RICHARD WRIGHT'S PORTRAYAL OF AMERICAN NEGRO TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

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Richard Wright's primary concern in his fictional works is to portray the dehumanized existence of the American Negro. The destiny of his black characters is always in the hands of white men. For fear of white brutality these black characters do not rebel against the oppressive white society.

Those characters who revolt choose death in doing so. Yet, they exclaim, death is preferable to the circumscribed existence which they are forced to lead.

When a black character threatens, no matter how innocently or trivially, any facet of white supremacy rule, he pays for doing so with his life or, if he is lucky, escapes to another distant community.

Blacks in Wright's works cannot be full-fledged human beings; the white society does not permit them the freedom necessary to become responsible, self-assertive individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

Because the concern of this study is Richard Wright's depiction of Negro tragedy, it is appropriate, for reasons of clarity, to define what in this case is meant by tragedy. What Carl Milton Hughes terms "the tragedy of the common man,"[1] the individual who is overwhelmed by circumstances beyond his control, who lives in a society that creates desires but fails to provide the means for their satisfaction[2] is partly what is meant here. In other words, tragedy here refers to the man who is helplessly bound by devouring forces.

The American Dream, specifically the notion that anyone possessing the ambition to acquire wealth and fame can do so, is often at the core of the creation of many modern tragic heroes. In American fiction the American Dream often frustrates those who embrace its ideals only to find that everywhere there are insurmountable barriers which render that Dream unrealizable. American Naturalistic writers made the revelation of the falsehoods of the American Dream one of their central tasks. One of their major concerns was to show the tragic toll that pursuit of the Dream exacted of those who subscribed to it.

There are instances where, however, the successes of

various characters are in accordance with the ideals of the American Dream. But these characters do not altogether escape the tragedy inherent in the pursuit of the Dream, for in their efforts to amass wealth, they, because they must exploit others economically, inflict suffering on others; this consistent exploitation of whole minority groups or social strata produces in the oppressed groups angry individuals who strike back at their exploiters and thereby, from time to time, drag the wealthy into the tragic realities which characterize the lives of millions of poor, exploited Americans.

Many of Richard Wright's works may be read as satires on the American Dream or as tragic portrayals of it. Between the idea--the dream itself--and its realisation lies the shadow, and within this shadow fall the tragic products of the American Dream. Part of the tragedy surrounding the American Dream derives from the rationalisations fabricated by the owners and guardians of wealth with the intention of excluding others from successfully undertaking the quest for material success. When these rationalisations are concretised, for example, when the Negro, because of his race, is not permitted to hold certain positions, is intimidated by terror from rising beyond the status of menial labour and is told, despite his knowledge to the contrary, that he is incapable of performing tasks requiring the use of intellect,

he is bound to rebel, and in his rebellion, tragedy is inevitable. The reality underlying such practices is to exclude certain groups from even sharing the myth of the American Dream. In the words of Wright:

> The gigantic American companies will not employ our daughters in their offices as clerks, bookkeepers or stenographers; huge department stores will not employ our children, fresh from school, as saleswomen. The engineering, aviation, mechanical and chemical schools close their doors to our sons, just as the great corporations which make thousands of commodities refuse to employ them. The Bosses of the Buildings decree that we must be maids, janitors, cooks and general servants. [3]
>
> [White folks] smile in disdain when we black folk say that our thirst can be slaked in art, that our tensions can be translated into industry, that our energies can be applied to finance, that our delight in the world can be converted into education, that our love of adventure can find fulfillment in aviation. But in one way or another, the white folk deny us these pursuits and our hunger for expression finds its form in our wild raw music, in our invention of slang that winds its way all over America. [4]

> Whites did not have to actively hate black men; they had already put them in their "place" and they did not even have to think of Negroes until they tried to get out of their place and then violence was used against them. [5]

The barriers erected by white America to relegate the Negro to an unchanging position of menial labour, to exclude him from the vast benefits to be derived from being an American, become the Negro's insurmountable fate, a fate that crushes him when, like the classic tragic heroes in their battles against fate, he attempts to break these barriers down. Yet Wright shows that for the Negro to develop an identity, he must defy the limitations imposed

upon him by white America. Invariably such efforts culminate in tragedy. The impossibility of the Negro ever leading a serene life is expressed by Wright in the following words: "Without adequate preparation the Negro lives in one life, many life-times."[6] Wright's tragedies are therefore centred around the dehumanisation of the American Negro and the white brutality employed to imprison the Negro in his dehumanised role. In the words of Saunders Redding,

> the tragedy of Wright's heroes is that they lack a sense of direction, and the blunt point of Wright's fiction is that American society denies them the opportunity to acquire it.[7]

The principal works in this study will be Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son and The Long Dream. Wright's other works, where they serve to illuminate or reinforce various ideas and themes in these works, will be alluded to. The stories in Uncle Tom's Children are valuable to the extent that they portray black Southerners battling against the fate to which Southern white racism has consigned them. They also reflect, in two cases, Wright's transient solutions, influenced by his embrace of Marxism, for the black Southerner's racial plight. Native Son portrays the tragedy of blacks who exchange the South's racism for that of the North and the kind of tragedy that segregation is likely to produce in a large urban centre. The Long Dream deals with the tragic existence of two Southern black bourgeoisie and

the exploitation of other blacks that this class engages in for material gain.

The Outsider, Lawd Today and Eight Men, important works of fiction by Wright, have been excluded from this study because their themes are either ancillary to those of Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son and The Long Dream or because they are preoccupied with themes other than those of Negro tragedy. The central characters in Lawd Today are Negroes and the existence they lead is a tragic one. Yet one is not really convinced that their tragedy stems from racial difference, rather it stems from their inability to make their life meaningful; consequently, they indulge in pursuits that are emotionally and financially costly. They are, without realising it, victims of the quest for the American Dream. The Outsider can be properly called a philosophical novel. Its primary concern is with the search for a meaningful existence in a world where there are no traditions to sustain the individual. The stories in Eight Men which deal with black American existence offer illuminations on some of the ideas that went into the creation of Wright's works dealing with black American existence, but they contain nothing on the subject of Negro tragedy that cannot be found in Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son and The Long Dream.

When combined for an analysis of Wright's portrayal of black American tragedy, the last three mentioned works have the advantage of showing the tragic effects of racism on black individuals in different geographic areas and in different social classes. They therefore offer a wide-ranging view on this specific subject that other combinations will not yield. Nor will the addition of any other work to these three significantly enrich this study.

CHAPTER I

THE FOUNDATIONS OF WRIGHT'S TRAGIC VISION

In Wright's fiction a Negro's action, as long as it represents a threat to white domination of Negro existence, is never too trivial to bring about tragedy for the offending Negro. These portraits of Negro life were not mere imaginations on Wright's part; they were the daily realities of Negro life, a part of the fear and terror in which Negroes lived. Wright's environment and his personal experiences as a Negro supplied much of the material for his tragic depictions of Negro life. Certain key concepts and facts in Wright's autobiographical and non-fictional works are therefore quite helpful in any attempt to understand his tragic characters.

Wright never considered himself integrated with Western culture, even after he had moved to France and reported that he did not feel discriminated against there. In a lecture which he delivered during the decade before

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[French people] were not eaten up inside by the fact that he was black and was strolling alongside them on the Seine.... What a wonderful country! "I'm at last in Paris, city of my dreams..." Wright, "I Choose Exile," unpublished article, in Webb, p. 247.

his death, he stated the following:

> "Being a Negro living in a white Western, Christian society, I've never been allowed to blend, in a natural and healthy manner, with the culture and civilization of the West. This contradiction of being both Western and a man of color creates a psychological distance, so to speak, between me and my environment .... I'm restless. I question not only myself, but my environment .... In spite of myself, my imagination is constantly leaping ahead and trying to reshape the world I see (basing itself strictly on the materials of the world in which I live each day) toward a form in which all men could share my creative restlessness. Such an outlook breeds criticism. And my critical attitude and detachment are born of my position. I and my environment are one, but that oneness has in it, at its very core, an abiding schism." [1]

The foregoing, a statement by the mature Wright, affirms the same basic artistic stance which Wright held at the beginning of his literary career. As a black man, he understood that he was doomed to a position of inferiority within a white society; as a member of the doomed, he knew the suffering that formed a part of that destiny. His writings were therefore an attempt to reveal the agony of the damned.[2]

Wright struggled to understand the forces of the human psyche which propelled man to oppress his fellowmen. In other words, he sought philosophical and psychological explanations for the tragedy of racism. "Racism," he once said, "has almost become another kind of religion, a religion of the materially dispossessed, of the culturally disinherited."[3] Perhaps one is to deduce from this

statement that Wright saw men as needing rituals of some sort. But since the foregoing statement suggests the failure of a ritual, Christianity, which theoretically speaking, advocated the dignity and equality of man, Wright somehow suggests that men who are spiritually and materially impoverished have a greater liking for rituals which involve the sacrifice and oppression of their fellowmen, for such is what racism involves.

> When the Negro problem is raised, white men, for a reason which as yet they do not fully understand, feel panic, guilt, anxiety, tension; they feel the essential loneliness of their position which is built upon greed, exploitation, and a general denial of humanity; they feel the naked untenability of their split consciousness, their two-faced moral theories spun to justify their right to dominate. [4]

Elsewhere Wright prolongs his analysis of the idea of white racism being a new religion:

> ... this clinging to, and defense of, racism by Western whites are born of their psychological nakedness, of their having, through historical accident, partially thrown off the mystic cauls of Asia and Africa that once too blinded and dazed them.... What a poor substitute! What a shabby, vile and cheap home the white heart finds when it seeks a shelter in racism? [5]

In the statements about the psychological value of racism to those whites who practise it, Wright implies that there are certain needs in man which predispose him to vile pursuits like racism; therefore, he implies that racism originates in the tragic needs of the white man living in a society that does not offer him the opportunity

to sublimate his baser urges. Thus, the mature Wright sees racism as a result of the demystification of Western existence, as a ritual replacement of the religion which can no longer hold Western man spellbound and for which a substitute is necessary.

Although the foregoing are statements by the mature Wright, one can see the concepts they advance at work in his early fiction. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," Wright's first short story of artistic merit, the lynching of Bobo is described as a fertility ritual and its primary value is the gratification of the sadistic impulses of the mob that lynches him. A similar but more intense portrait of the brutality underlying racism is given in one of Wright's earliest poems, "Between the World and Me." If this interpretation is correct, then the demythicization of Western life, a seeming progress on the part of Western man, has resulted in the creation of a religion more barbarous than its predecessor, Christianity.

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* The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
into my bones.
The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering
into my flesh.
The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and
cigarettes glowed, the whore [illegible]ared the lip-
stick red upon her lips,
And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that
my life be burned....

"Between the World and Me," in Black Voices, ed. by Abraham Chapman (New York: The New American Library, 1968), p. 437. First published in Partisan Review, II (July-August, 1935), 18-19.

Emphasis on material comfort and the acquisition of material goods, "the lust for trash," Wright calls it,[6] is responsible, in part, for the black man's oppression, for the latter is perpetuated primarily for the material gains of the oppressor. As a sensitive black man who had already known the pains of material want, Wright, while still living in Chicago, observed how petty were the things for which his white co-workers yearned and concluded that[7]

> The essence of the irony of the plight of the Negro in America, to me, is that he is doomed to live in isolation, while those who condemn him seek the basest goals of any people on the face of the earth. Perhaps it would be possible for the Negro to become reconciled to his plight if he could believe that his sufferings were for some remote, high sacrificial end; but sharing the culture that condemns him, and seeing that a lust for trash is what blinds the nation to his claims, is what sets storms to roiling in his soul.

The analysis contained in the above passage led Wright to speculate that the dangerous members of society were not those who mercilessly exploited others for material gain but those who did not share the values of the American system, "for it is in them, though they may not know it, that a revolution has taken place and is biding its time to translate itself into a new and strange way of life."[8] There is over-optimism in the foregoing. Wright later modified that optimism. In "The Man Who Lived Underground," the protagonist, after

taking underground the articles of greatest material value--diamonds and dollar bills--to Western society and using them to decorate a cellar, hence divesting them of the great importance society attaches to them, ascends above ground and attempts to communicate the essential uselessness to which he has subjected the articles of wealth treasured by society. But the police officers to whom he attempts to communicate this discovery shoot him before he is able to do so, remarking, "you have to shoot this kind; they'd wreck things."[9] The owners of and seekers after wealth, therefore, employ various means to protect their possessions and desires and thus prevent themselves from ever ascertaining the basic emptiness of their material pursuits and dreams.

According to this story, one has to be cut off from the system, as the Negro is, and has to escape to the sewers where society's refuse runs, out of sight, to realise that those things the pursuit of which causes untold human misery are essentially worthless. The Negro discovering this wins only a temporary victory, for it is a lesson he learns but is unable to communicate. The lesson itself is learnt as a result of the tragedy of his own life--cut off as he is from the mainstream of American life--but is no mitigation of that tragedy.

One of the weapons used by whites in their oppression

of Negroes was the concept and all that derived from it of the purity of white womanhood, a concept which Wright and other writers, black and white alike, satirize. The implication is made in many of Wright's works that the barriers erected by white society to prevent miscegenation and the terror employed to enforce these barriers often function to make the white woman more sexually appealing to the black man. Because the white woman is a symbol of the unattainable, a preserve out of the reach of the black Southerner, the most potent reminder of his second-class status in America, violation of her by him becomes a desirable thing. Such an act symbolizes for the black man the attainment of his manhood, defiance of the greatest barrier placed in his way by the forces of white oppression and, in some cases, sheer vengeance. White obsession with the myth of the Negro's sexual prowess causes white women to be attracted to the black male and to seek him out. Invariably, in Wright's fiction, wherever the white woman and the black man come in close contact, tragedy results, for either she thinks that the Negro is about to rape her or the Negro, seized by the terror of what his plight would be should he be discovered alone with a white woman in such intimate circumstances, panics with far-reaching consequences. Saul Saunders, the protagonist in "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," is

aware that if you are alone with a white woman and she screamed it was as good as hearing your death sentence, for though you had done nothing, you would be killed."[10] Worse still, when he refuses to acknowledge the sexual overtures made towards him by a white woman and she screams, he batters her to death.[11] Wright's object in portraying tragedies like the one just alluded to, is, it would seem, to communicate to his white audience that more harm is done by the presence of laws which illegalize sexual encounters between black males and white females than from actual meetings between the two. Where these laws exist, an unnecessary amount of fear is generated each time the black male encounters the white female and that fear is sufficiently intense to create tragedy.

Lynching was the form of punishment meted out to the black man who violated the white laws regulating black sexuality. Reports of lynchings and actual lynchings were commonplace in Wright's Southern environment.[12] If Wright's character, Tyree, in The Long Dream, is representative of the way most Southern black folk think, then lynching was accepted as a way of life among black Southerners. Wright also saw lynching as one of the major symbolic acts of the injustice meted out to blacks in America. It connoted that the black man did not qualify for the judicial procedures spelled out by the American

Constitution for all Americans. Further, it was an indicator of the outsider role of black Americans in American society, since every civilized society takes upon itself the protection of its individual members. In 1945, in an argument with St. Clair Drake, a black sociologist with whom Wright and others were trying to work out the details of publication for a black journal, Wright is quoted as having said, in defiance of Drake's statement that blacks were not penalized because of their race, "I've never heard of a white man being lynched because his hair was red."[13] In other words, the practice of lynching the black male can be ascribed only to his racial difference. Elsewhere Wright is even more precise in expressing this conviction:

> Our boys come back to Dixie in uniform.... They have been in battle, have seen men of all nations and races die. They have seen what men are made of, and now they act differently. But the Lords of the Land cannot understand them. They take them and lynch them while they are still wearing the uniform of the United States Army.
> ... Our black boys do not die for liberty in Flanders. They die in Texas and Georgia. Atlanta is our Marne. Brownsville, Texas our Chateau-Thierry.
> ....
> "Don't lynch us," we plead.
> "You're not white," they say.[14]

In Southern American society, when blacks protest their lot, white plantation owners "preach the doctrine of White supremacy" to those poor whites who are eager to form mobs. Hysterically the mob seizes a black man, "innocent or

guilty," and "as a token, a naked and bleeding black body is dragged through the streets." The mob will ensure that this token death is publicized in black quarters.[15]

From his first to his last works of art lynching remained one of Wright's obsessions. Early experiences in his life having to do with lynching may have been responsible for this. When he was still a boy in Jackson, the brother of one of his school friends had been lynched for copulating with a white prostitute.[16] During this same period, he had accidentally chanced upon his female employer naked in her bedroom. Perhaps the warning he was given about this served to instill deep fears in him.[17]

In Black Boy there is a passage which retells a story Wright had heard about a Negro woman whose husband had been lynched by a white mob. "The woman took a shotgun, wrapped it in a sheet, and went humbly to the whites pleading permission to get her husband's body for burial." Once at his side, she unwrapped the shotgun and killed four whites before they realised what she was doing.[18] Wright goes on to explain that for him the story was emotionally true, "for I had already grown to feel that there existed men against whom I was powerless, men who could violate my life at will."[19] The impact of the story on Wright could be measured from the appearance of some

of its details in the actions of one of his characters, Aunt Sue, in "Bright and Morning Star."

Despair over the inability to exercise some degree of control over their lives is often the cause of tragedy for many of Wright's characters. Wright, though he strove to do otherwise, could never feel anything less than contempt for those blacks who resigned themselves to the inferior role forced upon them by white America. He was likewise contemptuous of those who resorted to religion as a palliative for the painfulness of their lives. Yet he was fully aware that any attempt on the part of blacks to challenge the system responsible for oppressing them would result in suicide. Few alternatives were available to blacks who wished to escape white oppression: one had to flee from it or kill the oppressor and be killed in return. These are, for the most part, the actions of his tragic heroes, and their actions illustrate their creator's conviction as he expressed it in 12 Million Black Voices: "If you act at all, it is either to flee or to kill; you are either a victim or a rebel."[20]

The controls placed by whites on the lives of blacks were extensive and covered virtually every aspect of black life. One of these was the denial of political and law-enforcing offices to blacks, thereby leaving them at the mercy of white politicians, law-makers and

law-enforcers. Since white people formed an estate and "race makes and marks the dividing line, and this must be the case so long as the superior stands in the presence of the inferior,"[21] blacks had no one to whom they could protest their unjust treatment.

> We cannot fight back; we have no arms, we cannot vote; and the law is white. There are no black policemen, black justices of the peace, black judges, black juries, black jailers, black mayors or black men anywhere in the governments of the South.[22]

The controls, Wright states, were extended even into the realm of education, where school facilities for blacks were vastly inferior to those for whites, despite the fact that blacks and whites were taxed equally for the support of these facilities.[23] In addition,

> in many states they edit the textbooks that our children study, for the most part deleting all references to government, voting, citizenship and civil rights. Many of them say that French, Latin and Spanish are not languages for us, and they become angry when they think we desire to learn more than they want us to.[24]

Denied justice, at the mercy of the white mob, Negroes had to evolve methods for survival in this hostile environment. Among the defense mechanisms they evolved for doing so was one of seeming compliance with the demands made by whites on their existence. What "we said" was always what "we thought" the whites would like to hear.[25] Each day Southern Negroes strove to maintain the kind of

behaviour most effective in allaying the fears and hatred of the "Lords of the Land." When questioned by a white man, no matter how innocent the question was, "some unconscious part" of the Southern Negro would listen attentively, not just to the obvious words but to those intonations of voice that indicated the answer sought by the white man. Never was the response "in terms of objective truth," rather it reflected "what the white man wanted to hear."[26]

Wright's childhood was affected by several experiences tragic in scope and brought about by white racism. These experiences are recorded in Black Boy. Many of them are found, in a modified form, in his fiction. In the case of Wright's own experiences with white racism, he could not, for fear of white brutality, react in a desirable and dignified manner. Many of his close relatives were also recipients of white brutality against blacks. Wright did not admire their refusal to fight back nor could he at first understand why they did not. What Wright did learn was that if Negroes living in the South attempted to obtain justice for the various acts of injustice meted out to them, whites intensified their brutality against them or simply murdered them. Wright therefore understood and imagined the tragedies that would have occured had he or others like him attempted

to redress their grievances. These imaginations he turned into works of fiction: "Because my environment was bare and bleak I endowed it with unlimited potentialities, redeemed it for the sake of my hungry and cloudy yearnings."[27]

Often Wright combines his Chicago and Mississippi experiences, as in the case of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist in Native Son. Bigger Thomas, Wright tells us in "How Bigger Was Born," is an amalgam of the Black Chicago youngsters with whom Wright worked one summer and several rebellious Negroes he knew in Mississippi.[28] Wright, himself afraid of white brutality in those days, envisaged that tragedy would overtake the Bigger Thomases of Mississippi, just as he predicted it would overtake the Chicago youths. His own character, Bigger Thomas, in Native Son, dies by the electric chair. Wright admits in Black Boy and in "How Bigger Was Born" that he experienced a certain amount of vicarious pleasure from the rebellious acts of the Chicago youths and the Bigger Thomases of Mississippi. The tragic quality of their lives could not be be contained from exploding into overt rebellion by fear of white brutality or ping pong balls given by white liberals to distract Negro youngsters from destroying white property.[29] These youngsters were destined to become victims of the law;

social conditions--economic deprivation and racial degradation--had already determined their destiny.[30]

> They were a wild, homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories and the electric chair of the state's death house.... The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all too clear destinies. I doubted if I should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here.[31]

Native Son was an attempt to portray this vision.

The fate of Bigger Thomas, death by the electric chair, not only was the result of a warped life but is symbolic of the punishments awaiting the victims of white racism. The electric chair functions in much the same way, symbolically that is, as mob violence, lynching or cold-blooded murder, all of which formed part of the tragic reality of Negro life.

Wright knew that there were blacks who defied the system and escaped the visitations of brutality common to those who did. However, it was likelier that a Negro who did this would be caught and killed. Hence, in his fiction Wright stuck closer to the reality of Negro life than to those chance and rare escapes that were not generally characteristic of the fate of the rebellious Negro. For this reason, Bigger Thomas does not escape after murdering Mary Dalton, although Wright knew of someone, Professor Matthews, who did murder a white woman,[32] and escaped after doing so. Thus, although details of

Professor Matthews' actions in murdering the white woman appear, in a modified form, in Bigger's murder of Mary. Bigger suffers, not Matthew's fate but the fate that Wright imagined, during his childhood days in Mississippi, was that of all blacks who dared to offend the white race.

The triumph of Professor Matthews over the white establishment of the South is offset by the brutal death of Uncle Hoskins, a murder undertaken because certain whites craved his saloon business, an example of how whites prevented blacks from successfully pursuing the American Dream. Uncle Hoskins was killed for failing to comply with white demands to sell his business and leave town. The murder of Wright's uncle was young Richard's first lesson on what happened to blacks who opposed the will of white folks. The character Tyree in Wright's last work of fiction, The Long Dream, bears many of the traits of Uncle Hoskins and suffers a similar fate.

Wright's interpretations of black and white relations and his reactions to them, as recorded in Black Boy, explain the rebellion and heroism which many of of his black characters display. Wright realized that heroism, when undertaken by blacks to free them from the shackles of white racism, could only lead to tragedy. As a writer, he never ceased to portray this fact. When Silas ("Long Black Song") pours out his venomous hatred for the white

race upon the white man who seduced his wife, when Dan Taylor ("Fire and Cloud") calls his whippers "poh white trash," when Mann ("Down by the Riverside") kills Heartfield rather than be killed by him and resists court-martial, when Sue ("Bright and Morning Star") outwits the law-enforcers and kills the Communist informer, much of the rebellion which Wright suppressed comes alive in fiction. Statements like, "I feared that if I clashed with whites I would lose control of my emotions and spill out words that would be the cause of my death,"[34] and "I was not made to be a resigned man; I had only a limited choice of action and I was afraid of them all,"[35] reveal the turmoil that Richard Wright at seventeen was enduring.

In his own way, Wright rebelled against the system of the South, first, by refusing to submit to his grandmother's religious blueprint for his life, his Aunt Addie's desire to use him for relief of her frustrations and his Uncle Tom's desire to whip him into conformity, all of which acts alienated him from those who were resident in the household. His second act of rebellion was theft, a violation of the ethical code, something he would not have done had his humanity been respected. This act earned him enough money to leave the deep South. Wright did not feel triumphant about this, for it reflected the the manner in which the racist system worked to the

detriment of the Negro's morality.

Suggested in the following is the kind of rebellion Wright would have liked to undertake against the white society and the consequences which would have accrued therefrom:

> I could fight the Southern whites by organizing with other Negroes as my grandfather had done. But I knew I could never win that way; there were many whites and there were but few blacks. They were strong and we were weak. Outright rebellion could never win. If I fought openly I would die and I did not want to die. News of lynchings were frequent.
>
> I could submit and live the life of a genial slave, but that was impossible.... I would rather have died than do that. [36]

The dilemmas related in this passage are the sources of tragedy for many of Wright's characters. Wright, therefore, endowed his characters with the tragic heroism that he himself was too timid to display. Like Fishbelly, in The Long Dream, his last creation, he escaped to the American North and from there to Paris.

The denial of the Negro's humanity, part of white America's overall concerted plan to use the Negro for economic ends, could only have had tragic repercussions. The refusal to recognize the Negro as an equal being functioned to make him an alien in the land of his birth; this situation had serious outcomes for black and white Americans alike. They are effectively portrayed in the tragedy of Bigger Thomas. Wright, in his non-fictional writings, gives the theoretical basis of Bigger's tragedy.

In the introduction Wright wrote to Black Metropolis he alludes to a quotation from William James:

> No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke or minded what we did ... and acted as if we were non-existent things a kind of rage would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest body tortures would be a relief, for these would make us feel that, however bad our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth to be unworthy of affection at all. 37

Wright's major preoccupation is with the place of the Negro in American society, the society which creates the Negro's desires but which denies him the means to satisfy them. The ideas in the foregoing passage by James are at the base of many of Wright's concepts concerning Negro life in America, for in most of his works he reveals Negro tragedy and all that is done to make the Negro's life a hellish one to be the result of social ostracism. More precisely, Wright saw a parallel between James' concept of the ostracized man and the American Negro. Wright states that the attention paid to the Negro comes in the form of rejecting him, and goes on to explain that 38

> the American Negro has come as near being the victim of a complete rejection as our society has been able to work out, for the dehumanized image of the Negro which white Americans carry in their minds, the anti-Negro epithets which white Americans carry on their lips, exclude the contemporary Negro ... as though he were kept in a steel prison, and does even those Negroes who are yet unborn. 39

This type of dehumanization underlies the processes which accounted for the majority of Chicago's South Side blacks having a sixth-grade education and sixty-five per cent of them earning their living through manual labour.[40] "The imposed conditions under which Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blueprints for the production of machines."[41]

"But the American Negro is a child of the culture that crushes him." In the same way that the white man wishes to be free, he too wants to be free. Negroes, with few exceptions, share the same ideals of justice, liberty and "the integrity of the individual."[42]

Unable to escape from sharing the dominant beliefs and goals of the white American civilization and yet fettered so that he cannot pursue them, the Negro becomes a boiling cauldron of frustration. His personality becomes "mangled" as any personality becomes distorted "when men are caught in the psychological trap of being emotionally committed to the living of a life of freedom which is denied them."[43] This set of contradictions creates the black Bigger Thomases of America.

For the American Negro racism is not just having to live with the restrictions placed on their lives; it involves the development of mechanisms to cope with these restrictions. Some of these mechanisms, Wright shows, are

in themselves tragic. There are, for instance, those blacks whose beliefs about the black race are modelled on those used by the white man in justification of his oppression of Negroes. Because the possession of wealth is a sign of success for all Americans, many blacks, seeing that the white man possesses wealth, consider imitation of all the white man's attitudes the correct thing to do. As a result such black men treat the members of their race in the same way that whites would treat them. Such attitudes, according to Wright, formed a central part of the black bourgeoisie's outlook. Material comfort and the respect of the white community were the major goals of the black bourgeoisie and no price seemed too high for payment in acquiring them. This class functioned as agents of white oppression and are shown by Wright in The Long Dream to intensify the misery of the black poor by taking from them their paltry earnings. Wright is not without insight into why the black bougeois behaved thus. It would seem that he was given an ultimatum by his white oppressors: either you help us repress the black masses or you suffer the results of our brutality. Wright's character, Rev. Dan Taylor, in "Fire and Cloud," opposes such an ultimatum, allies himself with the people and triumphs over the opposition of the white community. Tyree and Doctor Bruce,

both characters in The Long Dream, act otherwise. But, despite their alliance with the whites, both are in the end victims of white oppression. Never, Wright shows, can the black bourgeois ever feel like a man, for every detail of his life is calculated not to antagonize the white community, and that meant, among other things, their participation in keeping the black community in a position where it could be easily exploited by the white man.

Wright had a first-hand knowledge of the black bourgeois' attitude towards the black poor. This knowledge he acquired while working for various black insurance companies and undertaking establishments in Chicago. He had seen how these companies defrauded their policy-holders, and even he had been made to participate in such a swindle. Ironically, these swindlers were the leaders in the Negro community.[44] In a novel that he never published Wright also noted that Negro companies manufacturing bleaching creams and hair straightening compounds were perpetrators of "sociological and biological suicide."[45]

Wright, as his portrait of Tyree (The Long Dream) shows, believed that the possession of material wealth did not earn the Negro his humanity. In the American South, in particular, material wealth, when possessed by the Negro,

made him a more visible target for white hostility, for a wealthy Negro is more inclined to step out of the place white Southerners had created for blacks. When a black man became wealthy in the American South it somehow revealed that he had triumphed over the barriers that white Southern society had placed in his way; therefore white Southerners were especially uncomfortable about the presence of wealthy blacks among them.

Negro self-hatred was perhaps the most tragic product of white racism, if one subscribes to the theory that a man is only as good as he conceives himself to be. If one hates one's self one is therefore at war with himself. According to Wright, the Negro could not evade self-hate:

> Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in turn to hate in himself that which others hated in him. But pride would make him hate his self-hate, for he would not want whites to know that he was so thoroughly conquered by them that his whole life was conditioned by their attitude; but he could not help but hate those who evoked his self-hate in him.[46]

Each part of the black man's day is consumed by this internal war; much of his energy is spent attempting to control his unruly emotions.[47] In Lawd Today, Wright's protagonist, Jake Jackson, is fashioned to portray the the existence that someone suffering from self-hate and race-hate leads. Jake is one of those who are "less able to see and judge the objective world; he [is]

continuously at war with reality."[48] By emulating white attitudes, Jake's lifestyle is designed primarily to gain white acceptance. His life is a never-ending bankruptcy, for to emulate the white man, Jake must drown those sordid details of his life which are not a part of the daily reality of white life. Jake's need to be accepted by the white world inhibits him from ever getting angry at his white boss, so he transfers his anger to his wife whom he beats when he awakens and before he goes to sleep.

Wright's works are forceful in their assertion that white racism operated to rid the Negro of any control over his destiny. Moreover, "oppression seems to hinder and stifle those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor."[49] An arid existence was all that white America wanted the Negro to have, and bleak indeed was the life of most Negroes. But against this bleakness the Negro had to fortify himself. Many Negroes dealt with their oppression by refusing to struggle against it, that is to say, they accepted it. Such an attitude, the opposite of Wright's own, saved many blacks from "the daily horror of anxiety, of tension and eternal disquiet."[50] Wright summed up Negro life as "a sprawling land of unconscious suffering, and there were but few Negroes who knew the meaning of their

lives, who could tell their story."[51]

Wright felt that whenever those blacks who for the moment were repressing their oppression became conscious of it, trouble would result, for either they killed themselves or their oppressors. Partly to illustrate this point, Wright told the story of a black co-worker who drank excessively to drown his frustrations, but who, nevertheless, proclaimed one day that he had a solution for the race problem--give every man a gun and five bullets and let those who triumphed from the slaughter rule. In response to his proposition, Wright states that he had "never met a Negro who was so irredeemably brutalized. [He] stopped pumping [his] ideas into [this man's] brain for fear that the fumes of alcohol might send him reeling toward some fantastic fate."[52]

To Wright, black life was a prison. For the black man to see things in perspective, he had to break out of this prison, for as long as he remained in the Black Belt the white world existed for him only as a shadow world. This is one of the central themes of Wright's short story, "The Man Who Killed a Shadow." For Wright, the Communist Party, during the time he was a member of it, offered the escape he needed from the prison of ghetto life. This need often impelled the black man to abdicate whatever dignity he had not yet been robbed of by racism.

Wright noted this in 1936 at the trial of a black Communist, Ross Poindexter, by fellow Communists in Chicago. Ross was charged with "ideological factionalism" and "class collaborationist attitudes,"[53] all of which meant that he was inclined towards "black nationalism."[54] Since Ross supported a line which the Party did not advocate he was guilty. Wright was alarmed at this black man's inability to cherish his beliefs, "his personality, his sense of himself, had been obliterated."[55] Such absence of will, as Wright saw in Ross and other black Communists, he attributes to "the blindness of their limited lives--lives truncated and impoverished by the oppression they had suffered long before they had ever heard of Communism."[56]

It was Wright's conviction that he was entitled to his beliefs that forced him to break with the Party. Wright was grateful that he had his art to sustain him, for he knew that for many Negroes only the self-abasement to some movement like the Communist Party or the escape from reality such as is found in alcholism that keeps them sane.

Through the vehicle of literature, Wright claimed that he would reveal to the black man the sources of his unconscious suffering; he would become a voice for the "voiceless ones, not because [he] wanted to, but because [he] felt [he] had to if [he] were to live at all."[57] Even in

1960, the year of his death, Wright maintained that writing was his way of keeping alive; he felt spiritual emptiness when not working on a manuscript; writing for him was "like psychoanalysis to others"--it was an outlet for "the poison" in his system.[58]

Wright's art is therefore inseparable from his suffering as a Negro and the suffering of Negro Americans in general. Though Wright, in the opinion of many critics, did not succeed in giving the whole picture of black life, he nevertheless aspired to do that. In cases where he felt he lacked specific knowledge of black life he took the means necessary to correct it, for example, his probing, before writing Native Son, of the extensive sociological studies available on Negro life in Chicago.

Wright took upon himself the task of being a spokesman for the Negro race. David Littlejohn thinks he succeeded in being merely a spokesman for himself. Because many of Wright's predictions pertaining to black revolt have been fulfilled, and since contemporary social science supports many of his claims regarding the damage inflicted by racism on black Americans, one has to agree that he was not just a spokesman but a perceptive analyst of the

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* "Wright was never able to see himself, or other men, or the Negro problem or anything else except in the shape of the fixed abstractions of his moral myth." Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1966), p. 104.

of the pathology of racism. At the same time, however, Wright's emphasis on making his works vehicles for the revelation of American racism, since he frequently chose not to couch his analyses in literary metaphors, and when he does so interprets them for his audience, mars the effectiveness of his art and limits the scope of his vision. Of this last fact no one was more aware than Wright himself. Only when the Negro, he claimed, ceases to be a Negro and possesses the rights of universal man can the black man's writing reflect the concerns of universal man.[59] For the time being, "we [black men] write out of what life gives us in the form of experience."[60]

CHAPTER II

TRAGEDIES OF THE RURAL AMERICAN SOUTH

Except for the story "Fire and Cloud" in the volume, Uncle Tom's Children, each of Wright's protagonists in these tales comes to a tragic death. The setting for the stories is the American South and each tale is based on an instance where the will of the Negro clashes with Southern white restrictions on Negro life. Eleanor Roosevelt called Uncle Tom's Children a book about the tragedy of fear,[1] and the stories justify this interpretation. Central to the action in these tales are the Negro's lack of rights and the refusal of the Southern white community to respect the Negro's humanity.

Violence characterizes the tales--violence sometimes inflicted by frustrated Negroes upon whites or violence meted out by whites to those Negroes who are threatening to step out of the circumscribed life that had been established for them. "The violence comes with such unrelenting directness, in such unbroken and unrelieved totality, that the community becomes nothing more or less than organized insanity."[2] Responsible for engendering much of this violence is the fact that "Southern whites saw blacks as a peculiar race who had to live apart from the

rest of mankind."[3]

Wright maintained, up to the point of his death, that "the reality of Negro life in the South was horror."[4] This horror, unmitigated, is effectively portrayed in the stories of Uncle Tom's Children. The brutality which Southern whites were always ready to visit upon Negroes and which led Wright to remark once, "when I am down South I want steel between me and these white folks,"[5] is what these tales are bent on revealing. Wright's own reason for writing these tales, recorded in a manuscript copy of a preface intended for the original publication of Uncle Tom's Children, is: "I had been seeking for an efficient way and manner to project my will into the manifold conditions under which Negroes are forced to live."[6]

The characters in these tales are not in anyway geniuses or individuals favoured by chance in some unusual hereditary way; they are prosaic blacks, all, in one way or another, deprived, all seeking their human worth from a society that refuses to let them have it. "In none of these stories do [the] heroes act out of a sense of consciously arrived ideology ... but rather out of an innate repressed longing for freedom."[7]

In "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star" there are implications that the black community could defeat white racism by allying itself with oppressed workers of

of the white race. Although the last two stories were written partly with the intention of glorifying the mission of the Communist Party--freeing the oppressed--Communist dogma in them assumes secondary importance to black action. Communists are shown, particularly in "Fire and Cloud," to be ignorant of the precarious nature of the black man's existence, especially when that black man finds himself bargaining with leaders of the white community for essentials for the black community. In "Bright and Morning Star," while the central characters hope for relief from racial oppression through Communism, they are shown, nevertheless, to be vulnerable to betrayal from having allied themselves with Communists. Blacks, however, should attempt to foster a united front within the black community before allying themselves with the Communists. In both of these stories the black characters are members of the Communist Party because, through it, they hope to triumph over white racism. Here Wright was portraying an aspect of his own life. In a letter dated August 21, 1955 to Ed Aswell, his editor, Wright wrote: "As anyone could easily guess, I was a Communist because I was a Negro. The Communist Party was the only road out of the Black Belt for me."[8] When explaining why he left the Communist Party Wright made the following allusion to "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star:"

> I remembered the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honour and glory to the Communist Party, and I was glad that they were down in black and white, were finished. For I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write this way again.... [9]

The central characters in the tales of Uncle Tom's Children are different from the traditional Southern "nigger," the "Uncle Toms" who accepted white restraints on their humanity. Here they fight back. According to white expectations of blacks, Negroes were not supposed to fight back; those who were called "good" were those who accepted as right whatever suited the white man's whims and fancies. For those Negroes who thought differently and who revealed their thoughts in their actions tragedy resulted.

2

"Big Boy Leaves Home" depicts the tragedy of both blacks and whites living in a community in the American South. The emphasis of the story is on the brutal, ravaging force employed by whites against the black community. Here, innocent defiance of the white man's code, an act which is interpreted by the white community as the black man trying to get out of his "place," elicits the harshest form of brutality possible, death. The sexual prowess of the black male, in itself a myth, is shown to

prompt the defenders of white womanhood to alleviate fears of it by resorting to deadly force.

Wright shows that sadistic urges are partly what impel Southern whites to make victims of black men. In this sense, therefore, the black man's tragedy results from the white man's attempt to satisfy his baser urges. But, to the extent that the white man derives his pleasure from lynching members of the black community, it is not the white man's tragedy, for, under these circumstances, he can never come to understand the forces causing him to act thus.

But that the practice of lynching is permitted by any community is itself a tragic reflection on that community. Civilized societies do not allow their members such pleasures; they feel called upon to defend their weakest members against those individuals who derive pleasure from the infliction of pain on others and from the decreeing of who should or should not live. Since the white American South exposed the black race to the desires of its sadists, in fact encouraged its white citizens to lynch blacks so as to relegate the latter, by way of terror, to a position of servitude, this story is implicitly calling it barbarous.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" relates the tragedy of four innocent black boys who had no intentions of threatening Southern White Supremacy and are only vaguely aware of

their position as blacks in the American South. They contribute to their tragedy by merely executing a simple urge to swim in a white man's creek.

Wright amplifies the horror of the story through the use of pastoral imagery right up to the point where the white woman appears at the creek. Images reflecting the man-made, for example, the movement of the boys from the wood to the cleared pasture, are generally used, in a manner reminiscent of William Blake-- the movement from innocence to experience--, to portray an innocent situation that will culminate in white brutality. The use of foreshadowing, a device Wright is fond of employing, is also quite noticeable in the tale.

In the first few pages of the story, the emphasis is on the boys' innocence and on foreshadowing their doom. Wright also reveals in these pages that the boys are aware of, though not bothered by, white restrictions on black life. They are at first on an aimless journey which takes them "out of the woods into cleared pasture." Woods, because they provide shelter and often contain the unknown, are an archetypal symbol of innocence. Cleared pasture, the environment altered by man, is symbolic of the disillusioned mind. The cleared pasture can also be seen as symbolic of the race taboos and restrictions created by the white man, of which the boys

will soon be victims.

Through the boys' search for a word to rhyme with "hall," words which reflect the story's theme are introduced: "fall," "wall," "quall." Fall is an apt word, for the whole story is the depiction of a fall from innocence to tragedy. The word fall even operates to evoke in the mind of the reader the primal fall, itself the result of a necessary disobedience. (The boys' tragedy comes from disobeying the injunctions of the white society, by significantly venturing onto white property.) The use of Edenic images--hovering butterflies, sweet-scented honeysuckle and droning bees--functions to create the scene for a fall. The white woman whose fear brings about the boys' death is not wholly unlike Eve in the Genesis story. (The latter brought about the tragedy of man, the former that of Big Boy's colleagues.) Even the image of the serpent in the original story finds itself into this one. Big Boy, who triumphs over this situation, significantly kills the serpent which neither Adam nor Eve, primal man, could. The symbolic value of the word wall is to be found in the united effort of the white community to lynch Big Boy and Bobo. It is a wall which cannot be surmounted, from which one had to hide to avoid being burnt to death. The word quail represents nothing in particular, signifies the unknown into which

the boys are venturing. Their hopes of swimming in the creek, undiscovered, and their refusal to believe, emotionally, that their action will evoke white brutality are naive. Quall, therefore, stands for the unknown, inconceivable brutality awaiting these innocent youngsters.

Through their conversations the boys are portrayed as poised between illusion and reality. Jestingly, they acknowledge that their going to the creek can result in their being lynched. But the fact that they go to the creek shows that they do not take their intuitions seriously, that they regard their intuitions as something belonging to a legend. Hence, they are depicted with their shoulders on the earth (fallibility) with the sun (reality) shining down on them, into their face.

Even the boys' calling Big Boy crazy goes beyond the simple circumstances that results in his being described thus. It is Big Boy who, when the boys hesitate for fear of what might happen to them should they be caught in the creek, encourages them to discard their fears. Only a crazy "nigger" will atempt to defy a white man in "Dixie"; by attempting to do this, however innocently, Big Boy is crazy. His craziness goes even further: when a black man ventures out of "place," he takes the resulting white brutality as his punishment for having done so. Big Boy violates this custom. Jim, old man Harvey's son,

10

and defender of white womanhood, kills two of Big Boy's colleagues in response to his fiancée's cries, but is finally overpowered and killed by Big Boy. Thus, Big Boy displays the courage which most blacks did not possess, the courage to fight back.

Big Boy is sufficiently insightful to know that the creek is out of bounds. When the proposition is made, his response is that going there is reason enough to get lynched. Even in their seeming innocence, these youngsters have already learnt the lines which, as blacks, they are not supposed to cross. Here Big Boy knows that the price for violating this convention might be as severe as a brutal loss of life. But the desire to swim triumphs over the fear (if it is real fear and not merely talk) of being lynched.

The image of the barbed wire fence is a poignant one; it is a demarcation and as such is intended to protect the property from undesirables. The fact that the boys climb over it reveals that they are trespassing. Having done so, Big Boy, the obvious leader of the group, is shown whistling with his eyes half-closed. He has abandoned that watchfulness which every member of the black race must exercise when he lives among Southern whites. The knowledge Big Boy earlier displayed about the plight of Negroes who defied the wishes of the white man no longer guides his

actions.

But in a wrestling match that takes place between the boys, Wright, as Edward Margolies notes,[11] reveals that Big Boy, because of his pragmatism and his being favoured by chance, will triumph. He is bigger and stronger than the others, and he himself exclaims, "Ahma smart nigger,"[12] his judgement on the strategy he used for defeating the other boys in the wrestling match. Pride, however, triumphs over pragmatism when Big Boy, despite his awareness of the dire consequences that could result from swimming in the creek, chooses nevertheless to do so. His action is a violation of Hervey's "no trespassin'" sign which means "ain no dogs n niggers erllowed."[13] And this is done in spite of Bobo's warning that Hervey took "a shot at Bob fer swimming here."[14]

But the youngsters' ignoring of Hervey's wish is given a certain inevitability: they do not have a place in which to swim. Had they, it is implied, they would not have ventured onto Hervey's property:

> "Ah wish we hada place to swim in."
>
> "The white folks got plenty swimming pools n we ain got none."
>
> "Ah useta swim in the ol Mississippi when we lived in Vicksburg."[15]

Here Wright implies that the tragedies which are

portrayed in this story are partly the result of racial inequality. In effect, Wright is portraying an instance where public facilities do not exist for Negroes and because of this fact, they are forced to trespass onto the white man's property to satisfy a need. Wright seems to be implying, then, that if the community deprives a minority group of public facilities, that minority group will be forced to defy the community.

When that minority group is Negro and lives in the American South defiance can be quite costly, can be profoundly tragic. When the boys rise up from the water they are greeted by a white woman's "OH." In all their innocence, connoted by the various pastoral scenes, these adolescents are confronted by the greatest race taboo of white Southerners. The woman's shout, as is expected, exasperates the youngsters; instinctively they cover their groins. These boys know that their nakedness, not their presence at the creek, is what most astounds the white woman. At this point they can only think of flight. To escape, however, they must get their clothes.

What happens next reveals something about the psychology of the Southern white woman. The woman screams for Jim. But does she scream because she is terrified of four naked youngsters whom she ought to know, granted the circumstances

under which she discovers them, are merely bathing in the creek? If she were really scared of them, would she stand next to the tree where the youngsters' clothes lie? Something, it would seem, impels her towards a confrontation with them: "The woman, her eyes wide, her hand over her mouth backed away to the tree where their clothes lay in a heap."[16] When Big Boy tells her that they want their clothes, an indirect way of saying: "Lady we only want to get away from here, we do not want any trouble," she moves even closer to the tree. By remaining rooted to the spot, she seems determined to want the boys to approach her in their nakedness, and in this way, perhaps, to impress others with the idea that they had come to rape her. Her frequent yelling for Jim somehow indicates that she is in distress. The details of the story show that the distress is her own, resulting from her own emotional reaction to the naked Negro youngsters, not the result of anything the boys did or threatened to do to her. Wright therefore intimates, in the portrait of this woman's encounter with the black boys, that the myth of the black male's uncontrolled sexuality towards white women is in part a wish-fulfillment on the part of whites, for the white woman here is setting herself up for a sexual confrontation with the black youngsters.[18]

When Jim appears and, without asking any questions, begins shooting at the youngsters, a callous brutality on

the part of the white man towards blacks is displayed, and the essential meaning of the "no trespassing " sign, as Bobo interpreted it earlier, becomes clear. The lives of Negroes are here revealed to be as cheap as those of dogs. Shoot them now, ask questions later is the attitude displayed here. Here Wright shows that the idea of Negroes being human beings with legal rights never enters Jim's mind.

An innocent, trivial violation of a white man's "No Trespassing" sign results in the cold-blooded shooting of two black youngsters. As Edward Margolies notes,

> Wright sets up a situation whose simplicity and innocence ring a nostalgic appeal in the reader and then jars the reader into a sense of horror when he comes to realize what such a situation could mean if Negroes are involved. [18]

Shooting one and then two does not satisfy Jim; he wants to kill them all. But Wright's characters here become radical; of necessity, they fight back. Both Bobo and Big Boy kill Jim. The violence that he had used upon their comrades and would have used on them, had they not fought back, is turned upon him. This is a radical departure from conventional black/white relationships. Black resignation to white subjugation, that is, remaining in one's place, is what Big Boy challenges, albeit innocently. In the actions elicited from the white man for having trespassed on his property one sees a total disrespect for the sanctity of black life; in Big Boy's and Bobo's

wrestling with the white man the affirmation is made that their lives are just as valuable as his, and if killing him was necessary to preserve their own, they would; and they did. For this reason, Big Boy is more than "a poor victim of brutality" and more than "a victim only."[19] He challenges white inhumanity towards blacks and refuses to abide by the white code which deemed death for those blacks who ventured too far out of their "places."

With the death of Jim and the deaths of Buck and Lester, tragedies are generated for both the black and white community: the young woman loses her husband and the black community loses two of its youngsters, and the possibility looms that two others will be lynched.

"The subsequent hunt of Big Boy and Bobo by the whites is like the hunt for an animal."[20] Big Boy's terror is contrasted against the anticipated amusement the white hunters hope to obtain from lynching him. Big Boy and his family, as well as the black community, know that the price for such a monumental challenge to white supremacy is lynching, and that the only chance of survival lies in escaping from the South. Big Boy cannot stay around and fight for his life in a court of law; such did not exist for rebellious Negroes. He is not an American; he is a Negro. In this Southern community what the mob decrees is what befalls him; his trial is conducted by those who would be baffled

by the word jurisprudence and are wholly incapable of grasping its concepts, especially in relation to Negroes.

The prelude to the lynch scene and the lynching itself contain one of Wright's greatest indictments of whites living in the American South. They further contain various implications about the psychological forces which inspire Southern whites to create and maintain a tragic and oppressive existence for blacks. Communal sadism is one of the most visible aspects of this portrait. The hunting party is not portrayed as being angry because Big Boy had killed a white man; rather when anger is displayed, it is in response to the disappointment the mob will suffer if the search fails to find the victim and thus deprives them of a black body to lynch:

"Yuh reckon they git erway?"

"Ah dunno. Its hard t tell."

"Gawddam them sonofabitchin niggers!"

"We oughta kill ever black bastard in this country."

"Waal Jim got two of em, anyhow!"

"But Bertha said there wus fo!"

"Where in hell they hidin?"

"She said one of em wus named Big Boy, or somethin like tha."

"We went t his shack lookin fer im."

"Yeah?"

"But we didnt fin im.... We looked all thu the

shack n couldnt fin hide ner hair of im. Then we drove the ol woman n man out n set the shack on fire."

"Jesus: Ah wished Ah coulda been there!"

"Yuh shoulda heard the ol nigger woman howl!" [21]

The tone of this conversation is one of frolic and disappointment. The conversants here are depicted as being blood-thirsty. There is pleasure to be had from killing "niggers." Even if they do not find Big Boy and Bobo, they content themselves momentarily with the thought that Jim had gotten two of the boys (the irony is that two of them had gotten Jim). But they "oughta kill ever black bastard in this country," a desire which shows the extent to which white Southerners are threatened by the presence of the black man in America and the wish they sometimes entertain for ridding themselves of the menace. Human suffering--in this case it is restricted to Negroes--is a source of pleasure for these white characters. Disappointed that they did not find Big Boy at his parents' house, they set the house on fire. The pleasure obtained from witnessing the suffering this act causes is conveyed in the exclamation: "Yuh shoulda heard the ol nigger woman howl!" The other character is disappointed at not being there to witness the brutal act. This, then, is sadism; it is human beings inflicting suffering on other human beings and experiencing pleasure from the

victim's pain.

The statement by one of the non-descript white characters that if the boys "git erway notta woman in this town would be safe,"[22] prepares the audience, among other things, for the lynch scene. From the actual details of the story no evidence exists to prove that white women are in anyway endangered by the black man's presence. The reverse is true: because white women are terrified of black men, the lives of the latter are in danger, since the defenders of white womanhood move swiftly to end the lives of those black men of whom white women are unjustifiably fearful.

The defense of white womanhood soon gives way to the ecstasy the mob hopes to enjoy from lynching one or both boys:

> "Say what's tha yuh got?"
>
> "Er pillar."
>
> "Fer whut?"
>
> "Feathers fool!"
>
> "Chris! Thisll be hot if we kin ketch them niggers!"
>
> "Ol Anderson said he wus bringa barrela tar!"
>
> "Ah got some gasoline in mah car if yuh need it."[23]

It is blood-chilling to know that the enthusiasm expressed in these statements is over anticipated gratification from roasting a human being alive. Obviously,

these characters care little for the sanctity of human life, as long as that life is black life. In this case, white womanhood, which they claim their actions are deemed to protect, is a rationalization invented to couch a bigger and reprehensible need, the need to revel in human pain. (In Wright's short story, "Man of All Work," Mr. Fairchild attempts to seduce his black maid and thereby arouses the jealousy of his wife who shoots her. However, when to their surprise, they discover that the maid is a man disguised as a woman, Mr. Fairchild decides that he can solve his wife's dilemma by resorting to the concept of white womanhood:

> "Anne, Burt, listen, ... I've got it solved. It's simple. This nigger put on a dress to work his way into my house to rape my wife! Ha! See? I shot 'im in self-defense, shot 'im to protect my honor, my home.... I was protecting white womanhood.... Any jury'll free me on that." 24)

In "Big Boy Leaves Home," the actual lynching, when the search party captures Bobo, is, as Dan McCall notes, "much more than a desire to punish, is a desire to enjoy."[25] Wright portrays the lynch scene in the images and rhythms of the sex act and even shows it to be a festive gathering:

> There were women singing now. Their voices made the song round and full. Song waves rolled over the top of the pine trees. The sky sagged low, heavy with clouds. Wind was rising. Sometimes cricket cries cut surprisingly across the mob song. A dog had gone to the utmost top of the hill. At each lull of the song, his howl floated into

the night.[26]

In delineating the lynch scene thus, Wright accords lynching the ability to provide, for the white characters, emotional release similar to what one derives from sexual orgasm. There is satire in such a portrait, for in a sexual encounter, both participants share the pleasure. Here, however, the white mob experiences gratification, the Negro youngster indescribable torture. He is not a willing participant, and therefore this is rape, rape of a human life by the worst methods of torture ever conceived by the human mind.

In a manner not unlike a Dionysian frenzy, the lynch mob dismembers Bobo:

> "Look, hes gotta finger!"
>
> ...
>
> "Hes got one of his ears, see?"
>
> "Whuts the matter?"
>
> "A woman fell out. Fainted, Ah reckon!"[27]

At this point, the climax is attained: "the sky was black" (moisture-laden), "and the wind was blowing hard." The fire--symbolic perhaps of the group's hatred for the black race--is at this moment unleashed onto Bobo's body. "The flames leaped as tall as trees." A short while later the ground becomes slippery;[28] the pleasure has ended.

In a Greek legend, where human sacrifice was once thought to appease the angry gods, such scenes of horror are not encountered. In twentieth century America, to see the need for human sacrifice dominating human lives and taking its victims from the community of mankind, is nightmarish. That this story is based on actual incidents that plague black life, is not art for art's sake, is even more disconcerting.*

The remainder of the story gives the details of Big Boy's escape and confirms what is intimated at the beginning of the story, that Big Boy is favoured by chance. It is only through luck that he escapes, for if Bobo had not been caught, the bloodhounds would have discovered Big Boy. In fact, he has to kill one of them before he eventually escapes. Big Boy's luck rests only in the fact that he escapes being lynched, for the fact that he has to flee to Chicago is a tragic one. A young adolescent, he needs parental support, a fact which is evinced when, after killing the white man, Big Boy can only think of running home to his parents in the hope

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* The story is based on an event in the life of Ross Poindexter, a black member of the Communist Party in Chicago at the time when Wright was a member (1933-36). Wright, in The God That Failed, ed. by Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), p. 133.

that they will extricate him from the trouble into which he has fallen. Fleeing to Chicago means giving up home, family and friends, means cutting off the social roots that sustained him, means the brutal implantation in a society which is altogether alien to him.

One could not escape the tragedy inherent in threatening even the mildest facet of white supremacy rule in the American South if one were an average youngster; one had to be a "Big Boy," had to possess the strength and skill necessary to outwit the monstrosities of a brutal environment, and even this must be abetted by a bit of luck. Wright extends the monstrous nature of the whites inhabiting the American South to creatures like the dog and snake, both of which Big Boy, through his cunning and physical strength, defeats. From the white mob, however, he must successfully hide to avoid a certain death. But even all this is not enough, for the black community must devise a way for his escape, and Will has to be taking a shipment of goods to Chicago-- a fortunate occurence-- for the whole escape to be effected. The reader must also bear in mind that the only success here is Big Boy's escape from the lynch mob. Such an escape costs his parents their house which is burned by the mob. The mob loses nothing,

except perhaps a double lynching. The desires of its members are satiated by lynching Bobo.

Big Boy's tragedy and that of his friends can be imputed to three reasons. The first of these is the abhorrent need, found in some human beings, to be gratified by scenes of human torture. These desires are fulfilled when the society is brutal enough to allow its citizens to become victims. The second aspect of Negro tragedy here, related to the first, is that of simply being Negro, that is, possessing physical traits which make one distinctly different from members of the oppressing group and which are used as a basis for branding him as a species of human beings inferior to that of the dominant group. Consequently, he can be seized by members of the domineering group and used for those sacrificial ends for which a member of the power-wielding group cannot be legitimately used. The third reason lies in the hegemony, achieved through the imposition of intolerable controls on Negro existence, that whites maintain on black life. Such tyrannizing power is used to stifle many manifestations of black humanity, for example, the denial of the Negro's right to have access to public facilities; in this case, swimming pools.

Wright's motive for writing Black Boy can be equally applied to this story as well as others in the volume:

> ... the main desire was to render a judgement on my environment. That judgement is: the environment of the South is too small to nourish human beings. Some may escape the general plights and grow up, but it is a matter of luck and I think it should be a matter of plan.[29]

In "Down by the Riverside," Mann's tragedy is not solely the responsibility of white brutality; it is, to a large extent, due to the flood. But Wright seems to have used the flood and the problems it creates to show that Mann could triumph over the forces of nature but not over white racism which does not relent even in those times when both races are equally threatened. Such natural phenomena tended to amplify, it would seem, the vicious nature of whites towards Negroes.

That the story as a whole emerges less brutal than the other tragedies of Uncle Tom's Children is due to Wright's inept handling of the material rather than any conscious attempt on his part to reveal that the tragedy of black Southern existence is further compounded by the disastrous forces of nature. From Wright's own theory about calamities which affect both blacks and whites, we know that in these instances white hostility towards blacks lessens.[30] That the flood here exacerbates white hatred of blacks reveals that, for Wright, Southern whites were exempt from this inclination.

The White world of "Down by the Riverside" remains, like in Wright's other predominantly Negro fiction, a shadow world, contemptuous of black humanity, without warmth or compassion for black suffering and without any respect for black life. Even when blacks, through heroic efforts, save the lives of whites, their actions are regarded as expected of them and require no special recognition.

The tragedy of Mann, because it is shown to be partly his fault--his materialist preoccupations, precisely the desire to be the first to begin tilling the land after the flood waters have receded, motivate him to refuse rescue help when the flood waters were less threatening--is more in line with universal depictions of human tragedy than are Wright's other portraits in Uncle Tom's Children.

Wright does not succeed in conveying the brutal image that he wishes to give of Heartfield. In Wright's vision of race relations, Heartfield's action, one is to interpret it, reflects Southern white America's cheap estimation of Negro life, reflects the attitude: "if a 'nigger' threatens you kill him." But the event of the moment, a threatening flood, and subsequent events reveal Heartfield's need for his boat. In his desperation to recover his boat and move his family, if he could, to safety, Heartfield is liable to take any action he deems

necessary. Wright's point is severly undercut by the prevailing circumstances.

White brutality is successfully portrayed in other instances. When, for example, the white nurse laughs as Granny, Pee Wee and Mann express their sorrow following the pronouncement of Lulu's death, Wright successfully conveys that either she experiences surprise at the expression of sorrow by blacks for a dead relative or that she sees the emotional suffering of blacks to be devoid of human seriousness, either of which points to her contempt for black humanity. The detention of Mann by the white soldiers is equally brutal, for though he protests that he is grief-stricken over his wife who has just died, they do not consider this a valid reason to let him go. Instead, he is forced to work on the levee.

There is a touch of the heroic in Mann's killing of Heartfield. If Mann attributed racism to Heartfield's motive for attempting to kill him, then Mann, by killing Heartfield rather than being killed by him, is asserting his right to defend himself against racism. In his action, therefore, he is like Big Boy, Silas and Aunt Sue, heroes in the other stories. But having shot Heartfield, Mann's plight becomes that of Big Boy: how to flee the scene before his murder of the white man is discovered. Consequently, Mann's killing of Heartfield is as tragic as it is heroic.

Since Mann cannot escape because of the military regulation of all life within the threatened community, he has no choice but to face his plight.

Mann, though, is given an opportunity to destroy all testimony of his murder of Heartfield. Wright presents him with a chance to murder Mrs. Heartfield and her two children. In Mann's readiness to slay Mrs. Heartfield and her children, Wright shows that the black man who is already a victim of racism can come to hold white life cheaply if such a stance is necessary for his own preservation.

When Mann is robbed of his opportunity to destroy Mrs. Heartfield and her children because of the sudden tilting of the house and the appearance of the boat's pilot, he pushes his desire aside and amiably rescues Mrs. Heartfield and children. When they arrive at the camps for those who have been evacuated, Mrs. Heartfield, as is natural of any woman whose husband had been killed by a man who stole his boat (Mrs. Heartfield does not know that Mann did not steal the boat), reports the incident to the military officers and Mann is sentenced to be court-martialled. Perhaps Wright intended the audience to feel that Mann should have been shown some mercy because of his heroic efforts in saving the lives of several people at the Red Cross hospital. The story does not provide

enough evidence to warrant this. What reflects racism is the white mob's willingness to lynch Mann. Perhaps, too, a more detailed trial should have been undertaken before Mann's sentencing.

Therefore, the tragedy in this story seems to lie elsewhere, in the fact that the black community can only relate to the white community in terms of brutal force, in the fact that blacks know that whites are incapable of understanding black violations of laws against white property on purely humanitarian grounds, in the fact that whites never give offending blacks enough time to state their reasons. If this were not the case, Mann would have had no cause to flee from Heartfield when in his attempt to reach the Red Cross hospital he chances upon his house, and Heartfield would not have had to shoot at Mann with the result that Mann shoots back and kills him. Mann's death at the end of the story and Heartfield's death are needless tragedies. In a climate where race hate did not reach such proportions, where people did not have to be white to be full-fledged human beings such killings would not have occured.

4

The hero of "Long Black Song" epitomizes the existential tragedy of the socially aspiring black man living in the

American South. The story is centred around the tragic frustrations engendered by the racial oppression which the Negro endures and the extreme and often fatal resolutions he undertakes to resolve them. Although no dramatic instances are given of many of the reasons given by Silas to justify his suicidal and heroic death--and in this one might say, like Carl Brignano, that the story contains a basic flaw--yet one is made to understand that it is these forces, though they are invisible within the story, that govern Silas' life, and it is from them that he seeks freedom.[31]

Silas, an aspiring petit-bourgeois, has gone to town to sell his cotton, leaving at home his wife Sarah. A young, white salesman shows up at the shack trying to sell Sarah a combination clock and graphophone. Before he leaves he succeeds in seducing Sarah sexually. When Silas returns home later that night he discovers, among the things left by the white man, his semen-soaked handkerchief. Enraged at this discovery, Silas awaits the white man, who returns the following morning with his buddy to collect the money for the graphophone or take it back. Silas beats them both and manages to kill one of them. When a white mob comes to get Silas he kills two of them and stays in his shack where he burns to death.

No racial motives are ascribed to the white man's

seduction of Sarah; he takes advantage of her physical and, perhaps, emotional weakness. He is characterized by the glib talk of a salesman and metaphorically--hot and sweating, eyeing Sarah's breasts--as someone dominated by sexual passion. If Wright intended the white man's seduction of Sarah to be racially-inspired, that is, that her blackness aroused his sexual passion or that he refused to control that passion because he felt she had not the right to refuse him, he does not imply it.

Silas, however, interprets the action in racial terms. He does not react to the fact that his wife had coitus with another man but that she did so with a white man. Incidentally, Sarah too resisted the saleman's efforts because of his whiteness. In this and other actions, Silas exhibits a fierce degree of race pride. What he implicitly needs is independence from the white man, and it is the realization that he cannot achieve this that drives him on to his heroic death. Before he realized what had happened to his wife, he could have said: "Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs gotta do jus like they do."[32] After he discovers that the white man had been sexually involved with Sarah he concludes that there is no place to go, that every aspect of his life is circumscribed by the whims and fancies of the white folks.

Silas' race pride, which is his tragedy here, saves him

from feeling inferior to the white race simply because he is black. Were he of the opposite mentality, he would have taken his frustrations out on Sarah and too afraid of the salesman to wreak vengeance on him. Silas is the exact opposite of Wright's protagonist, Jake Jackson, in Lawd Today.

Despite Silas' knowledge that any attempt to punish the white man would have tragic repercussions, he nevertheless persists in doing so. His belief in equality, even if separate, is quite pervasive:

> "Ah works mah guts out t pay them white trash bastards whut Ah owe em n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house! Ah cant go into their houses, n yuh know Gawddam well Ah cant.... Ef yuh wans t eat at mah table yuhs gonna keep them white trash bastards out, yuh hear. Tha white ape kin come n git tha damn box n Ah ain gonna pay im a cent. He had no bisness leavin it here n yuh had no bisness lettin im in: Ahma tell tha sonofabitch somethin when he comes out here in the mawning, so hep me Gawd:" 33

Few speeches could be more intense in their expression of hatred for the white race. Just as important in this speech is its tone of searing anger. Granted the Southern environment, where a black man could not be a man, Silas, in attempting to reciprocate the white man's contempt or lack of respect for everything that pertains to the black man, is highly idealistic. His ideals embody a tragic dimension, for he possesses neither the power to enforce them nor will the dominating white society respect them. Silas is therefore another version of Bigger Thomas,

Wright's protagonist in Native Son, and his fate cannot be different from that of the other Bigger Thomases.*

Silas' hatred for the white race reaches the level of the pathological. It is the sort of hatred against which one must strive or else be destroyed.

When Silas first enters the shack and proudly announces to his wife the amount of money he obtained for his cotton and the purchase of ten additional acres of land, one senses in him a proud feeling of achievement. But that sense of achievement and the hope for financial gain evaporate when Silas realizes that then and always his life will be restricted by the white folks. Thus the simple fact, for that is all that Silas knows at the beginning, that a white salesman had been in his shack can call forth from him the most excoriating hatred of the white race. At this point one knows already that any white man who goes as far as to have sexual intercourse with his wife could not escape his fury. Here is an instance of the black man defending black womanhood, an undreamed of situation in the American South.

When, next day, Silas fights his wife's seducer and the latter's buddy and later kills one of them, he exclaims

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*"The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South.... Eventually the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price." "How Bigger Was Born," in Native Son (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. XI.

that the black man is in fact a cipher:

> "Ef Ah run away, Ah ain got nothin. Ef Ah stay n fight Ah ain got nothin. It don make no difference which way Ah go.... Gawd, Ah wish all them white folks wuz dead." [34]

Silas ascribes the nothingness of his condition to the white folks: they represent the impediment which must be removed before he can pursue, as a citizen of America, his legitimate goals.

By hating the white folks, by identifying them as the enemy, Silas does not succumb to the self-hatred and race-hatred which is typical of many of Wright's other black characters. Silas even hates his wife for yielding to the white man's advances; he calls such action back-stabbing, treachery, in effect.

Silas' hatred for the white race and the actions which are a culmination of it dispose him to follow, in Sarah's terms, "the old river of blood, knowing that it meant nothing. He followed it, cursing, whimpering. But he followed it." [35] For him it was a nobler way: a noble death is better than a base existence:

> "The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothin in yuh whole life yuh kin keep from em!... Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So help me Gawd; Ahm gonna be hard! When they come for me Ahm gonna be here. N when they git me outta here theyz gonna know Ahm gone! Ef Gawd makes me live Ahm gonna make em feel it!... But Gawd Ah don wanna be this way. Ah don mean nothin. [36]

Silas states quite clearly in this speech that the

oppressive elements of white racism motivate his actions. It is somewhat astounding, though convincingly portrayed, how the seduction of a black man's wife by a white man brings alive, in all its possible fury, this particular black man's hatred for the white race.

Silas remains true to his word. He battles for his dignity with the dearest thing one holds, one's life. He sacrifices his life in order to have vengeance on the white race for the wrongs, enumerated in the foregoing quotation, that it has committed against him and the black race. When the mob arrives he responds by killing two of its members; when his house is set on fire by the mob with the implicit intention that he will run out of the flames, he chooses instead to stay inside, to burn to death rather than be killed from the physical blows of the mob. The mob does not triumph in this instance, and Silas, by killing three white men before he dies, triumphs in a mathematical sense.

Although violence characterizes Silas' revolt, "it is based on the valid conviction and not a mere fantasy.... Men ought to defend themselves when frustrated of their legitimate expectations from life by continual repression."[37] But such a defense as Silas undertakes, a defense which costs him his life, is disastrous and pervasively tragic.

In his actions and speeches Silas proclaims: "I will

not be the white man's slave. I will be a man in death, for I cannot be a man in life."

The success of this story, to a large extent, is attributable to the various aesthetic devices used by Wright. Quite noticeable is the use he makes of various symbols. Black and white or darkness and light (for both seem interchangeable in the story) and the uses he makes of earth imagery are outstanding. Sarah is pictured adhering to the rhythms of nature:

> "We git erlong widout time."
>
> "It gits dark when the sun goes down."
>
> "Mistah we don need no clock." [38] --

are her responses to the white salesman's astonishment at her ability to exist without a clock. She is also shown walking barefooted to the well; hence as having no need to shield that part of her that comes in contact with the earth. Even Sarah's reaction to an orgasmic climax is depicted in diurnal and seasonal rhythms: "she rode on the curve of white bright days and dark black nights and the surge of the long gladness of summer and the ebb of the deep dream of sleep in winter...." [39] Nor can Sarah understand the tragic forces in man which result in wars; she can only see the latter in terms of personal suffering. This depiction of Sarah serves to set her up as an innocent creature. It functions to intensify the brutal loss which overtakes her when Silas dies. Her

innocence leaves her vulnerable to the white salesman's seductive overtures, undeserving of her fate and unreflective of the tragedy which coitus with a white man, if discovered by her husband, can spark off. As much, when the calamity ensues Sarah is as much a victim as is Silas.

Darkness and light are used in the story in a manner reminiscent of Elizabethan tragedy. Significantly it is sunset when the salesman enters the yard, for it is the beginning of the end of Sarah's and by extension Silas' illusions. It is dark when the seduction scene begins. Darkness in this sense symbolizes the irrational quality of the salesman's passion. The well, with its underground waters in darkness, from which the salesman drinks, is an apt reflection of his sexual lust for Sarah, for he does not know to what consummation of this lust is going to lead. When the sex act is over he too leaves in darkness, since he expects a ten-dollar reduction of the price of the graphophone to remedy his disregard for the sanctity of Sarah's body. This last is a tragic reflection of the salesman's mentality: he uses money to appease his violation of another's rights.

The house is dark when Silas enters and appropriately so, since Silas is full of illusionary plans for material success, plans which are only illusionary because he is a Negro. He has bought additional land and would require

hired help on his farm. His hope is to "git somewhere." But these hopes are shattered by his justifiable but pathological hatred of the white race. Driven to uncontrollable limits, he pours out his rage for the white race when he discovers that Sarah has had an affair with a white man. At dawn, the beginning of a new day, Silas resolves to die; he exclaims the futility of his whole life, the emptiness of his dreams and the meaninglessness of his existence. He, therefore, comes to a new realization of his existence.

Silas, therefore, evolves from darkness to light, from illusions about his condition as a Negro living in the American South to the stark reality of his condition, and Wright manipulates his symbols to reflect this.

4

"Fire and Cloud" could justifiably be called the story which made Richard Wright known to the American reading public. When this story won the first prize in a contest run by Story magazine in 1937 for the best short story produced by members of the Federal Writers' Project[40] it established Wright as a writer worthy of attention. This story also won second prize in the O. Henry Memorial Award contest of 1939.[41]

"Fire and Cloud" differs from the first three stories

in the volume in that its protagonist challenges the white racist system of the American South and does not lose his life. In it, there is hope that threats, despite the fact that they are feeble ones, could gain blacks some concessions from that segment of white society which controls the black man's destiny. The tragic quality of the tale is therefore modified by this last fact. But when one realizes that hunger, not the desire for equality, motivates the black masses, this modification is only a superficial one.

Mayor Bolden, by doing petty favours for the black community at the request of Rev. Dan Taylor, has established the latter as a prestigious figure among the black residents and thereby makes him the leader of the black community. These favours were done, however, with the explicit purpose of making Taylor a tool for the enforcement of the will of the white world among the black folk. In Taylor's words, "All the time they wuz helpin me, all the time they been givin me favours, they wuz doin it so they could tell me to tell you how to ack." This statement is adequately supported by the mayor's request that Taylor ask his black congregation not to protest, through a demonstration the following day, their hunger:

> "Dan I helped you to get the influence by doing your people a lot of favours through you

> when you came into my office a number of times. ... I am asking you now to use that influence and tell your people to stay off the streets tomorrow." 42

Here, Taylor is aked to put personal interests ahead of those of the people he leads. Taylor refuses. His refusal is an affront to the white establishment, and within a short while he is abducted into the woods, where he is whipped into a state of unconsciousness. The whipping is, in the words of one of the whippers, "a nigger lesson," for all that Taylor does "is get crowds of niggers to threaten white folks;" and when they were through with him that night he will "know how to stay in a nigger's place." 43

The object of the whipping is therefore to get Taylor to submit to the wishes of the white world, the breaking through terror of the spirit of the rebellious "nigger." But the story reveals that the brutality Taylor experiences makes him more resolute to battle with the white establishment, to tear, if possible, the whole system down: "Gawd if Yuh gimme the strength Ahll tear this ol building down! Tear it down like Samson tore the temple down." 44

Taylor is shown to possess an unfailing courage. He will stand up to the vilest form of racial oppression, even under the white racist's lash. He calls his white whippers, while he is being whipped, "white trash

cowards." By doing this he shows that he is not afraid of their punishment, and when he tells them "Tie me and kill me!" he reveals to these agents of white supremacy rule that he cannot be conquered.

In an earlier story, for example, "Big Boy Leaves Home," it is unlikely that Taylor would have escaped alive. Here, however, the beating is to mould Taylor into an "accomodationist," not to kill him. Brutality, however, is shown to be the major tool used by the white society to force its will upon the Negro people. This conforms to the formula expressed in the words of James Kimble Vadaman, Governor of Mississippi during Wright's childhood: "The way to control a nigger is to whip him when he does not obey without it, and another is never to pay him more wages than is actually necessary to buy food and clothing."[45] Tragedy, in both the story and the words of the governor, seems to lie in the white Southerner's fear of the Negro. For Taylor, the real tragedy lies in the fear and shame he feels for being subjected to such humiliations.

In this story, like the others in the volume, black people are without rights and are in every respect made to be the white man's inferior. They are the targets for whites who enjoy inflicting brutality on blacks. Here, too, blacks are fully prepared to protest their lot, even if it means death.

"It don make no difference wid me.... Them white folks cant do mo than theys already done."

"Ah gotta die sometime, so Ah just as waal die now."

"They cant kill us but once!"

"Ahm tired anyhow! Ah don care!" [46]

Extreme white brutality, Wright shows, can cause the black man to develop a new awareness of his position in the society. When Taylor regains consciousness after his severe whipping, Wright describes him in terms of Christian resurrection imagery: "Some power had sucked him deep down into the black earth, had drained all his strength from him. He was waiting for that power to go away so he could come back to life." [47] The story goes on to reveal that Taylor's old vision is replaced by a new one. In the old way of life, Taylor was, metaphorically speaking, on his knees, "a-beggin n a-pleadin wid the white folks." Following his whipping he can see that all he got by pleading and begging were kicks and crumbs, and if he so much as acted like a man they tried to kill him. [48] This sudden revelation on Taylor's part, for which the whipping acted as a catalyst, makes him ready to challenge the white establishment which is profiting from the people's hunger. In the following speech, Taylor is shown, following his recovery from the shock of his beating, to be a believer in Black Nationalism:

> Wes gotta be wid the people, son. Too long we done tried to do this thing our way n when we failed we wanted to turn out n pay-off the white folks. Then they kill us up like flies. Its the people, son! Wes too much erlone this way! We los when wes erlone. Wes gonna be wid our folks.... N theyll keep on killin us less we learn t fight. 49

The contents of this speech closely resemble a statement Wright made several years later: "Pan-Africanism is a response to the fears and anxiety which blacks feel in the presence of whites."[50] Taylor realizes that the black man can only challenge racism if he unites as a body against those institutions erected to preserve it.

The story shows that Wright lacked the courage--in doing so he was perhaps realistic--to believe that an organization of blacks can effectively challenge the various facets of racism. For this reason, he depicts the black poor joining ranks with the white poor (a highly improbable occurence in any Southern American town). The presence of this significant detail had a propaganda value. It was designed to show the virtues of Communism, under whose banner all races unite to fight economic injustice.

First, the united efforts of the blacks and, second, the support of the poor whites result in an overwhelming number of protesters which inhibit police attempts to use the bratality which the day before they had vowed to to use on all demonstrators. When Mayor Bolden visualizes how united the people are he changes his attitude of no relief for the hungry. In other words, the protesters

succeed in having their demands met. Realizing the method by which this concession is wrung out of the mayor, Taylor remarks: "Freedom belongs to the strong." By implication, the poor masses are the strong. But the statement is itself a tragic commentary on twentieth century Southern American society, for only in uncivilized societies is brute force resorted to in order to obtain freedom, or gain ascendancy. Here, because the poor are threatened by starvation and can only thwart it through a show of force, the society is shown to be a barbarous one.

The story is, despite its optimism, replete with gloomy details. Blacks are portrayed waiting until their lives are threatened by starvation before they storm the white power structure that has always circumscribed their lives. This last implies that it takes a crisis of major proportion to jolt blacks into an awareness of the precarious nature of their existence. The struggle in the story is not one of social equality, rather it is a struggle for bread. One is also made to feel that police brutality is not employed against the black demonstrators because white protesters are in their ranks. Therefore, despite the great claims Taylor makes for Black Nationalism, it cannot succeed without the support of the white proletariat.

By making economic deprivation--hunger-- the real culprit of the people's ills and by showing this

deprivation to be the result of Capitalism --

> "The white folks say we cant raise nothing on Yuh earth, Lawd: They done put the lans o the worl in their pockets." 51

"They bleed us: They fatten on us like leeches!"[52] -- Wright shows the desire for material aggrandizement to be one of the major causes of racism.

Throughout the story Wright manages to maintain an objectivity about the black man's reaction to racism. Although he shows Taylor to be a leader in every sense of the word and likens him even to the Old Testament Moses--his task seems harder than the latter's; the reason being that "the pillar of cloud" in this tale is fear of white brutality while the "pillar of fire" is brutality itself--there is Deacon Smith who simply wants personal power and who, to get it, employs every conceivable form of subterfuge against Taylor and the black community. The story condemns Smith: at the end he is pictured with the enemy and is described as "meaningless, lost." In Taylor one sees a genuine leader of his people, in Smith the potential of a leader who leads for personal gains, who will exploit his people's misery if it is a boon to do so.

Nevertheless, none of Wright's fictional works is as optimistic as this one. Dan Taylor is the only black protagonist in Wright's works who defies the forces of white supremacy and escapes alive. The vision portrayed here is one of Communism and Black Nationalism joining

to defeat Capitalism and thereby racism. The story was written at a time--1936-- when Wright was a strong believer in the ideals of Communism.

6

What makes "Bright and Morning Star" different from the other stories in this volume are the story's setting and the dedication of its heroine to the cause of Communism. The forces which motivate the chief characters to act are similar to those delineated in the other stories. The themes of communal sadism, of the white man's lack of respect for black humanity, of the black man's abiding distrust for members of the white race, of blacks forsaking their other-worldly vision to lead an active life in the struggle for racial equality, all themes of the other stories, are present here.

Dan Taylor challenged the white establishment and won because he was supported by the Communists in his struggle. But in "Bright and Morning Star," Sug is jailed because he is working for the "Party" and both Sue and Johnny Boy sacrifice their lives because of their belief that in Communism lies a new hope for the equality of mankind. It is shown, however, that the embracing of Communism by Sue's sons comes from the fact that they live in a society which refuses to grant them equality. They rejected their

mother's religious vision and were instrumental in destroying her resigned attitude to white racism and replacing it with one of action against it.

Here, as "In Fire and Cloud," Wright shows how deeply religion pervades the lives of black folk and the necessity for blacks to transcend their other-worldly vision if they are going to pose a challenge to the forces of oppression. Sue's understanding of racism, prior to her embracement of Communism, gives a unique picture of the extent to which blacks rationalize their sufferings, rather than undertake the struggle necessary to defeat it.

> Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to him.
>
> But as she had grown older, a cold, white mountain, the white folks and their laws, had swum into her vision and shattered her songs and their spell of peace. To her that mountain was temptation, something to lure her from her Lord, a part of the world God had made in order that she might endure it and come through all the stronger. 53

Involvement with Communism made her shed the foregoing vision. "The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of him nailed to the cross." 54 As such, "Wright continues, in this story, to explore the evolution of black religion from its traditional forms of expression to a militant weapon." 55

In the reaction of the sheriff and his men to the food in Sue's house, Wright communicates a blatant lack of

respect on the part of white law enforcement officers for black property. The sheriff and his men are delineated as pillagers:

> "Boy look at these jars of jam!"
>
> "Niggers make good jam!"
>
> "Say lemme git some!"
>
> "Take it easy! Theres plenty here!"[56]

Through the sheriff's treatment of Aunt Sue, Wright portrays what happens to blacks living in the South when they attempt to impress upon whites that they are human beings with rights which they want others to respect. Sue does not like the presence of the policemen in her house and asks them to get out. This is interpreted by the sheriff as "sass." Sue sees no reason not to engage in a verbal battle with the sheriff and his men, who are there with the intention of arresting Johnny Boy for being a member of the Communist Party. At points, this type of behaviour from Sue elicits threats from the sheriff and on one occasion, slaps. Frustrated at the end that he had not attained the object of his search and angered by Sue's proud declaration, " Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it,"[57] the sheriff, as the airplane beacon over Memphis gleams, metes out cold, brutal treatment to Sue: "The blow caught her high on the cheek; her eyes went blank. She fell flat on her face. She felt the

hard heel of his wet shoes coming into her temple and stomach."[58]

Later, when the sheriff and his men apprehend Johnny Boy, Booker, a new party member who later turns out to be a police informer, brings the news to Sue. He goads Sue to entrust him with the names of the other party members, on the pretence that he wants to warn them not to show up at the meeting scheduled to be held the following day. Sue is caught at this point between her distrust of the white race and her concern for the peril of the lives of the party members. Reluctantly, she gives the names to Booker only to discover shortly after from Reva, the daughter of a white Communist member, that Booker is working for the police. At this point Sue realizes that she must kill Booker to protect the lives of the other party members. Although this means giving up her own life, she, nevertheless, does it. The end of the story shows Johnny Boy being tortured to reveal the names of the party members, Sue's awaiting of Booker, her killing of him and her own death.

Initially Sue became a Communist to fight for the rights of the black man. That fight demanded her life. Both she and Johnny Boy, who is also killed at the end of the story, are tragic products of the battle for racial equality. All that Sue manages to keep in the story is

her pride. The racial pride that Sue displays here is itself tragic, since it is a product of oppression. Sue and Johnny Boy die heroic deaths without realizing their dreams for black equality. Heroes in the Communist movement they are, on the one hand; victims of racial prejudice, on the other hand.

7

The stories in Uncle Tom's Children, as this analysis has attempted to show, were created to depict the brutal forces employed by white Southern society against its Negro population. This they succeed in doing very well. The themes pursued in these tales remained the skeletal basis of much of Wright's later writing, a fact which shows how deeply obsessed Wright was with the tragic aspects of racism.

Portrayal of the quality of Negro life in America was one of Wright's goals in writing these tales. Negro writers, he claimed,

> are being called upon to do no less than create values by which their race is to struggle, live and die. They are being called upon to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give a meaning to blighted lives, and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people. 59

> [In] the Negro writer's subject matter and theme his rebellion will be not only against the exploiting whites, but against all of that within his own race that retards decisive action and obscures clarity of vision. 60

> One of the greatest tasks of Negro writers of the future will be to show the Negro to himself; it will be, paraphrasing James Joyce, to forge in the smithy of our souls the uncreated consciousness of our race. 61

These statements express what Wright considered to be the functions of Negro literature. Wright, above everything else, wanted Negroes to be conscious of their existence, to understand the meaning of their lives. In his fiction and non-fiction he attempted to reveal the Negro to himself.

Simultaneously, Wright wished to show to white Americans, by way of the printed page, the horror in which they forced Negroes to live. He was also prepared to shatter the false beliefs that Negroes living in the American South were content with their limited existence. It was not contentment with their lot, Wright shows in these tales, but fear of brutal reprisals that prevented Negroes from rebelling.

Revealing to white Americans the psychological forces which impelled them to maintain the institution of racism, because of Wright's emphasis on it in these tales, seems also to have been one of his motives in writing these stories. The fears and rationalizations which were used by whites to justify their oppression of blacks are shown by him to be without vindication.

In these tales Negroes are for the most part innocent and benign, except where they are forced to resort to killing to protect or avenge themselves; white people,

except Communists, are power-seeking, brutal and anxious to kill the Negro for sport--a simplified portrait of the white race, but a seemingly necessary one for Richard Wright.

The themes explored in the stories may be summarised in the following way: in these stories the Negro is shown to be defenceless, at the mercy of white people who are incapable of showing mercy to members of the Negro race. Whites fear Negroes; they are perturbed by the Negro's demand for equality, for such demands will lessen their power over his fate. Negroes fear white brutality, but they are also disgusted with the restricted lives they lead; they express a willingness to die rather than live the life of slavery to which Southern white America has relegated them. These stories, in the conflicts they present between both races, are genuine depictions of tragedy.

CHAPTER III

TRAGEDY OF THE BLACK URBAN POOR

Using data gathered from his daily observation of black life in urban ghettoes, the historical and social reasons for the existence of such ghettoes, and the theories regarding the personality deformations that may result from a ghettoized existence, Richard Wright fashioned his protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Bigger violates all that is considered sacred in a civilized society, not because he wants to, but because, in his ignorance of how to live a meaningful life in Chicago's South Side, his impulses are his only guide. In short, he has not had the chance to benefit from culture and therefore misses its blessings.[1] Because all or most of what he does happens without his being able to control it, does not bring him happiness but rather temporary relief of his pent-up frustrations, and converges in the end to rid him of his life, Bigger Thomas is a tragic figure. Bigger could not, Wright shows, channel his energy into meaningful pursuits. His society forbade that. He therefore had to resort to crime. His crime in the ultimate sense is the crime of being.[2]

From the various statements Wright made regarding his

creation of Bigger and the conditions which are likely to breed individuals like Bigger, one realizes that Bigger is an amalgam of several concepts. It will be enlightening, therefore, to examine some of the ideas that went into the creation of Bigger.

Wright affirms that "the imposed conditions under which Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outling blueprints for the production of machines."[3] This concept, expressing the idea that man is determined by environmental forces, pervades Native Son. "Bigger," said Wright, "felt the need for a whole life and acted out of that need."[4] One must assume, therefore, that since Bigger can only find meaning in murder, that the society, of which Bigger--"an American product, a native son of this land"[5]-- is a product, is responsible for his acts. Wright speculated that this society could produce other Hitlers, reminds America that Hitler was raised in a slum and that "Chicago's South Side could become the Vienna of American Fascism."[6]

Wright saw that the social conditions which produced Bigger were present in other urban centres: "The Negroes of Harlem have never been allowed to act upon the assumptions and aspirations which most Americans take for granted and which form the core of meaning for the nation."[7] This fact, relevant in this case to Chicago's South Side,

is shown in Native Son to be responsible for Bigger's hatred and fear of the white race.

The reasons given by Wright for the high incidence of juvenile delinquency among Harlem blacks (the 300,000 blacks of Manhattan's 2,000,000 population produced 53 per cent of that borough's juvenile delinquents[8]) are similar to those which produce criminals in Chicago's South Side: "the high rates of juvenile delinquents stem from the Negro's social environment."[9] "The ties that bind Negro families together are weaker than those that bind white families," for many Negro women function as heads of families and stable homes and regular incomes have been lacking among American Negroes for generations."[10] The foregoing are all factors in Bigger Thomas' existence.

Native Son begins by portraying the never-ending friction which is bred by inadequate housing and poverty. Bigger and his family live in a "kitchenette." About "kitchenettes" Wright said the following:

> The kitchenette throws desperate and unhappy people into an unbearable closeness of association, thereby increasing latent friction, giving birth to never-ending quarrels of recrimination, accusation and vindictiveness, producing warped personalities.
>
> The kitchenette injects pressure and tension into our individual personalities, making many of us give up the struggle, walk off and leave wives, husbands and even children behind to shift as best they can. [11]

It is interesting to note that although Wright, in Native Son, does not portray Mrs. Thomas deserting her

children, she is faced, nevertheless, with the temptation of doing so.

Wright's description of the hard-core juvenile delinquent, "no words of persuasion can penetrate the hard shell of his feelings, and he regards the world with defiant and suspicious eyes,"[12] fits his delineation of Bigger when he first enters the Dalton's home. Bigger's behaviour there conforms well to Wright's belief that "by merely looking at the tense, tired, drawn face" of the delinquent, no one "would suspect the emotional quicksands that form the foundation of his life."[13]

In his introduction to Black Metropolis Wright states that "the Jim Crow lives that Negroes live in our crowded cities differ qualitatively from those of whites and are not fully known to whites."[14] In Native Son this is shown to be a tragic fact, for here segregation is shown to be responsible for Bigger's irrational fear and pathological hatred of white people which eventually lead him to murder Mary.

As an insurance agent for various black burial societies in Chicago, Wright had had the opportunity to analyse first-hand the subhuman conditions under which most of Chicago's South Side blacks lived.[15] In addition, he had worked with many of the delinquent children produced in these homes. Of these children Wright later wrote:

> The streets, with their noise and flaring lights, the taverns, the automobiles, and poolrooms claim them, and no voice of ours can call them back.... They go to death on the city pavements faster than even disease and starvation can take them. 16

Bigger was created with the intention of portraying the lives of these children. In explaining how he came to conceive the character of Bigger Thomas, Wright wrote:

> [At] the South Side Boys' Club, an institution which tried to reclaim thousands of Negro Bigger Thomases from the dives and alleys of the Black Belt... I had an opportunity to observe Bigger in all his moods, actions, haunts.... They paid me to distract Bigger with ping pong, checkers, swimming, marbles, baseball in order that he might not roam the streets and harm the valuable white property adjoining the Black Belt.... These little stop-gaps were utterly inadequate to fill up the centuries-long chasm of emptiness which American civilization had created in these Biggers.
>
> I would work hard with these Biggers, and when it would come time for me to go home I'd say to myself ... "Go to it boys, prove to the bastards who gave you these games that life is stronger than ping pong. ... Show them that full-blooded life is harder and hotter than they suspect, even though that life is is draped in a black skin which at heart they despise.
>
> They did. The police blotters of Chicago are a testimony to how much they did. 17

And so with the foregoing concepts and experiences, Wright created Bigger Thomas according to his aesthetic theory that "art for art's sake is dead," that beauty will consist in the power of a given work to influence," and "the greatest novel will turn the world upside down." 18

Bigger came from Mississippi five years before, where his father had been killed in a race riot. These facts tell us that Bigger was not adequately prepared for life

in the urban jungle and that he had already been the victim of racial trauma.

"Wright proceeds in the first book to document Bigger's activities in such a way as to prove that the whole of Bigger's waking existence is a kind of meaninglessness--a kind of death."[19] Poverty regulates Bigger's home life. Segregation restricts his goals and his fear of white people determines his actions which culminate in tragedy.

Bigger, a twenty-year old youngster lives with his mother, brother and sister in a rat-infested, one-room tenement on Chicago's South Side. His day begins in a battle with rats, then moves on to recriminating quarrels between members of the household, punctuated by frequent complaints from Bigger's mother about her poverty and its emotional toll on her life. The quarrels stem from three main sources: the first is Bigger's way of entertaining himself by scaring his sister into unconsciousness with the rat he had killed, an implication that Bigger derives pleasure for sadistic acts. The next reason is Mrs. Thomas' dissatisfaction with her living conditions and her attempts to improve them by disparaging what seems to her to be Bigger's irresponsibility in not undertaking to be a provider for the household. The most important cause, however, is her fear that Bigger will not accept the job he had been offered by the "relief," who had already

threatened to cut off their supply of food if Bigger does not take the job. The children cannot remain at home because the tenement, used for sleeping at night, must serve several purposes during the day. This day in particular it becomes a laundry room. Therefore, poverty and all the disenchantments it breeds form the basis of Bigger's relationship with the other members of his family. Should Bigger allow his sensibility to be constantly bombarded by the suffering produced by his family's indigence, his life in such a tenement would be hellish. He therefore immunizes himself to their suffering by hating them.

Out on the street awaiting the members of his gang, Bigger watches the campaign slogans of Buckley, state attorney, being posted. He notes with irony the campaign slogan: "IF YOU BREAK THE LAW YOU CAN'T WIN," for he knows that those able to "pay off" Buckley are winners; hence that the slogan applies only to the poor.

Poverty returns to haunt Bigger again as he contemplates his activities for the day and finds that he needs twenty additional cents. To solve the problem, Bigger thinks of a hold-up, and in the interior monologue that takes place, the audience is told that such acts are common to Bigger and his gang, that Bigger is in fact a petty criminal, and that he had even spent some time in a reform school.

However, the hold-up being planned was different from all the others in which Bigger had taken part: this time they were going to rob a white man. "It would be a symbolic challenge to the white man's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to."[20]

The hold-up does not come off. Bigger is so terrified of the white race that he dares not attack its property. Yet he is too proud to let his friends know this, although they openly let him know that they are aware of his fear. Consequently, when the robbery is about to be committed his fear explodes, manifesting itself in his grotesque, brutal treatment of Gus, a member of the gang. Bigger's cruel treatment of Gus is designed to prove to himself that he is powerful and able, through the use of force, to get others to execute his wishes. Yet his brutal handling of Gus, his instincts tell him, is the only way by which to stall the planned robbery. Violence, the novel shows us, is Bigger's way of reacting to situations which threaten him. Whatever stands in his way must be blotted out. The scene in which Bigger mercilessly manhandles Gus can therefore be seen as a foreshadowing of the extent to which his blind, violent impulses will drive him.

One has to look at the origins of violence in Bigger. First, Bigger's home life, dominated by

and complaining in an atmosphere of helplessness, is responsible for much of it. But most of it is generated by Bigger's hatred and fear of the white world. That world, through its racist institutions, had caused Bigger to hate the blackness in himself, the members of his race and even his own family, while the power of the white world over his existence instills deep fear in him. Bigger knows that because he is black he can never begin to pursue his goals and therefore never attain them. His desire is to be an aviator, a desire born, for the most part, it would seem, from feelings of helplessness, for as an aviator, he can be above the earth, can possess power over those who are below him on the ground. But to fly a plane one had to be white, had to have money and be permitted to enter a school of aviation. Bigger, with his black skin, was therefore doomed at birth not to realize his goals. The hatred that such restrictions elicits from him is expressed in his statement, "Maybe they right in not wanting us to fly... 'cause if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em sure as hell."[21] Bigger's statement contains a wish to annihilate the society that had produced him and is restricting him; it is violent and charged with hate. In the following statements Bigger expresses his awareness of the circumscribed life which he, as a black man, must lead:

> "They don't let us do nothing.... I just can't get used to it.... I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Everytime I think about it I feel like somebody poking a red hot iron down my throat. Goddamit, look we live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we aint. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail.... Everytime I think about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me." 22

It is evident, then, from the foregoing that Bigger knows that racism--his black skin-- is responsible for his exclusion from participating in the rewarding quests of American civilization. As one critic put it, he

> is the little man who cannot find adjustment nor success in life..... through no fault of his own he is doomed.... His psychological reactions to life become portents of the ultimate tragedy that will befall him. 23

Wright, therefore, shows Bigger's life to be chaotic. Frustration is its foundation. Hatred and fear replace hope and aspiration. Before Bigger is a vast sheet of nothingness which is his life, and placed alongside that sheet are the reasons, not of his own making, why this is so.

The games that Bigger and Gus play, "roles of generals, financial magnates and government officials," reflect how their fantasy dwells on roles that are forbidden them. 24 They do not understand the meanings of these roles; they had perhaps learned of them through movies and cheap magazines, but as positions of power, opposed to their

own social insignificance, they enjoy playing them.

Bigger and his pals depend on what they see in the movies for their knowledge of the way white people live, for segregation prevents them from living with and learning about white people as individuals. There is comic irony in Bigger's statements that white people will sleep with anyone from a poodle up and that their matresses are stuffed with dollar bills. In Bigger's understanding of the way whites live, Wright reveals the tragic distortions about the lives of others that result from and are encouraged by segregation.

Again, it is tragic that the wealth of the white world and the loose morality of that world, as portrayed by a movie Bigger sees, are what inspire him to seek the job at the Dalton's household. Perhaps, Bigger reasons, the Daltons might have a daughter who will behave in a manner similar to the woman he sees in the movie. Wealth and sex, which he thinks might be available at the Dalton home, are the things that motivate him to take the job. But only after he has armed himself with his gun and knife can Bigger summon up enough courage within himself to go in search of the job; only when armed with violent weapons can he feel sufficiently secure to venture into a white neighbourhood.

Once in the Dalton household, Bigger is imbued on all sides by statements about living a clean, good life.

working hard and getting ahead. Mrs. Dalton even thinks of inspiring him to go to night school (implying that she sees the solution to the black man's plight as lying in his educating of himself). It is significant that Bigger, in response to her questions on this subject, thinks he has plans for the future but does not know what they are, for to work towards a goal one has to have some assurance that he is able to attain it and will be rewarded for his strenuous efforts in pursuing it, assurances that no black man living in America could have had. Thus,

> Bigger, simultaneously with his indoctrination of the Negro's inferiority, is introduced to the glowing account of the American ideals and what they entail.... The ideal American citizen is encouraged to work out his own destiny within the cultural pattern in which he lives. American dogma is that any man may achieve financial success, leisure and power. Bigger... knows from bitter experience that he cannot attain the ideal because he is Negro. 25

The segregation of blacks and whites on the latter's terms, Wright shows, has worked very well, perhaps too well. The fear that white people wanted blacks to have of them is shown to have been accomplished. The menial labour that they wished blacks to provide--adequately portrayed in Bessie's case as a domestic servant and Bigger as a chauffeur for a wealthy family--has also been attained. But whites had never calculated the extent to which this could go. The white people in

the Dalton household do not want Bigger to be afraid of them. Bigger finds this strange; white people had conditioned him to act one way all his life and now they were discouraging him from acting that way. He can only see Mary's naive overtures of equality towards him as designed to get him "into trouble." Both Mary and Jan expect Bigger to act towards them as though he were a white man unfettered by the inhibitions that blacks have had to adopt in order to survive.

> When they make advances towards him, it is not as an individual, but to him as a Negro of the old school, grateful for whatever charity a white man may offer. If they do not see that they are treating him as a type, they cannot be expected to see how inevitably he at the same time is treating them as a different type...
>
> When they insist upon his eating with them in a Negro cafe habituated by his friends,... they do not realize ... that to his friends in the cafe his presence will seem a disloyalty to his race ... or that his own wishes in the matter have been completely ignored. Their equality, therefore, becomes an act of racial superiority through the very compulsions they mistakenly think are breaking it down. 26

Throughout their several attempts to make Bigger feel like an equal, they only succeed in increasing his anxiety and distrust. Without realizing it, Mary goes as far as to imply her power over him when she states that she will make him read the Communist pamphlets that Jan gives him.

Bigger's first work assignment in the Dalton household begins in an uncomfortable way. Mary and Jan violate

the agreements that the white world had created to deal with blacks, and Bigger cannot understand the new agreement they offer him. He went to the Dalton's home in fear, heavily armed as a defense against that fear, with set ideas of how to behave in the presence of white people and finds that he cannot use these ideas. This last serves to aggravate his fear. We also know that he went to work for the Daltons, not because he wanted to, but because the option was starvation.

Having seen Bigger's irrational and exaggerated reaction to the fear created in him by the thought of attacking white property and his taking of weapons into the Dalton household, one fears that at the least threat he might resort to those weapons to protect his ego. But Bigger's fear overpowers him in another way. When he returns to the house with Mary she is too drunk to go to her room alone, and Bigger, unconsciously violating a race taboo, takes her there. His bodily contact with Mary excites him sexually and he lingers on in the room. Mrs. Dalton's sudden appearance in the room, though she is blind, is enough to evoke in him, in the most intense form, all his fears of the white world. Bigger cannot risk being discovered in the room; rape would be the motive ascribed to his being there. Impulsively, he seeks to silence Mary by putting a pillow over her mouth, but Mrs. Dalton

stays in the room long enough for him to suffocate Mary. Hence an attempt to silence Mary so that he could keep his reputation undamaged culminates in a gruesome tragedy for Bigger-- he kills a millionaire's daughter. The tragedy produced here is racial in origin; it is rooted in the sex taboos created by the white race to prevent black/white miscegenation. Had Bigger been a white boy, he could have risked being discovered in the room, for he could have explained that Mary was too drunk to climb the stairs and so he had to help her to her room. Therefore, Bigger acts in the only way he knew and that act makes him a murderer.

Naturally, Bigger has to think of escaping and the first thing that comes to his mind is disposing of the dead body and this he throws in the furnace. Some critics make a great story of the violent way in which Bigger mutilates the body in order to get it in the furnace. Really, it seems that his acts are dictated more by the hysteria caused by his murder of the girl than from anything else.

What happens after Bigger recovers from the initial shock of the murder reveals the depravity to which his ghetto existence had conditioned him. Money had always been a problem in his life. Lack of it had [illegible] him to work for the Daltons [illegible], and [illegible]

his family to live in a one-room tenement, to be constantly bickering with each other as a result. Why not use the murder as a means of getting some? In the process, because of America's unfavourable attitude towards Communism, he would try to pin Mary's disappearance on Jan and extort $10,000 from the Daltons. Bigger is thus shown to be a criminal of extraordinary size. One, however, has to bear in mind that Bigger's violent acts stem from his helplessness in the face of frightening situations.[27] Hence, Bigger, as Edward Margolies notes, is at heart a coward. Bigger therefore runs to his girl. He hopes to bribe her into collecting the ransom money for him. Bessie is unwilling and Bigger takes no chances; he threatens to kill her if she does not comply. At the Daltons Bigger baffles the interrogators by playing the role of "the dumb nigger." Stated otherwise, he uses the white man's racist belief that the black man is incapable of intelligent scheming to his advantage. He skilfully implicates Jan and turns suspicion away from himself. But this terminates, as it must--white people are shown to be all-powerful in the novel--when a newspaper reporter uncovers Mary's bones and a charred earring in the furnace.

At this point Bigger flees, thereby implicating himself. He discards the diversion idea and is only concerned with his bodily escape. To achieve the latter,

however, means keeping Bessie in his control, for she knows too much about him and is too weak not to reveal the information to the law. To Bigger, Bessie is a tool, first, for sex and petty thievery and, later, for the collection of the ransom money. With no more need for her, and because she knows of his crime, he considers her an impediment to be disposed of. First, he rapes her and following this, he batters her to death with a brick. These actions reveal, above everything else, Bigger's monstrous nature. How can one fleeing from the police possess the state of mind to desire sexual intercourse, and how can one so easily murder a sexual companion? In these acts Bigger is operating at the level of a beast. His justification is that he has to save himself; anything that impedes his escape must be moved, where possible, out of the way.

What is profoundly tragic is the meaning with which Bigger invests his accidental murder of Mary. Margaret Walker, who provided Wright with much of the material out of which Native Son was produced, who discussed writing techniques with Wright and who was a close friend of his for three years, informs us that:

[redacted]

> society are determinants and, being what he is, man is merely a pawn caught between the worlds of necessity and freedom.... 29

This statement is amply justified in Native Son. When Bigger exclaims, shortly before his electrocution, "what I killed for I am," he affirms that he is a murderer through and through. When all legal outlets for self-affirmation are closed to the black man, he must assert his claim to heroism "through extra-legal means." Such is the symbolic value of Bigger's name: "he aspires to action on an epic plane;" seeking, as it were, "a challenge worthy of his manhood" and insisting on something "bigger" and better than the cramped horizons of ghetto life.[30] That he can only find a larger and more meaningful existence through violence and crime is the central irony of Native Son.

Wright shows an evolution taking place in Bigger soon after the initial horror of the murder leaves him. He prepares the reader for the gruesome meanings Bigger will attach to his slaying of Mary by showing Bigger falling asleep, on the same morning, five minutes after getting into bed, falling asleep, that is, with a rapidity not unlike that which follows after a sexual orgasm. That same morning at breakfast Bigger ... analyzes the various members of his family and begins to observe things he had never before noticed. He

concludes that, because they all seek after the crumbs of ghetto life, they are blind. Later, in the presence of his pals, we are told that it was the first time he had been in their presence without feeling fear. That same morning Bigger tells himself: "he had murdered and created a new life for himself. It was something all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take away from him."[31]

Wright does not want the reader to overlook the significant role society, by crushing Bigger's dreams, plays in Mary's murder. For this reason Native Son tells the reader that though Bigger

> had killed by accident, not once did he tell himself that it had been an accident.... He had killed many times before only... there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make dramatic his will to kill. His crime seemed natural; ... all of his life had been leading him to something like this. The hidden meaning of his life--a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide--had spilled out.... There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly he had done it. [32]

Edward Margolies notes that "Bigger's crimes ... signify something beyond their therapeutic value. In a world without order, purpose or meaning, each man becomes his own god and creates his own world in order to exist."[33] Mary, Wright goes on to say, had set off Bigger's emotions, "emotions conditioned by many Marys." Now that Bigger had killed her, "he felt a lessening of tension in his

muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he long carried."[34] From this statment one infers that Bigger, in his murder of Mary, triumphs in an existentialist sense over the white society which had been oppressing him.

When Bigger sees the fright and confusion into which he had plunged the Dalton family and the possibility of extorting $10,000 dollars from them, "he felt he had his destiny in his grasp." The security that his knife and gun had earlier provided him was now being offered by "his knowledge of having secretly murdered Mary."[35] He felt "the equal of them, like a man who had evened the score" because "he had killed a white girl whom they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty."[36] And, following his murder of Bessie, his second in twenty-four hours, Wright states that "over and above all that happened, there remained to [Bigger] a queer sense of power."[37]

Captured and in his cell, Bigger is determined to die heroically. For a while he feels shame and remorse as he reflects upon the anguish he has caused his family. He also regrets the fact that he had not come to know people like Max and Jan (the Communists who arrange his defense) prior to his involvement in crime. Bigger knows all along that the hope Max is trying to arouse in him is essentially false and fights fiercely with

himself to suppress it. When Bigger is asked a few days before his trial if he does not want to live, his reply is "What for." Here Bigger communicates that life is in essence meaningless to him. And in the following statements he tries to persuade Max that his defense efforts are futile:

> "It don't matter Which way I die."
>
> "You can't help me Mr. Max."
>
> "It aint no use."[38]

The failure of Max's defense plea to save Bigger's life proves Bigger right. Bigger at the end seems to have a better understanding of his crimes than Max could, despite the latter's admirable defense of Bigger--

> "What Bigger Thomas did early that Sunday morning in the Dalton home and what he did that Sunday night in that empty building 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--[39]

for Max is astonished when Bigger refuses to see horror in his crimes.

Wright succeeds in showing Bigger accepting his death sentence heroically. In words that convey a very calm, resigned tone Bigger tells Max that he never consciously intended to hurt anyone:

> "I was always wanting something and ... nobody would let me have it.... I thought they was hard, and I acted hard.... I won't be crying none when they take me to that chair.... I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them." [40]

Fate, then, since it was Bigger's fate to be black, had cheated him of a meaningful life, had arranged things in such a way that he had to be electrocuted.

After a few efforts to get Max to give him some knowledge about the folks who had indirectly and directly sentenced him to death, Bigger laughs, for all that Max can tell him is about labour unions, about men uniting to fight oppression. Again, Bigger reverts to his individual way of seeing things, to depending upon himself:

> "I reckon I believe in myself... I aint got nothing else.... I got to die.... I aint trying to forgive nobody and I aint asking nobody to forgive me. I aint going to cry. They wouldn't let me live and I killed. Maybe it aint fair to kill, and I reckon I didn't want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am...." 41

Bigger's concluding words, his final judgement, that is, on his acts of murder show that he accepts his crimes as being inevitable and that he feels absolutely no remorse for having committed them. To be, he had to murder, he concludes on a triumphant note:

> "What I killed for must've been good!... When a a man kills it's for something.... I didn't know I was alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em.... I feel alright when I look at it that way." 42

Bigger, therefore, does not seek to escape his plight but accepts it, without bitterness, as part of his inescapable lot. He rejects, or to be milder, cannot understand Max's vision of faith in the collective goodwill of

mankind. In one's self, whatever the content of that self, Bigger affirms, lies one's salvation.

The foregoing is Bigger's interpretation of his crimes. Wright, however, leaves his audience with a somewhat modified impression. The white world, represented by Mr. Dalton, is responsible for Bigger's plight. That white world forced Bigger to feed on the garbage of American civilisation and then marvels at his monstrosity. Mr. Dalton charges Negroes twice as much rent for substandard housing as he charges whites. He ghettoizes blacks by refusing to rent them houses in white neighbourhoods. He thereby contributes to segregation which is shown in the novel to account for Bigger's distorted and tragic impressions of whites. His ping pong donations to the South Side Boys' Club and taking Bigger into his home to work cannot repair the damage inflicted by his business ethics and false notions about black people's preferred lifestyle. In this way Wright shows that Mr. Dalton contributed to Bigger's degeneracy and ultimately to his daughter's death.

Unfortunately, the newspaper reports in Native Son, as Margaret Walker points out, [43] are modelled on similar comments that were made in 1939 during the trial of Robert Nixon, a Negro rapist, in Chicago. Bigger's crime is publicised by the white press and is used by white people to vindicate their fantasies about the degeneracy of the black race. The depravity with which they charge Bigger,

is, ironically, expressed in very bestial terms. Buckley, the state attorney, refers to Bigger as "human scum," "infernal monster," "maddened ape," "fiend," "lizard," "dog." The eagerness with which the white world is ready to pounce upon Bigger and sentence him to death reveals, among other things, America's tragic mistake in believing that, after it has brutalized the Negro by denying him his rightful place in the society, it can keep him under control by the threat of death.

In the novel, nothing changes, no one learns anything. Bigger dies so that the white community can again sleep in peace.

Many critics of Native Son agree that it is replete with flaws;[44] yet they concur that it is, in spite of these flaws, a powerful work. Part of its power, thinks Dan McCall, lies in the fact that it utilizes many of the white man's myths regarding black existence and portrays a character who daringly violates them.[45] Of course, Wright could have expressed the concepts that went into the creation of Native Son in essay form (he later did), since he chose to do so in art, one has to examine his artistry in light of the manner in which it potentiates or weakens his message. Fiction, we know, can capture the reader's imagination and sweep him along in a way that essays cannot. If in this medium one is able to hammer home certain truths about the human condition

without damaging the integrity of his art, he succeeds in a way in which propaganda tracts do not.

Native Son is for the most part a naturalistic novel. It is bent on recreating life in detail, and like most works in this mode, on conveying to the audience certain sociological truths. The novel itself is modelled on Theodore Drieser's An American Tragedy. Margaret Walker reports that while Wright was writing Native Son, he told her that he was using various newspaper clippings she had sent him "in the same way Drieser had done in An American Tragedy."[46] Margaret Walker goes on to say that "the major portion of Native Son is built on information and action of those clippings," and is supplemented with facts from the Loeb-Leopold trial, a kidnap and murder case, in Chicago.[47]

Dan McCall notes that

> in Drieser as in Wright we see naturalism in its traditional form. The prose of both writers was often sloppy, hasty; their effort was not to fashion any delicate or local effects, but to build, to pile on, to reach some kind of crashing force which would show up the sickness of society.[48]

Influences other than naturalism are visible in Native Son. Wright's minute and detailed portrayal of horror is reminiscent of Poe. One thinks of the scene in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym where the crew are deliberating which of the group will be eaten in order to prevent the entire crew from starving to death.

Wright's probing into Bigger's psyche is also somewhat more profound than the case study presentation one usually gets in naturalistic novels. His influence here may have been Dostoyevski. The example which comes to mind is <u>Crime and Punishment</u>, a novel with which Wright was familiar, by which he was impressed and whose major theme--crime, cause and consequence for the guilty one--influenced Wright. (One must bear in mind that both Bigger and Raskolnikov are victims of circumstances.) The Dostoyevskyan influence is best seen in terms of Bigger's response to his crime; Dostoyevski's portrayal of Raskolnikov in this regard is what Wright used.

<u>Native Son</u> has as part of its artistic power violent drama. It is drama which keeps the reader spell-bound. Wright "develops his novel around the shock technique which demands atrocities and violence."[49] "From the outset the novel assumes a fierce pace which carries the reader breathlessly through Bigger's criminal career."[50] When the reader learns of Bigger's hatred and fear of white people, understands Bigger's tragically queer notions of the latter and witnesses his cold, inhuman treatment of Gus, he is anxious to know what is going to happen at the Daltons'. The excitement is intensified by the weapons Bigger takes with him to the Dalton home. The smothering of Mary and the burning of her body drives story [illegible]

fevered pitch, for Bigger has violated the most powerful taboo in race relations. Wright profits in the meantime, though not always cleverly, to drive home to his audience certain truths about the black man's existence, to interpret, as it were, the role society played in depraving Bigger.

Noteworthy in Native Son is the way Wright often used external phenomena to reflect Bigger's emotional state. When, for example, a pigeon lands in front of Bigger and then flies away, Bigger remarks, rather skilfully, that black people are the only things that cannot go where they wish; in short that brutes had more freedom than black human beings. The choking and smoking of the furnace in the Dalton's basement is an adequate portrayal of the foiling of Bigger's plans and of Bigger's having come to disturb that family's sleeping conscience. When Bigger falls in the snow and is for a moment buried in it, this action foreshadows his eventual capture and death sentence by the cold forces of the white world. In like manner, Bigger's inability to control his heat against the cold, thereby causing him to urinate involuntarily, foreshadows his capture by the cold forces of society.

Through tonal devices Wright is often able to tell the reader much. For example, the building into which

Bigger takes Bessie is snow-covered and "its many windows gaped blackly like the sockets of an empty skull."[51] These images evoke thoughts of a graveyard, of death in effect. It is in this building that Bigger kills Bessie. When Bigger is about to murder Bessie he reasons thus: "He could not use a gun; that would make too much noise. He would use a brick."[52] In these thoughts Bigger displays no emotion; Bessie's murder is thought out in dispassionate terms like, perhaps, the most efficient way of slaughtering chickens for the market; this has the effect of conveying to the reader Bigger's bestial state. Again, when Wright wishes the reader to see Bigger hiding like a frightened animal, he does not say so, rather he describes him as crouching. The use of these tonal effects often gives Wright the advantage of portraying Bigger's tragedy objectively, of breaking away from his sometimes too-involved portrayal.

In his introduction to Anger and Beyond, Herbert Hill writes:

> Although Native Son is basically a novel of protest, Richard Wright went beyond the attack on environment and injustice to a powerful symbolic rendering of the narrative material that is frequently a comment on the narrative itself. [53]

This is quite true, although Wright explicates his symbols too frequently and therefore robs them of their potency.

Quite visible in Native Son are many traditional symbols or stereotyping techniques used in the portrayal of

tragedy. Blindness, winter and fire are key symbols. Blindness is by far the most pervasive symbol. Mrs. Dalton is physically and metaphorically blind. The latter is revealed in her thoughts that by going to night school Bigger can improve his lot; as such she is blind to the suffering of Negroes, if she thinks that increased education will solve their plight. She is especially blind to individual blacks; Bigger is simply part of an amorphous mass. Mr. Dalton too is blind, for he cannot see how traditionally racist he is. He exploits the misery of Negroes by charging them higher rents and enforces segregation by refusing to rent them houses in neighbourhoods outside of the Black Belt. Yet, by giving millions, which he drew out of black misery, to Negro institutions even though he will never hire any of their graduates, he considers himself a friend of the Negro. Because of his role in producing Bigger, his blind following of custom figures in the tragic death of his daughter.

Bigger's inability to analyse his fear and hatred of the white race—fear and hatred which lead him to commit acts of violence and [illegible]—[illegible] to his murder of Mary [illegible] passion. [illegible] after he has [illegible] Mary [illegible] without [illegible]

the tragic reality, that is, the delusions behind many of his thoughts and actions. His mother is blind; for her the ultimate meaning of life lies in an other-worldly existence. Buddy, because he seeks after the crumbs which whites have reserved for blacks, is blind. Vera follows very closely in her mother's footsteps and therefore has not a mind of her own. Jan and Mary, in the way in which they naively wound Bigger's sensibility and are condescending to him, are also shown to be blind. Max, though he defends Bigger, cannot understand the full meaning of crime to Bigger, is horrified by Bigger's acceptance of his crimes and his way of asserting his individuality. Neither is Bessie credited with much vision; she has accepted life on the white folk's terms and blinds herself to the horrors of her life through alcoholism. Hatred of the black race blinds white people to any sympathetic understanding of Bigger and makes them cry in a unified voice, "electrocute him."

Wright, who was fond of Yeats, may have obtained the idea of blindness in relation to tragedy from Yeats' poem, "The Tower." In any case, absence of vision, be it lack of self-knowledge, as in the case of many of Ibsen's works, or a blind lust for power, as is evinced in A Shakespeare's Macbeth, is noted by many writers as a fundamental theme of tragedy.

Winter, because it is an archetypal symbol of death, is an apt symbol with which to portray the dead or sleeping existence which many of the characters follow. Except for Bigger and, to a lesser extent, Jan, they are all asleep and only bothered by the fact that Bigger had come to haunt their dreams. The wintry season serves Wright's purpose in another way, for through the snow-covered landscape Wright is able to reflect the cold white world of which Bigger and other Negroes are victims. Metaphorically speaking, the lives of Bessie and Mrs. Thomas, as described by them, are a perpetual winter.

Fire is an excellent reflection of the violence that seethes in Bigger. One can hardly miss Wright's intention when Peggy asks Bigger does he "fire." Prior to his going to the Dalton home he had "fired," in his brutal treatment of Gus, in a shocking manner. One of the weapons he takes to the Dalton house is a firearm; and his is a fiery explosion when, out of fear, he suffocates Mary and later burns her body in the furnace. It is interesting to note that the furnace at the Dalton home is kept under control, for this family has its hired help to take care of it. Once Bigger arrives his uncontrollable fire destroys Mary, whose ashes clog the furnace. Only by solving the mystery of Mary's disappearance can equanimity return to the household. Hence, her bones must

be uncovered before the fire can again burn freely. At this point, however, Bigger's own fire is going out; the violence in him can no longer adequately insulate him against the white world's deadly cold. By killing a member of the white race he had exposed himself, without any protection, to the fiercest of that race's wintry blasts.

The symbol of the rat genuinely belongs to Wright. Bigger kills the rat upon awakening and finding it a threat to members of his family. Buddy is surprised at its size, and Bigger explains that it was acquired through the consumption of garbage. Bigger is later portrayed like the rat he had earlier killed. Just as the rat was fearful of Bigger and therefore fought back, so Bigger attacks in response to his fears of the white world. One is flabbergasted by the extremity of these fears. He, too, acquired them by feeding on the base notions--the garbage--of American life. The white race is alarmed at Bigger's monstrosity and it must dispense with Bigger at all costs, must hunt him down, deprive him of a hiding hole, and kill him to ensure that its women may go to bed without fear.

I The rat symbolizes Bigger's own downfall later in the narrative. He is also cornered and killed, for he is like a rat in a white man's maze of civilization. Indeed, Bigger is put through the maze of human experience like a rat only to be

hurdles according to the set pattern of the maze.[55]

Through a naturalistic framework, a plot which keeps his readers alert and expectant, various tonal devices and a pervasive use of tragic symbolism along with various other writing feats, Wright successfully portrays the tragedy of Bigger Thomas which he makes, in his treatment of the material, an existential tragedy.

Bigger is by far the most tragic character in Native Son. His hatred for the white race, himself, his own race and even members of his own family is pathological and leads him eventually to find vindication of his existence in murder. Bigger's hatred is, in the words of James Baldwin, the "naked and unanswerable hatred" that every Negro living in America has felt; hatred which makes him want "to smash every white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low."[56] But every Negro must make the adjustment to "the nigger in himself" and in others.[57] Failure to do this results in tragedy. Bigger's relatives have every right to be appalled by his actions, for his criminal activity is motivated by his hatred and self-hatred. By killing "he does not redeem the pains of a despised people but reveals, on the contrary, nothing more than his own bitterness at having been born one of

them."[58] Wright, of course, would see nothing wrong with his portrait of Bigger, but Baldwin does:

> A necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relation that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. [59]

Wright, on the other hand, preferred to follow what he described as a form of literature that was "traditionally American, ... the posing of the problem of the individual in relation to society."[60] Bigger must first satisfy his being before he turns to the problems of the group; in the words of Irving Howe, "there is for each Negro an ultimate trial that he can bear only by himself."[61] But in doing so, Bigger shocks the group by pursuing activities that are abhorrent to it.

By showing the lives that other blacks in Native Son lead, Wright presents the reader with the options available to Bigger. They are options that call for emasculation of blacks and their unrevolting subservience to the white race, options to which Bigger, despite his fear of the white world, could not turn. Bigger's mother and his girlfriend, Bessie, are the examples Wright uses. Mrs. Thomas fits Dorothy Canfield Fisher's description of her as a "sweet-natured, infinitely patient, unrebelling doormat of a mother."[62] When faced with Bigger's murder Mrs. Thomas can only say that she did all she

could for him in the way she knew: "I scrubbed and washed and ironed from morning till night, day in and day out, as long as I had strength in my body."[63] Life for her has been one long, laborious toil vividly expressed in the words of the song she sings:

> Life is like a mountain railroad
> With an engineer that's brave
> We must make the run successful
> From the cradle to the grave. 64

Nothing could more effectively convey Mrs. Thomas' subservience to the white race like the scene in which she throws herself on the floor at Mrs. Dalton's feet and pleads with her to use her influence to save Bigger's life; she is even willing to sacrifice the rest of her life working for Mrs. Dalton in return for this favour. (This scene, I also realize, communicates the profundity of her maternal affection for Bigger. Her method of revealing it though--a preparedness to kneel before white people-- is what leads to the foregoing judgement.) To mitigate her suffering Mrs. Thomas believes unwaveringly in religion.

Bessie's life, as she describes it, has been full of "hard black trouble:"

> "If I wasn't hungry I was sick. And if I wasn't sick, I was in trouble. I aint never bothered nobody. I just worked hard everyday as long as I can remember till I was tired enough to drop; then I had to get drunk to forget it. I had to get drunk to sleep. That's all I ever did."[65]

Bessie drinks, Mrs. Thomas prays, Bigger murders. They are all victims of the choking forces of white racism which doomed the majority of America's blacks to a meaningless existence. Native Son suggests that as a black person living in America whichever way one turned he was the victim of white racism. As such, Wright was correct in stating that in Native Son he attempted to reveal the tragic enormity of the race problem in America.[66]

CHAPTER IV

TRAGEDY OF THE SOUTHERN BLACK BOURGEOISIE

Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son and Black Boy, works in which Wright's efforts are devoted to revealing the debilitating effects of white racism on Negro American life, were all written by 1945. These works had earned for Wright the title of spokesman for the Negro people. When The Long Dream was published in 1958 many readers were disappointed and perhaps embarrassed to find that Wright had not ceased to portray Negro American life in the same tragic and hopless terms that he had used in his earlier works. Absent in The Long Dream are the mobilisations on the part of black and white Americans for an improvement in the Negro's lot and the ameliorations in the status of the Negro that were everywhere apparent in the 1950s.[1] Moreover, in The Long Dream, Wright repeated much of what he had said in his earlier works. For these reasons, as can be expected, the literary critics deprecated the novel and made it unpopular with the reading public.

A few reasons, all of which are plausible, have been given for Wright's continued portrayal of Negro life

in America as bleak, helpless, hopeless and worthless. The first is that Wright had expatriated himself and was therefore unaware of the improvements that had taken place in the lives of black Americans. Statements by the afterward civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the poet Langston Hughes that no real changes had taken place in the lives of black Americans reinforced Wright's ignorance.[2] Above all, Emmett Till had been lynched in Mississippi in 1957 because he had whistled at a white woman.[3] This last may have suggested to Wright that the terror employed by white people in earlier years to maintain their oppression of blacks had not abated. Wright therefore felt that he should once more disturb the conscience of white America and chose to do so by writing The Long Dream. Wright's feelings about black American life at this time is conveyed in the introduction he wrote for Paul Oliver's book, Blues Fell this Morning. Here he states:

> The American environment which produced the blues is still with us though we call labour to render it progressively smaller.... It is well that we examine the meaning of the blues while they are still falling upon us.[4]

Writing protest fiction, it seems, was Wright's way of examining the meaning of the blues.

In condemning The Long Dream the critics ignored much that was appearing in Wright for the first time. Wright had never before explored the moral plight of the

Southern black bourgeoisie, and this is one of his central themes in this novel. However, to the extent that the relationships Wright portrays between the black bourgeoisie and the Southern white community were almost wholly outmoded, the critics were justified in attacking the novel. As a portrayal of the tragic existence of the Southern black bourgeoisie, The Long Dream reflects the practices of an earlier era.[5] This fact does not, however, inauthenticate its validity as one of Wright's major works on the theme of Negro tragedy.

Because much of what is said in The Long Dream regarding the Negro's tragic existence in America has already been dramatized in Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son and Black Boy and has therefore been dealt with in the earlier chapters of this study, this chapter will be restricted to those aspects of The Long Dream which depict the existence of the Southern black bourgeoisie.

The implications to be drawn from the actions of the central black characters in the book, Fishbelly, Tyree, Dr. Bruce and Maud Williams, if they are taken to represent the Southern black bourgeoisie as a whole, are quite disconcerting. These characters are preoccupied with the procurement of wealth, are not concerned about who, among their own people, they exploit or the implications of such exploitation as long as such acts bring

monetary gain. They are, in a word, vultures. To realize the American Dream, that is, to become wealthy, they descend to the lowest of the low, sacrificing dignity, self-respect and race loyalty, even becoming willing instruments of white oppression. Symbolically, they make themselves prostitutes for the white race, since there appears to be no ceiling on what they will not do to other members of their own race at the white man's commands. Real prostitutes they make of many unfortunate, poor black girls. If there is anything admirable about these characters, it is their wiliness in abeying the white man's fears. Ultimately, however, such crafty behaviour is valueless.

The pact that the Southern black bourgeoisie make with whites is equally damning to them as it is to the immediate victims of these pacts. If the Southern black bourgeoisie have an identity, it is in mask-wearing, dissimulating, and flawless lying in the presence of whites. Fortunately, Wright tempers these judgements by showing that it is only through these practices that black Southerners can climb out of their poverty. And when shown the wretched conditions under which the impoverished black folk live, one finds it difficult to condemn the ostensibly despicable practices of the black bourgeois class. Folk short, our understanding

their plight in Tyree's terms:

> "... Niggers aint corrupt. Niggers aint got no rights but them they buy. You say I'm wrong to buy me rights? ... I want a wife. A car. A house to live in. The white man's got 'em. And when I get 'em the only way I can, you say I'm corrupt.... Don't call me corrupt when I live the only way I can live.... When you have to do wrong to live wrong is right...." 6

In portraying the black bourgeoisie thus, Wright was merely continuing to fulfill a commitment he earlier made to himself regarding the portrayal of Afro-American existence. In the "Blueprint for Negro Literature," which he published in New Challenge (Fall, 1937), he wrote the following:

> ... a cowardly sentimentality has deterred Negro writers from launching crusades against the evils which Negro ignorance and stupidity have spawned. Negro writers should not hesitate to tell the truth about their own people for fear that these truths will be used by belligerent whites against them. 7

Furthermore, the manner in which Wright portrays the Southern black bourgeoisie is related to a specific idea he held regarding its role in the black community. In a speech he made at the American Church in Paris in November, 1959 on "The Role of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in the U. S. Today," he stated that "the paltry wages" of blacks working at menial jobs "form the foundation of the black economy." He went on to say:

> "... there exists in the midst of the black working class a small professional class composed

> of doctors, lawyers, undertakers, etc. The undertakers of course have the monopoly. They are a bit more independent than the labourers but not much. They know that their race constitutes a minority and that that minority is for the most part uneducated. These professionals find it more convenient to pattern their lives, in so far as this is possible, on the norms of the whites than on any form of revolt.... Among them there is no imperative sense that life can be different." 9

In The Long Dream emotional turmoil is one of the chief characteristics of the black bourgeois' life, a fact which is perhaps related to an observation Wright made in 1941 in Twelve Million Black Voices: Those blacks of independent means had to partake in the game of "keeping the niggers down." "An independent and prosperous black family flourishing amid a vast area of poverty is in itself a powerful enough symbol to be a source of trouble." 10 This idea comes to mind when Tyree, king of "nigger town," surmises, as he awaits indictment for the part he played in "The Grove" fire, from the advice given him by the chief of police and the town's mayor, that part of their plan is to strip him of his wealth.

In The Long Dream Wright sometimes uses a technique he employed in "Big Boy Leaves Home," that is, to depict a scene of racial horror and describe the reactions of those witnessing it. Foremost in mind is the lynching of Chris Sims. In Tyree's reaction to the terror this produces within the black community Wright implies that

Tyree, though at first inclined to see it as an injustice to the black race, eventually accepts it. Tyree mildly accepts Chris' lynching by calling him a fool. What Tyree refuses to confront is the psychological problem, manifested in the black man's increased attraction to the white woman, that the concept of white womanhood creates. Tyree's condemnation of Chris' action results from a greater problem--his readiness to comply with white restrictions on black existence. But there is a tinge of irony in his attitude, for granted his premise that white folks need black blood, and only when they have obtained it will they be quieted, white folks will kill blacks anyhow, if not for copulating with white women, for any reason at all.

A pragmatist, profiting from the oppression of his race, Tyree sees the lynching of Chris as an excellent opportunity to impress upon his twelve-year-old son and hopeful heir the need to eschew white women. This, like everything else that Tyree does, has the reverse effect; Fishbelly becomes magnetized by the white woman's sexuality to the point where he carries around a semi-nude photograph of a white woman in his wallet. The inefficacy of Tyree's lesson to Fishbelly is well dramatized when it is shown that it is the concept of white womanhood, not the act of [illegible] with a white woman, that

should be feared. This idea is conveyed when Cantley, the newly resigned chief of police, sends a white woman to Fishbelly's apartment so that he can charge him of sexual molestation and on that basis secure his incarceration for other reasons. Tyree's emphasis is therefore shown to be in the wrong place; it should be directed against the very existence of white womanhood, not merely against escaping its afflictions.

While the lynching of Chris is taking place, Wright reveals Tyree expressing fear and helplessness. Tyree is also credited with the knowledge that the killing of blacks by whites stems from some dark psychological urge which periodically seeks to be satisfied with human blood. Although his response is understandable, there is irony in the fact that Tyree is glad when, because of the ecstasy the white folks have experienced from lynching Chris, peace returns to the community and life resumes its regular pace. What he does not ponder is that one day his life might be required in this grisly sacrifice.

All along and up to the point of the crisis created by the burning of "The Grove," Tyree revels in a false sense of power. [illegible]

activities which whites have reserved for themselves.

Tyree instructs his son, Fishbelly, that the black man is a dream that can never come true, that the black man's business is to stay alive, that is, to outwit the forces of racism that are forever seeking his death. For remaining alive, Tyree gives Fishbelly a formula:

> "Dream, Fish. But be careful what you dream. Dream only what can happen.... If you ever find yourself dreaming something that can't happen then choke it back, 'cause there's too many dreams of a black man that can't come true. Don't force your dreams, son; if you do you'll die." 11

Implied in these cautions is the idea that Fishbelly must find out what as a black man he can accomplish in life and restrict his goals to those findings. Stated otherwise, Fishbelly must submit himself to the blueprint created by the white race for the regulation of Negro existence.

When Tyree tells Fishbelly that he makes money "gitting black dreams ready for burial," 12 he expects Fish to understand that black people who aim too highly, that is to say, who seek to overcome their "Jim Crow" existence, meet with death. In a more sarcastic vein, Wright wishes to convey that Tyree thrives on the misery engendered by racism. Nevertheless, as Tyree imparts this [illegible] to his son, he also wishes, the horror of the black man's existence cannot be discussed without a palliative.

Part of Tyree's pragmatism was an agreement to supply "the blood that he felt the white folks wanted in order to buy a little security for himself."[13] When Fishbelly marvels at his father's resignation to the acts of terror by whites on the black community, Tyree responds by telling him: "We own our own home. I got about forty thousand dollars worth of property rented out.... 'Cause I tend to my business and leave white folks alone. If I didn't I wouldn't be where I am."[14] Thus, Tyree declares, that provided he has wealth and is allowed to prosper in business, the white folks can do as they please. There is again irony in this statement when, despite Tyree's wealth, he must escape from sight, must lie on the floor and keep the house in total darkness as the white community unleashes it fury on the black community. Tyree must wait anxiously, in fear and trembling, for the white fury to be spent before venturing outdoors, before resuming his perfunctory existence.

Tyree's statement that he leaves white folks alone is dishonest. The contrary is true; he is one of their oppressive agents, and indirectly he encourages white brutality against blacks. This is clearly pointed out in Tyree's statement that he does favours for the chief of police: "I done buried many a black man he shot to death. I did 'in favours. Fixed up dead folks that way, fixed 'em up so you couldn't tell they been beat to death."[15]

Far from being a friendship, this is a conspiracy against his race. In addition, Tyree collects rent from a few tenements owned by the chief in the Black Belt and pays him $190 weekly to operate houses of prostitution and gambling joints. Since this money must be drawn from the earnings of the prostitutes and gamblers, Tyree, by taking this money from them and paying it to the white authorities, is exploiting his people for the benefit of the whites and himself.

Tyree then has agreed to comply with every facet of oppression against the black race, and, in doing so, he profits financially. In the presence of the white man he plays the role of the humble "nigger," he bends his knees, speaks in a cracked tenor voice and slumps his shoulders, becomes a child in his behaviour. Never will he openly contradict a white man, and nothing is too debasing for him to do when he must convince him that he is not operating against his interests. In Fishbelly's initial understanding of Tyree, the whites did not have to threaten Tyree with castration; he was already castrated.

Having traded his manhood for wealth, Tyree at times talks about the members of his race as though he were white. The only thing he had in common with the black poor, he informs Fishbelly, is the colour of his skin.

"Niggers," he says, are so crooked, they can hide behind a corkscrew. Yet, apart from his real estate undertakings, Tyree's business ventures are restricted by his blackness. He engages in those enterprises--prostitution and gambling--which are contrary to the mores of the society. In adversity Tyree knows that not even his wealth can guarantee him justice before a court of law, a basic right of the poorest white American. The irony is that Tyree pays the law to allow him to operate illegally, knowing all the while that there is no justice for him in the law courts.

Tyree is merciless towards members of his own race. He can see them only in terms of dollars. He is "a heartless landlord" and "is as ruthless an exploiter of his own people as any less subtle white supremacist."[16] It is only when Tyree becomes a victim of his exploiting schemes, shown in the burning of "The Grove," that he can be charitable to members of his race--he offers a ten per cent discount on the cost of the funerals resulting from the fire. Ironically, he shares in the responsibility for these deaths and should not only give a discount but a free burial; in addition, he should be punished for the deaths.

Here Tyree's charity is practical and grudgingly given; yet it contrasts with an earlier lack of sympathy

on his part for the black poor, suffering as a result of a long drought followed by torrential rains. His reaction to their plight, if not one of pleasure, is one of callous indifference:

> "I know it's hard on some folks," Tyree declared with solemn satisfaction, "but it aint hurting me none. If they burn or drown I bury them. Business is damn good. I done bought six new flats to rent out and I'm gitting me a brand new Buick." 17

Tyree is therefore that individual who welcomes any calamity from which he stands to profit.

Tyree's predatory behaviour and lack of sympathy for the sufferings of the poor is effectively conveyed when he is shown to respond to the grief of Mrs. Sims, whose son had just been lynched, by attempting to seduce her. In an all-round way Tyree is a vulture on the constant lookout for black prey.

But Tyree's business deals are slippery ones and, as such, are capable, when he least expects, of bringing him low. In partnership with Doctor Bruce, he operates "The Grove," a meeting place for black prostitutes and their clients. To operate it without harrassment from the town's law enforcement officials, Tyree pays bribes to the chief of police, Cantley. Like everything else--Tyree's status as a wealthy black man, his deals with the chief of police--"The Grove" is made of highly combustible material. On the fourth of July, America's

birthday, it burns to the ground killing forty-two of its clients and injecting tension into Tyree's and Cantley's relationship. In their greed for wealth and in keeping with Tyree's character, he and Doctor Bruce operate the club ignoring the safety of their clients.

Those pacts which Tyree had made with Cantley cannot ensure that he and Doctor Bruce will emerge from "The Grove" scandal unscathed. They had been operating the club blatantly ignoring notices of fire violations. To do so, however, they had to have Cantley's collusion. As a white man, Cantley has nothing to fear except the fact that Tyree, who has evidence of the bribery payments, in the form of cancelled checks, can implicate him in the fire.

The burning of "The Grove" and the several deaths resulting from it serve to make Tyree aware how much of a "non-man" he is. It takes a calamity of this sort, a back-firing of the black bourgeois' sell-out of his race to make him realize that though he might possess wealth, he is essentiallly powerless. Tyree even suspects that Cantley and the mayor find in "The Grove" scandal an excellent opportunity to end their uneasy relationship with him, by stripping him of his wealth. Tyree knows that he will be tried by the white law, by a jury that is not his peers and by a judge who is a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Beyond doubt, he will be

found guilty and dealt with without mercy. It is only then that Tyree realizes how unjust is the system from which he reaps his profits. Having fostered that system, it is now as powerful as ever, ready to take him into its jaws.

Tyree conceives that Cantley might be able to use his influence to have him tried by an all-black jury. Tyree's words jolt the reader and are obscene-sounding to the chief. Suddenly it would seem that Tyree, contrary to the advice he had given Fishbelly, is nourishing dreams that cannot come true. Tyree, in making this demand, is asking for social equality; his request threatens the very foundations of the white caste system that he had worked all his life to maintain and which he exploited for material gain. Since his request will never be granted, Tyree is the victim of a system he refused to oppose and even nurtured. Cantley is rightly shocked by Tyree's request; certainly, this "nigger" had "gone nuts." So astounded is the mayor by Tyree's proposition that he calls upon Tyree at home to find out if he had been in touch with Communists, for Tyree's plea is revolutionary. The only solution, the mayor informs him, is to sell his property and be prepared to defend himself.

Realizing that there is no way out of his crisis, Tyree decides to implicate Cantley. By weeping to him,

he is momentarily able to persuade Cantley that he had destroyed the checks and has no intentions of dragging him into the scandal. On the same day, however, Tyree takes the checks to a reform-minded lawyer, McWilliams. His action backfires: Cantley intercepts the checks. Tyree is therefore threatening to Cantley and Cantley kills him. It is fitting, from an ethical standpoint, that Tyree, who had supported Cantley's brutal murders of other Negroes, should die in a similar manner.

In "Long Black Song," one of the stories in Uncle Tom's Children, Wright shows the aspiring bourgeois, Silas, dying heroically and disillusioned, realizing fully the valuelessness of wealth in a life devoid of dignity. But Tyree, who sacrifices his dignity for wealth, who acquiesces to all the white man's decrees designed to abase the Negro, is not given such a death. He is shot in coldblood, refused the services of a doctor at the crucial moment and bleeds to death in one of his whore-houses.

Without liberty, Wright implies, it is useless for blacks to pursue the American Dream, for they can never enjoy the benefits of that ideal. Moreover, the American Dream was never intended for blacks, and, in spite of all the conspiracies in which blacks enter against other blacks and indirectly against themselves so that they can pursue the dream, they can only arrive at a brief and

compromised version of it. Sooner or later the unhealthy deals they make with the oppressor ignite, and from the resulting conflagration they can never emerge unscathed. In fact, Tyree is the best representative of his concept that the black man is a dream that cannot come true, for Tyree's life had no reality for himself; it was spent fulfilling the specifications of the white world. Killed by the bullet of the white man with whom he had colluded in the exploitation and oppression of his race, Tyree's plight is no better than that of those Negroes he derides for daring to challenge white oppression and die doing so.

His partner, Dr. Bruce, argues that in order to survive he must operate a business on the side. That business involves prostitution, the selling of the bodies of unfortunate black women. As such, he too is guilty of oppressing his race. "The Grove" fire is the result of his lack of concern for the safety of those from whom he obtains his revenue. He is, therefore, no less a predator than Tyree. He too pays his penalty for the forty-three deaths resulting from the fire. There is no possibility of him practising medicine anymore as long as the indictment is hanging over his head, and he does not possess the resources to extricate himself. He is therefore a dead man (he escapes in a hearse to

to the American North). In exploiting his people Dr. Bruce damns himself.

In writing The Long Dream, Wright's primary concern was to portray the tragedy of Fishbelly. But, as Edward Margolies observes,[18] Tyree's is the more striking portrait, since his acts, apart from Fishbelly's interpretation of them, are impressively convincing. But although Fishbelly is eclipsed somewhat by his father's character, his is, nevertheless, a genuine and well-realised portrait.

Fishbelly's tragedy lies in the fact that he wishes to be a full man and finds that, because he is black, this is not possible. His father instructs him that in order to survive he must be either "crying or grinning"[19] when in the presence of the white man; he must allow, as Fishbelly later interprets this practice, the white man to annul the reality of his life. Emphatically, Fishbelly asserts, "I don't want that."[20] Crying and grinning, Fishbelly knows, "is not winning."[21] Fishbelly even has the courage to tell his father that he had not the courage to oppose white folks.

Tyree finds that Fishbelly's spirit is too independent and determines to make him tractable to the practices of Southern society:

> "... I got to break your goddam spirit or you'll git killed sure as hell!... Say look at what I done

> with my life. I'm black but do you hear me whining about it? Hell, naw! I'm a <u>man</u>. I got a business, a home, property, money in the bank.... Is my life bad?" (The last ellipses are Wright's) 22

Quite appropriately, Fishbelly replies, "Nawsir. It aint bad, it's just hopeless, Papa."[23] Fishbelly had already observed that Tyree, symbolically, had made a eunuch of himself in order to become wealthy. It takes more than wealth, Fishbelly initally knows, to be a man, and so at the outset he rejects his father's counsel.

Unfortunately, Tyree is, in the long run, able to impress his philosophy on Fishbelly, who moves from contempt for to worship of his father. How Tyree accomplishes this is somewhat tragic and reflects his limited vision. He takes Fishbelly, first of all, to one of his whorehouses where he organizes the boy's initiation to sex. Despite Tyree's wealth, Wright shows, he had not been touched by American middle class mores, for had this been so, he would have never wanted his son to mingle with prostitutes. But whatever the effects of Tyree's actions, his immediate goal is to show Fish that he can lead a meaningful sex life among his own people and did not need to copulate with white women. This action stems from Tyree's fears for Fish's life, for no one had told him that Fish was attracted to white women. But Tyree's deed results in something he had not anticipated. Fishbelly becomes addicted to sex to the point where he

absents himself from school to go in search of it; consequently he fails his school year. Tyree's revelations to Fish about his financial assets and his emphasis on the value of wealth influence Fish's belief that the completion of his education is not necessary. This fact is particularly evident when Fishbelly, arguing against his father's wish to keep him in school, asserts that he wants "to make money.... That's what counts."[24] "Ironically," notes Katherine Sprandel, "it is Tyree, the loving father, who helps destroy his son."[25]

More tragic is the fact that Fishbelly adopts and even improves his father's exploitation techniques of other blacks. In one instance, he shows Tyree how he can increase his profits by selling his more expensive coffins, which otherwise will not be sold, on a time-payment plan. Working as a rent-collector for his father, Fishbelly comes in contact with the squalor of black life and the exaggerated and neurotic behaviour which squalid existence produces. Fishbelly reacts by despising these unfortunate blacks, by referring to them as sick. The reader knows, however, that Fishbelly is no less sick than are these people. In an earlier scene Fishbelly, in a moment of intense self-hatred, had actually spat at his reflection in the mirror.

When, after "the Crows" catastrophe, Fishbelly suggests to his father that as a way out of their crisis they place

the responsibility for the fire on Fats, the bartender who supervised the running of "The Grove," one realises that he had been thoroughly conquered by his father's corrupt business ethics.

So Fishbelly witnesses his father's lack of control over his existence and his corrupt business practices and accepts them as a way of life. In addition, he is present when his father expresses to McWilliams the nothingness of the black man's condition and the perennial injustice which the latter must constantly circumvent by corrupt practices. Finally, Fishbelly sees the brutal murder of his father, sees in fact what happens to the black bourgeois who involves himself in shady deals with the white power structure. Fishbelly knows that his father is killed to prevent him from divulging evidence of the bribes he had been paying Cantley. But, in spite of the pleas of his mother and his father's employee, Jim, that he disentangle himself from Tyree's corrupt business practices, Fishbelly is enticed by the wealth such ventures yield and remains heedless of the danger signs and impervious to his mother's advice. He has fallen prey to his father's corrupt business practices and will continue in his footsteps; hence Wright shows that one generation of Negroes replaces another and the white-dominated system remains unchallenged.

In ending [illegible] Fishbelly

inherits a portion of his father's problems. Gloria, his father's mistress who had escaped with Dr. Bruce, sends him a batch of cancelled checks, evidence of five years' payment of bribes to Cantley. Fishbelly knows that his father had saved these checks so that if necessary he could fight Cantley from the grave. The implication is that Fishbelly must use the checks to wage war on Cantley. Instead, Cantley knows that the checks are missing and wages war on Fish. First, he threatens Fish by pointing out that Tyree had been killed for refusing to co-operate with the syndicate. Imitating what he had seen his father do to persuade the white man that he had honest intentions, Fishbelly cries and crawls before Cantley, "acting out the role of vassal" to the white lord.[27]

Just when Fishbelly is contemplating the possibility of fleeing the South, of leaving behind the nightmares that have so far been his life, Cantley closes in on him. He had stayed around too long and the white world had begun to use its weapons on him. A white woman comes to Fishbelly's apartment while policemen wait outside for her screams. So that Cantley can pressure him into disclosing where the checks are or where he can find Gloria, whom he also thinks may have the checks, Fishbelly is arrested and taken to prison on the charge of attempting to rape a white woman. After spending two

years in jail, he is released with the bitter knowledge that life for him in America is impossible. Cantley expects him to take up from where he left off. Instead he escapes to France, where his school friends had informed him there exists freedom for the black man.

Fishbelly is the "native son" of the black bourgeoisie, who cannot find peace under no circumstances in America, who realizes that as a slave to the white establishment his life would be as meaningless as if he rebelled against it and got killed. He must therefore seek self-actualisation in an alien land.

In his portrayal of Fishbelly, Wright returns to his basic premise in Uncle Tom's Children, that black people, if they wished to preserve their dignity as human beings, must either revolt against white oppression or flee from it. The twenty-one years which elapsed between the publication of Uncle Tom's Children and The Long Dream did not, according to Wright's portrayal of the black existence in these works, modify Wright's vision of black existence in America.

Nor did this time span greatly alter Wright's fictional techniques. Wright is still guilty of over-writing. He is never content with the mere dramatisation of his concept; he must state what the concept is. This happens so often that the reader feels that Wright is condescending to him. Not one spelling out of his purpose

weakens, not potentiates, his message.

In The Long Dream the reader is spared much of the blood-chilling violence of Native Son and Uncle Tom's Children. Except for two episodes of violence which are vividly described (one of them is between Sam, the son of a working-class subscriber to the "Back to Africa Movement," and Fishbelly over ideology, and the other is between Fishbelly and a black prisoner placed in his cell allegedly by Cantley to gather confidential information from Fishbelly), the reader is spared much of the violence. For example, Chris' lynching and the shooting of Tyree do not take place on stage. The ongoing, vivid portrayal of the burning "Grove" is the closest Wright gets to the horror he portrayed in Native Son. It is the first time that Wright attempts to portray a father/son relationship and where this is concerned, he does a good job.

Wright's technique reveals his intention. It is fairly evident from the transparency of his art, his frequent iteration and constant explication that protest is his major motive. Because of these techniques, rather than pursuing the narrative, telling the tale that is, for its own sake, The Long Dream does not conform to the convention of the novels being written in America in 1958. Notwithstanding, it conveys reasonably well Wright's vision of the tragic reality of the lives of America's Southern black bourgeoisie.

CONCLUSION

With the three works that have been discussed, an attempt was made to analyse Wright's conceptions and portrayals of American Negro existence. In all his fictional works dealing with Negro life, and that is to say all his major works, Wright shows that in America the black man's destiny was in the hands of white men. The historical reasons for this, Wright explains, in the first section of Twelve Million Black Voices, cannot be attributed to the Negro, and in White Man, Listen, he does not wholly ascribe them to the white race as such but to the revolutionary social changes occuring in European society prior to and during the era of colonization.[1] Whatever happened, Wright shows that the black man became the white man's victim, and for the value that he is to the white man, he tries to keep him forever in this state. As a human being reacting to victimisation and oppression, the black man spends his life trying, with profound tragic consequences, either to adjust to or defeat racism.

In portraying the black American experience, Wright's main focus is on the detrimental aspects of white racism. From Wright's art which, in its ideology, is inseparable

from his non-fictional works, one realizes that Wright, for the most part, had fixed ideas about Negro American existence. Those ideas--that racism had robbed Negroes of the ability to organize among themselves to fight oppression, that black life was controlled by a fear of white brutality, that blacks allied themselves with whites against other blacks for material wealth and in the process defeated themselves--all tragic truths, more or less, about black American life, dominated his art. As has already been pointed out earlier in this study, Wright's obsession is with the individual, his ability to cope with oppression or, as is more common, his inability to deal with it.

Wright's characters are in a sense modern tragic heroes, driven to action or inaction against their will. In the works which form the body of this study, their tragedy stems almost invariably from the fact that they are members of a hated minority, a minority which is available for use as a scapegoat for the emotional ills of the white race, for a mitigation, as it were, of the latter's suffering. As such the tragedy of Wright's Negro characters is unlike that of mankind in general. Saunders Redding notes that in "Big Boy Leaves Home," Wright's first short story of artistic merit, Wright created the prototype "of all his heroes, who were to be angry, bitter, vengeful, violently hurling themselves

against the walls that barred them from a life that they knew was a better life than theirs..."[2]

Because Wright's works, with few exceptions, deal with American Negro oppression, his artistic vision is a narrow one, a narrowness which is reflected also in the themes and techniques he employed. In the words of Redding, "Wright became a man with a message and a mission.... The message was addressed to a white audience to bring awareness to that audience and thereby to save the world."[3] Redding's observation is supported by Wright's statement that all black lips that sang after Phyllis Wheatley "pay tribute to the power of oppression."[4] Wright also notes that in the works of more recent black writers, "Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Ann Petry, Frank Yerby, Gwendolyn Brooks, etc., one finds a drastic reduction of the racial content" and that this is proof that "our white American neighbours" are more tolerant towards Negroes.[5] However, Wright did not want his art to reflect the optimism of these writers, for in his view, the American Negro's progress was due to pressures placed on America by the outside world to respect its democratic ideals. It was not due to a change of heart on the part of white Americans.[6] Hence, although there were visible improvements in the realm of Negro equality, the white American, as Wright saw him, had not changed; hence there was no reason for him to lessen the protest in his

fiction.

Wright's works, as Redding claims, are flawed by an absence of humour. "The closest he could come to humour was irony," but even this irony "is grim, sardonic and never mirthful."[7] The ambiance created by his scenes and landscapes is one of despair. Rarely does the sun shine in his works, and when it does it is usually in mockery of the black victims. His favourite season in his works is winter.

Despite Wright's noble intentions to portray the Negro's existence to the white world and to the Negro himself, he succeeds in portraying a limited area of Negro life. While it is incontestably true that fighting or fleeing racism was a vital part of Negro American life, that several blacks died as a result of racism and much of the energy of those who did not was consumed by racism, blacks had their various pursuits: jazz, the blues, the Church and involvement with their families. Wright's art barely acknowledges these facets of Negro existence, and, unfortunately, when it does, it is not to portray them objectively but rather to show how they inhibit rebellion in the black man. Wright agreed with his friend, Dr. Frederic Wertham, who operated a clinic in the late 1940s for Harlem's blacks, that "a Negro was an exaggerated American--his problems were those of other people only more naked and obvious because of

oppression."[8] This fact, though present in Wright's fiction, is usually obscure; the Negro's actions, whether against the white race, himself, or his own people, are always blamed on the oppressiveness of white racism rather than aggravated by it.

Wright limited his art by his belief that making "what Negroes experienced known to the American people was one of the most powerful things that could be done to help solve the race question."[9] He was over-optimistic. "For art to be effective in this manner, it must be first attractive to the reader. If it is threatening, he will not buy it, and the message will be lost. This was a bitter lesson that Wright, beset by financial problems in Paris in 1960, just before his death at age 52, was perhaps on the verge of realizing.

The tragic plight of the American Negro seems, for all the reasons I have given, to be the most valuable study of Wright's works. Saunders Redding, in what seems to be an exaggerated statement, goes as far as to call it Wright's only theme.[10] Yet, despite the shortcomings of which Wright's art is replete, his portrayals of Negro American tragedy remain, in most instances, quite good.

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61 Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in Five Black Writers, p. 258.

62 Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Introduction to the First Edition [of Native Son]," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice Hall, 1972), p. 111.

63 Native Son, p. 63.

64 Ibid, p. 14.

65 Ibid, p. 214.

66 "The Negro Artist and Intellectual in the U. S. Today."

CHAPTER IV

1 Fabre, p. 469.

2 Webb, p. 379.
McCall, p. 160.

3 Webb, p. 364.

4 Introduction to Blues Fell this Morning, by Paul Oliver (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1960), p. xii.

5 Redding, "The Alien Land of Richard Wright," p. 10.

6 Wright, The Long Dream (New York: Ace Publishing Co., 1958), p. 249.

7 "Blueprint for Negro Literature."

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Twelve Million Black Voices, pp. 47/48.

[11] The Long Dream, p. 73.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid, pp. 65/66.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid, p. 130.

[16] Margolies, Art of Richard Wright, p. 159.

[17] The Long Dream, p. 89.

[18] Margolies, Art of Richard Wright, p. 158.

[19] The Long Dream, p. 130.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid, p. 131.

[22] Ibid, p. 133.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid, p. 172.

[25] Muriel Sprandel, "The Long Dream," in Impressions and Perspectives, p. 175.

[26] Brignano, p. 46.

[27] Ibid, p. 45.

CONCLUSION

[1] "The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People," White Man, Listen, p. 4.

[2] "The Alien Land of Richard Wright," p. 6.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "The Literature of the American Negro," White Man, Listen, p. 103.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid, pp. 103/104.

[7] Redding, Comment made in "A Symposium on an Exiled Son," p. 69.

[8] Webb, p. 229.

[9] Ibid, p. 222.

[10] "Alien Land of Richard Wright," p. 8.

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