Memphis. We have already seen how he fares with Bess, his landlady's daughter, and must now meet one of his fellow workers. Richard tells us:

The most colorful of the Negro boys on the job was Shorty, the round, yellow, fat elevator operator. He had tiny, beady eyes that looked out between rolls of flesh with a hard but humorous stare. He had the complexion of a Chinese, a short forehead, and three chins. . . . (p. 248)

Shorty made extra money by letting White men kick his behind (250). It is in Memphis that Richard becomes fully immersed in the reading that definitely determined his direction. He says that he knew of no Negroes who read the books he liked and he "wondered if any Negores ever thought of them" (p. 275). Wright knew that there were some well-to-do Negroes but felt that they "lived in a
world that was almost as alien" to him as "the world inhabited by whites" (p. 277). Yet, as Wright leaves Memphis for Chicago he knew that he "was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently. . . ." (p. 284). American Hunger is the answer to that question, but before looking at that volume it may be illuminating to look at some critical reviews and studies of Black Boy.

Thus far an attempt has been made to examine Black Boy with as little recourse as possible to external references; it now becomes necessary to draw on these sources. The overwhelming majority of studies and reviews were favorable almost to the point of being uncritical. John D. Paulus, in the Pittsburg Press (February 18, 1945), acclaims "Black Boy as one of the best books in its class that you are ever likely to read."¹⁹ Time (March 5, 1945), in an unsigned article, says that Black Boy "is the story of a man set apart from his own race by sensitivity and intellect, yet barred forever from the white race by the color of his skin."²⁰ The article does not explain why "sensitivity and intellect" should set him apart from his own race though this is apparently what Wright, himself, believed. This is also his tragedy. Social Progress

¹⁹ Reprinted in Reilly, Richard Wright, p. 117.
²⁰ Ibid., p. 138.
(April, 1945), an organ of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, has an article by J. C. W. It says that Black Boy "is incredible. But it is true because it is the author's own experience." Black Boy is what Wright purports to be his own experience but this is certainly open to question. Augusta Strong in Congress Views (May, 1945), official news of the National Negro Congress, writes as follows: "Black Boy makes unpleasant reading but it carries the weight of absolute truth. . . ." These are powerful words, especially when one reads further:

Wright's clarity about his own plight and constant blind spot to the fact that in greater or lesser degree all the Negroes surrounding him were victims of the same frustration is perhaps caused by a common human quality--his intense preoccupation with himself.

Phylon (Second Quarter, 1945) has an article that states "the story bears the mark of authenticity." Alice Browning, in Negro Story (May-June, 1945), says this of Wright:

He is brutal in his condemnation of Negro and white, but he shows a reason for his Negro's ignorance, stupidity and viciousness. How can the Negro be different? Why is he jealous, petty, unusually uncooperative, prone to tear down his own people, spiteful, passionless in his passion, loud and wrong and hollow in his joy--and he is--let's not deny it.

If one believes that Blacks have more of these qualities than other people, there is little in Black Boy with which to argue. Some of the less effusive reviews take note of the inconsistencies and contradictions in Black

21 Ibid., p. 162.  
22 Ibid., p. 164.  
23 Ibid., p. 167.  
24 Ibid., p. 168.
Boy. Patsy Graves, in Opportunity (July, 1945), points out certain discrepancies in Black Boy. She says:

Too, there are some blatant assertions, some bland generalizations in Black Boy that are themselves denied in the unfolding of the story. Wright speaks of the "strange absence of real kindness in Negroes," but upon the occasion of his mother's first paralytic stroke he relates how the neighbors came in and nursed her, fed the children, cleaned the house, washed the clothes, gave freely of what was theirs to give. Well, what is kindness anyway? 25

Isidore Schneider, in New Masses (April 3, 1945), notes the following:

Yet Wright's picture of bleak and shallow life is self-contradicted by episodes that the record compels him to set down. It would be difficult for any racial group to offer a finer example of deep feeling, of family solidarity and responsibility than his own far-scattered family who came in . . . to assume the burdens brought by his mother's physical collapse. 26

W. E. B. DuBois, in the New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review, goes even further. He says of Wright: "The Negroes whom he paints have almost no redeeming qualities. . . . The hero (Wright) is interested in himself, is self-centered to the exclusion of everybody and everything else." DuBois concludes his article with the remark that "Nothing that Richard Wright says is in itself unbelievable or impossible; it is the total picture that is not convincing." 27

Beatrice M. Murphy, in Pulse (April, 1945), is even stronger than DuBois in her criticism. She states

that "Richard Wright has demonstrated anew the power of the pen. He has used it to stab his own race in the back."²⁸ Her article supports her strong language.

There is one final study of Black Boy which must be examined that can be used to throw light on the subject. It reveals the following information about Wright and Black Boy:

There is the fact that 79 per cent of his descriptions of Negroes are unfavorable. According to him, Negroes are often petty, (p. 200), incapable of genuine emotions (pp. 30, 31, 33), given to petty stealing (p. 174), suspicious of each other (pp. 205, 299), hostile to each other (pp. 212, 221), hostile to Jews (pp. 53-54), lacking in curiosity or appreciation of creative writing (pp. 146-48, 220). . . . The similarity or percentage of identity in the five traits he most often attributes to Negroes and the five that he most often attributes to himself is 0. . . . Although Negroes are second only to his mother as explicit "objects of concern," the number of times that he explicitly shows concern for their welfare is small (approximately 1 per cent) compared with a total (7,166) of all the emphasis units in the book.²⁹

One problem of major concern in approaching the study of Black Boy is to determine to which genre it rightfully belongs. Wright, of course, puts forward Black Boy as an autobiography; and there are indeed many who accept it as such. On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that Black Boy, at best, is autobiographical fiction; or if straight autobiography, omissions and exaggerations of

²⁸ Ibid., p. 160.
facts highly distort it. If Black Boy is fiction, its truth can be judged by the laws of probability and necessity, by consistency and verisimilitude. If it is pure autobiography, our concern is with the accuracy of facts, the completeness of the record and the objectivity of the selection. Black Boy fails on both levels. In addition to the high degree of improbable action noted already but action that had to be admitted if this were pure autobiography and actually happened, we now see that many incidents are not only improbable but untrue or highly distorted.

Michel Fabre is obviously a very close friend of the Wright family and a great admirer of Wright. He has also done excellent studies on Wright's life and works. If he is biased at all, it is in favor of Wright. Being a French scholar, his chance of objectivity are as good as anyone's. Since the information that follows is all drawn from Fabre's book, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, we can assume the source is not a hostile one.

The scene in Black Boy (p. 27) showing dozens of saloon patrons--men and women--enticing a six-year old to get drunk was questioned as most unlikely. Fabre states:

It is safe to assume that Richard remained a mere observer, as published versions of Black Boy do not corroborate the story told in an earlier draft that the

30 Fabre, Unfinished Quest.
child; tempted by one of the drinkers, developed an irresistible craving, linked with eroticism, for alcohol which turned him into a buffoon to amuse adults. He was never really a delinquent, despite his effort to make us believe so by exaggerating his depraved behavior to underline the harmful effects of racial and economic oppression.\textsuperscript{31}

Wright exaggerated his depraved behavior by exaggerating the depravity of Black life that surrounded him. Fabre says Wright did this "to underline the harmful effects of economic oppression." But the racial oppression of Blacks in this country has always been of such horrendous magnitude that nothing can justify its exaggeration.

Fabre writes:

Although \textit{Black Boy} was designed to describe the effects of racism on a black child, which meant omitting incidents tending to exonerate white persons in any way, there is no doubt that the Walls were liberal and generous employers.\textsuperscript{32}

Indeed they were, and Wright presents the Walls in a sympathetic manner just as he presents several other glimpses of White life in a favorable light. It is Black life which Wright wishes to degrade and which he does so continually by omission and distortion. One of the effects of racism, its most unforgivable sin, is to make the victims hate themselves. That it has failed to do this on any wide scale speaks to the indestructability of the human spirit. But to fail to recognize that some individuals will succumb is to ignore the extent of racial degradation or to deny that

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., p. 13. \hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 46.
there are individual limitations. Wright is a classical example of a person who hated himself and projected his hatred on his own people, the "safest" channel that he knew. We have seen how ambivalent he was to most of his family and how he hated his father with a passion, but Fabre reveals the following about Wright:

His parents showered him with attention. In an early version of *Black Boy*, he admits that they bought him many mechanical toys, among them a monkey and a dog, which he immediately took apart to see how they worked. His father once gave him a drum which delighted him, but since he never stopped playing on it, it was put on top of a closet where he could not reach it. Characteristically, Richard refused ever to touch it again.\(^{33}\)

Clearly, Ms. Beatrice Murphy's statement has some validity when she writes that *Black Boy* is the story "of how a terrible Negro boy grew up."\(^{34}\)

Fabre states that Richard's father's "large appetite sometimes made him repulsive to Richard, as reported in *Black Boy*, although this could also be a hidden way of suggesting the son's sexual rivalry."\(^{35}\) Wright's failure to successfully pass through this Oedipal phase and his consequent guilt may help to explain his inability to relate to Blacks of the opposite sex, even more than to Blacks generally. We have already noted the peculiar situation in

\(^{33}\text{Ibid., p. 11.}\)

\(^{34}\text{In Reilly, Richard Wright, p. 160.}\)

\(^{35}\text{Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 11. This idea was also advanced by Ralph K. White in the article already cited.}\)
the Moss incident. The mother, who appears to be fairly well off and basically normal, goes into the street and practically drags Richard, a perfect stranger, in the house in the hopes of getting him in bed with her beautiful seventeen-year old daughter. In *Black Boy* Richard tells Bess, the daughter, that they should wait until they can get to know each other better, but Fabre gives a bit more information. He writes:

> It is not necessary to take literally the account of their relationship in *Black Boy* for an earlier version of the autobiography shows that with this pretty girl in his arms he was less sophisticated and scrupulously restrained than he admits.\(^{36}\)

So the version in *Black Boy* is not quite accurate, but, if what is hinted at here is true, it simply reveals Wright's peculiar attitude toward Black women in a different form. Fabre adds that this "nevertheless reveals his attitude toward a certain type of black woman."\(^{37}\)

What type of Black woman does Richard Wright want?

Of Bess, who in real life is identified as R, Fabre writes as follows:

> He [Wright] was alone as he had been at school or working at Edwards House. In this episode with R--it is clear that Wright hated her as much as himself for their failure to communicate. This reaction is characteristic; he might not expect a woman to understand all his problems, but he could not love her for any length of

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\(^{36}\) Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, p. 61.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 59.
time if she were not in some way his intellectual equal.\textsuperscript{38} [Emphasis added.]

The girls at school were certainly his equal, yet he tells us nothing in \textit{Black Boy} about them. But Fabre tells us of two girls who were objects of Richard's affection during this period. It is interesting to note his description of them.

Charlotte Metcalf, who turned everyone's head with her delicate manners and her clear, translucent complexion, was Richard's passion for a long time; . . . . For Birdie Graves, a charming mulatto who wore a pleated skirt and white frilly blouse, he experienced a distant and idealized love.\textsuperscript{39}

Fabre points out that Wright's heroes show a propensity to mock, even to strike, the women who unwittingly hold up an ironic mirror of their situation; Bigger feels this in making love to Bessie, Cross in relation to Dot (in \textit{The Outsider}), Fishbelly to Gladys (in \textit{The Long Dream}), and Wright himself toward his illiterate mistress in "Early Days in Chicago."\textsuperscript{40}

Fabre might also have added Jake Johnson toward Lil in \textit{Laud Today}. Fabre says that "This indicates the male desire for superiority as well as the despair at still being imprisoned in a solitude which even sexual relations cannot destroy."\textsuperscript{41}

It is true that sexual relations, and as we have seen, no other kind of relation, can destroy the solitude

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 62. \hfill \textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 53

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 61-62. "Early Days in Chicago" is incorporated into \textit{American Hunger}, pp. 32-34.

\textsuperscript{41} Fabre, \textit{Unfinished Quest}, pp. 61-62.
of a Black man whose imprisonment is the result of self-hatred and hunger for White women. But one should note that in all of the books listed above, the Black male is entirely different when his sexual partner is White. In Native Son, Bigger's hatred of the White girl is clearly the effect of her being unobtainable to him and any violence directed toward her is accidental or occurs after her death to conceal the crime. Bigger's brutality toward Bessie, on the other hand, is deliberate and senseless. Cross's violence directed at Dot in The Outsider, which will be discussed in a later chapter, is equalled only by the tenderness he shows to Eva, his White girl friend. In The Outsider, whose initial setting is Chicago, there are several relationships between Black men and White prostitutes; there is no brutality and the prostitutes are treated with far more consideration and respect than Wright's typical Black male characters treat their wives and sweethearts. Why? Fabre is quite explicit. He says that Wright "preferred the white woman with her ease and brilliance, cultivated by her background, to the black woman, whose intellectual capacity he was prone to underestimate."42

On other incidents, Fabre is more equivocal. He states that the boss of the optical company may not have

42 Ibid., p. 48.
been from Illinois but Wright, in any case, quit to return to school, not because he was driven off the job by bigots. Fabre implies that the boxing match that Richard describes with such anger may not have taken place at all. So Wright includes things in his autobiography that never took place, twists some things out of proportion that did take place and omits others altogether. His greatest sin is the sin of omission. One example will suffice to conclude this aspect of this argument. In the valedictory episodes (pp. 193-94), Wright manages to demean the principal of his school, his grandmother, his Uncle Thomas and his classmates. The only person mentioned in the episode who escapes unscathed is White, his employer, Mrs. Bibbs, who was treated favorably. The principal wrote a speech for Richard to deliver but he refuses. Richard insists, as a matter of principle, on delivering the speech that he has written himself. The principal threatens not to allow Richard to graduate, his classmates pressure him, his grandmother scolds, and Uncle Thomas sermonizes, but Richard remains adamant. This is the version in Black Boy. But Fabre writes that "the principal capitulated and allowed Richard to read his own speech; in return Richard agreed to cut certain passages that might have antagonized the authorities."
American Hunger is the autobiographical continuation of Black Boy in more ways than one: It continues Wright's debasement of Black people and his glorification of self. In his "Afterword" to American Hunger, Michel Fabre quotes Wright as saying "that to tell the truth is the hardest thing on earth," . . . (p. 138) This frank admission is cancelled out by Wright's implication that he has somehow succeeded. Wright's first real contact with Northern Whites is Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman, his German employers. Wright made up a lie to cover his few days of absence which he had used in order to prepare for and take the Post Office examination. He describes the incident as follows:

Their attitude had proved utterly amazing. They were taking time out from their duties in the store to talk to us, and I had never encountered anything like that from whites before. A Southern white man would have said: "Get the hell out of here!" or "All right nigger. Get to work." But no white people had ever stood their ground and probed at me, questioned me at such length. It dawn upon me that they were trying to treat me as an equal. . . . (p. 10)

One cannot quarrel with the fact that Wright might have met kindly White people as his first employers in the North. People do get lucky, even Black boys. But Wright makes them more than good individuals; he implies that they are representative of Northern Whites in contrast to Southern Whites from which he fled. There are some good Northern Whites and some good Southern Whites on an individual level in about the same proportion, but Wright consistently
attributes the goodness of individuals to their sectional origin. This has no basis in fact. In Black Boy, Wright intimates that there is some connection between Mr. Crane, the optical company boss, being from the North and his liberalism on the race question (pp. 204-5). Nothing could be more unfounded, especially when he is from Illinois. Griggs, a character in Black Boy, tells Richard, "Naw, my boss is a Yankee and he tells me things. You are marked already" (p. 203). And the White man that wants to give Richard a dollar to buy him some food is "unmistakably a Yankee." On speaking to Richard, he says, "Say, boy, I'm from the North" (p. 252), as though that is supposed to mean something. The Hoffmans state this explicitly. "Ve know you come from ze Zouth. You feel you can't tell us the truth. But ve don't bother you. Ve don't feel like people in ze Zouth. Ve treat you nice, don't ve?" (p. 9).

Wright's next job is in a cafe, and he is still marvelling over the wonderful White people of the North. He writes as follows:

There were several waitresses. I was the only Negro in the cafe. The waitresses were a hard, brisk lot and I was keenly aware of how their attitude contrasted with those of Southern white girls. They had not been taught to keep a gulf between me and themselves; they were relatively free of the heritage of racial hate (p. 11).

One must remember that this is Chicago during the late twenties. The book, however, was not started until the early forties. By that time, Wright had acquired suf-
ficient financial success and fame to look down his nose at poor Whites. Wright states:

During my lunch hour, which I spent on a bench in the park, the waitresses would come and sit beside me, talking at random, laughing, joking, smoking cigarettes. I learned about their tawdry dreams, their simple hopes, their home lives, their fear of feeling anything deeply, their sex problems, their husbands. They were an eager, restless, talkative, ignorant bunch, but casually kind and impersonal for all that. They knew nothing of hate and fear, and strove instinctively to avoid all passion (p. 12). [Emphasis added.]

Notwithstanding the apparent absence of color prejudice among these young ladies, Wright went to the Black salad lady when he needed to confide in someone. The following explains why:

"Look, can I trust you?" he asked.
"What are you talking about," she asked.
"Now don't get scared. Just watch the cook. . . ."
"What do you mean," she demanded.
"All right," I said, "I'll tell you. The cook spits in the food. . . ."
"Spitting?" she asked me in a whisper. "Why would she do that?"
"I don't know but watch her. . . ."
"Oh God I feel awful."
"Did you see it?"
"She is spitting in the food."
"What ought we to do?" I asked.
"Tell the lady," she said.
"She wouldn't believe me," I said. She widened her eyes as she understood. We were black and the cook was white (p. 16). [Emphasis added.]

So Wright realizes the color question still must be reckoned with even in Chicago. This was especially true in social affairs which Wright occasionally attended. He writes:

At these affairs I drank home-brewed beer, ate spaghetti and chitterlings, laughed and talked with black
Southern born girls who worked as domestics in white middle class homes. But with none of them did my relations rest upon my deepest feeling. I discussed what I read with no one and to none did I confide (p. 20).

During this period of time, Wright is living with his Aunt Maggie. She can't figure out what he gets out of his reading. He answers: "I get a great deal out of it," then ruminates:

And I knew that my words sounded wild and foolish in my environment where reading was almost unknown, where the highest item of value was a dime or dollar. . . . The most valued pleasure of the people I knew was a car, the most cherished experience a bottle of whiskey, the most sought-after prize, somebody else's wife. I had no sense of being inferior or superior to the people about me; I merely felt that they had had no chance to learn to live differently (p. 21).

There is no question about Wright feeling inferior to anyone Black, but to say he did not feel superior to the people whom he described is another matter. He writes:

My reading in Sociology had enabled me to discern many strange types of Negro characters, to identify many modes of Negro behavior; and what moved me, above all, was the frequency of mental illness, that tragic toll that the urban environment exacted of the black peasant (p. 26).

Even when Wright met Blacks of the middle class "all of whom possessed academic learning, economic freedom, and vague ambitions to write," he found them preoccupied with "twisted sex problems" (p. 27). But Wright expresses some grudging admiration for the Garveyites, especially the "emotional dynamics of its adherents. . . ." (p. 28). At the Post Office he did meet some Irish and Jewish chaps with whom he had something in common but the Post Office
job came to an end with the crash of the stock market in 1929.

Wright's next job was with a Negro burial society although "the thought of selling insurance policies to ignorant Negroes disgusted" him (p. 30). The insurance company was a racket. It paid very little but it did provide some fringe benefits. Wright states that "There were many comely black housewives who were trying desperately to keep up their insurance payments, were willing to make bargains to escape paying a ten-cent premium each week" (p. 33). With so many to choose from, Wright tells us something about himself when he says the girl he chose was "an illiterate black child with a baby whose father she did not know" (p. 32). She was so ignorant that she did not know when a book was upside down (p. 32).

Some of the agents were so vicious, according to Wright, that they would not pay off claims unless the woman had sex with them. "The average black woman," says Wright, "would submit because she needed the money badly" (p. 36). [Emphasis added.]

Wright reserves his most poisonous venom, however, to pour on the heads of Black Communists who were, he says, "acting like irresponsible children" (p. 40). At this time, he, himself, worked as an assistant to a Negro Republican precinct captain. He says that he "had no interest in the candidates" but "needed the money." He "went from
door to door with the precinct captain and discovered that the whole business was one long process of bribery, that people voted for three dollars for the right to continue their illicit trade in sex or alcohol" (p. 41).

Finally, forced on relief, Wright began to notice some positive mumblings among Blacks at the welfare station. He recognized that "some of the things that Communists said were true; they maintained that there came times in history when the ruling class could no longer rule," . . . (p. 44). Wright's Black consciousness is not very pervasive or permanent, however, because he continues to select or create incidents to further confirm the stereotypical view of Black life. The experiences with Whites that he chooses to relate or conjure up include positive as well as negative elements, as the following quotation shows:

Again I met the Irish chap and we discussed world happenings, the vast armies of the unemployed, the rising tide of radical action. I now detected a change in the attitudes of whites I met; their privations were making them regard Negroes with new eyes, and for the first time I was invited to their homes (p. 46).

One must note that Wright is not rendering the reaction of an individual or two but he is suggesting a general trend. He ignores the counter tendency that usually occurs when times get tough; namely, for Whites, especially White ethnics, to make scapegoats of the Blacks whom they see as a threat to their already precarious existence. It
would be interesting to know just how common was the practice of Whites in the Post Office during the depression of entertaining Blacks in their homes.

Wright's next job is in a hospital. He paints this montage:

A line of white girls marched past, clad in starched uniforms that gleamed white; their faces alert, their steps quick, their bodies lean and shapely, their shoulders erect, their faces lit with the light of purpose. And after them came a line of black girls, old, fat, dressed in ragged gingham, walking loosely, carrying tin cans of soap powder, rags, mops, brooms. . . . I wondered what law of the Universe kept them from being mixed (p. 46). [Wright's ellipsis.]

One may also wonder what law of the Universe prevents Wright from seeing that nature is fairly indiscriminate in distributing her bounty. Two lines of women—one White and professional, the other Black and unskilled—will show a mixture of beauty and natural aspiration on both sides. The proportion may vary depending on circumstances to one degree or another, but the mutual exclusiveness that Wright presents does not exist in nature. A great poet once said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Viewed from that perspective, of course, all becomes clear.

Wright tells us that of the three Negroes who worked with him "in the hospital, one was about his own age." His name was Bill and he "was either sleepy or drunk most of the time" (p. 46). He is obviously a little disturbed, according to Wright's representation. "The two other Negroes," says Wright, "were elderly and had been em-
ployed in the institute for fifteen years. One was Brand, a short, black, morose bachelor; the other was Cooke, a tall, yellow, spectacled fellow. . . ." They quarelled all the time and one day fought each other with a knife and an ice pick (p. 54). The fight was over a bulletin in the newspapers. Wright reports one instance when he was the victim of a prank. Brand, on learning that Wright had sniffed at a mysterious liquid, put the fear of death in him. But even when he is the butt of the joke, Wright manages to make his fellow Black look even more ludicrous, as the following shows:

I wanted to ask Brand what symptoms I must expect, but we were running too fast. Brand finally stopped, gasping for breath. . . . Brand then dropped to the concrete floor, stretched out on his back and yelled with laughter, shaking all over. He beat his fists against the concrete; he moaned, giggled (p. 49).

Once back in the Post Office, Wright again meets up with Whites. One invites him to the John Reed Club; it was contact with this left-wing literary society that led him eventually into the Communist Party. By the time Wright begins work on *American Hunger*, he has left the Communist Party so it comes in for a great deal of criticism; even here, his Black Communists are presented in the worst possible light. The following is illustrative:

I began to realize why so few sensitive Negroes had had the gall to come as close to them as I had.

I learned to my dismay, that the black Communists in my unit had commented upon my shined shoes, my clean shirt, and the tie I had worn. Above all, my manner of speech had seemed alien to them. "He talks like a
book," one of the Negro comrades had said. And that was enough to condemn me forever as bourgeois. The more I learned of the Negro Communist, the more I found that they were not vicious, that they had no intention to hurt. They just did not know anything and did not want to learn anything. . . . The word "writer" was enough to make a black Chicago Communist feel that the man to whom the word applied had gone wrong. . . ."

(p. 77).

This is Wright's picture of Blacks in the Party; the picture of Blacks outside the Party has been shown throughout his writing. And this picture Wright presents after he has "been inside of three-fourths of the Negroes' homes on the South Side" (p. 106). Another significant episode involved Wright's experience with the Federal Negro Theater. He was assigned to do publicity for the Theater, which was directed by "a skinny white woman, . . . an elderly missionary type" (p. 113). Wright sized up the situation at once. He says:

What a waste of talent, I thought. Here was an opportunity for the production of a worthwhile Negro drama and no one was aware of it. I studied the situation, then laid the matter before white friends of mine who held influential positions in the Works Progress Administration. I asked them to replace the white woman . . . with someone who knew the Negro theatre.

Within a month the white woman director was transferred. We moved from the South Side to the Loop and were housed in a first-rate theatre. I successfully recommended Charles DeSheim, a talented Jew, as director. . . . I urged that our first offering should be a bill of three one-act plays, including Paul Green's "Hymn to the Rising Sun," a grim, poetical powerful one-actor dealing with chain gang conditions in the South (pp. 113-14).

Wright managed to get one white director replaced by another but the Blacks managed to get rid of both of
them in short order. It should also be noted that the only play identified by title is by a White playwright and that the theater's location is shifted from the Black community to the Loop. In the absence of the Black actors' version of what transpired, Wright's words will have to suffice:

When I arrived at the theatre a few mornings later, I was horrified to find that the company had drawn up a petition demanding the ousting of DeSheirn. I was asked to sign the petition and I refused. . . . I called DeSheirn to the theatre and we went into a frantic conference. "What must I do," he asked. "Take them into your confidence," I said. DeSheirn . . . assembled the company and told them that they had a right to petition against him if they wanted to, but that he thought any misunderstanding that existed could be settled smoothly. "Who told you that we were getting up a petition?" a black man demanded. DeSheirn looked at me and stammered wordlessly. "There's an Uncle Tom in the theatre!" a black girl yelled. After the meeting a delegation of Negro men came to my office and took out their pocket knives and flashed them in my face. "You get the hell off this job before we cut your belly button out!" they said. . . . I telephoned my white friends in the Works Progress Administration. "Transfer me at once to another job, or I'll be murdered" (p. 116).

Wright was transferred to another position and some while after this was invited to witness a Communist trial of one of its members. The purpose of inviting him was to let him see how the Party treated members that strayed away. This experience causes Wright to make the following observation:

I knew that if they held state power I would have been declared guilty of treason and my execution would have followed. And I knew that they felt, with all the
strength of their black blindness, that they were right (p. 125).

In spite of this feeling, Wright ends up in the Communist section of the May Day Parade shortly afterward, only to get thrown out. He writes as follows:

Hands lifted me bodily from the sidewalk; I felt myself being pitched headlong through the air. . . . I could not believe what had happened, even though my hands were smarting and bleeding, I had suffered a public, physical assault by two white Communists with black Communists looking on (p. 132).

Earlier, Wright had said that he felt—but only temporarily—that perhaps the whites were right, that Negroes were children and would never grow up . . . they sat like frightened mice, possessing no words to make known their vague desires (p. 115).

Even though Wright says this feeling was temporary, its frequent occurrence throughout the book should have been sufficient to disabuse him of the idea that Blacks would come to his rescue. In any case, they did not and Wright eventually wandered alone to a park bench where he heard echoes of the Communist International calling on the workers to "Arise."

In the "afterword" to *American Hunger*, Fabre quotes from Wright's interview with *P. M. Magazine* (April 14, 1945) as follows: "I wanted to give, lend my tongue to the voiceless Negro boys. I feel that way about the deprived Negro children of the South: 'not until the sun ceases to shine on you shall I disown you'" (p. 137).

That night, reflecting on his May Day experience,
Richard Wright made the following resolution:

Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressably human (p. 35).

Whether Wright kept his vow made in the P. M. interview or this promise made on May Day can be determined by an examination of his subsequent works. So we must now turn to The Outsider, 1953, his next major publication, for an answer.
CHAPTER V

THE OUTSIDER

In many respects American Hunger is a disappointing and, at times, even a reactionary book. It is the final section of Black Boy... And like Black Boy, it has very little good to say about the black community. Actually, American Hunger serves as one of the clearest reflections of Wright's alienation and estrangement from the rhythm and tempo of the black community.¹

This is a sound assessment of both books. The explanation for the repetitive, unrelieved picture of barrenness and bleakness of Black life as Wright depicts it, according to this author, has its source in Wright's own alienation and estrangement from the Black community. The fact that Black Boy and American Hunger are autobiographical may be advanced as an excuse but not as an explanation that bears very close scrutiny. But The Outsider, Wright's first published novel after Native Son, lacks even this as justification. The treatment of the theme of alienation itself needs no special justification but the continued embellishment of the subhuman stereotype of Black people is another matter altogether. "The image of the American hero of our time is the image of a D.P., and Karl

Shapiro [notes] that 'The great theme of American literature is rootlessness, . . .'\(^2\)

Yet, as another critic points out, "Wright suffers, no doubt, from rootlessness but the source of that rootlessness is self-hatred."\(^3\) This is it: the inescapable fact is that Wright hates himself and hates Black people. Which is cause and which is effect is not a decisive question for this study. Regardless of the answer, the results are the same. The dehumanization of Blacks in Wright's works is a manifestation of his own damaged psyche.

Bone puts it mildly when he states the following:

From the first he [Wright] adopts a negative attitude toward Negro life. He finds no sustaining values in the Negro past, but on the contrary equates being black with being nothing. He then proceeds to flee from that putative nothingness. Abandoning a concrete sense of time and place and circumstances, he espouses a specious and abstract universalism.\(^4\)

Earlier Bone had written that "It is Wright's surrender to abstraction that betrays his spiritual sickness."\(^5\) Gerian Moore attributes this fault to Wright's association with the Communist Party in these words:

The tendency to deal with only surface reality is a direct result of his involvement with the Communist Party whose ideology seeks to abstract human experience

\(^2\)Stuart A. Lewis, "Rootlessness and Alienation in the Novels of Bruce Jay Friedman," CLA Journal, XVIII (March, 1975), 422.

\(^3\)Robert Bone, Richard Wright (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 44.

\(^4\)Ibid.

\(^5\)Ibid.
and tries to fit it into categories. In fiction, especially fiction about the black experience, such attempts often result in stereotypes.\(^6\)

Whether Wright's tendency toward abstraction should be attributed to his earlier involvement with the Communist Party is debatable, particularly in view of the fact that his most concrete rendering of the Black experience occurred in *Uncle Tom's Children*. These stories were written when he was most completely under the influence of the Communist Party. Conversely, *The Outsider*, a book more anti-Communist even than it is anti-Black, was written nearly a decade after his public break with the Communists.

In any event, Moore is correct in pointing out the harmful effects that Wright's tendency toward abstraction has had on his work. He writes:

This is why many critics have referred to the heroes in Wright's fiction as being essentially one-dimensional stereotypes, lacking in any fundamental human complexity. The reason for this is that most of Wright's heroes are extensions of his ideas. The issue here is not that there is anything inherently wrong with fiction rooted in ideas, but that Wright's ideas were not rooted in his understanding of Black people.\(^7\)

Although Moore's conclusion was based on his analysis of Wright's *American Hunger*, it applies much more directly to *The Outsider*. Roi Ottley, a Black writer, reviewing *The Outsider* in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune, Magazine of Books* section (March 22, 1953, p. 3) declares:

\(^6\)Moore, "Richard Wright's *American Hunger*, p. 80.

\(^7\)Ibid.
The racially ubiquitous Richard Wright has created one more monster to add to his gallery of dispossessed people in his brutally explosive book. This time the main character, an intellectual Bigger Thomas, has read and absorbed the gloomy thoughts of Nietzsche, Hegel, Jasper, Kierkegaard and Dostoevski and... proceeds to run amuck on a rampage involving betrayals, deception, lying and murder.\(^8\)

On the same date, Milton Rugoff writes in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, as follows:

One would have thought that in *Native Son*, Richard Wright had gone about as far as he could go in making the enormity of a Negro's crime an index to the oppression he had suffered... But next to Wright's latest protagonist, Cross Damon, Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* seems merely a pathetic victim of circumstances.\(^9\)

Nathan Scott, Jr., in his article, "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," comments on *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. Speaking first of *Native Son*, he writes:

Thus it is, I say, that the novel is paradoxically controlled by precisely the assumptions about Negro life that elicited its rage; for the astounding thing that it finally does is to offer a depraved and inhuman beast as the comprehensive archetypal image of the American Negro... He forged an image of la presence noire that is in no great way removed from the wild and liverish nigger who inhabits the demented imagination of the racial paranoic. For all of the new sophistication that appeared in *The Outsider*, this is as true of his novel of 1953 as it is of his early work of the thirties.\(^10\)

\(^8\) Reprinted in Reilly, *The Critical Reception*, p. 205.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 196.

\(^10\) In *The Black Novelist*, ed. by Robert Hemenway (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1970), p. 81. This article also appears in *Black Expression*, ed. by Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright &
A concise but very cogent summary of The Outsider is contained in a critique by Lorraine Hansberry in Freedom, XIV (April, 1953). It reads as follows:

The Outsider is a story of sheer violence, death and disgusting spectacle, written by a man who has seemingly come to despise humanity. The hero is Cross Damon, a twenty-six year old Negro postal clerk on Chicago's South Side. For 45 pages Wright describes Damon's deterioration into a drunkard who leaves his wife and children, has an affair with a fifteen year old girl, murders one of his best friends, fakes a new identity and murders three other people and finally winds up being shot in the street by some grotesque characters who are supposed to be agents of the Communist Party.\(^{11}\)

This summary may not do justice to a book of 440 pages, but, then, no summary could. A significant passage in the article states that Cross Damon is someone we will never meet on the South Side of Chicago or Harlem. For, if he is anything at all, he is the symbol of Wright's new philosophy--the glorification of--nothingness.\(^{12}\) Even if this statement is too strong or too dogmatic, the fact remains that Wright's depiction of the Black experience through the characters, incidents and episodes of his fiction has gotten worse since Native Son instead of better. An argument to explain away Bigger Thomas, as

\(^{11}\)Reprinted in Reilly, The Critical Reception, p. 220.

\(^{12}\)Ibid.
phony and weak as it would be, could nonetheless draw on the excuse that Bigger typified the dregs of Black life, the element that never had a chance to do or even to dream, a victim of racist hate.

No such defense can be made for Cross Damon. He had a job in the Post Office which in 1950 was still a much sought after opportunity by Blacks. He had enough college to enable him to study some of the most eminent minds of modern times though it must be conceded that he apparently lacked common sense sufficient to benefit by his study. He had a wife who was a nurse, a highly respected position among Blacks even today. His mother was at least equal to Bigger's mother in *Native Son* and his three friends were a notch above Bigger's friends. Bigger was only twenty years old when his tragedy unfolded whereas Cross Damon has reached twenty-six. Bigger has a sister and a brother but their limitations leave little possibility that Bigger could derive strength from them. Damon has no siblings but he does have children and his wife, Gladys, at first, was loving. Compared to Bessie, Bigger's girl friend, Gladys was a bargain. In each novel, the father is dead. The only real disadvantage that Damon shares with Bigger is being born Black in a world ruled by Whites. But Wright, through the meditation of Damon, assures the reader that "It was not because he was a Negro that he found his obligations intolerable, it was because
there resided in his heart a sharp sense of freedom that had somehow escaped being dulled by intimidating conditions.\textsuperscript{13}

Notwithstanding all this, Bigger and Damon end up about the same way. Bigger, while awaiting death for the murder of two women, whimpers that what he killed for must have been good; and Damon, as he lay dying, whispers to Ely Houston, the District Attorney, that all his life had been horrible. When the District Attorney asks why, Damon replies: "Because in my heart . . . I'm . . . I felt . . . I'm innocent. . . . That's what made the horror. . . ." (p. 440) (Author's ellipses.)

Darwin T. Turner's article, "The Outsider: Revision of an Idea,"\textsuperscript{14} attempts to justify the argument "that The Outsider is a revision and redefinition of Native Son." Turner succeeds by examining the close resemblances and parallels between the two works. The article does not concern itself with the question of stereotypes as such; no mention is made of the fact that The Outsider merely updates the stereotypes of Native Son. An unusually close comparison could be made of The Outsider and Lawd Today.\textsuperscript{15} The initial setting in each novel is the

\textsuperscript{13}This quotation was taken from page 376, but the same idea appears in several places, including pages 86 and 288.


\textsuperscript{15}Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright,
the protagonist has three friends, he is deeply in debt; he perceives his wife as responsible for his financial difficulties; his wife threatens to get him fired; he borrows money from the Post Office in each novel; and the White postal officials involved in the transactions are almost identical. In each novel the protagonist spends time with prostitutes, hates himself and beats his wife.

Wright seems virtually incapable of depicting a sustained relationship between Black men and Black women. If the women are not prostitutes, they are teenage girls, usually deficient mentally. Dot, in *The Outsider*, seems to have no mental deficiency but she is barely fifteen. She has already run off from home and is living independently with a girl friend named Myrtle. It is not clear whether she had been sexually active before meeting Damon, but "In their relationship he found her a passionate child achingly hungry for emotional experience" (p. 32).

A flashback reveals that Dot and Damon meet in a

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p. 372, states the following: "Wright had actually opened the novel with a whole section from the then unpublished *Lawd Today* describing Cross's life in Chicago, his work at the Post Office and his colorful conversations with colleagues, and leaving the reader to expect a picturesque, perhaps even humorous, depiction of Black life.

Elsewhere (p. 368), Fabre states that "Colored Man" was once considered as a title for the book. It is just as well that Wright changed his mind.
liquor store. He begins an affair with her even though he knows that she is only a child. In the crowded line, Damon's elbow inadvertently touches Dot's breast. He is not sure if she is aware of it but he does feel that "she's just a child" (p. 30). He even claims to have felt a "twinge of shame" (p. 30). It must have been a very slight twinge because his elbow remained in contact with her breast and "The image of woman as body of woman filled him and his head felt pleasantly giddy" (p. 30). After some commonplace remark to her about the long line, he asks her where she lives. She tells him and then "He looked at her openly now, as a man looks at a woman he likes and wants. 'You couldn't be over sixteen,' he ventures" (p. 31). Dot says that she is seventeen but as the story unfolds we see that she was only fifteen, if that. Damon accepts her statement at face value. He relieves himself of further responsibility by letting her know "that he was not free, that he worked in the Post Office, that he was married but not living with his wife" (p. 32). (Emphasis added.) Damon does not mention his three children at this point.

Their relationship at first was purely physical.

Of an afternoon she would come to his room with the most disconcerting directness he had ever known in a woman. He would try to talk to her and as he talked he could tell that she was not listening, she was pulling off her dress, stripping down her nylon stockings, stepping out of her nylon slip and panties. . . . (p. 32)
As time went on Damon found himself talking freely to Dot. He never knew how much she understood but she listened patiently.

He came at last to believe that she accepted the kind of talk in which he indulged as a mysterious part of man's equipment, along with his sexual organs (p. 33).

Unfortunately, Damon apparently did not tell Dot about birth control and did not bother to use any protection himself, yet "what saddened him to inward tears was that he suspected that Dot had allowed herself to become impregnated in order to test the strength of their attachment" (p. 29).

If Dot had gotten pregnant to test Damon's love, she was in for a big disappointment. True love seems as alien to Cross as it was to Bigger Thomas in _Native Son_ and Jake Jackson in _Lawd Today_ and to Richard Wright himself in his two autobiographical works, _Black Boy_ and _American Hunger_. Dot, of course, did not understand this but as Cross said earlier "she was not capable of understanding anything" (p. 14). This statement is probably too strong. Dot does show that she understands the life growing within her is part and parcel of her own being. When Cross suggests that she abort her baby, Dot replies:

No, no, no . . . Don't ask me that again! Please, Cross, if you do . . . If you asks me that again, I'll jump out of the window! I swear I will! I swear, I swear . . .

No, no! I'll never kill my child! I'll die
first! You can't make me murder! . . . It's my child and I'll keep it and love it like I love my own life . . . (p. 43).

Cross's reaction to all this is the unspoken reflection that "A woman's business is emotion and her trade is carried on in cash of tears" (p. 44). Later, as he prepares to depart, Cross tells Dot: "I've got to go, I've got to see Gladys and attempt to undo some of the harm you've done" (p. 47). So this twenty-six year old man dumps the blame for his plight on his fifteen year old pregnant girl friend just as he had blamed his wife for his wretched marriage. He told Dot "how when he was twenty-one years of age he had naively been sucked into a stupid marriage with Gladys; . . ." (p. 33).

Except for the fact that men sometimes chase women and women sometimes allow themselves to be caught, there seems little justification to Damon's statement that "he had naively been sucked into a stupid marriage with Gladys." Hindsight reveals that the marriage was far more stupid for Gladys than for him and that she was equally naive. From Damon's review, we learn the following: "He had congratulated himself on having tumbled upon a naive girl who gratefully received his amorous attention" (p. 49). Later, he discovered that she "had waited patiently while he had gropingly strayed into her domain, and then she had quietly closed the trap over him" (p. 49). The misfortune, as the story later makes clear, is that she is trapped with
him. Their initial meeting is normal enough: both live in the same building and speak casually to each other from time to time. Eventually, he offers her a lift to work on a rainy day and they make a date for the following afternoon. They go to an interracial party sponsored by the "interracial Nurses Association." They later go bar hopping and end up drunk, wet and in bed. He also ended up with pneumonia. Gladys nurses him back to health and to the altar.

This is all quite normal; what is abnormal is Cross's irresponsibility precisely when he should have been most responsible. Their first baby falls due probably within the first year of their marriage. And this, the author tells us, "marked the beginning of protracted trouble" (p. 55). The source of the trouble is clear as the following lines show:

After safely transporting Gladys, who was in violent labor, to the hospital, Cross went out with a picked group of his Post Office cronies—Pink, Joe, and Booker—to stage a celebration which ended for his cronies after seven hours of guzzling, but which for Cross, extended itself for two whole days and nights. . . . Gladys had tried to reach him by telephoning from the hospital and, worried, she had come home with the baby and a nurse to find Cross unshaven, bleary-eyed and in bed with what she called his "whore" (p. 55).

Contrast this episode with what actually happened in Wright's own life. Webb provides the details:

Ellen went into labor on April 12, 1942, and Richard took her to the hospital. He stayed by her side, holding her hand when she had pains but she labored
on and on and by the end of the twenty-third hour she sent Richard out to eat something. When he returned he beamed at his wife and handed her a present. The book was *Grapes of Wrath* and between Ellen's convulsive pains Richard described the wonderful book. At last it was time to go to the delivery room and Richard, awestruck and nervous of all that went on in the green amphitheater, watched the birth of his big eight-pound two-ounce, baby girl.¹⁶

The point here of course is not that an author needs to model his characters and incidents after his own experience, but to show that Wright's experience, like all other human beings, has had its good and bad, but Wright never seems to remember the good or forget the bad.

In spite of all this, Gladys still stays with Cross. She sulks and nags more but by now Cross "knew that he did not love her and perhaps had never loved her." (p. 55). Out of "compassion" for Gladys, Cross now hit upon "a way of squaring their relationship, of curing her of her love for him, of setting her free as well as himself" (p. 55). The way to achieve this miracle was simple: he would make her hate him. Before Gladys' hate was fully grown, however, she bore Cross twin sons. "Gladys had been hopeful, but not for long" (p. 55) that her marriage could yet be saved, but Cross had other plans:

He would support her and the children, of course. He sipped his drink idly, turning his wish carefully over in his mind. Then his self-hate, his aversion for Gladys, his perpetual toying with his own feelings resulted in a sudden, confoundingly luminous idea. He had it! By God, this was it.

Cross's clever scheme was to come home early, beat Gladys unmercifully, then leave without saying a word. He would then return at his usual time as though nothing had happened. The trick worked to the extent that Gladys convinced herself that Cross had been temporarily insane, but it failed to accomplish its primary object of forcing her to leave or to send him away. So Cross, a short time later, repeated his action step by step. When he returned home this time, however, Gladys was waiting for him with a gun; the desired effect had been achieved. She told him he was sick and sent him packing. After this episode, he met Dot and got into worse trouble.

The crash of a subway train on which Cross was riding resulted in the erroneous report of his death. This fortuitously provides him with a chance to make his separation from Gladys, Dot, his mother, children, debts and everything else permanent. Cross could not escape from being Black, despite Wright's assurances that "there was no racial tones to his reactions, he was just a man, any man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it" (p. 86).

In mid-twentieth-century America, the transformation of a Black man into "just a man, any man" would, indeed, be a miracle. It did not happen in The Outsider. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., deals with this question in these words:
Though Mr. Wright insisted that his hero "could have been of any race" and that his primary quality was the metaphysical horror felt before the yawning emptiness in things created by the demise of the old myths, the fact remains, however, that Cross is a Negro. [Emphasis added.]

Several critics, including Granville Hicks (New York Times Book Review, March 22, 1953), tend to veer away from the identity of Cross Damon in racial terms. Hicks says that The Outsider is concerned with the "quest for meaning; not, however, in terms of racial discrimination nor in any sociological terms whatever, but in purely philosophical terms." Lewis Lawson does not deal with the racial identity question at all but his statement that "however much he may wish to deny it Cross was born with a Christian heritage," applies equally to race. One critic states the following:

Wright continually tried to fulfill himself as a moral agent. Although he shocked his readers by depicting terror, violence, irrationality, and human alienation, his desire was that the shock treatment help in breaking down prejudice and ignorance and in creating a rational world.

Now this is a very commendable goal, not likely to be attained by the method suggested, yet commendable nonetheless,

18 In Reilly, The Critical Reception, p. 198.
20 Brignano, Richard Wright, p. 122.
but what does Wright or the critic mean by the concluding line to this paragraph? It reads: "A world, for him in particular, in which a Negro would be a man, not a Negro."\(^{21}\)

This negation of Black reality to conform to White perceptions—real or imaginary—is a major source of Wright's errors. Even Cross Damon knows that he is Black and that he is a man. Whether White America will accept him as such is, of course, a different matter. Katherine Fishburn notes that "As a result of his race Cross Damon has never been and never will be an integral part of the American fabric."\(^{22}\) [Italics hers.] This in no way prevents his being a man. In fact, she even states that "he is our surrogate self searching for grace through violence."\(^{23}\)

To survive in this world, however, everyone must have an identity so Cross decides that "to begin his new life he would relive something he knew well... He would be a Negro who had just come up fresh from the Deep South looking for work" (p. 88). He adopts the name of Charles Webb for his new identity and checks in at a cheap hotel. The elevator man was "a skinny Negro with a small, black face... [who] eyed Cross sullenly" (p. 89). A White prostitute, whom Wright describes in details that are gen-

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Fishburn, Richard Wright's Hero, p. 117.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
erally positive soon knocks on Cross's door. Her name is Jenny. A few nights later Jenny returns and this time Cross tells her of the train wreck, including the mistaken identity of his body. "Listen, they found a body down there all mangled and they think it is mine" (p. 104). She does not believe him so he retracts the story. He does not tell her when he murders Joe, his Post Office buddy, whom he runs into in the hallway. Joe was a regular customer of Ruth's, another White prostitute. After recovering from his astonishment at seeing Cross alive, Joe invites him into his hotel room. The scene follows:

Joe went on talking and Cross stared at him. He had to do something. But what? This clown was tearing down his dream, smashing all he had so laboriously built up. And there he sat: fat, black, half-laughing and half scared. . . . (p. 107)

At the first opportunity, without having made any effort to find an alternative to murder, Cross kills Joe and dumps his body out of the window. When he returns to his room, he allays Jenny's anxiety and curiosity by promising to take her West. He subsequently purchases her a ticket and tells her to meet him at the Greyhound Bus Terminal. Meanwhile, he catches a train going to New York. On the train an event occurs in which Cross acts completely out of character, showing neither foresight nor hindsight. His behavior is inconsistent with the Cross revealed up to the El wreck in which he was supposed to have died and his behavior is even more inconsistent with his new identity.
The incident involves a White woman who inadvertently caused the Black waiter to spill hot coffee on her. She screams, calls him a nigger and raises a water pitcher above her head to strike the waiter.

Cross was on his feet before he knew it and had traversed the aisle and was standing between the woman and the waiter, fronting the woman, blocking her action with his uplifted right hand. "You're not hitting me nigger," the woman said quietly. "You are not hitting anybody, either," Cross said (p. 125).

Up to the train wreck, Cross had displayed no sense of race consciousness or personal responsibility. Since assuming his new identity, he needlessly betrayed a White prostitute whom he knew had been betrayed by men all her life. He also killed his buddy, Joe, without hesitation and with no show of regret. His murder of Joe presumably was to protect himself from exposure; yet, here he is making himself conspicuous by fronting a White woman on a train. Cross, then, betrays the Black waiter by agreeing to be a witness for him and then giving him a false name and address.

Immediately after this incident, Cross meets Ely Houston, the District Attorney of New York City. Houston, with Father Seldon, whom Cross had already met, soon involves Cross in their discussion.

I'm profoundly interested in the psychological condition of the Negro in this country," Houston said. "Only a few people see and understand the complexity of this problem. . . . My personal situation in life has given me a vantage point from which I've gained some insight into the problems of other excluded people (p. 129)."
On first introducing Houston, Wright points out the following:

His shoulders were Herculean with long arms that terminated in huge hands with delicately strong fingers. The hump on the back was prominent but not as noticeable as Cross would have thought it would be, so naturally did it blend in with the man's general build. Cross had not particularly noticed this deformity when Houston had first sat down. . . . (p. 127)

So when Houston laid claim to a special "insight" into the problems of Black people Wright tells us that Cross "knew that Houston, in identifying himself with Negroes, had been referring to his deformity. Houston was declaring himself to be an outsider like Cross. . . ." (p. 128)

But herein lies confusion. For what makes Cross an outsider in the sense that Wright depicts him is not race, but temperament, his philosophical bent accentuated by undigested reading of White existentialists. Moreover, the kind of existentialist alienation that Wright attempts to force on the story is not related even remotely to race or physical deformity. Finally, is there any evidence in real life or literary tradition, Black or White, to suggest that Whites who suffer from physical deformity have special insights into Black problems or empathize with Blacks to a greater degree than other Whites? What Wright is really doing is presenting an equation of Blackness and White deformity. Even so, Blackness suffers by comparison. As a matter of fact, Houston is the only male character in the book that is half-way admirable.
One critic makes an interesting observation that is not unrelated to this question. It reads:

While the physically deformed Houston is chosen to enforce the law, the racially scarred black outsider must operate beyond the law to be free. If race is incidental, why aren't the roles reversed? The answer is obvious. Wright drew upon reality when he cast the Negro as rebel, the white man as his judge.24

This raises the question as to just how much of an outsider Houston really is. Outside of his own statement, completely unsupported by the evidence before the reader, and outside of the ruminations of Cross Damon, there is nothing to suggest that Houston is outside of anything. There is also nothing in the novel to suggest that Cross is rebelling against anything, certainly nothing White. The first man whom he killed was Black and the killing of three Whites was hardly motivated by race. Ely Houston and Eva Blunt, the two persons that Cross most admires and respects are both White. Within a few days after meeting Eva, Cross reveals a capacity to truly love her, a capacity not shown by Black men in relationship to any of the Black women in this novel or any of Wright's other novels.

This is not surprising. Since Wright obviously hated himself, at least his Blackness, it follows that he would hate Black women also. His fiction reflects this. What is surprising is the manner in which critics deal with

the implication of this fact or refuse to deal with it altogether. As late as 1979, Evelyn Avery can write the following: "Wright's own experience with black women depressed him. Intelligent and sensitive, he sought companionship and was offered sex." Where is the evidence to support this assertion? Avery cites the scene in Black Boy involving Bess, a scene so ridiculous that it could be told only about Black people for White consumption. She further cites the insurance company episode in "The Man Who Went to Chicago." This is a short story in Eight Men that will be examined later. At this point, only Avery's interpretation will be pursued. She writes:

In "The Man Who Went to Chicago," Wright describes the "commissions" he received as an insurance salesman when pretty black housewives would pay their premiums with their bodies (Eight Men, p. 228). Unlike most of his protagonists, he pitied the poor, illiterate women who demeaned themselves. According to biographer Michel Fabre, Wright's sexual attitudes were molded in part by his mother who "could appeal to his moral sense." Wright may have "pitied the poor, illiterate women who demeaned themselves" but he managed to control his pity. In American Hunger as well as in "The Man Who Went to Chicago," Wright tells the same story. He writes that he "... had a long, tortured affair with one girl by paying her ten-cent premium each week. She was an illiterate black child with a baby whose father she did not know." The story

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25 Ibid., p. 65.  
26 Ibid.  
reveals that the girl is not only a child but also re-
tarded.

Since Avery is guided in part by Fabre, a glance in
his direction at this point should prove illuminating.
Fabre writes as follows:

Wright's emotional and sexual experience . . . not only
determined his eventual choice of a companion but even
affected his literary career. They are often reflected
in his fiction, especially in The Outsider, where in
contrast to the somewhat negative characters of Damon's
black wife and black mistress, Eva, emerges as the por-
trait closest to Wright's idealized, if not ideal,
woman.28

Fabre might have added that not only was Cross's
Black wife and Black mistress portrayed somewhat negatively,
but so were Dot's friends, Myrtle and Mary; Cross's mother;
Bob Hunter, the dining car waiter; Sarah, his wife; the
Black elevator man; a Black postman; and Hank, the Black
man who is probably responsible for Cross's death. Dot is
portrayed a little less negatively than the others, but she
is a child and just happens to be the lightest in complex-
ion. Wright describes her as a "young, willowy yellow
girl" (p. 29). We can be grateful to Fabre, however, for
the following information:

In fact, the time was coming to an end where adventures
that merely satisfied his desires and flattered his
vanity would be enough for Wright. He wanted to find a
companion for life. By this time it was clear that his
wife could never be a black girl; whether a bourgeoise
or an intellectual. She would have to have defined
personality and, in addition to being cultured and in-

28 Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 195.
telligent, she would have to be interested in politics, while also being affectionate and desirable.29 [Emphasis added.]

Since these qualities are as common among Black women as among any others, we must look further for the explanation of precluding a Black woman as Wright's possible spouse. The answer is not hard to find: he loved White. Fabre states what was no doubt Wright's thoughts: "To possess a white woman was a way of eradicating painful memories, even though a black man suffered many humiliations in her company. . . ."

Fabre, himself, provides proof that Wright knew many Black women who possessed all the qualities that Wright demanded except a White skin. He writes as follows:

He [Wright] also knew a number of well-educated, pretty, intelligent black girls, such as Fern Gayden, Alberta Sims, Deborah Smith and Margarer Walker. Since his arrival in New York, he had many relationships with girls and married women of both races, and in February 1938, he was even on the point of marrying a girl from a black bourgeois family in Brooklyn; he father, however, would not consider a "penniless writer" for a son-in-law."30

One need not follow Fabre too literally because Fabre relies heavily on Wright too much.

Whether the Black women mentioned above wanted Wright is another question. Some surely did, and had Wright wanted to he could have found a Black woman, one even whose parents would have approved, or one whom he

29 Ibid., p. 198.  
30 Ibid., pp. 195-96.
would have felt strongly enough about to marry over her parent's objections. There can be no absolute guarantees in a marriage regardless of race as Wright found out in his first marriage. The marriage, which was to a White woman, hardly survived the honeymoon, but when the final break came, note Wright's reaction: "Now he would purge Dhimah and the marriage from his mind—he was free again and the first thing he intended to do was to find Ellen Poplar."  

Apparently Wright did not make parental approval a precondition for his second marriage for Webb tells us that "Ellen's parents disapproved of their daughter's marriage to a Negro. . . ."  

Wright's attitude, it seems, was a valid one. He said:

Ours is a mixed marriage, yet I and Ellen never think of it as such until we're reminded that it is. There're no problems in people of different races marrying and living together; the only problems that may arise come from those who look on, and those who look on are usually the ignorant.

Those who look on may or may not be "usually the ignorant" but it certainly is none of their business. Even when a Black man marries one White woman after another, it is his business and hers. But if that man is a Black writer who peoples his novels with caricatures of Black people, this is another matter. If this Black man depicts virtually all of his Black woman in a "somewhat negative"

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31 Webb, Richard Wright, p. 189.
32 Ibid., p. 192.  
33 Ibid.
manner, makes his White prostitutes a notch above most of his Black women characters, and despite strong sexist bias against women in general, manages to make his major White woman character akin to the angels, a study concerned with stereotypes may explore the connection. Let us examine more closely this Eva. She is a "tall, blond, white girl" (p. 172) who introduced herself and "extended an incredibly soft white hand" (p. 173). Within a few minutes of their meeting, Gil, Eva's husband, is trying to politicize Cross. During a brief pause, Cross

took advantage of Gil's silence to observe Eva, who sat with her shapely nyloned knees close together and regarded him with wide enigmatic eyes. . . . She was a fragile girl of about twenty-four. . . . She seemed kind, impulsive (p. 175).

Cross wonders how Eva married "a course inhuman character like Blunt" (p. 175). He later learns from Eva's diary "that it was common knowledge in radical circles that Gil Blunt had been ordered to marry her, to get her into the Party for prestige purposes" (207). For the Party to go to such length, Eva's artistic talent and reknown must have surpassed even her beauty. Cross would have probably disputed this. For when Gil offers to send him to Worker's School at Gil's expense on condition that Cross comes and lives with them, Cross thinks Gil is crazy. "Did this man want him in the same house with a girl as beautiful as Eva?" (p. 178). Of course the whole idea was crazy but The Outsider was written when McCarthyism had made the de-
piction of Communists as crazy quite acceptable. The absurdity of a man inviting a perfect stranger into his home under the conditions described did not seem to disturb Cross. He was engrossed in Eva's beauty and gladly moved in.

Cross appreciated Eva's work and associated its artistry with Eva's personality.

The odd power of her work was immediately apparent; Cross saw a bewildering array of seemingly disassociated forms—out of a dark brooding background surged broken forms swimming lyrically in mysterious light, stemming from an unseen source. The magical fragility of this light... was like Eva herself, like her sense of herself (p. 204).

Despite Cross's admiration for Eva, he subdued his conscience enough to allow him to pry into her personal diary. When he closed the diary, he had an impulse to run and tell Eva that she was not alone, but he repressed it. Wright reveals Cross's feelings:

Here was a lost woman who had enough sensitivity and intelligence to understand what he had to say. She was a victim like him; the difference was that he was a willing victim and she was an involuntary one (p. 212).

Within a few days, Cross frees this involuntary victim by making her a widow. Before the blood stops oozing out of her husband's body, Cross is conscious of other thoughts.

He was aware of her slim, willowy figure on the bed, the legs tapered with such a long, slow curve, the suggestively dramatic roundness of her hips, the small but firm breast, the long and delicate neck, and the hazel pools of her eyes now dark and anxious with dread; and desire for desire rose in him for her for the first
time. Oh, God, he must not think of that now. . . . (p. 236) [Wright's ellipsis.]

But Cross does think of it "He felt the soft pressure from her thin, almost transparent fingers on his hand and she became woman as body of woman for his senses" (p. 236).

Before the bodies of his latest victims are in their graves, Cross kills again. This time the victim is Hilton, another Party functionary. But three murders in three days and the memory of a fourth one are too much for Damon's mind, existentialist or not. He catches a cold and becomes delirious with the fever. In his delirium he confesses the four murders to Eva but she considers his babbling the expression of a mind temporarily deranged. "Oh God," cried Damon, "What have I done? I've killed and killed and killed. . . . Eva, save me, help to save me." He felt her arms about him, tugging at him. "Get in bed darling," she begged. "You're sick." Cross repeats his confession but begs Eva not to leave him. She promises that she will never leave him. "Hush darling," she said. "You're sick" (p. 321). The following paragraph tells what ensues:

He heard her moving softly about him and then he was paralyzed with surprise when he felt her soft naked body coming into bed and nestling close to him. Her warm arms went about his neck and she pulled his face to hers and he felt her lips clinging to his. Good God he had told his horror and had expected to hear her scream and run from him; and now she was surrendering herself, giving her gift to the man she loved, hoping
to cure the distraction of his mind, by placing a benediction upon his senses (p. 321).

The benediction may have had the power to cure Damon's distraction but not to erase his crimes. Eventually the District Attorney and the Communist Party solve the mysterious murders. Lacking legal evidence the police release him but the Party persists. When Damon returns to Eva, he still will not give her up, although he understands that she now knows all. "I must talk to you, Eva," he said. "Come into the room. I love you. This can't break us up. It mustn't" (p. 396). He realizes that Eva wants to be told about Gil.

Yes, she wants to ask me about Gil. . . . She wants to know. . . . Oh God! He went to his knees and clutched her arms about her legs. He would beg and plead for his life. "Eva," he begged. "It's not too late. If you love me, it's never too late. Remember that. You told me you loved me and I need you now. If you turn from me, the world collapses" (p. 397).

Cross tries to explain to Eva why he killed but she does not understand him because he really makes no sense. The idea first given on page 212 is repeated here but with no greater clarity: "She was a reluctant victim and he a willing one. . . ." (p. 401). Eva commits suicide by leaping from a six-floor window. As Cross looked on her crumpled body, he knew that "He had botched it and Eva's crushed, mute face told him that this was hell" (p. 406). A few days later, Menti, who acts like a Party enforcer, and Hank, a Black who acts like Menti's faithful dog, gun
Damon down as he attempts to flee in a taxi. Cross dies in a hospital (p. 436) with the District Attorney at his side. The circle is complete. The Communist characters who were depicted in *Native Son*, however flawed, as people of good intentions, are presented in *The Outsider* as the very personification of evil. The District Attorney, who was an arch-villain in *Native Son*, in *The Outsider* emerges heroic. But it is the White woman who has made the most progress. In *Native Son*, Mary Dalton is a silly, little simpleton endowed with sentimentality but devoid of common sense. In *The Outsider*, Eva, despite her naivete, is goodness and beauty personified. Black people are depicted as the same old stereotypes; the stereotypes are more sophisticated and therefore more insidious. Even Jet Magazine (March 26, 1953), the Johnson publication least noted for its probing analysis, had this to say:

*The Outsider* almost reads like a revised version of *Native Son*. Basically, the plot is exactly the same. A Negro youth, unable to adjust to his Jim Crow environment, goes beserk. . . . Instead of two murders, there are four that Damon commits. Perhaps the only basic difference in the two novels is that instead of making the Communist Party the hero of his book, the Reds are now the villains.35

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34 Phyllis R. Klotman points out that "which one actually put the bullet in him is not clear but Hank seems the most likely" in Another Man Gone: The Black Runner in Contemporary Afro-American Literature (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), p. 125, n. 2.

Arna Bontemps, in the *Saturday Review* (March 28, 1953), notes the following:

(1) Mr. Wright's novel reopens the intriguing and often disputed question of the Negro's place in contemporary American fiction. (2) In the past, of course, the central problem has been the stereotype and (3) perhaps it is wrong to place too much blame on the creative writer for more or less standard portrayals of Negroes. (4) We now know that there are minds that need such stereotypes for their comfort, (5) that the root of the matter is a national attitude and (6) that the recurrence of those oversimplified types cannot be honestly accounted for without reference to the sociological environment in which they exist.

In these terms, it is possible to trace a sort of evolution of stereotypes. (7) One recalls the shiftless, improvident and musical predecessor of the slum-shocked Depression folk. (8) New phantoms glide in as the older ones glide out, and the otherwise serious reader is consoled without being convinced. (9) Thus it was, no doubt, that the latest racial stereotype of the Negro as problem emerged. [Enumeration not in the original.]

Bontemps' review of *The Outsider* has been quoted extensively because he raises several points directly concerned with the argument in this study. These points are as follows: The only objection that can be raised about point one is that Wright's novel cannot reopen what was never closed. From the early rise of American literature certainly to the death of Wright, Black life has been traditionally treated in a stereotypical manner. As was stated in the introduction to this study, "Wright's depiction of the Black experience strengthens, supports and perpetuates the stereotypes that have filled much of American

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literature from its inception to the present time." Point two is undebatable unless one wishes to debate the humanity, itself, of Black people. Point three, from the point of view of this study, needs rephrasing. The question is not one of placing blame but of analyzing literature. If the author simply repeats "more or less standard portrayals of Negroes," the work will lack originality, authenticity and creativity. It merely perpetuated stereotypes, albeit, streamlined, that should have been discarded at least after the Civil War. From an artistic point of view, these stereotypes get between the reader and the real life that the author should be illuminating. But even if this were not so, the fact remains that anyone who continues the "standard portrayals of Negroes" strengthens, supports and perpetuated the stereotypes of Black people. This is precisely the charge that this study levels at Wright. Whether he is wrong for doing so is not the question.

Much more germane to this study is the reason for the survival of those stereotypes. Point four notes that "there are minds that need such stereotypes for their comfort. . . ." Perhaps, but is it the responsibility of the novelist to satisfy this need? Individuals who can find comfort in reading about other people only if the image of these people is degraded are indeed sick. But point five holds that the root of the matter is a national attitude. If this is so--and one need not agree that it is--then the
problem is simply a national one. Eric Fromm, in discussing the concept of consensual validation, indicates that a whole society can be insane. America's racism sometimes borders on this possibility. Point six states that the recurrence of these stereotypes cannot be "honestly accounted for without reference to the sociological environment in which they exist." Again, one may insist that Bontemps is going beyond literary criticism, that he is making a sociological critique. But when the literature is shaped by certain social attitudes and conversely shapes these attitudes, an examination of this interaction surely can be considered one way of looking at the work.

Points seven, eight and nine simply indicate the evolution of the stereotype which finally emerges is the problem stereotype of which Wright is the master.

The author of *The Outsider* was clearly writing for a White audience. He had been abroad for seven years but had no reason to suspect that the racial climate in America had changed since his departure. Besides Wright, himself, states that "An American Negro will therefore write like the Whites of his native country. It is not a question of


choice." If Bontemps is right about the national attitude, then the Black writer too may be guilty of stereotyping his own people. A critical reference to Claude Brown's *Man Child in the Promised Land* states that it was "obviously written for the large White reading audience which relishes everything that is sordid in the life of black people that can be found between the pages of a book." If this statement about the White audience is extreme, there still remains the problem of publication as illustrated below:

As many Afro-American authors themselves remark, the question of audience has long plagued blacks, and has been compounded by the fact that most major publishers are white. When these publishers think it advisable to print the works of black authors, they anticipate images of black life that accord with the prevailing cultural stereotypes—anything from the obsequious darky of the 1880's to the raging militant of the 1960's. Only the rare white publisher has recognized or encouraged artistic independence in black writers.

James Emanuel and Theodore Gross, in a preface to their anthology, *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*, state the following:

If as Richard Wright observed . . . the Negro is America's metaphor, it is particularly significant to understand the meaning of that metaphor: to know organically from within the mind and spirit of the American

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Negro himself. And if one of our primary aims as readers of native works of art is to discover the complex fate of being American, to banish stereotypes of thought and character and discover the truth about our own people, then it is time we viewed the Negro through his own clear eyes, listened to the Negro in his own best voice and felt the complexity of the Negro's humanity in the most intimate and permanent form that has been available to him—literary expression. [Emphasis added.]

But if "Some black authors are also guilty of writing about blacks from the white perspective" as certain critics aver, there is no assurance that the stereotypes will be banished or the truth of Black humanity disclosed even in their works. Richard Wright's three novels, Lawd Today, Native Son and The Outsider, provide ample proof of this assertion. The Long Dream, discussed in the next chapter, is also filled with stereotypes. For, despite the claim to artistic independence, most writers—Black and White—write to be published. They soon learn about the "national attitude" and that this has little to do with art.

The Chicago Defender on January 7, 1981, p. 6, carried this headline: "Black Authors 'Blister' Publishers."

The article reported on a forum held at Columbia University entitled "Black Literature in the 80s; Revolution Or Re-

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naissance?" Toni Morrison was quoted as saying that "The main publishers are only concerned with profits." James Baldwin said, "The price for becoming articulate in this country or in the West was to lie about your experience," and Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) commented as follows:

When I was writing "Kill Whites," "Kill Whites" and those poems were well read and I'll tell you something interesting. I had less trouble getting published back then (the 1960s and early 1970s). But when I started writing that this country consists of a ruling class of whites which makes up six-tenths of one percent of the total population, then I began to have difficulty. Revolutionary rhetoric is much more acceptable to the power elite, according to Baraka, than penetrating social analysis. This should surprise no one, for as Hoyt Fuller says, "Racist attitudes and practices are the norm. I know of no reason why book publishers should be expected to be less racist than, say, a razor blade manufacturer or the United States State Department." 

The publishers want profits; and lies, especially about the Black experience, have always proved popular and profitable. The power elite can tolerate screaming Blacks even calling for White blood as long as Blacks are not encouraged to think. This is the sum of what these writers

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45 Quoted in Maccann and Woodard, The Black American, p. 201.
are saying. In an essay entitled, "Overcoming the White Man's History," Howard M. Meyer writes:

The men who control the coffers are likely to conclude that their institutions are not threatened as much by direct action street demonstrations as they would be by a widespread revelation that as a nation we have been living on lies; that what has until now been accepted as the American heritage is permeated with falsehood and mendacity.  

The persistence, then, of racial stereotypes in our fiction is not a question of art as such but of societal factors extraneous to literature per se. A Black writer who succumbs to these forces and peoples his works with Black stereotypes does a disservice to his art as well as to his people. Richard Wright is a case in point.

CHAPTER VI

THE LONG DREAM

Phylon (Fourth Quarter, 1958), a scholarly Black journal on race and culture, carries an article by Ford on The Long Dream entitled "A Long Way From Home." The article speaks of the promises of Uncle Tom's Children, the extraordinary power of Native Son, and even the challenge of a new philosophy in The Outsider. On coming to The Long Dream, however, the article states: "This book is a colossal disappointment. The plot is contrived with unconvincing motivation. The characters are wooden puppets whose dilemmas are neither compelling nor natural."  

Saunders Redding, a Black critic, writing in the New York Times Book Review (October 26, 1958), also expresses longing for the good old Wright. His article entitled, "The Way It Was," says that "The Long Dream proves that Wright has been away too long. . . . Come back Dick Wright to life again."  

Ted Poston, a Black journalist and newspaperman's article on The Long Dream appears in the New York Post (October 26, 1958). It is entitled: "Wright: He's Out of Touch."

1 In Reilly, The Critical Reception, p. 335
2 Ibid. p. 329
3 Ibid. p. 327
Not all the Black critics, however, were disenchanted by The Long Dream. Roi Ottley, writing in the Chicago Sunday Tribune, Magazine of Books (October 26, 1958, p. 3), had this to say:

Richard Wright, whose gifts as a novelist were first revealed in his "Native Son," has written a surging, superb, new book which closely examines the anatomy of Southern racial prejudice and reveals some awful truths. In the process he has given us a social document of unusual worth.

The Crisis magazine, official organ of the NAACP, had a review of the book in February, 1959, by Henry F. Winslow. He speaks of Fishbelly as "the tortured protagonist in this novel of terrible truth." After referring to the weaving into the story the real life incident of the Natchez Rhythm Nite Club fire, Winslow writes: "With this documented verisimilitude Wright works Tyree around to the self same dramatic focus where Taylor, the horse whipped Negro minister in 'Fire and Cloud' ... stood his ground, on the premise that 'Freedom belongs to the strong.'"

There is not the remotest resemblances between the characters or episodes in "Fire and Cloud" with The Long Dream and very little resemblance between the Natchez fire and the Grove episode. But then there is very little resemblance between "Fire and Cloud" and the Angelo Herndon case on which it was supposedly based. The important thing is the admiration for Wright's works that still appeared in

4 Ibid. p. 336
the pages of the official organ of the NAACP. It should also not be forgotten that the NAACP's highest award, the Spingarn Medal, went to Wright for his authorship of *Native Son.*

White critics also differed in their reception of *The Long Dream.* *Time* (October 27, 1958) complained that Wright "has one string to his bow: the shameful plight of the Negro in the White man's world. His writing is grace­less, and he uses it with the subtlety of a lynching." *Time* (October 27, 1958) complained that Wright "has one string to his bow: the shameful plight of the Negro in the White man's world. His writing is grace­less, and he uses it with the subtlety of a lynching." In Reilly, *The Critical Reception*, p. 329

William Dulea in *Commonweal* (October 31, 1958) says that "The Long Dream would seem to provide little insight on current U.S. interracial realities...." But Dorothy Parker says that "Certainly it is a novel--no, a real account--to rack with guilt those of us who regard ourselves as supreme because we are enclosed in a pink skin" (Es­quire, 51 [February, 1959], 18).

Granville Hicks's review of *The Long Dream* in *Saturday Review* (October 18, 1958) is interesting as an example of so-called balanced criticism. It, indeed, makes positive and negative points, perhaps in relatively equal proportion, but in terms of the quality of judgment the positive far outweights the negative. All things being

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5 Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest*, p. 244.

6 In Reilly, *The Critical Reception*, p. 329

7 Ibid. p. 331

8 Ibid. p. 337
considered, the reader of Hicks's review is most likely to conclude that in spite of its flaws, here is another great work by Richard Wright, particularly as it pertains to the Black experience. He writes, for instance, as follows:

Yet it is impossible to deny that this novel, like its predecessors, has power. However one may criticize details, one cannot doubt that in a fundamental way, Wright is telling the truth about the situation of the American Negro, and the truth cannot fail to shock us. There is nothing here that we haven't known but we are compelled to come to terms with what we should like to forget.9 [Emphasis added.]

Earlier Hicks had written that "Wright is once more trying to show the world what being a Negro in America is like."10

From Wright's strenuous efforts, however, what really emerges is the same old stereotypical images of Black life that has characterized American literature from the beginning. Given Wright's own self-loathing of his Blackness, his own belief, as confessed in Black Boy (p. 45), of the bleakness of Black life, the cultural barrenness, the absence of kindness, the hollowness of memory, the instability of tenderness, the lack of hope, and even the shallowness of despair, it is astounding that Wright does not sink to even lower depths. These presumed attributes correspond point by point to the view of Black life propagated by the perpetrators of the historic crimes against

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9 Ibid. p. 325  
10 Ibid. p. 324
Black people and Wright accepts them as valid. Indeed, Hicks notes that:

Wright has always felt that one of the peculiar evils of the Negro situation is an almost inevitable confusion of values. Bitterly, as he rejects the white man's world, Fish can never get rid of a suspicion that the white man may be right.\(^\text{11}\)

And the careful reader can never get rid of the suspicion that these words coming from Fishbelly really express Wright's own attitude. Hicks's article was one of the most favorable, yet he admits that "one ought to feel, as I do not, that the ideas Fish expresses are his ideas and not Richard Wright's."\(^\text{12}\) It is not necessary to assume that Fishbelly or any of Wright's other characters speak directly for him to see the close similarity between the views expressed by these characters and the ideas expounded by Wright himself. But if authors could disavow all the ideas, images, episodes and characters in their works as alien to their thinking, they would nonetheless be responsible for their own creations. This study, however, is not so much interested in assigning responsibility as in establishing the fact that the dominant character of Wright's work is the conventional stereotype.

In *The Long Dream*, Wright's stereotypical depiction of Black life seems to spring from a single-source—self-hatred. Like tributaries from a polluted sea, this

\(^{11}\text{Ibid. p. 325}\quad^{12}\text{Ibid. p. 324}\)
self-hatred, and hence hatred of Black people, manifests itself in several tendencies:

1. The exaggeration, almost deification, of White power and its converse—Black powerlessness.
2. An exaggeration and generalization of the loathing that Black people are supposed to feel for themselves in response to White hatred.
3. The preeminence of the importance in Black life of the White female and the consequent disparagement of the Black female.

These three tendencies flow together like the burst main of a sewer.

On Rex Tucker's first errand downtown, a White man forces him into an alley to shoot for him in a dice game. The assumption is that "Niggers are born with luck," and since Fishbelly, Rex's nickname, is only six, he still "has all his luck."¹³ We can dismiss this as White superstition and when the six-year old shoots a seven on the first throw, and an eleven on the second, we can accept this as beginner's luck. When, on the next throw, his point becomes eight and he makes that too, the reader may wonder.

The irate losing gamblers do not wonder long, however, but make Fishbelly quit. The winner pushes a dollar

bill in Fish's hand and lets him go. Although Fish is only six and has obviously been forced into rolling the dice, one of the gamblers tries to kick him and another throws a brick at his retreating form. Yet Fish wonders "how he could account for the dollar. If he told the truth, his father might well whip him" (p. 16). Now there is nothing in the novel before this incident or after it to suggest that Fishbelly needs to fear a whipping from his father. All signs point in just the opposite direction: his father spoils him. But Wright wants to make a statement about Black fathers for sociological reasons, not literary ones, so he puts thoughts in Fish's head to do this. On another errand, Fish has to go to Mr. Jordon's store. Mr. Jordon is Black and so are the railroad workers loitering near the store. Yet Fish readied himself to be laughed at, scorned. His parents had cautioned him against those roustabouts. "Son, they your color, but they not your kind," his mother had told him. "I touch 'em only when they dead, Fish, and I wouldn't do that less I was paid," his father had drawn the line.

Until very recently, certainly up to the sixties, if not up to the present, railroad workers were always held in the highest esteem in the Black community. This is one of the few references to Black workers of any kind and it is loaded with contempt. Mr. Tucker, though he is a successful businessman partly due to his corrupt connections,
is virtually illiterate. He has relations with the well-to-do Blacks, but his main activities are with the lowest elements in the Black community. Nowhere else do we see further evidence of this "class" attitude. Fishbelly does see what kind of person his father is, however, when he next visits his father's mortuary establishment:

Fishbelly saw a naked black body leap from the bed. "That you Fish?" The dread in his father's voice was replaced by scared hope. His sobbing would not let him speak. "What you doing here?" his father demanded accusingly. He could not speak. "Your mama here?" his father asked in a clipped whisper. "Nawsir ... s she's at home," he gasped (p. 22).

This incident takes place during regular business hours in a public establishment. Yet precautions to assure privacy were not even sufficient to prevent the intrusion of a six-year old. While waiting and "praying" that he would be forgiven for his blunder, Fish notices on the wall, a calendar that held a photo of a laughing white girl strolling along a sandy beach, her blond hair blown back, her lips holding a cigarette, her legs as white as bread, and her rounded breast billowing under satin (p. 22).

These details seem more the observation of an adult than a six-year old child. In any event, Fishbelly "senses a relation between the world of white skins and black skins, but he could not determine just what it was" (p. 23).

While Fish was being reminded to never talk about what he saw in the shop, "his father's eyes glaring like the eyes of a cat in the dark" (p. 24).

One day three of Fishbelly's playmate, Sam, Zeke
and Tony, call on Fish to settle their argument about Africa. Sam's father is apparently a Black Nationalist of the Garveyite orientation and Sam has absorbed his father's attitudes. Fish is not much help. Sam and Fish head for home in the same general direction but start fighting.

"Three days later he and Sam had forgotten that they had ever fought and over what" (p. 34). But on the night of the fight Fishbelly

snapped on the light and stared open-mouthed at the reflection of his tear-stained black face in the mirror. He grimaced at the reflection, then sucked a volume of hot liquid from his saliva glands and spat, spattering the glass. "Nigger" he whispered in a voice that was like an escaping valve (p. 34).

The next incident involves the same foursome: Zeke, Sam, Tony and Fish. At last it looks like the reader may enjoy an ordinary scene of boys playing ball. They have all the accoutrements and even limber up. Then Aggie West arrives:

"Hello Rex," Aggie greeted Fishbelly by his Christian name. Fishbelly scowled for he despised anyone so pretentious as not to call him Fish. . . . "Look sissy/ Beat it," Zeke was harsh. "I want to play ball," Aggie mumbled musically. "Naw, you pansy," Fishbelly said. "Now go." "Why can't I play?" Aggie seemed indifferent to his frigid reception. "Cause we don't want to play with fruits!" Sam snarled. . . . "Play the piano, you fairy," Tony said, "That's all you fit for!" (p. 35)

Soon the argument becomes stronger. Tony counts to three for Aggie to be gone and when he does not run, Tony hits him in the head with a "sharp, flat stone as large as
a baseball" (p. 36). Though blood gushes from his head, Aggie still does not move. We now get this scene:

Nervous hysteria made Sam advance and snatch the baseball bat out of Fishbelly's hand. Lifting the bat, Sam lashed Aggie across the chest. Tony, Zeke and Fishbelly kicked, slapped and punched Aggie, who walked groggily . . . toward a field, not protesting the raining blows (p. 36).

Afterward they discover that they treat Aggie as White folks treat Blacks and when Fishbelly asks why Aggie acts like a girl, we get the following dialogue:

"Beats me," Tony said. "They say he can't help it."
"He could if he tried," Zeke said.
"Mebbe he can't . . . mebbe it's like being black," Sam said. "Ah naw, it ain't the same thing," Zeke said.
"But he ought to stay way from us," Fishbelly said.
"That's just what the white folks say about us," Sam told him (p. 37).

In The Outsider an attempt is made to compare the Black condition with White deformity; in this scene an analogy is made between the White persecution of Blacks and the Black treatment of a homosexual. There is no way of knowing the exact age of the boys in this chapter. Sam and Fishbelly were six at the last mention of their age, and Zeke and Tony are four years older than they. Three chapters later, Fishbelly's age is given as twelve. The two oldest boys at the time of the attack on Aggie West had hardly reached puberty while Fishbelly and Sam were several years short of puberty. The brutality of their attack on Aggie, whose age probably falls between the two limits, seems highly improbable. Wright uses the scene, however,
to suggest how Blacks would treat people different from themselves if they had the power. In doing so Wright simply updates "the Antebellum axiom that 'the slave is always a tyrant if he can get a chance to be one.'" 14

The boys are next seen at a carnival, but Wright does not show them doing and experiencing what most boys typically do and experience at carnivals. They purchased their tickets at school. On entering the carnival grounds they surrender "their tickets to a cold-eyed white woman" (p. 38). Once inside "They came upon a girl show where five half-nude young white women danced . . ." but a sign under the ticket window says "No colored." They do manage to get into a Black minstrel show. The only other activity they engage in outside of eating popcorn is trying to "Hit the Nigger Head." 15 Despite the free use of the word nigger by the White customers and the carnival barker, three of the four Black boys join in the game. Immediately after this episode, the boys start for home. As they deliberately


15 This was a game common to many carnivals and amusement parks until the late fifties in both the North and South. It involved customers throwing balls at a Black man's head. Riverview in Chicago had this as one of its attractions almost until it closed. I observed the game from a distance on every opportunity I got, but I never saw a Black person take part in the game and I never met anyone, despite diligent inquiries, who did see Blacks participating.
pass near the circus trailers where the circus folks live, we get the following scene:

"Hello!" A feminine voice sounded softly in the gloom. They halted. The white woman whom they had seen upon the platform of the girl show was smiling at them out of the shadows. "Looking for something special?" the woman asked. "N'm, Zeke breathed. "You boys got any money?" the woman asked. They did not reply. "Come closer. Don't be afraid. I'll take you in for five dollars apiece," she said, unbuttoning her blouse and baring her big white breasts in the half-light. "Naw!" Sam exploded and ran.

This is Mississippi in the forties; it is early evening on the carnival grounds among the living quarters. Everything else aside, such indiscretion seems incredible. The boys agree to say nothing about this incident because "Folks wouldn't understand. Both colored and white'd think we bothered the woman" (p. 45). Chapter VIII that follows this episode also devotes about half of its pages to a White woman passer-by. The chapter ends with Zeke wondering "What happened to that white woman?" "... I don't want to know," Fishbelly said. "Me neither," Sam said. "I want to forget that woman," Fishbelly sighed. "Me too," Tony said.

Fishbelly, as the frequent alter ego of Wright himself is not likely to forget the White woman soon, but the next woman that we encounter in the story is Black. She is Fishbelly's teacher; "old, fat black Mrs. Morrison" (p. 51). She acts as if she has never seen the inside of a school.

While recuperating from his first serious illness, Fishbelly was left alone by his mother who "absented her-
self for hours to do work for the Mount Olive Baptist Church" (p. 54). Fishbelly begged her not to leave him but she said that "working for the church" was how she thanked Jesus for healing him. "He sulked, silent, jealous of Jesus" (p. 55). During one of these absences, he falls on a hot stove. The doctor is barely able to save him. As he recovers, though, we read Fishbelly's thoughts but hear Wright's voice.

Fishbelly now felt justified in burrowing himself into his mother; and she, wallowing in guilt, let him. The comfort he drew from her was sensual in its intensity, and it formed the pattern of what he was to demand later in life from women. When he was a man in distress, he would have to have them, but his need of them would be limited, localized, focused toward obtaining release, solace; and then he would be gone to seek his peculiar, singular destiny, lonely but affable, cold but smiling, and strongly insulated against abiding relationships (p. 56). [Emphasis added.]

Wright's failure to successfully resolve the relationship between himself and his mother was no doubt a personal tragedy, and may have prevented him from establishing proper and appropriate relationships with Black women in general. His constant projection of this crippling limitation upon his characters, however, becomes a literary catastrophe. Chapter 10 deals with Wright's major preoccupation -- the White woman. In this chapter, a young Black is lynched and castrated for fooling around with a White prostitute in the hotel where he worked. Several Black men are shown rushing to the schoolhouse to get their children home to safety. They fear a race riot and some random shooting of
guns echo in the town. To Fish's repeated questions, Tyree finally answers: "You twelve years old and it's time you know. Lissen Fish; Never Look At A White Woman, you hear" (p. 59). This is a waste of breath for in another few minutes, Fish goes to the bathroom and we read as follows:

On the front page of the dusty top sheet was a photograph of a white woman clad only in panties and a brassiere; she was smiling under a cluster of tumbling curls, looking straight at him, her hands on her hips, her lips pouting, ripe, sensual. A woman like that had caused Chris to die (p. 63).

Fishbelly tore out the picture and put it in his pocket because

He knew that he wanted to look at that face again and he would never be able to stop thinking of what happened to poor Chris until he had solved the mystery of why the laughing white face was so radiantly happy and at the same time charged with dark horror . . . the luminous image of that laughing white girl's face lingered on in his mind (p. 164).

Lingering also in Fishbelly's mind are loathing and self-hatred. Scattered throughout several pages are ideas similar to these:

As he neared her [his mother] he rejected her. Were these scared and trembling people his parents. He was more afraid of them than he was of white people. Suddenly he saw his parents as he felt and thought that the white people saw them and he felt toward them some of the contempt that the white people felt for them. . . . Yet he knew that he could never put what he was feeling into words (pp. 58-59). [Emphasis added.]

Wright does put these feelings into words in his autobiography as well as in his fiction. We read further:

Again he was ashamed of his father. If his father could not defend him then who could? He was lost and
so were all black people. The sense of it hit him and his knees felt weak (p. 61).

From that night on, he was intuitively certain that he had a winking glimpse of how black people looked to white people, he was beginning to look at his people through alien eyes and what he saw evoked in him a sense of distance between him and his people that baffled him (p. 62).

But Fishbelly was clear on one thing: "Of all the emotions churning in him, he was sure of only one: he held toward his father a nameless hatred" (p. 73).

While the mother is distraught with grief at seeing the mutilated corpse of her son, Tyree is scheming on how to get her in his bed. Fishbelly "knew with swift instinct that his father was brooding rapaciously over the body of the mother of the dead Chris. He's waiting for her, he told himself with dismay" (p. 73). One may argue that some men are like that—sex is always in season. But that is not the point; the point is that it is the sordid that Wright virtually always manages to focus on. There are even hints that the mother is going to allow herself to be seduced. She is already trying to drown her grief with alcohol. As Tyree drives away from his home with the lynch victim's mother, we get this dialogue from Fishbelly: "'I hope they kill you too!' he hissed with rage. Then, stunned at what he had said, he wailed, 'Naw.' When Fishbelly's mother greets him with a hug, he shrinks from her and growls 'Lemme alone!'" (p. 74).
During the summer of Chris's lynching, Fishbelly turns fifteen. Zeke, one of the gang, informs the rest that he has been intimate with several of the girls; they were quite easy and quite promiscuous. Zeke recounts the little tricks he plays on the girls, tricks that could lead to their pregnancy, but none of this bothers Zeke. Shortly after this incident, the boys are almost caught in the laboratory looking at pictures of nude White women. Zeke later relates how he got out of this mischief:

Man I had some fun with that black, scared fool of a professor! I kept asking 'em: "What kind of pictures?" "And that fool was too scared to tell me." "He's more scared of naked white folks than white folks wearing clothes," Fishbelly said, laughing (p. 88).

Fishbelly soon gets his chance to show fear of White people. As might be anticipated, a White woman must be involved a little somehow. Fishbelly's friends and another group of Black boys are playing with mud balls when the police show up. Tony and Fishbelly are arrested, but on the way to jail, the officers stop for refreshments at an "outdoor soft drink bazaar" (p. 101).

One of the policemen signaled a white waitress wearing a pair of tightfitting shorts, a brassiere, and a tiny white lace apron that jiggled suggestively about her hips as she walked. . . .

Fishbelly stared at the girl's white face, her pink cheeks, her ruby-red lips, and her sky-blue eyes—and he remembered Chris.

Involuntarily and wonderingly, he stared at the girl's blue eyes as she floated sensually toward the car, her hips swaying. . . .

"Something on your mind nigger," the tall one demanded.
"Sur?" Fishbelly's heart leaped into his throat. . . . "Go damn it nigger, stop looking at that gal!" the tall one shouted.

The officer takes out his knife and threatens to castrate Fishbelly, but Fishbelly faints. Amused, the White officers repeat the threat and each time Fishbelly faints. Eventually, Fishbelly ceases to faint even though the threats are continued. The officers then lock him and Tony in their separate cells. Fishbelly's excessive fear earlier had resulted from the secret guilt that he felt for carrying the picture of a White woman in his wallet. He managed to eat the picture before the officers found it during their search. Tyree's intercession gets them off in Children's Court the next day; it is obvious that somebody was bribed. Fishbelly cuts through the woods on his way home and sees an injured dog. He kills it to put it out of its misery, but he then disembowels it. Later, he comes across a White man pinned under his car from the accident he had incurred in attempting to avoid hitting the dog. Fishbelly is about to try to help the man, but when the man calls him a nigger, Fish goes on his way and leaves him there to die (p. 124). Before he reaches home, the same officers who arrested him stop him again. One tells him that if he were not old Tyree's son, he would still use the knife on him. When they drive off, Fishbelly cries out:
"I ain't done nothing . . . why they act like that? I can't help it if I'm black. . . ." He began to sob, "If I'm wrong 'cause I'm black, then I don't want to be black. . . ." (p. 127). [Wright's ellipses.]

As Fishbelly reports to Tyree at the undertaking establishment, we read that: "All the wisdom he knew counseled him to love and honor his father, yet his father was something that mocked everything that he thought a father should be" (p. 127). We later read that

On the day that Fishbelly had discovered how brutal the white world could be, he had also discovered that he had no father. . . . He knew in a confused way that no white man would ever need to threaten Tyree with castration; Tyree was already castrated (pp. 131-32).

But later in an argument with Tyree, Fish calls his father scared, and Tyree hysterically orders him to get out on his own. Fishbelly suddenly changes his attitude and begs his father not to put him out (p. 133).

Shortly after this episode, Tyree takes Fishbelly to a house of prostitution run by Maud Williams but controlled by Tyree. He tells Fish that

A woman's just a woman and the dumbest thing on earth for a man to do is to get into trouble about one. . . . And don't get no screwy ideas about color. I had em white as snow and black as tar and they all the same (p. 137).

Fish learns that the mother of one of his playmates is in the "business" and that Vera, Maud's daughter, also "works" there. Vera is a high school girl and Fish has heard a good deal about her from the boys at school. He chooses her.
On the way home, Tyree cautions Fish again about White women, but his warning boomerangs.

Until Tyree had mentioned the world of white women he had not thought of them in relation to the soaring experience he had had with Vera. . . . Though he did not know it, he was fatally in love with the white world, in love in a way that could never be cured. That white world's attempt to curb him had dangerously and irresponsibly claimed him for its own (pp. 144-45).

That night he has a nightmare about a naked White woman and Maud Williams.

Part Two of The Long Dream opens with a quotation from an O. Mannoni which reads, in part, as follows:
"Naturally, the place they make for themselves is very often of an inferior moral order and cannot fully compensate for their feelings of inferiority. . . ." Wright's use of this statement does not prove that he agrees with it, but the manner in which he renders the Black experience in this and his other works goes even beyond the implications of this quotation. We are hardly into Part Two before we read that:

To Fishbelly the Black Belt was a kind of purgatory, a pit of shame in which he had been unjustifiably consigned. But how could he ever climb out of that purgatory, escape that pit? (p. 144)

Earlier Wright has revealed the innermost thoughts of Fishbelly: his obsession with the White woman. Despite his fear of castration,

despite the real crucifixion of Chris, he knew deep in his heart that there would be no peace in his blood until he had definitively violated the line that the white world had dared him to cross under the threat of death (p. 144).
This creates a real dilemma for Wright and for Fishbelly. In real life Wright solved the problem by marrying White, not once but twice. To paraphrase Ellison on Bigger: Wright can imagine all of his Black characters but none of them can imagine a Wright, so it does not occur to Fishbelly to go North, become a famous writer and marry White. Both Wright and Fishbelly leave school early, but Wright left as valedictorian and Fishbelly flunked out. But there is some light even in the purgatory to which Fishbelly has been unjustifiably consigned. If the White woman, including the White prostitute, is beyond Fishbelly's dreams, there is always the White-skinned mulatto. This is the solution that Fishbelly discovers, but first he meets his father's mistress. She is a young mulatto with clicking heels and swaying hips, called Mrs. Gloria Mason.

The woman, in her late twenties dazzled Fishbelly by her yellow skin, her ample bosom, her easy laugh, and her smiling, brown eyes. She was the best dressed woman he had ever seen at close quarters (p. 152).

Now there is no reason why mulattoes should not be admired and loved as likely as any other woman, since as the title of a famous autobiography states: The Heart Has Its Reasons. The question is: What is Wright's reason for having Fishbelly display his admiration always at the expense of women of darker color. Gloria and Fishbelly have

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hardly met before we are told that "Vera flashed through" Fishbelly's mind. "He had treated that slut of a Vera like a princess, but he needed no further proof that he should not see her again; he could do much better" (p. 151). Unless being a harlot is being a slut, there has been nothing to suggest that Vera was a slut. If being a prostitute per se makes one a slut, then Gloria would be equally slutish; yet we read that "Gloria filled him with wonder because she did not speak in that whinny way so characteristic of the black people he knew" (p. 151). But does the human ear find the sounds and speech patterns to which one has been accustomed to hearing all one's life so offensive, especially when one has rarely heard any other form of speech? Some light may be thrown on this question by the following quotation:

Gloria confounded him not only because she had the air of a white woman, but because she acted white. What then did acting white mean? She acted correctly. But what did acting correctly mean? She did not act like a black woman. And how did black women act? . . . he remembered Sam saying that black people were niggers. Well, Gloria was certainly not a nigger. Indeed, she behaved like those white girls in the downtown department stores where he bought ties (p. 151).

Fishbelly goes on to say that "Vera was an ignorant bitch compared to this Gloria whose face could have been an advertisement in a newspaper" (p. 151). Wright does not reveal the basis for this judgment nor does he disclose any information about Gloria's face other than its whiteness.

Fishbelly and Zeke, who sees Gloria also, are so
wonderstruck with her beauty that they play hookey from school and visit the Grove to get high. The Grove is a hangout for prostitutes that operates covertly twenty-four hours a day during the summer but officially only during certain hours. It is run by "A tough nigger called Fats" but secretly owned by Dr. Bruce, one of the town's Black physicians (p. 152). We later learn that Doc's silent partner is none other than Tyree. In the Grove there are "cheap rates for students" and the doctor treats clients free who catch a venereal disease there (pp. 153-54).

Zeke and Fishbelly are joined at their table by three women peddling their wares. Gladys is near White; Beth is Yellow; and Maybelle is Black. We learn that Gladys graduated from high school four years ago and that she has a child by "old Professor Jefferson" (p. 155). Since there are three girls and only two boys, someone has to be left out. The reader is hardly surprised that Fish chooses the whitest looking, Zeke, the next whitest, and that Maybelle is left alone. The stupid scene that follows contains some surprises but it only tends to justify Maybelle's exclusion. The scene closes with the boys on their way to the girls' houses. When they remember their books left in the Grove, Gladys assures them: "Don't worry. Nobody'll steal them books, 'cause nobody around here reads" (p. 159). This is a point that Wright never tires of repeating.

Cutting school to go to the Grove and then to
Gladys' became a regular pattern with Fishbelly. Eventually, Tyree learns of this and catches him with Gladys in the Grove. Fishbelly promises to do better but later he talks his father into letting him quit school altogether and work with him. Tyree assigns Fish to collecting rent from the various houses that he owns, including some used for prostitution. The reader gets a panoramic view of the poorest sections of the Black community, which are the only places that Wright surveys. When Fish once asked his father about the stupid behavior of Blacks, Tyree says: "Fish, don't ask me why our folks act like that. . . . For our folks, it's natural. Ain't that good enough answer for you" (p. 176). While all of Tyree's tenants may have been Black and poor, there was no reason to suggest that they were more impoverished than the typical Black. It can be assumed, then, that, according to Wright, their conduct is representative of Blacks in general. Sam's family lives there and so do Aggie West and his mother. Aggie is now an organist in the Mount Olivet Baptist Church and Mrs. West, who works for White families, is a "pillar of the church and a choir singer." She had vague communications from God and took a kind of mute pride in the fact that Aggie's younger brother was a crippled idiot. For that was a kind of proof that God had, for reasons unknown, noticed her. We get bits of information like this about virtually all tenants. Tyree also contributes from his storehouse of
wisdom. He tells, for instance, of one woman whose nineteen-year-old daughter had died of a heart attack. The mother insisted on staying with the body until it was buried, not out of grief as one might expect, but she "said her gal was a virgin and she wanted to make sure she was buried as a virgin" (p. 179). These are the typical incidents recounted in the book, although here and there, almost as an aside, the reader may learn the following:

[Some Blacks] were owners of bars, restaurants, grocery stores, drugstores, barber shops, undertaking establishments, etc.; there were also a few school teachers, postal clerks and preachers (p. 182).

In a passing reference, Fishbelly divides the Blacks into two groups: those dependent directly on Whites and those not directly dependent on Whites. Fishbelly notices that the independents have a greater degree of self-respect and aggressiveness but we rarely see this sense of self-respect and Fish himself notes that "the aggressiveness was more often directed toward their own people than toward whites" (p. 182).

Only a few examples of Blacks not illiterate or semi-illiterate are shown in the novel and in almost every instance they are shown in their most unfavorable light. We remember "old, fat, black Mrs. Morrison" who was about to beat Fish until the child mentioned to her that he seemed to be sick (p. 52). The first girl Zeke had was Laura Green, who sang in the choir and whose husband
worked "nights in the Post Office" (p. 79). Professor Butler is shown frightened almost witless in dealing with the boys and some nude pictures of White women. Professor Jefferson impregnated one of his students. "That's how he taught me verbs," she said (p. 155). And the one undertaking establishment that we see is a disgrace. Jake and Guke, who work for Tyree, also are alcoholics, and on it goes. Small wonder then that what Fishbelly heard and saw made him tell himself:

These niggers walking around in their sleep. . . . He sensed in them a profound lassitude, a sort of lackadaisical aimlessness, a terribly pathetically narrow range of emotional activity, veering from sex to religion, from religion to alcohol. He found them ready to explode over matters devoid of real content and meaning (pp. 181-82).

In American Hunger there were women who swapped their bodies for ten cent insurance premiums and in The Long Dream:

There were women who tried to swap their bodies for the rent, who waited for him naked upon beds in semidarkened rooms, leaving doors slightly ajar, calling out when he knocked: "Come in Mr. Rent Man."

Fishbelly sets Gladys up as his kept mistress and it seems that we are about to have a half-way decent love affair between a Black man and a Black woman. It is true that the "man" is barely sixteen and that the Black woman is almost White. But then what happens? Why, Gladys gets burned to death on the same day that they reach their agreement. To celebrate their understanding they went dancing
at the Grove and both stepped out for air. Gladys, however, went back in the Grove to tell Fats that she would not be "working" there anymore, and she never came out again. The firemen later counted forty-two bodies (p. 203). Gladys was among the dead. "The worst had been confirmed. That sadly, smiling white face had been swallowed up in flames" (p. 205), but even in death, she was beautiful. Fishbelly "had loved Gladys and in one night he had won her and lost her" (p. 205). While it cannot be said that he ever forgot her, he did not let his mourning or her memory, however, stand in the way of his getting the business from the tragedy for his father.

He looked at the staring and murmuring white men and women, his mind now anchored in the logic of the workaday world. These bodies had to be buried and burying people was his father's profession. He saw the Chief of Police, the man to whom Tyree paid bribes each week. Yeah, that was the man to talk to (pp. 205-6).

Fish manages to make a deal to get all the bodies for his father, but Tyree later modifies the arrangement because he knows that his secret interest in the Grove is bound to come to light. Tyree knows that the White Chief of Police, whom he has been bribing for years, will now abandon him. He, therefore, turns over some incriminating cancelled checks to his mistress, Gloria Mason, to hide for him. Meanwhile, Tyree tries to abandon Dr. Bruce, but Dr. Bruce warns him that they will both go down together. The two of them decide to use Fats as a fall guy, but Fats dies on them. The syndicate indicates that it cannot
control the grand jury inquiring into the fire and that Dr. Bruce and Tyree are sure to be indicted for gross negligence. Tyree suggests to the Chief that they could get off if the Whites would allow a few Blacks on the jury. But this is construed, despite Tyree's servility, as a step toward social equality. The idea was dropped. In desperation, Tyree attempts to turn state evidence and is killed by the police in a frame-up.

Dr. Bruce and Gloria Mason slip away to Detroit with Fishbelly's help, but he remains in town and is eventually framed on an attempted rape charge of a White woman. Fishbelly hires Mr. McWilliams, a Souther White attorney, who had attempted to aid Tyree in becoming a witness for the state. The White woman never appears in court to press her case so the attempted rape charge is allowed to die. Fishbelly, however, must serve two years in jail for an assault on his cell mate. The cell mate was a stool pigeon planted in Fishbelly's cell to get information for the Chief of Police.

After serving his sentence, Fishbelly is released. The Police Chief, who had been replaced by another man, soft on corruption, is convinced that he has nothing further to fear from Fishbelly. Tyree, however, left some additional evidence in care of Gloria which was turned over to Fish. When Fish is safely out of the country, he mails the damaging evidence to Mr. McWilliams. The assumption is that the crooks will at last be caught.
Jim, Tyree's helper in the mortuary business, and Mrs. Tucker had informed Fish before his flight to Paris that they were going to be married. Jim, incidentally, comes as near to being a positive Black character as Wright seems capable of producing, but he is kept far back in the shadows. What is pushed forward, of course, is Fishbelly wallowing in self-hatred and awe of White women. There are several instances on the plane involving White women, but one will suffice. It reads:

Finally, he stared directly at the object that rested under the dreadful taboo; the young woman ahead of him had a head of luxuriant, dark brown hair, the wispy curls of which nestled clinging at the nape of her white, well-modeled neck. His Bowman Street experience made the rounded firmness of the woman's throat a symbolic stand-in for the exciting, hidden geography of her body and he grew tense, . . . (p. 346).

Four pages from the end of the novel, Wright has Fishbelly to draw "his hand in, covering his right black hand with his left black hand, trying vainly to blot out the shameful blackness of him" (p. 348). Finally, on the last full page in the novel we read that

Above all, he was ashamed of his world, for the world about him had branded his world as bad, inferior. Moreover, he felt no moral strength or compulsion to defend his world (p. 350). [Emphasis added.]

If these are Fishbelly's thoughts about the world he shared with his father at sixteen, they make no sense. For that cesspool of immorality could not be defended by anyone. If these are Wright's thoughts on the real world of Black people, that world needs no defense.
But what about Wright himself? Perhaps more light on the author will illuminate some of the problems of his work. The article dealing with Richard Wright and the concept of Double Vision may provide a point of departure. An interesting passage follows:

The examples of self-hate in Black literature and in the Black experience generally seem to indicate . . . that some individuals do not possess a sociological imagination, do not see the larger relationships between their troubles and society's issues. Instead, they internalize the impact of a society-wide problem and blame themselves or certain characteristics they possess.

Klotman and Yancy do not include Wright in this category. Even if one were to concede that Wright does not share the ideas propounded in his fiction, it is his fiction, none-the less, that propagates them. In a book that deals with the origin, diffusion and persistence of anti-Spanish attitudes, this passage occurs:

Despite the passage of time, they have not changed. They are based now, as they have been in the past, on two principal elements: Omission of what counts in our favor, and exaggeration of what counts against us.

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This is precisely the way that Wright treats the Black experience. One final example of this will suffice to illustrate the point: his treatment of the fire itself. Usually a mass tragedy of this magnitude brings out the best as well as the worst in people but Wright dwells only on the latter. We saw how Fishbelly schemed to get all the business of burying the dead for his father and there is little evidence that life in the Black community ever rose above that level. This episode could have logically and strictly from a purely literary point of view revealed new dimensions about the life of Black people, but it was used by Wright, to borrow his phrase from Black Boy, to show only "how shallow was even our despair" (p. 45). It is obvious, as it had already been noted, that the fire episode in the story is based on the real life tragedy of the Rhythm Club fire in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1940. Wright, as is an author's privilege, modifies the facts, but in doing so, he reduces the magnitude and human dimensions of the episode. First, he makes the Grove a sort of way station for harlots, their clients, and nondescript hangers-on. Secondly, we see Dr. Bruce, the only conspicuous professional other than the teachers, in his worst light. We have already seen the teachers in a very unsavory light, so this is consistent. Thirdly, he changes the nature of the affair to a little Fourth of July blow-out and drastically reduces the number of fire victims. The tragedy
occurred in April, 1940. As negligent as management might have been to have had decorations that were a fire hazard at the time, it becomes even worse to move the date to July 4th. Over two hundred people lost their lives, not forty-two. The admission ticket was $2.50, a rather respectable sum in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1940. Six youths were arrested on suspicion in connection with the fire. The music was provided by a fourteen-piece band from Chicago, ten of the fourteen lost their lives there. Dr. A. W. Dumas, president of the National Medical Association, resided there and is reported to have lost a daughter. Dr. Dumas' brother was a pharmacist in the town. John R. Lynch, a Black Reconstruction Congressman, resided there and died only in 1939. Natchez College, a Baptist school, and Alcorn College, only a few miles away, provided educational opportunities for Blacks. But one sees nothing in The Long Dream in general or in the fire episode in particular to suggest this side of Black life. We could blame this omission on ignorance except for the fact that Wright lived for so long in and near Natchez. We could say that few positive factors could be worked into the novel because of his fidelity to the demands of his craft in this particular instance, but in Black Boy, which is supposed to be an autobiography, the exclusion is equally glaring. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that Wright's focus is virtually always skewed to the most negative aspects of Black
When he is not putting down Blacks, he indulges in meaningless rhetoric. The last few lines of *The Long Dream* illustrate this charge. Presumably disclosing thoughts in Fishbelly's consciousness as he flees to Paris, Wright concludes his novel with these words:

He peered out of his window and saw vast wheeling populations of ruled stars swarming in the convened congress of the skies anchored amidst nations of space and he prayed wordlessly that a bright bursting tyrant of living sun would soon lay down its golden laws to loosen the locked legions of his heart and cast the shadow of his dream athwart the stretches of time (p. 351).

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20 Granville Hicks also calls attention to the awkwardness of this paragraph. Details of the Natchez Rhythm Club fire were taken from *The Chicago Defender*, April 27, 1940, and from *The Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 1940.
CHAPTER VII

EIGHT MEN

Eight Men\(^1\) is a collection of short stories published posthumously in 1961. The chronology of the stories as first published range from "The Man Who Saw the Flood," 1937, to "Big Black Good Man," 1957. Wright, himself, prepared the collection for publication some while before his death. Each story will be examined in the order in which it appears in the volume.

Eight Men received mixed reviews from the critics but the least favorable review simply longed for the Richard Wright of old, of Native Son and Black Boy. Richard Sullivan, in the New York Times Book Review (January 22, 1961), writes that:

There is not a touch of phoniness or fakery in the book. All eight men and all eight stories stand as beautifully, pitifully, terribly true. Some readers will be shocked by it, for it presents straightforwardly a brilliant American Negro's point of view.\(^2\)

Irving Höwe has generally reviewed most of Wright's works quite favorably. This review is no exception. It appeared

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\(^1\)Richard Wright, Eight Men (New York: Pyramid Books, 1969). First published by The World Publishing Company, 1961. Page citations to these stories will refer to the Pyramid edition and will be incorporated within the text.

\(^2\)Reprinted in Reilly, Critical Reception, p. 348.
in the *New Republic* (February 13, 1961) and contains this interesting passage:

The reality pressing upon all of Wright's work is a nightmare of remembrance, and without the terror of that nightmare it would be impossible to render the truth of the reality, not the only, perhaps not even the deepest, truth about American Negroes, but a primary and inescapable one. Both truth and terror depend upon a gross fact which Wright faced more courageously than any American writer: that for the Negro violence forms an inescapable part of his existence.\(^3\)

Richard Gilman, in *Commonweal* (April, 1961), states that Wright simply was not a good writer. Circumstances of an extra-literary nature, namely, "the fact that he was a Negro and the first of his race to write about what that meant, in full acceptance of its terrors, frustrations and imposed shame" accounts for his recognition.\(^4\) In short, the three critics agree that Wright's stories about Blacks represent some profound truth though Wright may not be very talented or may too frequently be filled with anger to give his truth the finest literary expression. Gloria Bramwell, in *Midstream* (Spring, 1961), adds another dimension. She writes:

> His rage is thrust against himself. That is the greatest irony of all, that a man should be guilty in America by reason of his difference from the majority and acquiesce in his guilt. But Wright is involved in guilt, nor irony. . . .

> It became increasingly clear to him as he wrote and as we read his work that lying at the bottom of every Negro soul is crushing guilt. For him Negro

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 349.  \(^4\) Ibid., p. 352.
life took on proportions of expiation for crimes committed, known and unknown.  

This may or may not be true. What is more germane to this study, however, is Bramwell's statement, referring to the man who lived underground, that "The protagonist is merely presented as an instrument for the author's ideas moving from a lesser to a greater madness." We may not be able to determine with absolute finality whether "crushing guilt" is lying at the bottom of every Negro's soul but we can explore Wright's ideas as they reflect themselves in the stories. If Eight Men is at all consistent with the other published works of Wright, we shall find in them very little that resembles the Black response to White oppression but a great deal that resembles the stereotypical literary conventions. In the first story, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Wright's protagonist is a seventeen-year old boy who is a liar. (Some seventeen-year olds are liars and some are not; Wright chooses to present us with one who is.) Wright does not, however, associate this defect with race. The boy's mother had allowed him to buy a gun on condition that he bring it straight home so that she could give it to his father. He promised to do as his mother asked; but "to avoid surrendering the pistol he had not come in the house until he knew that they were all asleep" (p. 14). When the mother comes into his room late

5Ibid., pp. 353, 355.  
6Ibid.
that night to inquire about the gun, he first plays "possum" then he lies to her. The gun is under the covers, but he tells his mother that it is outside and that he will bring it in the house in the morning. This is such a simple lie that it is surprising that the mother accepts it. As a matter of fact, she shows poor judgment in allowing him to buy the gun in the first place. If she felt that the father needed a gun surely she could have assumed that he could undertake the responsibility of getting one. The next morning the boy sneaks out early, goes to the section of the field that he is to plow and decides to try the gun. "Know what this is Jenny? Naw you wouldn know! Yuhs jus a ol mule! Anyhow, this is a gun n it kin shoot, by Gawd!" (p. 15). He walks off a little way, shuts his eyes and, after much straining, fires. Unfortunately, he has made a half turn and the bullet hits Jenny.

The author does not indicate what happened between the morning and afternoon, but at sunset we see Black and White standing around while they bury the mule. "I don't see how in the world it happened," said Jim Hawkins for the tenth time (p. 17). Jim Hawkins is the White owner and Dave, the seventeen-year old, has concocted a lie too fantastic to be believed. When Dave's mother joins the crowd and asks about the gun, the truth comes out. "That night Dave did not sleep. He was glad that he had gotten out of killing the mule so easily (p. 19). Nonetheless, he wallows
in self-pity, pity that seems almost incomprehensible. He remembers that his father had promised to give him a good licking but the father had obviously neglected to do so. Mr. Hawkins said that Dave would have to pay fifty dollars for the mule but would allow him to do so at the rate of two dollars per month. It is true that at times in the past his father had beaten him but that hardly justifies these lines. "Darn em all! Nobody ever gave him anything. All he did was work. They treat me like a mule, n then they beat me. He gritted his teeth. N Ma had to tell on me" (p. 20). The story shows that the mother was saving his money to buy him clothes to go to school in the winter so he apparently did something besides work. A good index to his character is seen in the fact that despite the misfortune that the gun and his lying have brought him, he is still "thinking how he fired the gun. He had an itch to fire it again" (p. 20). He had told his father that he had thrown the gun in the creek but that was a lie. Later in the night he goes "looking for the spot where he had buried the gun. Like a hungry dog scratching for a bone, he pawed it up" (p. 20). He fires the gun several times and says that he would "like to scare ol man Hawkins jusa little ... jusa enough to let im know that Dave Saunders is a man" (p. 21). The story ends with Dave hopping an Illinois Central freight train. "He felt his pocket; the gun was still there. Ahead the long rails were glinting in the
moonlight, stretching away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man. . . ." (p. 21).

It is difficult to imagine where this could be. If Dave had the makings of a man, it seems that some of his manly potentials would have manifest themselves during this crisis. The mixed crowd scene of Black and White during the burial of Jenny suggests a rather positive interracial climate. The White storekeeper who lent Dave his only mail order catalog seemed friendly enough though he could be criticized for selling Dave a pistol. Mr. Hawkins, the White owner, appears to be an open-minded, reasonable man. Dave's parents seem to be firm but loving, yet Dave does not even consider the possibility that his parents may have to suffer because of his irresponsibility. "Almos a Man" depicts a Black youth who does not seem to know what being a man is, but it is less stereotypical than many of Wright's works. Dave's weaknesses are individual shortcomings and cannot be generalized to reflect on his racial background. His mother and father play a limited role in the story but are multi-dimensional personalities. The two distinct White characters are presented as men, not gods or devils. The story itself is not exceptional, but the treatment of the material is exceptional for Wright.

"The Man Who Lived Underground" tells the story of a young Black man being hunted by the police for a murder he did not commit. He escapes down a manhole into the
underground sewer. The fugitive starts out normal enough, but somewhere in the story he is transformed into a character akin to an irrational being. This does not take place gradually, step by step, yet there is no sudden jolt that drives away his senses. At one point he is fleeing the police, acting normal in every way, and at another point he is acting like a man who has taken leave of his senses. Nothing occurs in between to account for this transformation nor is there a sufficient lapse of time to explain the change. Yet, even the fugitive manages a few glimpses of Black life, always in the negative. In one or two instances, the reader cannot be sure of the racial identity of the people but in other instances, their race is unmistakable. Some of his observations are of a surrealist nature, but the content is essentially that which filled Wright's other works. The fugitive's first encounter with people occurs when he ascends partially from an abandoned section of the sewer. He hears voices and secrets himself in a position to observe without being seen.

He edged to the crevice and saw a segment of black men and women dressed in white robes, singing, holding tattered songbooks in their black palms. His first impulse was to laugh, but he checked himself... They oughtn't to do that, he thought. But he could think of no reason why they should not do it. Just singing with the air of a sewer blowing in on them. . . . He felt that he was gazing upon something abysmally obscene, yet he could not bring himself to leave (p. 26).
When he sees some people in the theatre, he felt that "These people were laughing at their lives, ... They were shouting and yelling at animated shadows of themselves. ... Yes, these people were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying" (p. 31).

These scenes can be dismissed as the product of a disturbed mind or one can see in them a deeper meaning. Neither solution presents a very positive image of Black life. It is in the protagonist himself, however, that we get our main stereotype. He is crazy, childlike, and inclined to be amoral. In speaking of the typewriter which he discovers during his rambling, he reports that "It was a queer instrument of business, something beyond the rim of life" (p. 44). Yet he shows great ingenuity and some electronic know-how in another instance. When he is robbing the safe, we read that "There was in him no sense of possessiveness; he was intrigued with the form and color of the money, with the manifold reactions which he knew that men above ground held toward it" (p. 44). Here is a Black man fleeing from a false charge of murdering a White woman. We learn in a single line only that he is married (p. 38). Chance presents him with an opportunity to rob a safe which

Dorothy Lee, in "Denial of Time and the Failure of Moral Choice; Camus's The Stranger, Faulkner's Old Man, Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground," CLA Journal, XXIII (March, 1980), 364 writes that "In sum, he creates his own value system simultaneously devaluing those things which the society above esteems." Lee gives no clue to the values of Daniel's value system.
he does without scruples; then he takes all the money, jewelry, and diamonds and decorates his underground cave with them. "He had no desire whatever to count the money; it was what it stood for—the various currents of life swirling above ground—that captivated him" (p. 49). When he went to type his name on the typewriter—"the same machine which the blond girl had used" (p. 44), "He pecked out his name on the keys: freddaniels" (p. 45). But later when he went to type his name again, he could not remember what it was (p. 49).

The story is replete with Wright's philosophic notions of guilt. After hearing the singing in the church previously mentioned, again we read that Daniels had the following awareness:

He felt that their search for a happiness they could never find made them feel that they had committed some dreadful offense which they could not remember or understand. . . . Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? (p. 55).

One would think that a person this familiar with the nature of guilt would also have a conscience. But our fugitive watches a boy being beaten for stealing a radio that Daniels knows he [Daniels] had stolen himself.

He felt a sort of distant pity for the boy and wondered if he ought to bring back the radio and leave it in the basement. No. Perhaps it was a good thing that they were beating the boy, perhaps the beating would bring to the boy's attention, for the first time in his life, the secret of his existence, the guilt that he could never get rid of (pp. 55-56).
Fred Daniels also watches from his hiding place the same policemen who had beaten a confession out of him beat a night watchman almost to death. They strung the night watchman up by his heels because "his brains were in his feet" (p. 57). In fact, Fred Daniels "grinned as he watched them take the body down and dump it carelessly upon the floor" (p. 57). When the watchman regains consciousness and sees that he is alone, he decides to commit suicide. Fred Daniels is "intent, eager, detached, yearning to see the end of the man's action" (p. 58). At the last second, Fred does half whisper and half shout "Don't" to the watchman, but it is too late.

After this incident, the fugitive apparently decides to give himself up. He emerges on a level near a church.

"A church!" he exclaimed. He broke into a run and came back to brick steps leading downward to a sub-basement. This is it! The church into which he had peered. Yes he was going in and tell them. What? He did not know; but once face to face with them, he would think of what to say (p. 60).

The church people had other ideas and threatened to call the police. At the word "police," he was reminded where he was going.

He would go there and clear up everything, make a statement. What statement? He did not know. He was the statement, and since it was all clear to him, surely he would be able to make it clear to others (p. 62).

He does not make anything clear, but finally the
officers give up on their questioning of him, tell him that he is free to go, burn up his confession and even let him know that the man they wanted "wasn't colored at all. He was an Eyetalian" (p. 66). In many instances, Wright makes comparisons between his Black character and an animal. Several critics went so far as to say that the story of Bigger Thomas was the story of a rat. One of the chief characteristics of the animal world, however, is the instinct to survive. But this is a positive trait and Wright generally will not allow his Black character to manifest this trait even on an animal level. The consequence of all this is that instead of scurrying away out of danger like a rat, or going back in the cave and getting the money, as a man with no more scruples than he had would have done, or wandering away like the child that he so frequently resembled, the fugitive continues to babble until he arouses the fear and anger of the cops. They ask him to lead them back into the cave but as he climbs down the manhole one of the officers kills him. The other officer asks: "What did you shoot him for, Lawson?" "I had to." "Why?" "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things." So "The Man Who Lived Underground" gives us the image of a Black man whose mind is deranged and yet it is only through his eyes that other Blacks are seen. Whether the story is psychologically or even philosophically true need not be debated
here. What is beyond dispute is that the stereotypical image of Black life is perpetuated.

The third story, "Big Black Good Man," is set in a hotel in Denmark, Olaf, a former sailor and now the night porter, who also checks in guests, speaks English, French, German, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian and Spanish (p. 75). He spent ten years in New York, a city which typically, in terms of racial attitudes, would have affected most Europeans. Olaf was on duty when the Black man arrived.

He just stared up and around at the huge black thing that filled the doorway. . . . He was staring at the biggest, strangest, and blackest man he'd ever seen in all his life . . . it towered darkly some six and a half feet into the air, . . . and its skin was so black that it had a bluish tint. And the sheer bulk of the man! His chest bulged like a barrel, his rock-like and humped shoulders tinted of mountain ridges; the stomach ballooned like a threatening stone; and the legs were like telephone poles. The big black cloud of a man now lumbered into the office, bending to get its buffalolike head under the door frame (p. 77).

We must note that the first identification of this man is as a "huge black thing" and that he is further referred to by the pronouns "it" and "its" as often as by "he" and "his." One can picture a "ballooned" stomach as a large potbelly but it is difficult to imagine what a man looks like with a "buffalolike" head, especially on one only six and one-half feet. Later on we find out that this "giant" has "tiny, little beady eyes" (p. 83). And when Olaf tries to rise he "feels the black pain of the beast helping him
roughly to his feet" (p. 93). The Black man is constantly referred to as a "black mass" and he has "gorilla-like arms" (p. 83). It is true that we see the Black man through Olaf's eyes, but these are the only eyes that Wright allots to his reader. Olaf is not particularly prejudiced, we are told.

Olaf took in all comers--blacks, yellows, whites and browns. . . . To Olaf, men were men, and in his day, he'd worked and eaten and slept and fought with all kinds of men. But this particular black man. . . . (p. 77).

What is significant about this particular Black man, and he is the only Black man in the story, is "well, he didn't seem human" (p. 77). Why not? He was "too big, too black, too loud, too direct and probably too violent to boot" (p. 77). Now Olaf himself is "five feet seven inches" so he should not suffer from any particular complex about height. Ten years in New York City, countless years at sea, in addition to running a hotel primarily for sailors in Copenhagen should have accustomed him to seeing tall men six and a half feet or more. At this point in the story there is absolutely nothing to suggest that the man is violent. His loud speech is not uncommon among outdoor workers and sailors. As for being too direct, how does one enter a door indirectly, or indirectly ask for a room? It is possible, of course, but foolish, and the man has not yet been presented as a fool. Since Wright's Black characters virtually always conform to the stereotype of
being childlike, crazy or foolish, we can expect some such traits to emerge later. In fact, they emerge immediately. For before Olaf has even registered him, the Black man thrusts a thick roll of American banknotes, "crisp and green under Olaf's nose." It was two thousand, six hundred dollars "in denominations of fifties and hundreds" (p. 78). The Black man does not ask for a receipt, does not ask if Olaf will be on duty the next morning. He simply tells Olaf to "Just put it into an envelope and write Jim on it and lock it in your safe, Hunh?" (p. 78). This was a "cheap water-front Copenhagen hotel that catered to sailors and students" (p. 80).

Jim did request something of Olaf: "You send whiskey and the woman, quick, pal"; the black giant asked (p. 80). Olaf got the woman reluctantly, not because he was prejudiced, "No, not at all, but . . . God oughtn't make men as big and black as that." The woman he got was named Lena; she was big and strong and always cut him in for fifteen percent; others only gave him ten percent. "Lena had four small children to feed and clothe" (p. 82). Lena was sent for regularly for a week, then Jim left but not before he frightened Olaf almost to death. Without explanation, Jim put his fingers around Olaf's throat and caused Olaf to wet his trousers (p. 84). Jim laughed and was gone.

A year later Jim returns but Olaf is prepared.
Olaf announces in a determined voice that there are no rooms available. Jim assures him, however, that he has only come to bring him a present. He gives Olaf six nylon shirts. When Jim had put his fingers around Olaf's throat, he was merely measuring it for size. A more complex mind might have figured out a better way of obtaining the information, but it was the intent that mattered. As for Lena, Jim has been writing to her all the time and he is now on his way to her house. "The black giant paused, turned his vast, black head, flashed a grin. 'Daddy O, drop dead,' he said, and was gone" (p. 88).

The fourth story, "The Man Who Saw the Flood," was written in 1937 before Wright had fully mastered the technique for depicting the revised version of the Black stereotype. In this story we get the pathetic Black family succumbing under a burden too heavy for it to bear. It is a short story of less than six pages and tells of a farmer being wiped out by a flood. He owes the White man who has staked him for grub money because, as the White man said, "You ate that grub, and I got to pay for it" (p. 93). One can surmise that the Whites may not treat the Blacks fairly but the real cause of the trouble is a natural catastrophe.

"Man of All Work" is presented in straight dialogue because it was written as a radio script. The positive

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8Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. xvi.
elements in the story are reflected in the fact that it deals with an ordinary Black family comprised of a husband, wife, little boy and newborn baby. The fact that this is noteworthy shows how all-pervasive racism has saturated our culture and how much of it has been reflected in Wright's work. The Blacks seem to laugh at themselves and at each other; they are not consumed by self-loathing. Although the man is unemployed, he is still determined to try to provide for his family. Lucy, the wife, evidently has the reputation of being a good cook so the husband, Carl, decides to dress himself up like a woman and trade on her credentials. He answers an ad in the newspaper for a cook and he is hired by a White family. Unfortunately, the man of the house drinks and chases after the hired help. He tries to seduce Carl with disastrous consequences. Anne, the White wife, catches her husband, Dave, attacking Carl (Lucy) and Carl is fighting him off. Ann misconstrues the scene and eventually shoots Carl. In a panic now, they call their doctor, who is Anne's brother-in-law. The doctor reveals to the White couple that Lucy is a man and this information provides them with a way of getting out of their trouble.

The husband is a scoundrel and would have framed Carl for attempting rape, but the wife is more decent and she is also tired of lying for her husband. They give Carl two hundred dollars and a man's suit of clothes to keep him
The story, of course, is not perfect, but most of its limitations do not rest on a stereotypical view of Black life. One incident, which may not be wrong per se, seems somewhat contrived. The White woman calls Lucy (Carl) into the bathroom to wash her back. Despite Carl's reluctance and obvious uncomfortableness, she still insists.

"Don't you feel well Lucy?" "Yessum." "Then come here and wash my back." "Yessum." "That's it, scrub hard. I won't break. Do it hard. Oh, God, what's the matter with you? Your arm is shaking, Lucy?" "Ma'am." "What came over you? Are you timid or ashamed or something?" "No'm." "Are you upset because I'm sitting here naked in the bath tub?" "Oh no ma'am." "Then what is the matter? My God, your face is breaking out in sweat. You look terrible. Are you ill, Lucy?" "No ma'am. I'm all right" (p. 110).

This goes on for nearly another full page, yet it does not occur to the White woman to excuse the Black "woman" from this task. The "woman" was just hired that morning as a "cook" and her only reference that could be checked was "Reverend Burke of the Pearl Street Baptist Church" (p. 105). The child immediately notices how different "Lucy" is from the previous Black cooks, but the woman detects nothing. It is true that he uses a brush, but do women ask their servants on the first day of work to involve themselves in such intimate tasks? Anne asks Lucy to hand her the towel, the box of talcum powder and to sit on the stool while she, Anne, dries herself because
she wants to talk to her, caution her about her husband (p. 111). She later asks "Lucy" to pass her her brassiere and panties (p. 112). All this may be included on purely literary grounds but it appears to be included to satisfy the author's preoccupation with the White woman, especially the naked White woman. In any event, the story, so far as its depiction of Black life is concerned, is far superior to most of Wright's works and perhaps that should suffice.

"Man, God Ain't Like That" was also written in straight dialogue first as a radio script. 9 But unlike "Man of All Works," it has no redeeming qualities. 10 It

9 Ibid.

10 The main points of one perceptive critic of Wright's attitude towards Black Africa can be summarized in the following quotations. "Wright associates Africa not merely with wishful thinking here, but with superstition and charlatanism designed to keep people in ignorance and to impede a change of conditions through enlightenment and rationality, . . . Indeed how could he feel any affinity towards a distant continent if he did not even have feelings of solidarity with his own group in the United States? (p. 163). Wright never made any bones about his ambivalent feelings toward Africa whenever he met Africans or other people of the Third World. This led to problems of communication which, in turn, had such a negative impact on his image of the continent . . . (p. 164). There are moreover a number of comments on certain African patterns of behavior which represent crude generalizations. . . . It is characteristic of the measure of his annoyance rather than of his objectivity that he denigrates as "childish" an attitude which he does not understand. . . . This aversion . . . put him in the position of denying all group consciousness and escaping all associations with other Blacks . . . (p. 165). All his attempts at rationalization notwithstanding, Wright turned his back on Africa, unreconciled and irreconcilable, and returns to his 'no-man's land between the Black world and the White.'" (p. 167). Marion Berghahn, Images of Africa in Black American Literature (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan & Littlefield, 1977), pp. 163-65.
starts off in Africa and ends up in France. The conver-
sation of the two main White characters, John and Elsie,
is filled verbiage about being eaten by Africans and about
the "savages thinking that they are gods" (p. 133). The
Africans are referred to as "goddamn niggers" and we read
that "you can't hurt these monkeys." John's car hits an
African causing his skull to bleed, but John tells Elsie
that "You can't hurt these baboons" (p. 133). The White
doctor later tells them that he took ten stitches in the
African's scalp and that "maybe he's got a slight con-
cussion" (p. 135). Even when John had gotten out of his
car and had seen the bleeding scalp, he assured Elsie that
"You can't hurt these monkeys. ... Bet he dented my
fender more n he did his thick skull" (p. 134). Now, this
could be dismissed as so much racist nonsense, but what can
we do with the African? He is the only significant African
c character and his name is Babu. A human being in such an
accident, one would think, would be concerned about how
badly he was hurt. Even a dog would probably lick his
wounds, if possible. But not so with Babu, as the follow-
ing dialogue reveals? "Aw so sorry, Massa." "Hunh?
Sorry? Sorry about what?" "So sorry my head hurt Massa's
car" (p. 134).

When Babu hears John tell the doctor that "Niggers
are expensive," Babu replies: "So sorry, Massa. Pay Massa
back" (p. 135). Elsie gets the idea that John, who is an
artist, should paint Babu. "Make him pay his way, pose for you!" (p. 136). They also make use of Babu's culinary skills, but this does not always turn out so well as the following shows:

"I hope you didn't cook that roast beef too much."
"Ha, Ha! No roast beef Massa. Chicken chop for lunch."—"No, goddamn it, I told you not to buy chicken! I asked for roast beef! Did you forget, you blockhead?" "Nawsar Massa. Babu no forget." "Then why in hell did you buy chicken?" "Sorry Massa, Babu's fault. It's Babu's religion Massa" (p. 137).

It turns out that Babu bought a chicken, cut the chicken's throat and let the blood drain out in a ritual to Babu's dead papa. "Babu bless Massa with blood" (p. 138). This incident is illustrative of the whole story. When Babu is in Africa, and even when he is taken to France by John and Elsie, he always carries a battered old suitcase with him. We later learn that the suitcase contains the bones of his dead father. The French police explains the matter to John: "You see, monsieur, the boy's father's not really dead for him. He prays and makes sacrifices to these bones. We've had cases like this before" (p. 146). The police officer makes his deduction on the basis of his experience and not because of any singularity with Babu whom he has not even met.

After discovering the "real God," Babu realizes that he has no further use for his father's bones. Babu has traveled all over the world and he is convinced that the wonders that he beholds were created by the White man's
God. The White man killed God but God came back from the grave and made the White man powerful. Babu "discovers" that John is none other than the resurrected Christ. He, therefore, beheads John in the hope of gaining power and immortality for Blacks as he understands the Whites to possess. The police never solve the case.

Saul Saunders, the protagonist in "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," is introduced to the reader as follows:

Saul was not dumb or lazy, but it took him seven years to reach the third grade in school. None of the people who came and went in Saul's life had ever prized learning and Saul did likewise. It was quite normal in his environment to reach the age of fourteen and still be in the third grade, and Saul liked being normal, like other people.

From this we can see that Saul is not just a single individual or one who is somewhat retarded but we are dealing with a representative Black. But there is a contradiction here, or at least an inconsistency. Saul's schooling was all in the South or in Washington, D.C., whose policies on integration followed Southern practices. If his Black teachers set such standards that Saul could not get beyond the third grade by age fourteen, and if he is typical, whom did they teach? How could such poor teaching accompany such high standards?

Saul learned that "the strange white people for whom he worked considered him inferior, he did not feel inferior and he did not think that he was" (p. 158). Why not? A fourteen-year old in the third grade might have
logically suffered from a feeling of inferiority, especially when he saw that Whites his age were in or near high school. Perhaps he imbibed from his Black surroundings the fact that there are other measurements of worth. Maybe there were Blacks outside of Saul's family who exercised this positive influence. Such a point of view would be a radical departure for Wright. It is not just the immediate Black family but the whole Black environment that is suffering from the sickness of an inferiority complex, according to Wright. It is not surprising then that when Saul "looked about him he saw other black people accepting this definition of themselves, and who was he to challenge it?" (p. 158).

Saul, at fifteen, realized what was to be his lot in life and as he grew older he accustomed himself to it. He took to drinking because it "helped to banish the shadow" (p. 159). After a while, it got where "It did not even bother him when he heard that if you were alone with a white woman and she screamed, it was as good as hearing your death sentence, for though you had done nothing wrong, you would be killed" (p. 159). We are three pages in the story and Wright has already set the stage: Saul's mother and father die before he is old enough to remember them; his five brothers and two sisters are strangers to him (p. 157) and "the one person--his grandmother--who Saul thought would endure forever" dies before
Saul is fifteen (p. 158). We now have a man without a family, without a community worth having and with the sword of Damocles—the White woman—as a shadowy threat.

One night, when he was half-drunk—he was thirty years old and living in Washington at the time—Wright tells us that Saul got married. We know nothing about how Saul and his wife first met, whether he courted her and how they suddenly got married at night, but these are minor details. The important thing is that "The girl was good for Saul, for she too liked to drink and she was pretty and they got along together" (p. 160). In Wright's other works, he goes to great length describing the beauty of his White women characters, even if they appear only in the newspaper or on a calendar. But of this Black character whom Wright tells us is pretty, we get not a single detail. But when we meet the White woman, whom we must inevitably meet, we get the following description: "She was blonde, blue eyed, weighing about 110 pounds and standing about five feet three inches" (p. 161).

Saul, except for his drinking and slight mental retardation, seems to function fairly normally. He worked for five years as chauffeur and butler for an "old white army colonel," and also worked as an exterminator for a chemical company (p. 160). There are little clues suggesting some mental and emotional instability, but Saul
would hardly be classed with the criminally insane. For instance, we read the following:

There was something in his nature that made him like going from house to house and putting down poison for rats, mice and roaches. He liked seeing the concrete evidence of his work and the dead bodies of rats were no shadows. They were real.

This is understandable to an extent but the next line of the paragraph may hint at problems. It reads: "He never felt better in his life than when he was killing with the sanction of society" (p. 160). Saul lost both jobs indirectly, at least, due to his drinking. This led him to his fatal encounter with the White woman. Saul was hired as a "janitor in the National Cathedral, a church and religious institution" (p. 161). The White woman was the lady in charge of the library, which was in a different building. When Saul went to clean the library, he was usually alone. Saul's boss had warned him to be careful around the librarian because she was a crackpot. She was worse than a crackpot in the usual sense of the word, and it is difficult to imagine her not showing pronounced signs of mental deterioration. Her death comes about in this fashion. She asks the janitor why he does not clean under her desk and when he protests that he has already cleaned there that morning, she insists that there is still dust there. Wright presents the scene as follows:

He [Saul] went and stood before her and his mind protested against what his eyes saw, and then his senses
leaped in wonder. She was sitting with her knees sprawled apart and her dress was drawn halfway up her legs. He looked from her round blue eyes to her white legs whose thighs thickened as they went to a V clothed in tight, sheer pink panties. Her face was a beet red, but she sat very still, rigid, as though she was im- pelled into an act which she did not want to perform but was being driven to perform (p. 163).

After a few hot words between them, she calls him a black nigger. Wright says, "Her legs were still spread wide, and she was sitting as though about to spring upon him and throw her naked thighs about his body" (p. 163).

There is a delayed reaction, but as the insult sinks in, Saul slaps her across the face. She screams and screams until Saul cracks her skull with a piece of wood. She "sank to the floor, but she still screamed." So "he choked her for a long time, not trying to kill her, but just to make sure that she would not scream again and make him wild and hot inside" (p. 165).

Since Saul "had been trained to keep floors clean" he wiped up all the blood with toilet paper. But when he went upstairs to clean up the blood where he had first hit her, he heard her hollering again. He remembered that he had a knife.

He took it out, opened it, and plunged it deep into her throat; he was frantic to stop her from hollering. . . . He pulled the knife from her throat and she was quiet (p. 166).

In approaching the conclusion of the story, it is impossible to treat Saul as a normal human being or to apply criteria that one would apply to a rational character.
When Saul takes the woman's panties off to wipe up the blood from the floor, we can assume that it is in keeping with some inner irrationality. How else can one deal with these lines?: "Next morning he ate the breakfast his wife prepared, rose from the table and kissed her, and started off toward the Cathedral as though nothing had happened" (p. 167).

The one "rational" thought that he had after being arrested

. . . leaped into his mind with such gladness that he shivered. It was the answer to everything . . . then he reached inside of his shirt and pulled out the gun. One of the policemen pounded on him and snatched the gun. "So you're trying to kill us too, hunh?" one said. "Naw, I was trying to kill myself," he answered simply (p. 168).

Saul sounded entirely sane.

The last story in Eight Men, "The Man Who Went to Chicago," is essentially the same as the material that passes for autobiography in American Hunger. The significant events all appear in Chapter II of that book and have been covered in the chapter on autobiography in this study. Richard Wright finally gives us a character with some all-around attributes worthy of emulation, but he is writing about himself. Nathan Scott, after citing the passage in this story where Wright, as a hospital orderly, assist in the devocalization of some dogs, quotes Wright as follows: "Later when the dogs came to, they would lift their heads to the ceiling and gape in a soundless wail. The sight
became lodged in my imagination as a symbol of silent suffering." Scott then makes an observation that may serve to conclude this chapter. He writes:

And though the image comes toward the close of this collection, once it is encountered it seems then to resonate backward across the entire book, indeed across the entire oeuvre, and we feel that the human presence at the center of Mr. Wright's dramatic world has itself somehow been converted into a howling dog whose wails are soundless.1

1 Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright" in Five Black Writers, ed. by Donald Gibson, pp. 24-25. Revised for this printing from Graduate Comment (Wayne State University), VII (1964), 93-99.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In a press conference, March 15, 1971, sponsored by Publisher's Weekly and the Council on Interracial Books for Children, Hoyt Fuller made the following statement:

For far too many centuries now, the Black image has been imprisoned and manipulated by white men. And, of course, a key instrument of that imprisonment and exploitation has been the publishing industry. The Black image has been systematically defamed; . . . and the Black Experience has been degraded so that its degraders would not have to deal with the monstrousness and guilt of the White experience.1

Exactly a decade later, in a review of one of the latest books on Richard Wright, Fuller notes that: "For more than 20 years he [Wright] was the most famous Black author in the world."2 If the publishing industry is as bad as Fuller suggests, and it appears to be, then Richard Wright's fame, perhaps, should be examined in that light. The publishers, however, could not achieve the feat of sustaining one man's preeminence for a score of years without support. Indeed, they needed help in creating him in the

1Quoted in MCCaan and Woodward, The Black American, p. 201.

2Hoyt Fuller in The Black Collegian (February/March, 1981), p. 37. The review is of Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son by Addison Gayle, Jr.
first place and the source of that help was the literati. From the beginning, Wright had its blessings and after the publication of Native Son, he was, in effect, annointed as the best interpreter of Black life. Evidence of the praise showered upon Wright during the forties, fifties and sixties had already been demonstrated; that it continues unabated into the seventies and eighties can be seen from these examples. One critic states that "Richard Wright went even beyond the truth as stark social reality. He plumbed deeper into the psychological roots of truth. The truth he laid bare was, indeed, Universal." 3

Another critic, a year later, says that Wright was "capable of translating into artistic terms two things: what it meant to be a Negro in America and what it meant to America to have created this alien--Native Son." 4 As late as 1980 we are told that "it is undeniable that artistic greatness is the lot of this man [Wright] who never wavered from his vision of truth or compromised his integrity." 5 Ladell Payne in 1981 in his book on Southern Black writers devotes a chapter to Wright entitled "A Clear Case." He


does not deviate substantially from the evaluations cited above.6

In the Introduction, it was stated that this study would show that (1) Wright's depiction of the Black experience strengthens, supports and perpetuates the stereotypes that have filled much of American literature from its inception to the present time; (2) that this stereotypical rendition of the Black experience results in works that are lacking in verisimilitude, with implausible action, defective plots, one-dimensional characters and superficial thought. (3) Finally, the Introduction stated that this judgment—the charge that Wright's works are simply streamlined and updated stereotypes—is contrary to the prevailing criticism. The quotations given above are representative of the dominant line of criticism of Wright's work. The great gulf, the dichotomy between the two points of view, is unbridgeable. Over and over and over, in story after story, in novels and in autobiographical works, this study has revealed Wright's depiction of Black life as stereotypical in the treatment of individual characters, groups, incidents, episodes, thoughts and philosophical views.

But before proceeding further, it may be refreshing to define the term "stereotype," whose meaning has been

6 Ladell Payne, Black Novelists and the Southern Literary Tradition (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), Chapter V.
previously assumed. Gordon Allport, one of the leading psychologists of this century, gives us this definition: "Whether favorable or unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category." Allport noticed that the investigators who employed "a method of measuring the definiteness of stereotyped ideas concerning various groups, discovered that agreement of people regarding traits to be assigned to Negroes was greater on the whole than for any other group." The stereotypes of Black people, as revealed by a number of studies reviewed by Allport, have considerable overlapping, but only one stereotype on the combined lists can be construed as positive. Interestingly enough, this

7 Gordon Allport, The Nature of Prejudice (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., 1979), p. 191. This is the 25th anniversary edition with an Introduction by Kenneth Clark and a Foreword by Thomas Pettigrew. On Page 513, Allport, unfortunately, "recommends Black Boy to illuminate facts concerning discrimination and prejudice." This is only a passing reference and could, perhaps, be overlooked if it did not fit so neatly into the critical pattern on Wright. For instance, two critics write as follows: "Black Boy is one of the best books of any kind for use with high school students. . . . For the teachers concerned about teaching human relations, Black Boy is one of the most effective books possible for helping students understand and respect Blacks and for showing the value of literature as a means of liberating a person from psychological oppression." Barbara Dodds Stanford and Karima Amin, Black Literature for High School Students (Urbana: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 52.

8 Allport, Nature of Prejudice, p. 197.
trait, "musical," appeared on only one list and it is the one trait that does not appear as a significant element in Wright's depiction of the Black experience. This obviously does not refer to little church verses of song that are interspersed in some of Wright's stories but to conspicuous musical ability of a group or of an individual character.

On the other hand, most of the negative traits appear repeatedly in Wright's fiction as basic characteristics of Black people. For example, ignorance, low intelligence, inferior mentality and emotional instability are cited by each of the four studies to which Allport refers. 9

9 Ibid., pp. 196-97. The stereotype of mental incompetence is an antebellum one to which the United States Government, itself, has made official contributions. Dr. Gerald A. McWorter, director of Afro-American Studies and Research program, University of Illinois at Urbana, and Co-Chair of the Illinois Council for Black Studies provides this interesting information: "The 1840 census set about to collect new data, to determine 'the number of insane and idiots' in the society, whether institutionalized or not, among Blacks and Whites. The results were reported as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Ratio of Insanity, 1840 Census by Race</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>1 out of 945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>1 out of 955</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>1 out of 1,558</td>
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... After getting these results, John C. Calhoun ... stated in Congress: 'Here is proof of the necessity of slavery. The African is incapable of self-care and sinks into lunacy under the burden of freedom. It is a mercy to him to give him the guardianship and protection from mental death'". ...  

Dr. Edward Jarvis, a founding member of the [American Statistical] Association ... was a student of insanity, and began to study the results of the sixth census of 1840. He found that in many towns in the North where "insane"
In Wright's *Eight Men*, the last book examined in this study, there are eight male protagonists; one for each story. The main character in three stories, "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," "The Man Who Lived Underground," and "Man, God Ain't Like That," suffers from severe mental problems and the Black man in "Big Black Good Man" definitely is not too bright. In "The Man Who Went to Chicago," Wright depicts himself as superior, but of the two secondary Black female characters, one is so retarded that she does not know when a book is upside down and the other is secondary indeed. As for the three men that Wright works with in the hospital; one, Bill, is inferior mentally and two, Brand and Cooke, are emotionally unstable.

The studies all list the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky, gaudy, flashy dresser. The best example of this is in *Lawn Today*. Jake, the protagonist, is going to borrow money again from his job at the Post Office, but he does not want to use any of it on an operation for his sick wife. Yet Jake's biggest problem is deciding what to wear. He has "ten suits hanging in the closet" (p. 30), he finally chooses a green one:

Negroes had been reported, there were no Negroes at all!"

And because he was wearing the green suit, he decided on low-cut brown suede shoes with high Cuban heels and toes that tapered to a point. . . . Spotlessly white spats capped the bargain. Next he put on a soft collared lavender shirt which contrasted pleasingly with his broad, red, elastic suspenders. Then he tried a black tie, a green tie, a brown tie and a red tie. In the end he selected a wide, yellow one studded with tiny, blue half moons. He added a delicate finishing touch by inserting a huge imitation ruby (p. 31).

Virtually no negative trait or cluster of traits appear on any lists of Black stereotypes that cannot be found in abundance in Wright's fiction and non-fiction as well. For instance, immorality is commonplace in Lawd Today, Native Son, and The Long Dream. It is equally prevalent in Black Boy and American Hunger, which are supposed to be true autobiographies.

Ironically, one of the traditional stereotypes found in American literature pertaining to the lust or longing of the Black male for the White female does not appear in any form on these lists. It does appear, however, in several forms in Wright's works. In Native Son, Bigger is on the verge of committing rape when the blind mother enters the room. All through The Long Dream, White women seem an obsession with Fishbelly who finally settles for the lightest skinned Black that he can get. Eva, the White woman in The Outsider, is the most beautiful and admirable female character that Wright ever created. It may not be a stereotype, but stereotypical thinking holds that only the low type of White woman could possibly be involved in an intimate relation with a Black man. The idea, of course, is
based on the assumption that Blacks are so utterly debased that the only White woman who could endure such a liaison would be one who completely devalues herself. It is the "Sense of Group position" thesis that holds that the lowest member of the "superior" group is above the highest member of the "inferior" group. Wright, himself, alludes to the Jim Crow period of American history as a time when "even insane white people were counted above" Blacks. Eva at first appears to be an exception but reflection reveals how little Eva could possibly think of herself. In The Outsider, we learn from her diary that she lived in an orphan's home after she was six (p. 209), and when she learned of her husband's betrayal of her, "she walked the streets to keep thoughts of suicide" from filling her head (p. 208). Her infatuation with a Black lover was based on a need to punish herself. She wanted "to feel all the hurt and shame of being black" so that she would feel that she was "worth something" (p. 288). It should also be pointed out that Eva kills herself quite soon after her affair. This, too, is a part of the literary convention. Any romantic relation between Whites and non-Whites must end in death for one or the other, or the woman must, at least, go mad.


11 In the examples that follow, one should note that each of the Black characters is so light complexioned that there is no visible sign of her Black ancestry, yet each
In The Last of the Mohicans (1826), Cora Munro, an octoroon in love with a White man, is killed. In the Octoroon (1859), Dion Beaucicault has his heroine commit suicide by poisoning just as her White lover arrives to rescue her from slavery. She expires in his arms. The play opened simultaneously in London with a different ending from the American version. In the London version, the hero arrives just in time to save the Octoroon. In Wingless Victory (1936), by Maxwell Anderson, the octoroon dies in her lover's arms after taking poison. In All God's Children Got Wings (1924), by Eugene O'Neill, the White woman in an interracial marriage goes mad. Reva, in Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," is a positive White female character, but she and her Black boy friend, Johnny Boy, are never shown near each other. Besides, Johnny Boy is later murdered. Almost all of Wright's other White woman characters that have anything to do with Blacks are prostitutes. Lena, in "Big Black Good Man," Jenny and Ruth in The Outsider, the nameless White prostitute at the carnival and the one involved in Chris's lynching in The Long Dream are examples.

The other side of the coin is the denigration of the Black woman and Black male-female relationships. In must die. One wishing to pursue this subject further should read Judith R. Berzon, Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in Fiction (New York: New York University Press, 1978).
Black Boy, we see the antics of a seventeen-year old girl attempting to entice Richard to go to bed with her. Her stupidity is surpassed only by the overt connivance of her mother. In American Hunger, it seems that nearly all the Black women in Wright's insurance district sell their bodies for ten-cent premiums. The only intimate relationship that Wright, himself, has is with a retarded child for whom he pays a dime premium each week.

In the novels, the pattern is worse. Lil, in Lawd Today, is a sorry excuse for a woman, and Jake, her husband, is even sorrier as a man. One of the first scenes in the novel and the last scene are scenes of their fighting. More accurately, they are scenes of Jake, postal worker, beating his wife like a dog. In a rage of desperate fear, however, Lil almost kills him in the end. Bigger kills his girl friend, Bessie, in Native Son. There was only a physical relationship between them and for the most part Bessie used the relation to get liquor. In The Outsider, Gladys is beaten unmercifully twice by her husband, Cross Damon. Dot, Damon's fifteen-year old mistress, is impregnated and abandoned. Native Son and The Outsider both have older women in them, the mothers of the protagonists, whose husbands are dead. In The Long Dream, Tyree, the husband of the mother of the protagonist, is still alive, but he has a mulatto mistress from the beginning of the story to his death. Immediately after Tyree's death, however, his
mistress leaves town with his former partner. Fishbelly's mulatatto mistress gets burned to death on the same day that they make a pledge of sorts to each other. Besides, he is only sixteen.

In the five stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, the father is dead in "Bright and Morning Star" and the mother dies in childbirth in "Down by the Riverside." One can assume that a decent relationship exists between the mother and father in "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Fire and Cloud," but their relationship is never the focus of attention. This leaves only "Long Black Song." In this story, the wife's adultery with a White stranger leads directly to her husband's death.

In *Eight Men* there is a passing reference to the protagonist getting married in "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," and the faint outline of a wife in "The Man Who Saw the Flood." In "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," there are a husband and wife whom we see only in relation to the boy and very little of that, but they appear to be positive characters. In "Man of All Work" there is a wholesome family relationship among mother, father and children. The plot of this story, however, bears further exploration. Wright, and most of his critics, frequently drop references to sources and influences of his works. Except for a passing allusion to Black folklore, however, one could assume that Black writers contributed nothing to his material. This may be
true, but the parallels between incidents in Wright's works and earlier Black literature are sometimes surprising. It is interesting that the plot of Wright's one story with a wholesome Black family parallels an incident in an earlier Black writer's work almost to the fine details. Wright has his Black man to borrow his wife's clothes in order to find work, disguised as a woman. Sexual harassment on the job despite the Black's resistance, leads to his undoing. In an earlier novel, we read that Belton, the Black husband, found work after outfitting himself in garments worn by women. But "The young men in the families in which Belton worked seemed to have a poor opinion of the virtue of colored women. Time and time again they tried to kiss Belton, and he would sometimes have to exert his full strength to keep them at a distance." 12

Of course, the similarity between the two episodes does not prove that Wright borrowed from the earlier work. It is unusual, though, that the Black writer hailed for a generation as the truest interpreter of Black life and a powerful influence on succeeding generations should owe nothing to Black authors who wrote before him. Other than the Double-Vision concept, neither Wright nor his critics

12 Sutton Griggs, Imperium in Imperio (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 134. This book was originally published in 1899. Fabre, The Unfinished Quest (p. 502), says that "The subject of the script, 'Man of All Works' had been taken from an article that had appeared in Jet magazine several years earlier."
acknowledge any influence of Black literature on his works. It is as though Wright and his critics were conspiring to prove, to paraphrase the words of one of Wright's characters, that Blacks may be his color but they are not his kind. But this statement from *The Long Dream* (p. 19) is itself taken verbatim from Black folklore, just as were other incidents. Only one will be mentioned here; it is also from *The Long Dream* and reads as follows:

He [Fish] was convinced that if the policeman found that picture of the white woman in his pocket, they would kill him. Somehow he had to get rid of it before he reached the police station. . . . Ah yes; he knew.

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13 On occasions, Black critics suggest a connection between Wright's autobiography and the slave narratives, especially in terms of style. Stepto, for instance, says that "Black Boy revoices certain tropes in Afro-American letters, tropes that reach back at least as far as the slave narratives." Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narratives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 134. Ralph Ellison cites the bathtub scene in "Man of All Works" with these words: "And any one aware of the folk sources of Wright's efforts to create literature would recognize that the situation is identical with that of the countless stories which Negro men tell of the male slave called in to wash his mistress' back in the bath, of the Pullman porter invited in to share the beautiful white passenger's favors in the berth, of the bellhop seduced by the wealthy blond guest." Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books-Random House, 1953, 1964), pp. 134-35.

Clearly there are at least surface similarities other than folklore in Wright's work to earlier Black literature. Besides the Grigg's references cited above, *Native Son* contains another example. The Bigger Thomas flight/fight scene (pp. 244-53) is roughly reminiscent of the flight and rooftop fight scene in Frank Webb's, *The Garies and Their Friends*, 1857, on pp. 217-19. This book was first published in London. Our reference is to the Arno Press, 1969, edition.
He would chew it and swallow it; he would eat it. That was it! (p. 104).

Over a century before Wright thought of this incident, one of the most famous of all American runaway slaves had related what happened when he and his fellow fugitive were captured.

Of one thing I could be glad: Not one of my dear friends upon whom I had brought this calamity, reproached me, either by word or look, for having led them into it. We were a band of brothers, and never dearer to each other than now. The thought which gave us the most pain was the probable separation which would now take place in case we were sold off to the far South, as we were likely to be. While the constables were looking forward, Henry and I, being fastened together, could occasionally exchange a word without being observed by the kidnappers who had us in charge. "What shall I do with my pass?" said Henry. "Eat it with your biscuit," said I, "it won't do to tear it up."

Arna Bontemps, a personal friend of Wright's, in his story of the Gabriel conspiracy, also has a character dispose of a note by eating it.

If Wright did not read Douglass or Bontemps, it is a pity because he might have discovered something positive in

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15 James G. Spady, "Memorial Services for Arna Bontemps," CLA Journal, XVII (September, 1973), 118.

16 Arna Bontemps, Black Thunder (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1936), p. 174. Black Thunder also contains a scene involving the fight between the protagonist and a rat. "The devilish thing was as big as a cottontail and as full of fight as a porcupine. . . . The rat, desperate in his corner, quickly showed a set of willing teeth," p. 190.
the Black experience, something positive to balance his negative perspective. In both Douglass and Bontemps, the note-eating characters are heroic fighters and the notes are their passports to freedom. In Wright's hands these giants have been reduced to a little boy and the passports to freedom have become the picture of a semi-nude White woman.

Owen Dodson, another personal friend of Wright's, wrote these lines:

\.\. but the mirrors in this country are convex
And show our bodies distorted
Are concave and show our minds hilarious.

Where are the mirrors to show us normal
To pain
Love
Hate
Kindness
To show we love our children?18

One thing is certain: Wright's works are not mirrors to show Blacks normal to pain, love, hate, kindness or anything else. As Margaret Walker states, Wright's characters "seem always to be lacking in some of the qualities all human beings need."19 This is surely true of the protagonists in Wright's novels with the possible exception of

17 Fabre, Unfinished Quest, p. 281.
Erskine Fowler in *Savage Holiday*. This novel contains no discernible Black characters and falls outside the scope of this study. Elsewhere Margaret Walker has written: "I sometimes wonder if it is malicious to think he [Wright] would have been happier if he had been born white than he was as a black man. He seems to feel and believe that all his troubles stemmed from being black." This speculation also falls outside the scope of this study, but the reflection of this feeling in virtually all of Wright's works is most germane.

Wright's works are permeated with contempt for Black people but it is not this that puts him in a class apart. What separates him from other Black writers that have indulged in stereotyping their own people is this: Wright's stereotypes were taken as authentic and he was acclaimed the most courageous and correct interpreter of Black life yet produced. As late as September, 1980, a scholarly article in *CLA Journal* indicates that Wright is the author of "one of the first American novels capable of capturing the truth of Afro-American existence in ways knowable only to those, like himself, who lived its realities daily."

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22 Priscilla R. Ramsey, "Blind Eyes, Blind Quests in
(Emphasis added.) The author of the article does have a small complaint or rather a polite annoyance with Wright. She continues as follows:

Perhaps the white characters' all too blatant intellectual and philosophical astigmatism toward Bigger provides one of the disturbing annoyances with this and some of Wright's other novels. In Black Boy especially, whites come off almost exclusively as one dimensional stereotypes. . . . We also see in The Outsider and Lawd Today as well as in . . . American Hunger similar black and white distinctions. . . . We see Wright's constant return to this division between black and white perceptions of reality, a division which labels white characters villainous and blind while simultaneously labeling black characters humanitarian but oppressed and insightful.23 (Emphasis added.)

The author says that "This is an oversimplification of critical positions, yet it covers, in a general way, much of Wright's stance."24 It also confuses the gallery of Black stereotypes put forward by Wright with "capturing the truth of Afro-American existence." At the same time it suggests that these caricatures are humanitarian "and insightful." These terms simply cannot be applied to Wright's Black characters in the novels that the critic, herself, cites. While something can be said for the need to examine further Wright's stereotyping of White people, there can be no comparison between the two. Rarely have critics cited Wright's delineation of White characters as faithful renditions of reality, but his picture of the Black experience


23 Ibid., p. 54. 24 Ibid.
has been generally taken as true to life. Moreover, Wright often presents some important White characters in a positive, though imperfect, light. Max, the defense lawyer, in Native Son, Houston, the district attorney, in The Outsider and McWilliams, the reform lawyer, in The Long Dream are examples. In Wright's autobiographies, there are far more positive, multi-dimensional, White characters than there are positive Black characters.

What is really covered in this article is the typical American view of our culture, a view that is generally White, but one that can, and often is, projected by Blacks as well. Ellison, in a different context, touches on this topic with these words:

Thus when the white American, holding up most twentieth-century fiction, says, "This is American reality," the Negro tends to answer (not at all concerned that Americans tend generally to fight against any but the most flattering imaginative depictions of their lives), "Perhaps, but you've left out this, and this and this. And most of all, what you would have the world to accept as me isn't even human."25

This was Wright's great failing: In attempting to reach the minds of White America, he strengthened the ultimate racist stereotype that he sought to destroy; namely, that Blacks were subhuman. He was not the first Black to stumble in this manner. But the rationalizations put forward in past eras cannot apply in his case or for

subsequent generations. Referring to certain nineteenth-century authors, one critic noted that "The Black writer who used available stereotypes did so out of cultural desperation or to make a more dramatic point to his predominately white audience." Writing of the same period, another critic states:

They had the choice of being silent completely or of compromising their sense of reality if they were to publish. . . . The shadow of white racism hung over early black novelists. Many years would pass before it would be lifted, allowing glimpses of reality to revise the distorted black images of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One might be tempted to ask, "What is man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul," but it is more relevant to note that many years do pass between the close of the nineteenth century and the advent of Native Son. Exactly one hundred years intervened between the publication of the first novel by an American Black and the publication of The Outsider. But Wright seems to have gone backward. Native Son, despite its "plethora of flaws," attempts to make a statement about the oppressed and ex-


28 William Wells Brown's Clotel was first published in England in 1853 and subsequently published in America under different titles with slight revisions.
exploited workers, especially Blacks. By implication, there is hope for the future through socialist redemption. This was in 1940 but by the fifties Wright was in headlong retreat. Mary-Emma Graham notes that "in his later novels, the pessimistic vision takes over completely from the socialist one. For the most part he [Wright] abandoned the worker as a major figure completely."29

Wright was as unsuccessful with his use of existentialism in The Outsider as he had been with his misuse of Marxism in Native Son and as he was later to be with his use of Freudism in Savage Holiday. One article states that:

Savage Holiday is unusual in that Wright first studied psychoanalysis and then wrote the novel. While his use of psychoanalysis adds another dimension to the development of his main character, anyone with even a basic knowledge of psychoanalysis would inevitably feel that its use is "forced."30 (Emphasis added)

No "ism" could ever help Wright for the truth is that he was too deeply infected with a sense of racial shame to capture the complex reality of the Black experience. As Margaret Walker said, Wright hated himself and "could not conceive of a Black man in terms of greatness and heroism."31


30 J. F. Gounard and Beverley Roberts Gounard, "Richard Wright's Savage Holiday: Use or Abuse of Psycho-analysis," CLA Journal, XXX (June, 1979), 345.

Longinus in his famous treatise "On the Sublime," written two thousand years ago, lists five principal sources of sublimity. "First and most important is the power of forming great conceptions."\(^{32}\) This is precluded, however, when the author is incapable of perceiving the grandeur that invests his own material. Nor is Longinus' second source of the sublime—"Vehement and inspired passion"—\(^{33}\) likely to be tapped by one who feels that his subjects are lacking in "genuine passion" that what has been taken for their "emotional strength" is really nothing more than "negative confusion . . . frenzy under pressure" (Black Boy, p. 45).

Had Wright not so haughtily dismissed the traditions of Black people as "bare," their memories as "hollow," their despair as "shallow," and their very lives as "bleak and barren," (Black Boy, p. 45), he might have discovered what Pauline Hopkins proclaimed even before Wright was born:

> Literature is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs, religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings


\(^{33}\)Ibid.
of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history. . . .

This passage appeared in print three years before DuBois pointed out that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Had Wright not been so blinded by ambivalence toward his own people, his powerful literary ability might have contributed something of value to a faithful portraiture of Black life. A contribution toward the resolution of the racial problem in America would clearly have been a corollary benefit. "If a writer exist for any social good" says Ellison, "his role is that of preserving in art those human values which can endure by confronting change."

Ian Walker in a highly laudatory article, appropriately entitled, however, "Black Nightmare: The Fiction of Richard Wright," states that Wright goes back to Poe, Hawthorne, Dostoevsky and Dreiser. He, then, notes that Jake Jackson in Lawd Today is "lazy, selfish, feckless and stupid." This description, in general, fits the major


Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 21.

characters in most of Wright's novels but would apply to few, if any, of the characters in the works of the authors that Walker cites. Jupiter, the Black character in "The Gold Bug," is, of course, a special case.

Robert Stepto in examining Wright's relationship to his Afro-American predecessors makes the following observation:

Wright's ambivalent attitude toward his race and its rituals is amply revealed here and while it is not a matter which should enter into our evaluation of his art, it does haunt and becloud our feeling concerning his place in the tradition.38

Of course, Wright's private, personal attitude toward his race is not in question. What phantoms lurk in the labyrinthian caverns of a writer's mind need not concern the critics. When these phantasms appear on the printed page purporting to be Black people, that is, of course, a different matter altogether. Pertinent to this point are the following remarks by Ellison.

The essence of the word is its ambivalence, and in fiction it is never so effective and revealing as when both potentials are operating simultaneously, as when it mirrors both good and bad. . . . Thus it is unfortunate for the Negro that the most powerful formulations of modern American fictional words have been so slanted against him that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself, he discovers an image drained of humanity.39

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39 Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 25.
Ellison, whose basic outlook toward Wright seems far more sympathetic than Irving Howe's pronouncement would lead one to assume, makes a specific reference to Wright further on in the same article. It reads as follows:

Too often what is presented as the American Negro (a most complex example of Western man) emerges as an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel. Seldom is he drawn as that sensitively focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man. Naturally, the attitude of Negroes toward this writing is one of great reservation. Which, indeed, bears out Richard Wright's remarks that there is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle over the nature of reality.

Ellison in this essay is concerned with matters not directly related to Wright and is, no doubt, justified in pursuing the issue no further. The discerning reader, however, may be forgiven for noting that Wright's version of the nature of reality corroborates, rather than contradicts the White version. This may not have been his intention, but as Blyden Jackson points out concerning Wright's purpose in another connection: authors, "Sometimes belie their own intention." Wright's failure to transcend the conventional stereotypes and depict the full and varie-

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gated range of the Black experience may be attributed to several causes. Wright's ambiguity toward Blackness has already been mentioned. Even Fabre conceded this much. He writes that "because of his [Wright's] sometimes conflicting attitudes toward Black life in the United States, the coherence of his purpose is not always apparent."\(^{43}\) This is an understatement, but Ellison suggests something more. He exclaims:

> How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means of discovering the forms of American Negro humanity. I could not and cannot question their existence; I can only seek again and again to project that humanity as I see and feel it.\(^{44}\)

Wright's failure is indeed a tragedy, but it may have nothing to do with Marxism. *The Outsider* was written under the influence of existentialism, yet it reveals no more of Black humanity than *Native Son*. *Lawd Today* was written under the spell of naturalism but Jake Jackson shows no more human attributes than Bigger Thomas. Jake Jackson has been employed at the Post Office for "going on nine years" (*Lawd Today*, p. 121) and Cross Damon, in addition to being a postal worker, has attended "day classes at the University of Chicago, majoring in philosophy" (*The Outsider*, p. 49). Wright, himself, worked briefly in the Post Office, yet the image that one gets of


\(^{44}\)Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 120.
the lives of postal workers and of the Black community at large is as warped as Bigger's vision. 45

The "ism" likely to be most deeply implicated in the literary debasement of Black humanity is, of course, Racism. The fact that Wright was Black only confirms an observation made about stereotypes in the mass media generally. It reads as follows:

In a society where greed is a norm of human nature, one doesn't pursue the brass ring of money-success without becoming isolated and corrupted in the process--regardless of race, creed or mythology. 46

This is a harsh judgment to apply to an author whose work has been characterized as an "angry, uncompromising indictment of racism in American life"; 47 but

45For a glimpse of ordinary Black life that discloses the strength and resilience of the human potential, one might read the brief fifty-two page autobiographical document by O. Grady Gregory. It is entitled: "From the Bottom of the Barrel, A History of Black Workers in the Chicago Post Office from 1921." No publisher is listed.

Mr. Gregory had forty-three years of continuous postal service and his stance can best be described in his own words: "I am unfamiliar with the art of separating myself from the feeling of injustice when I must write about what I have experienced" (p. 23).

Mr. William Kelly, father of Dr. Ernace Kelly cited in this study, spent over forty years in the Chicago Post Office. On several occasions, he was kind enough to talk to me about his experiences there and to introduce me to an organization of retired postal employees to which he belonged. I attended one of its meetings and talked briefly to several of the members. I also interviewed a high Black official who had spent the major part of his life in the postal service. Everything that emerged from these conversations contradicts Wright's images reflected in the two books cited.


47Hemenway, Black Novelist, p. 5.
it is a judgment most consistent with the facts. Besides, as Bone has so carefully pointed out:

The artist or image-maker is guardian of the national iconography. And since the power of images for good or evil is immense, he bears an awesome responsibility. If his images are false, if there is no bridge between portrayal and event, no correspondence between the shadow and the act, then the emotional life of the nation is to that extent distorted and its daily conduct is rendered ineffective or even pathological. This is the effect of the anti-Negro stereotype.48

The tacit acceptance of the anti-Black stereotype that shows "no bridge between portrayal and event" persists to the present time. The Janet Cooke caper that "won" her a Pulitzer Prize is a case in point. The hoax was exposed and the prize forfeited only after the publicity generated by the announcement of the award. There is irony in the fact that the embarrassed publisher was none other than The Washington Post of Watergate fame, known for its investigative reporting.

Marcia Gillespie's analysis of the Janet Cooke fiasco contains some significant insights relevant to this study. One is revealed early in her article and reads as follows:

Like most of you, I've got a thing about white America's need to see us; our lives and our communities, as studies in pathology. Yes, I know we've got our

troubles and our share of sickies and villains, but I also know that we've got a lot of good things as well. Yet time and time again, what seems to be published is one version or another of Catfish row—see how sick they are, how terrible their lives, the awful things they do to one another. That's what normally makes the headlines,—if we're discussed at all.49

Later in the article Gillespie notes that Cooke "found that the sordid details of life in "underclass" Black America seemed a sure ticket for getting that front page byline. . . ."50

What Janet Cooke discovered in the eighties, Wright knew well forty years before. Such knowledge is commonplace; even adolescents in high school know how the system works. "The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into High School Journalism" contains this testimony:

As long as you are expressing what the Administration likes, be as free as you want. As soon as you get on any kind of touchy ground . . . restrictions are more stringent.51

Students quickly learn what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.52

In the restrictive climate that prevails at most schools, students who dare to rebel at censorship policies know that they face official punishment. . . . Such a chilling effect discourages most students and results in the most pervasive form of censorship—that imposed by the students themselves.53

50 Ibid, p. 96.
52 Ibid., p. 38.
53 Ibid.
As late as 1972, a study, not unrelated to this area, reached the following conclusions:

Judging from the types of Afro-American materials enjoying favor among anthologists, the Black writer would enhance his chances of being collected if he ignored or repressed his deeper insights into his own experiences and those of other Blacks. The price of doing so, however, would be psychologically exorbitant. It would be tantamount to denial of an aspect of himself. 54

Yet some Black authors, including Richard Wright, have chosen to pay that price. In a Master's thesis in 1950, the present writer decried the caricature of Black life in American literature with these words:

Northern authors have done little better and often worse than their Southern colleagues. The most tragic observation of all, however, is to note that Negroes themselves have been guilty of these calumnies. With one eye on the great white master and the other on the almighty dollar, many Negro writers, looking cross-eyed at their own people have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. . . . They have joined hands with their white counterparts in a toady dance before the throne of white supremacy. The victim has become a partner in his own debasement. 55

Some progress has been made since 1950 toward a more truthful rendition of the Black experience, but it was made in spite of, not because of, The Example of


Richard Wright. This statement obviously applies only to Wright's fiction and autobiographies. His non-fiction and poetry deserve a study of their own. Wright's 12 Million Black Voices was used as a frame of reference against which to compare his autobiographies and his fiction. It stands as a powerful refutation of Wright's stereotypical view of Black life.

This is so not because of the difference in genre; it is not primarily a literary difference but a philosophical, socio-political one. Margolies indicates this when he writes:

The principal difference in the tone of the books is that Wright in 12 Million Black Voices identifies with the Negro masses—the history is related in the first person plural in a kind of "the people are the salt of the earth" manner—whereas in his autobiography they are unconsciously the enemy. [Emphasis added.]

To identify one's own people as the salt of the earth in one work and as the enemy in another represents more than a difference in tone; it reflects a difference in content. Moreover, if in each case the contrasting views permeate the entire work, deliberate consciousness may be involved. Wright was aware of his antipathy toward Blacks but attempted to cope with it through projection:

56Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969) is a sympathetic study of Wright.

he perceived himself as the object of Black hostility.

In speaking of *Black Boy*, Wright used words equally applicable to most of his other works when he said:

> I suspect that Negroes will pick my bones for this book, that they will hover over me like vultures and hack away at me; for I am convinced that they cannot as yet fathom the motives that made me write this book; they are not emotionally independent enough to want to face the naked experience of their lives.\(^{58}\)

If Blacks find it necessary to pick Wright's bones and hack away at him, it is not due to their emotional dependence, but to the fact that their cup runneth over. There is a boundary among all people as to how far a member of the tribe can stray before the group, of necessity, responds. Wright quite early violated those limits, but many Blacks were unwilling to accept the evidence of their own senses; others, however strongly provoked, were reluctant to engage in a public squabble with a member of the tribe that the world acclaimed. Still others saw that Wright was a symptom of the sickness, but not the disease itself, that inevitably infects a few individuals of a group that is for long held in subjugation. In short, Wright was himself recognized as a victim of what one author, in an entirely different context, calls "All of these oppressive forces which have together forced black

\(^{58}\)Quoted in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, p. 21.
Americans into their despair, rage and rebellion." To succumb to these forces, however, is to yield to "the advanced and general state of dehumanization which pervades so much of our culture, but which seems to have been focused on our racial situation." For "what we contend with today is cultural falsification: systematized, reasonable, pervasive mendacity." Native Son reflects this phenomenon and as Roger Whitlow says, "Most of Wright's work echo the themes of Native Son." What are these themes? Whitlow continues

A man must have enough control over his environment to feel that he can mold it, if only slightly, so that it can provide him with at least part of the realization of his dreams. When he has no control, he ceases to be a functioning member of that environment; and he thereby divorces himself from its mores and its legal restrictions.

But Wright divorces his Black characters from more than the mores and legal restrictions of the environment. He divorces them, as far as he possibly can, from their humanity. Ellison makes a cogent observation on this point. He states:

In Native Son Wright began with the ideological

60 Ibid. 61 Ibid, p. 37.
63 Ibid.
proposition that what whites think of Negro reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be. Hence Bigger was presented as a near subhuman indictment of white oppression. He was designed to shock whites out of their apathy and end the circumstances out of which Wright insisted Bigger emerged. Here environment is all—and interestingly enough, environment conceived solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious.64

This is an accurate assessment of Wright's thoughts and deeds. Errors committed by Wright and certain other "protest" authors have caused the whole category of protest literature to be called into question. Seymour L. Gross, synthesizing the ideas of several critics on this subject with his own, gives this summary.

More seriously, as various critics warned, Negro protest literature, so far from disturbing the racial status quo, could actually reinforce those very principles of oppression which it deplored. For in their view, by confining the Negro solely to the hopeless ring of "racial breast-beating" in which the only attitude is paranoia, the only movement is hysterical action, and even the suffering ironically takes on the quality of welcoming punishment for the sin of being Black, the net effect is to confirm the assumption of American culture that the Negro is incapable of sane and cognitive response and to leave the reader with pity that is not much different from contempt. Therefore, despite the commendable intention of protest literature, in it the Negro becomes, in however disguised a form, another experientially constricted stereotype, whose agonized choreography in the pit, because it implies that this is his exclusive reality, denies him a human destiny even as it moves us.65

64 Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 114.

This is a perfect description of Wright's novels, especially *Native Son*, which has been described as "the unique and thundering black literary protest. . . ." 66 But unless words can capriciously mean whatever one wants them to mean at any given moment, such literature has nothing to do with Blackness and very little to do with genuine protest. It does not disturb the status quo; it does reinforce the principles of oppression. The sufferings depicted do not portend a day of righteous retribution, redemption or reconciliation, but take on the quality of "welcoming punishment" for the "sin of being black." This literature does not produce "pity and fear," to use Aristotle's phrase, but arouses pity that is "not much different from contempt." Its greatest flaw is its subscription to the idea that the humanity of Blacks can be questioned and in doing this, in failing to affirm the humanity of all people, it debases nature and blasphemes against God.

To the enraptured applause of a large section of the literary elite, this is precisely what Wright has done.

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Native Son, one of the most critically acclaimed of Wright's works provides the best illustration. Ladell Payne makes the following observation:

Wright focuses much of his attention on the protagonist's sense of identity. . . . Bigger Thomas is not concerned with defining his identity in terms of whether or not he is black. Bigger knows he is black. His question is, Am I human? His ostensible answer is no.67 [Emphasis added.]

Payne correctly interprets Bigger from Wright's point of view but it is Wright's point of view that constitutes a perversion in the first place. Wright's argument is that subhuman conditions produce subhumans. Whites force Blacks to live under subhuman conditions; therefore, Blacks are subhuman. Even if this syllogistic argument were true, and it is not true, the fact remains that Wright has created only subhuman types like Bigger as representative of the whole. Defenders of the status quo obviously have nothing to fear from such a creature or from its creator.

Margolies alludes to some "Negro critics of Wright" who censure Wright for his "monstrous version of the stereotype." He then declares: "... this was precisely Wright's point: that subhuman conditions produce subhuman persons."68 This thesis has crossed the ocean to faraway

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68 Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study
Switzerland and has come back in these words:

The fact that only blacks mutilate bodies in Wright's fiction . . . might suggest that only blacks are capable of penetrating to the ultimate depths of horror, the underworld, the outside, where everything is possible.69

The author is in error when he asserts that "only blacks mutilate bodies in Wright's fiction." Chris's body in The Long Dream, for instance, is mutilated by whites (p. 71), but the author's point is well taken. Both critics are accepting Wright's thesis that subhuman conditions produce subhumans and, therefore, the bridges between portrayal and event are sound. The final span in Wright's network of bridges is to link his subhuman creations with real life people. In constructing this fantasy, Wright has the full cooperation of many critics, Black and White. We are assured, for instance, by Brignano that "in Black Boy, precisely what Wright tries to accomplish is a fusion of the particular with the general: the story of one Negro family is projected into a tale of all Negroes of the South."70 It is true that Brignano does not explicitly state that Wright achieves his objective but he


hails *Black Boy* "as an impressive social document." In discussing "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," Brignano says that

The single moment of uncontrollable rage bursts out into the white world in the form of hideous violence, as Saul, symbolically all Negroes, destroys the shadow that has covered him all his life. [Emphasis added.]

So this mentally unbalanced Black man who kills a White woman who was herself disturbed represents all Black men at least symbolically. He submits, despite his mental incompetence, meekly enough to the White male, but one may suppose that this, too, symbolizes all Black men.

Carl Milton Hughes discovers that "underneath Bigger's layer of callousness is the quickening sensitivity of the man who might have been. By extension he is twelve million Black people in America according to Wright." Hughes cites Max's speech to the jury identifying Bigger with twelve million other Blacks, and Hughes does not seem provoked by the idea. One critic, in different parts of his book, combines both the depravity and the identification. He writes that "The psychological impact of racism presented in *Native Son* and the Wrightian protest novels of the forties depicted the Negro as a de-

71 Ibid., p. 7.  
72 Ibid., p. 41.  
praved victim of American society." 74 This is in the preface but by the time we reach page 32, we are informed that

Bigger Thomas is no longer an exception who exists in a social or literary vacuum: He walks the streets under the banner of the Black Panthers; he exists multiplied many times in the novels of Black militancy of the sixties. 75

Bigger Thomas is not merely one of the boys but a member of the vanguard in the struggle for liberation. He is also an avenger. 76 This is all very ingenious, but it bears no relationship to literature or to life. The bridges will simply not bear the weight of logical examination. American slavery for centuries subjected Blacks to conditions as subhuman as the human mind could devise, yet the Blacks emerged as human as any human beings on earth. It should be clear that the essence of a human being and the behavior of a person are not always identical. It should also be obvious that if anyone's humanness is to be questioned, it should be the perpetrators, not the victims, of inhuman conditions.


75 Ibid., p. 32.

This does not mean that evil deeds, whatever its initial cause, can be condoned.

Critics who acquiesce in Wright's apologia for Bigger's behavior stumble into this pit. As deplorable as were the conditions under which Bigger and many other Blacks lived in Chicago during the thirties, he was never completely without choice. What circumstances compelled him to tarry in Mary Dalton's room after midnight before her blind mother entered? The text clearly shows that he was on the verge of raping her. After Bigger accidentally smothers Mary to death, does fate force him to try to capitalize on her murder by sending a ransom note to her parents?

Felgar boasts that an achievement of his book is to "demonstrate that Bigger does die as unregenerate as he lived and as worthless as society made him." (Emphasis added.) Felgar then adds, "But the achievement is truly Wright's . . . for Wright is so clear, so dispassionate." 77

It is true that Wright clearly shows that Bigger dies unregenerate, and worthless, but is it true that society made him die that way? Did society force Bigger to force Bessie to have sex with him even though he knew that he was going to kill her? Wright is less clear on this point. He writes:

77Felgar, Richard Wright, p. 1.
Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind. Don't, don't, don't Bigger. Wright does not explain what is "imperiously" driving Bigger, but it looks like violent lust.

If society is responsible for Bessie's murder, the only deliberate murder in the novel, Bigger is an over-zealous accomplice. The murder scene follows:

He lifted the brick again and again, until in falling, it struck a sudden mass that gave softly, but stoutly to each landing blow. Soon he seemed to be striking a wet wad of cotton, of some damp substance whose only life was the jarring of the brick impact.

That wet wad was once Bessie's face. Yet there are critics, in the face of all this, who reason that Bigger bears no responsibility for his acts. Some even go so far as to compare him to the son of the Almighty God. Raman K. Singh says that although Bigger "rejects Christianity as it is thrust at him by its preachers, Bigger becomes, in fact, a Christ figure himself." 78 Ladell Payne calls Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas "inverted Christ figures." But a paragraph later on Payne writes that "Instead of discovering a Christ, however, in a sense, he [Bigger] becomes one." 79 The meaning of Christ's death


79 Payne, Black Novelists, p. 76.
on the Cross, according to Christian theology, is the promise of eternal life. Thomas Le Clair states that "In the face of death, Bigger can find meaning only in his two murders, and this time he is right, for he now realized the conditions and motives from which these murders stemmed."80 If Wright does endow Bigger with any such insight, he does not share it with the reader. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult to agree with the next statement:

When we finish Native Son, we know quite well who was the good guy and who the bad. Wright, coming at his audience from a solidly conceived polemical stance, makes it clear throughout that in this given instance of racial confrontation, black is right and white is wrong. In spite of Thomas' crime, we come to accept his unfolding process of humanization in "Fate."81

Some readers with greater insight than the present writer may, indeed, "know quite well" the good guys from the bad but it is not easy to cast Bigger in the role of good guy even if Satan were on the other side. There are several reasons for this: Wright's political stance is not solidly conceived; the general frame of reference--White oppression--is a weak apology for the "given instance of racial confrontation," and most damaging of all, ___________________________


81 Stephen Corey, "The Avengers in Light in August and Native Son," CLA Journal, XXIII (December, 1979), 211.
one cannot speak of Thomas' crime, but must speak of his crimes for they were many.

Dorothy Lee says that "Human existence is perceived by Wright, as by Camus, as lacking purpose, divine guidance, plan. This absurdity, however, is exacerbated for the black by his societal predicament." If this absurdity were accepted, it would follow that literature would be even more purposeless. Fortunately, there is another way of looking at the matter; it is to view literature as one does other human activity—with purpose and meaning. Wright, himself, once held views similar to this. While there has not always been consensus on what the specific purpose of literature was, that it should serve some purpose has generally been conceded. Even the art for art's sake school recognizes, by implication, that literature serves the purpose of satisfying aesthetic needs.


This study embraces the ideas embodied in the following quotations:

... it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place.85

In all ages and climates of man's civilization, one of the major purposes of literature has been to represent the thought and action of men with as much truth to life as possible.86

Nearly two hundred years intervened between the publication of the principles incorporated in these two statements, but they have stood the test of time. The possibility that other approaches to literature may be equally valid does not nullify them in the least. With this as a frame of reference, criticism may proceed to make, in Matthew Arnold's words, "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."87

One may, or may not, agree with Gayles' declaration that "the Negro writer is America's conscience and the Negro critic must be the conscience of them both."88 It is difficult to deny, however, that the Black writer

85Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765), in Bate, Criticism: The Major Text, p. 212.


87Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864), in Bate, Criticism: The Major Text, p. 465.

88Gayle, Black Expression, p. xii.
has a singular gift to bring to literature that purport to illuminate the Black experience and that the role of the Black critic in evaluating this literature is equally special. For decades, Blacks, by the most scholarly investigations, have exposed the monstrous stereotypes of Black life in White literature; it is long past due that the works of Black authors should be subjected to the same scrutiny. This study of Richard Wright is intended as a contribution in that direction.
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