

The unifying factor in these novels is illuminated when they are studied in chronological order, since their individual responses to the frustrations of society point progressively toward strategies for survival, self-definition, and freedom, within a social structure.

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INTRODUCTION

I believe that any novel becomes effective to the extent that it deals quite eloquently with its own material . . . there's no reason why any novel about a Negro background, about Negro characters, could not be effective as literature, and its effectiveness transcend its immediate background and speak eloquently to other people.

Ralph Ellison

The predominant theme in all Richard Wright's fiction expresses the human quest for identity and freedom. Since this study will examine the themes, identity and freedom, as they are manifested in his last three novels, The Outsider¹ (1953), Savage Holiday² (1954), and the Long Dream³ (1958), it seems essential to discuss briefly his preceding fiction in order to trace the development of the themes and put these latter novels into perspective.

Although all of Wright's fiction, with the exception of Savage Holiday, deals overtly with the identity of the Afro-American,⁴ their interpretations can be extrapolated to include the plight of other oppressed groups or individuals. Because the terms "identity" and "freedom" are elusive and interpreted in various ways, it is appropriate at this time, to consider some definitions which will elucidate their application within the context of Wright's fiction. John K. Roth explains:

The achievement of a full and meaningful sense of identity is a task covering a lifetime. The reason for this is that the power of appropriation in the stream of consciousness involves man's capacities

for self-conscious organization of experience A harmonious unified life requires taking over experience in such a way that there is an honest facing of it and a projection of future goals that does not try to deny its existence. This unity is not easy to achieve. . . . past, often haunts us in ways, that threaten us and call our future plans and goals into question.⁵

The problems concerning the Afro-American's identity-crisis and repressed manhood are dealt with by many prominent Negro intellectuals and authors. W.E.B. DuBois makes this moving statement about his race's inaudibility:

It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in the side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it, speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement and development, and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not only of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically this way but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that people passing do not hear⁶

In the same vein, Ralph Ellison dramatizes the Negro's identity crisis in terms of invisibility,⁷ and James Baldwin does the same in terms of namelessness.⁸ In Who Speaks for the Negro?, Robert Penn Warren emphasizes:

I seize the word identity. It is a key word. You hear it over and over again. On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate a dozen issues shifting, shading into each other. Alienated from the world into which he is born and from the country of which he is a citizen, yet surrounded by the successful values of that new world, and country how can the Negro define himself?⁹

The themes, identity and freedom, are interdependent and inextricably woven together in Wright's fiction. As John K. Roth asserts:

Freedom is rooted in our capacities for paying attention, thinking, choosing, and exerting effort. As we become self-aware, we recognize that freedom can grow or be lost and that it must be cultivated and protected. If we impair our conscious powers, our freedom is diminished. By the same token, careful cultivation of our capacities of thought, choice, and action, maximizes our freedom.¹⁰

But freedom also depends on an environment which allows the individual to pursue the goals he chooses with a genuine chance of fulfilling the choices he makes. The concept of freedom thus embodies direct social and political facets.¹¹

Reinforcing the link between selfhood and freedom is the fact that the concept of oneself determines the choices that are made. Especially pertinent to Wright's characters is the connection between fear and freedom. Helpful in understanding this, are the following remarks:

When we discuss the question of fear, we must, of necessity, understand the nature of freedom, or see that when we talk about freedom we are not talking about complete freedom, but, rather freedom from some inconvenient, unpleasant undesirable thing.¹²

Richard Wright, himself, emphasizes the interdependence of the concepts of self and freedom by remarking: "Freedom for you is not freedom for another. . . . Perhaps it has to be defined negatively because when you define it concretely, you lose it."¹³ As will be demonstrated during the course of this study, Wright rejected the notion of absolute freedom and propounded the theory that an individual must come to terms with himself before finding his freedom within society.

Richard Wright's fictional works were produced in two periods. The first begins when he joined the Chicago John Reed Club in 1932, and ends with the publication of "The Man Who Lived Underground,"¹⁴ in 1944. During this period he also published a collection of short fiction entitled Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas (1938),¹⁵ and the novel Native Son.¹⁶ The posthumously published novel Lawd Today¹⁷ was also composed during this period.

The second and final period within which he produced works of

fiction spans 1953 to 1958.¹⁸ During these years, he was residing in Paris. His last three novels which will be examined in this study were written in Paris, and form the concluding phase of Wright's career as a writer of fiction.

Although Wright's fictional works emerge out of two periods, they comprise a thematic continuity which consolidates his literary vision. This vision seems to derive from two dominant aspects of his personality: firstly, a consequence of his racial experience, an involuntary reaction to a hostile world which seeks to destroy him; and secondly, the stance of an intellectual and moralist fighting for freedom in a threatening and confusing world.¹⁹ Substantiating the universality of his vision, despite his preoccupation with the tragic life of the American Negro, are his own remarks: "The voice of the American Negro is rapidly becoming the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world today."²⁰

In the first period, his major themes are dramatized through racism and violence. In these early works, the 1930's Depression and Wright's interest in the Communist Party play important roles. Manifested in the works of this period is a movement from rural to urban settings. Uncle Tom's Children is set in rural Mississippi, while the setting of Lawd Today and Native Son is metropolitan Chicago.

In Uncle Tom's Children, the development of the themes, identity and freedom, is given fictional form through a series of confrontations between blacks and whites. This book can be considered as a collection of short stories as well as a unified work:

In each of the four stories, Wright broadens the areas of

responsibility on the part of each succeeding main character, moving from boy to community leader, from victim to victor, so that the stories will compose a rising tide of militancy. When the last book ends with the cry of black triumph "Freedom belongs to the strong," we are to see it not just as the end of that story, but a point towards which all the stories have been moving.²¹

The first story, "Big Boy Leaves Home,"²² shows how black boys can be terrorized in Mississippi. It tells how four black adolescents, momentarily forgetting their blackness, unwittingly bring about a tragedy. By swimming in the creek of a white man, Mr. Harvey, they precipitate a confrontation which causes not only the death of the white man, but that of three of the black boys as well.

Before the fatal confrontation, the boys were happily enjoying a carefree afternoon's swim at a creek. They knew they were interlopers, trespassing on the property of Mr. Harvey, a Southern white, but the temptation was too great. They also realized that they as black boys did not have the same opportunities as their white counterparts. The story emphasizes that if they had had these same opportunities there would have been no necessity for them to trespass upon the property of the Southern Whites.²³ As Big Boy explains:

"Ah wish we hadda place to swim in."

"The white folks got plenty swimming pools n we ain got none."²⁴

After the swim, the boys sit on the embankment to dry themselves in the sun. Seeing a white woman, they instinctively cover themselves. The woman, feigning shock, calls her companion, Jim, and moves back to where the boys' clothes are heaped, suggesting by her actions an ambivalence to their nudity. Big Boy explains: "Lady, we wanna git our cloes." She replies: "You go away! You go away! You go away!" (p. 28). The action of this scene illustrates the hysterical attitude of the Southern

white woman toward Negroes.

Jim arrives and without assessing the situation, shoots two of the boys. In panic and self-defence, Big Boy batters him to death, initiating a pattern of violence that Wright's later protagonists will utilize to assert themselves. Big Boy and the other survivor, Bobo, escape to their homes. Their parents and the black community, aware of the Southern judicial system, realize that the boys' only hope for survival is to escape to the North.

The rest of the story juxtaposes the responses of the black and white communities. The blacks, now fearful, plan for the boys' escape. On the other hand, the white community, motivated by sadistic vengeance, does not worry much about Jim Harvey's death, but rather about the disappointment it will suffer if a scapegoat is not found, and they do not have a black person to lynch. The story ends with Bobo being discovered and lynched and Big Boy escaping to the North.

The second story, "Down By the Riverside,"²⁵ treats the tragedy of a black family during a disastrous Mississippi flood. The protagonist, Mann, had refused to escape with his family in the government's boats when they were offered, because he wanted to protect his property. His pregnant wife, Lulu, has been ill for four days and cannot deliver her child. As the drama unfolds, the flood waters are constantly rising, suggesting a parallel to the eventual tragedy that will overwhelm them.

Mann's brother-in-law, Bob, sent out earlier to trade the family's mule for a boat, returns with a stolen boat. Although Mann and his mother-

in-law, Granny, express fear and disappointment because stealing contradicts their piety, they see no alternative, and decide to take Lulu to the Red Cross hospital in the boat. On the way, Mann meets Heartfield, the white owner of the boat, who attempts to shoot him in order to retrieve the stolen property. In desperation, Mann shoots Heartfield and continues his journey.

When he reaches the town, he meets white soldiers whose attitudes throw light upon the American Negro's predicament. They address him as "nigger" and "boy" (p. 72), and refuse to let him take Lulu out of the rain. Finally he is allowed to take her to the colored section of the hospital where she is pronounced dead.

Later, in the story, the family's grief is contrasted with the callousness of the white community. Among the many instances which exemplify this, is this one in which Mann is compelled to work on the levee just after his wife's death:

"Is that your mother there?"
"Yessuh. Mah ma-in-law."
"What's wrong with her?"
"She's, just ol Capm. Her gal jus died n she takes it hard."
"When did she die?"
"Jus now, Suh."
"Oh, I see . . . But what's wrong with you?"
"Are you sick?"
"Naw suh."
"Well, you don't have to go to the hills."
"Your folks'll go on to the hills and you can stay here and help on the levee . . ." (p.77).

The dialogue illustrates that there is no recognition for Mann's humanity. As a Negro, he is not expected to feel any sorrow for the death of his wife.

Ironically, the story ends with Mann working to help the flood victims, and finally being sent to rescue the Heartfield family which identifies him as Mr. Heartfield's murderer. There is no compassion for

his predicament or recognition for his services and he is eventually shot by white soldiers for his crime.

In this story, Wright compares the plight of being a Negro in the South with a flood that brings death and destruction upon helpless people. Heightening the Negro's tragedy is the protagonist's ambition, piety, and sense of responsibility towards his own family and the community. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," flight represents one aspect of the Negro's struggle for survival. The second story, "Down By the Riverside," illustrates that forbearance, Christian humility, and stoic endurance are not enough to ensure the survival of Negroes. The brutality of the lynch mob, in the first story, is echoed by the callousness of the whites towards Mann in the second.

The third story, "Long Black Song,"²⁶ again juxtaposes black and white communities. It deals with the seduction of a black woman by a white man, and her husband's reaction to this. Interestingly, instead of trying to escape or to endure, as the protagonists did in the previous two stories, the Negro, Silas, of the "Long Black Song," takes direct action against the white salesman who seduced his wife. Realizing that this will mean death, he also discovers that the black man can act on his own behalf and thus assert himself. Although he pays the price, he makes an important step toward self-assertion.

Silas is portrayed as an ambitious Negro who owns property and is planning to buy more. He is a proud man, and his wife's unfaithfulness is a blow to his pride, which aggravates his feelings of being oppressed by the white race. Just before he dies, he summarizes his situation:

The white folks ain never gimme a chance. They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!²⁷

The fourth tale "Fire and Cloud,"²⁸ differs from the three preceding ones because its hero successfully challenges the racism of the American South. It tells the story of Reverend Dan Taylor, who refuses to become the tool of white mayor Bolden, and help with the subjugation of Negroes. In spite of brutal treatment by the white bureaucracy, Taylor is able to lead his people in a hunger march organized by Negroes and Communists.

The story represents a political, racial, and moral triumph: Reverend Dan Taylor refuses to be intimidated into assisting the whites manipulate his fellow Negroes. Blacks and whites unite in the march forcing the Mayor to comply with their demands, and the leader, Dan Taylor, remains alive. In this story, Wright draws upon The Depression and the ideology of the Communist Party to portray the tragedy of the American Negro. It marks a progression towards the literary depiction of growing political awareness among Negro people, emphasizing the importance of Negro solidarity. Dan Taylor confides in his son:

Wes gotta git wid' the people, son. Too long we done tried to do this thing in our own way n' when we failed we wanted t turn out n pay-off the white folks. Then they kill us up like flies. Its the people, son! Wes too much alone this way! Wes los when wes alone wes gonna be wid our folks. . . .²⁹

The last story, "Bright and Morning Star,"³⁰ presents political-ly conscious Negroes who devote themselves to the Communist Party. It tells the story of Aunt Sue and her sons Sug and Johnny Boy. Sug is jailed and Aunt Sue and Johnny Boy are tortured and eventually killed for refusing to betray the Party.

The substitution of the Communist ideology for traditional reli-

gion is central to this story. Formerly, Aunt Sue, a victim of racism and poverty, endured through her faith in a heavenly paradise. Through the influence of her sons she receives a new vision; that of racial equality offered by the Communist Party. Her son, Johnny Boy, however, carries the fight for freedom of equal opportunity beyond the racial context. He explains: "Ma, Ah done tol yuh a hundred times. Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black... Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men."³¹

Clearly a tribute to the Communist Party's racial policies, "Bright and Morning Star" is the most politically conscious story in Uncle Tom's Children. Aunt Sue murders to prevent the Party from being betrayed, and is consequently shot. Before being killed, she remarks, "Yuh [the sheriff and other officials] didn't git whut you wanted! N yuh ain't nevah gonna git it! Yuh didn't kill me; Ah come here by masef. . . ." (p. 215).

In accepting the full responsibility for her actions and thus attaining a momentary freedom, Aunt Sue prefigures characters such as Bigger Thomas of Native Son, Erskine Fowler of Savage Holiday, and Tyree Tucker of the Long Dream. The landscape of oppression, fear, ignorance, racial anxiety and lack of equal opportunity explored in these tales form the basis of Wright's succeeding fiction.

In its treatment of Negro life in the South, Uncle Tom's Children complements Wright's autobiography Black Boy,³² and his last novel The Long Dream. In turn, these works provide a background for understanding Wright's urban protagonists such as Bigger Thomas, Jake Jackson and Cross Damon.

Lawd Today, Wright's first novel was probably written in 1936.

but was posthumously published in 1965.³³ Although this novel is much less sophisticated than James Joyce's Ulysees,³⁴ it has a similar narrative line: both novels describe one day in the life of their protagonists. Jake Jackson, the protagonist of Lawd Today, is a Negro post-office employee living in Chicago with his sickly god-fearing wife, Lil.

The main subject of this novel is the subtle strangulation of the Negro personality in an industrial city controlled by a racially prejudiced white society. Like Wright's other novels, Lawd Today is divided into sections. Each of the three sections of this novel accounts for roughly eight hours of the protagonist's day.

The first section, "Commonplace," describes his activities from awakening until he goes to work in the afternoon. He awakes with a disturbing dream, and during the course of these eight hours, he beats his wife for excessive financial demands, loses his policy number as he walks in the neighbourhood, examines posters in front of a movie house, gets a haircut, wanders restlessly about the city, plays cards with his friends, observes a Negro medicine-man selling "Cureall for All the Divers Aliments of the Human Body," and watches a Negro parade with participants wearing uniforms which represent "the ranks orders and titles of a new, imaginary anticipated African Empire."³⁵

In the second section "Squirrel Cage," Jake Jackson's eight hour work-shift is described. There is a detailed account of his monotonous work and negotiations for an advance loan on his salary. He discovers that his wife had complained about his brutality and this could have endangered his job. Anticipating this, Jake had already arranged for one of his friends to bribe a corrupt postal official so that

his job would be safeguarded. Ironically, at the end of the day, Jake and his friends make plans to celebrate his good fortune in obtaining the loan for which he is paying usurious interest rates.³⁶

"Rats' Alley," the last section of Lawd Today, describes Jake and his comrades' visit to a night spot, frequented by gangsters, hoodlums and prostitutes. Jake offers to pay for all the food and entertainment, only to realise that his money has been stolen. He is then beaten and thrown out into the subfreezing temperature of an early February morning. As he arrives home in his drunken state, his anger, humiliation and frustration prompt him to beat his sleeping wife until he falls asleep in a drunken stupor.

Significantly, Jake Jackson's day begins and ends in violence. Jake relieves his unhappiness through alcohol, narcotics, sexual encounters with prostitutes, and violence toward his wife. Counterpointing his meaningless existence, the novel embodies a historic call for freedom which is heard on a radio broadcast commemorating Abraham Lincoln's birthday. The radio broadcasts excerpts from Lincoln's address, as well as lectures and commentaries on the Civil war. The description of Jake's life illustrates that although the Negro is emancipated by the events of history he remains a modern slave.

Although this novel is described as an apprentice work, it introduces many of the themes and techniques used in Wright's later works. It uses the anti-hero, the revelations of the dream, the symbols of trapped animals--"Squirrel Cage" and "Rats' Alley," the symbol of white snow, and the lure of the white world effected through posters of adventure films showing monoplane, machine guns, a hero and golden-haired, blue-eyed girl.

Lawd Today is a protest novel muted by its author's reportorial and journalistic technique.³⁷ In a sense, Bigger Thomas, the hero of Native Son, is an extension of Jake Jackson. Bigger's outrageous violence is foreshadowed by Jake Jackson's suppressed rage. Lawd Today is also an important precursor to Wright's existentialist novel The Outsider. As Edward Margolies observes:

... the futility of Jake's strivings in the face of a hostile environment, his Sisyphus-like failure to reach the top of the stairs as illustrated in his dream are translated easily into the absurdity of the existentialist hero.³⁸

Native Son, Wright's second novel, was published in 1940, bringing international fame to its author. Dan McCall refers to it as "a national literary event,"³⁹ and Edward Margolies comments on its proletarian weaknesses but concedes its impact is as resounding now as it was in 1940.⁴⁰

Native Son, like its precursor, is divided into three sections, "Fear", "Flight", and "Fate". Since Wright himself was affiliated with the Communist Party⁴¹ during the composition of this novel, its triadic structure seems to echo the Hegelian dialectic which Karl Marx adapted to his dialectical materialism. As Katherine Fishburn points out the novel's theme is "the quest for identity, the self-realisation of a personality, the growth from neurosis to joyful self-actualization."⁴²

Native Son tells the story of a twenty-year-old Negro man, Bigger Thomas, who had migrated from the South with his mother and two siblings, five years earlier. He lives with his family in a squalid, rat-infested, one-room apartment in Chicago.

The main events of the story begin when Bigger obtains the

position of chauffeur to the white Dalton family. On the first day of his employment, he drives Mr. and Mrs. Dalton's daughter and her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, to a South Side restaurant. Their attempts to treat him as an equal leave him tense and uncomfortable since Bigger is deeply suspicious of their intentions, never having experienced such social acceptance on the part of wealthy whites. As they persuade him to sit with them in the restaurant, his Negro friends stare in amazement and move away.

When they leave the restaurant Bigger drives Mary home, and realizing that she is too drunk to walk, takes her to her bedroom. Although terrified by the prospect of being found in her bedroom, he experiences a moment of sexual excitation and fondles the sleeping Mary. This is interrupted by the entrance of blind Mrs. Dalton, who attempts to hold a conversation with her daughter. Anxious to prevent Mary from making any sounds to prolong Mrs. Dalton's stay in the room, Bigger covers her face with a pillow, accidentally causing her death through suffocation. According to John Reilly:

The good-intentioned but blind Mrs. Dalton appears as a blur of whiteness when she comes into Mary's room. By her presence she summons to Bigger's mind his conditioned fear of the worst possible violation of the racial code, miscegenation.⁴³

After the murder Bigger experiences fear and horror as he burns Mary's body in the furnace of the family home. He then feels an awakening sense of life and wants to assume full responsibility for the murder although it was a quasi-accident.

In killing Mary, he feels he has symbolically destroyed all the oppressive forces that have made his life miserable . . . he enjoys a sense of potency and freedom that he has never before experienced. He knows something that he has done that the whites do not know--and proceeds to act with new-found dignity.⁴⁴

However, this new-found dignity does not prevent Bigger, a dehumanized product of racism and the ghetto, from committing further crimes. He attempts to implicate Jan Erlone, and extort ransom money from the Daltons. When his weak-minded Negro girlfriend, Bessie Mears, threatens his plans, he rapes her and then brutally murders her. The second murder is even more exhilarating than the first. As the narrator observes:

In all his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him . . . never had his will been so free as the night and day of fear, murder and flight.⁴⁵

The rest of the novel relates Bigger's frantic attempts to escape, and the white society's determination to bring him to justice. The Communist Party, represented by lawyer Max, unsuccessfully attempts to defend Bigger by citing historical and sociological references to justify his criminal acts.

After his conviction, Bigger confides in his lawyer: "I n-r-reckon I h-had it coming..." (p. 385). In the last few hours before his execution, he achieves an existential freedom and calmness which enables him to understand and accept his tragic existence and his crimes. He explains to the horrified Max:

What I killed for must've been good! . . . When a man kills, it's for something . . . I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things strong enough to kill for 'em . . . But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way . . . (p. 392).

In depicting Bigger's identity-crisis and lack of freedom in a racist world, Wright uses two symbolic animals. On the second page of the novel Bigger corners and kills a big black rat in the family's one-room apartment. Later in the novel he sees another rat leaping over the snow while he himself is searching for a place to

hide after killing Mary. The other animal is Mrs. Dalton's white cat, in the presence of which he always feels uncomfortable. This cat looks at him with eyes like "two green burning pools--pools of accusation and guilt," (p. 90) as he attempts to push Mary's body into the furnace.

By using the black rat and the white cat, animals which are natural enemies, Wright intensifies his portrayal of racial conflict. The black rat leaping over white snow is clearly representative of the black man's flight from racism. Besides, the Dalton family itself is used symbolically: Mr. Dalton appears outwardly as a philanthropist who donates ping-pong tables to a club for Negro youths; ironically he also owns the slums that Bigger and his people are forced to live in. In keeping with the business policy of other white proprietors, he refuses to rent apartments to Negroes in white residential areas. Like his blind wife, he also shows a blindness to his role in perpetuating the racial problems.

Besides being a powerful statement on what it meant to be a Negro in the United States at the time the novel was written, Native Son presents a new type of modern political man in revolt against oppression. Wright himself substantiates this notion:

The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you could suspect.

.....
 But more than anything else, as a writer, I was fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia. All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless.⁴⁶

Although Native Son belongs to the naturalistic literary tradition in its depiction of a man trapped by environmental forces; the values

depicted in its denouement are clearly existentialist.⁴⁷ As Bigger rejects Christianity and Communism, he accepts his existential self.⁴⁸ Although he is able to establish an identity through the murders, paradoxically, he is radically alienated from the human community in which he longs to participate, because of the horror associated with this newly attained identity.⁴⁹

The novella, "The Man Who Lived Underground,"⁵⁰ was composed between the publication of Native Son (1940) and Black Boy (1945), a time when Wright seemed to be at the height of his artistic powers. This story seems to indicate that Wright was shaping a new philosophy based on his interpretations of works by Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche.⁵¹

"The Man Who Lived Underground" embodies Wright's "real concern with meaning, with identity, and with the necessity to remain sane in a society where individual personality is denied and the world appears void of meaning."⁵² The protagonist of the story, Fred Daniels, is unable to articulate the meaning of his underground experiences, and thus in a sense, they amount to nothing. The story's existential content and ultimate meaning lies in this nothingness. This novella is, therefore, a fitting precursor to The Outsider whose protagonist believes "man is nothing in particular" ⁵³

Commenting on the structure of the novella, Irving Howe observes that Wright uses both the naturalistic literary tradition and a "radical projective image."⁵⁴ Although the racial aspects of this novella may be dismissed as they usually are in discussions on The Outsider, it is obvious that race helps to add credibility to the plot in both works.

The novella presents Fred Daniels, a Negro who is framed by the police and escapes into a metropolitan sewer through a manhole.

While there he gains a new perspective on life through contemplation and observation. Replete with symbols and images which comment on the dilemma of the Negro, and by extension, modern man, "The Man Who Lived Underground" is clearly allegorical.⁵⁵

Robert Bone lists and interprets all the symbols and images portrayed in this novel.⁵⁶ The sewer is symbolic of the status of the Negro (this status is portrayed by the metaphor "No Man's Land" in Native Son). The Negro church is a symbol of segregation-in-Christ, and the dead discarded infant presents a portrait of the Negro as an unwanted child in America. The undertaker's establishment (which will again be used symbolically in the Long Dream) in which a corpse is being embalmed evokes images of the draining of the black man's blood, or in other words his subjugation.

During his underground existence Fred Daniels steals money, rings, watches and precious stones from a jewelry store. This criminal act gives meaning to his existence. His underground life also permits him to take part in a financial exploit which is normally forbidden by the white social structure. He reinforces his identity by stealing a typewriter and spelling his name, "fred daniels." In so doing, he responds to a facet of the Negro's identity-crisis which James Baldwin refers to as namelessness.⁵⁷ In the underground world of the sewer, Fred Daniels names himself a member of the human community, a privilege which the society that treats Negroes as sub-humans has always denied him.

When he returns home from his exploits, he papers the walls of his sewer-cave with hundred-dollar bills and hangs jewelry on nails he has driven into the walls. He deposits heaps of metal coins on the

ground and sprinkles the floor of his cave with precious gems. Finally, he suspends a gun and cartridge belt, stolen from a night watchman, and a bloody meat cleaver, stolen from a butcher's shop.

It is obvious, as Robert Bone explains, that the decorating project illustrates the absurdity of Western civilization.⁵⁸ Wright succeeds in portraying Western culture as a combination of a jewelry store and a butcher's shop. By creating this mocking symbol Fred Daniels liberates himself. He overcomes his condition through scorn, thereby adopting the stance of a Camusian existentialist.⁵⁹

The concluding section of the story relates the hero's attempt to return to the upper world and share his vision with others. He is rejected by Negroes and whites alike, and is finally shot by the police who are unable to understand his vision, and therefore cannot acknowledge his reality.

The struggle for survival in an absurd world which is presented in "The Man Who Lived Underground," follows naturally from the struggles for survival of the Negroes presented in Wright's earlier writing. Taken in order of their compositions, these fictional works trace their author's intellectual journey from naturalism to existentialism, and illustrate his skill in effectively combining both traditions.

Wright's early fiction is highly evocative of his own background as well as his social and political awareness. It illustrates his deep involvement with the oppression of his fellow Negroes, and provides an informative backdrop against which his three later novels can be put into perspective.

Notes for the Introduction

- ¹ Richard Wright, The Outsider, (New York: Harper, and Row, 1953).
- ² Richard Wright, Savage Holiday, (New York: Avon Publishers Inc., 1954).
- ³ Richard Wright, The Long Dream, (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1958).
- ⁴ In this study, I am using the terms black, Negro and Afro-American, interchangeably. I am aware, however, that the Negro's struggle for a viable identity in the United States of America involved numerous debates on whether he should be called African, Afro-American, colored, Negro or black. These debates are intelligently discussed in Charles E. Silberman's Crisis in Black and White (New York: Vintage Books, 1964) pp. 111-114.
- ⁵ John K. Roth, Freedom and The Moral Life: The Ethics of William James, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press,) pp. 33-34.
- ⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, Dusk of Dawn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1940) pp. 130, 131.
- ⁷ Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
- ⁸ James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, (New York: Dial Press, 1961).
- ⁹ Robert Penn Warren, Who Speaks for the Negro?, (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 17.
- ¹⁰ Roth, p. 36.
- ¹¹ Roth, pp. 36, 37.
- ¹² J. Krishnamurthi, Talks and Dialogues, (New York: Avon Books, 1970) p. 60.
- ¹³ Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography, (New York: Humanities Press, Inc., 1970) p. 193.
- ¹⁴ Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground" in Eight Men (New York: Pyramid Publications, Inc., 1969.)
- ¹⁵ The first edition, Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas, contained only the first four stories. The edition Uncle Tom's Children, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1940), which is used in this study contains a fifth story.
- ¹⁶ Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).
- ¹⁷ Richard Wright, Lawd Today, (London: Anthony Blond Ltd., 1965).
- ¹⁸ These two periods are separated by the years 1945 to 1952, during which Wright did not publish any full length work of fiction. In 1945, he published his autobiography Black Boy which contains some striking similar-

ities to his last novel, The Long Dream.

19 Russel Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1970), p. 122.

20 Richard Wright, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" in White Man Listen! (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1964), p. 101.

21 Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright, (New York: Brace and World Inc., 1969), p. 25.

22 Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home" in Uncle Tom's Children.

23 The term trespassing is used here, as well as in The Long Dream, in a symbolic fashion. In each instance, the trespassing on white property brings about a confrontation between whites and blacks in which the white woman is portrayed as a threat to the Negro man's life. This will be developed in more detail in Chapter 3.

24 "Big Boy Leaves Home" in Uncle Tom's Children, p. 26. All further references appear in the text.

25 "Down By the Riverside" in Uncle Tom's Children.

26 "Long Black Song" in Uncle Tom's Children.

27 "Long Black Song" in Uncle Tom's Children, p. 125.

28 "Fire and Cloud" in Uncle Tom's Children.

29 "Fire and Cloud" in Uncle Tom's Children, p. 171.

30 "Bright and Morning Star" in Uncle Tom's Children.

31 "Bright and Morning Star" in Uncle Tom's Children, p. 192. All further references to this work appears in the text.

32 Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

33 Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright (Carbondale, Southern University Press, 1969), p. 65.

34 James Joyce, Ulysees (London: Bodley Head, 1937).

35 Margolies, p. 92.

36 Margolies, p. 93.

37 Russel Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction To the Man and his Works, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 28.

38 Margolies, p. 103.

39 Dan McCall, p. 64.

40 Margolies, p. 103.

41 Richard Wright was a member of the Communist Party from 1932-1944.

42 Katherine Fishburn, Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim, (Metushen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1977), p. 72.

43 John Reilly, "Afterword" in Native Son, p. 395.

- 44 Edward Margoljes, Native Son (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1968), p. 76.
- 45 Native Son, p. 225. All further references to this work appear in the text.
- 46 Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born." In Native Son, pp. viii-xix.
- 47 In Richard Wright: A Biography, Constance Webb explains that Richard Wright differed from European existentialists, because while they understood modern life through philosophical contemplation, he knew that the Afro-American's "fear lead to dread then anger, then self-hatred and ended in a sense of emptiness--the ennui and malaise of Sartre's characters. But it was more than philosophy to the black man, it was life itself." (p. 28).
- 48 Helpful in understanding the term existentialism as it is used in this thesis are the following remarks: "Atheistic existentialism . . . states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that being is man If man as the existentialists conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing: Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence." In Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism and Human Emotions, Trans. Bernard Frechtman and Hazel E. Barnes. (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1957), p. 15.
- 49 Robert Bone, "University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers." No. 74, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 22.
- 50 Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground." In Black Voices, Ed. Abraham Chapman, (New York: New American Library, 1968).
- 51 Brignano, p. 148.
- 52 Herbert Hill, ed., "Introduction," in Soon One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 8.
- 53 The Outsider, p. 265.
- 54 Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons." In Dissent, X (Autumn 1963) pp. 353-368. Rpr. in Brignano, p. 149.
- 55 It responds to the definition: "... all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery." Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 91.
- 56 Robert Bone, pp. 28-31.
- 57 James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name.
- 58 Bone, p. 30.
- 59 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, (New York: Random House, 1955) p. 90.

Chapter I

The Outsider: A Search For Complete Freedom

You have no doubt guessed long since that . . . the escape from reality, or however else it may be that you choose to describe your longing, means simply the wish to be relieved of your so-called personality. That is the prison where you lie.

Herman Hesse

Freedom exists and the will also exists, but freedom of the will does not exist, for a will that is directed towards its own freedom thrusts into emptiness.

Thomas Mann

As observed in the introduction to this study, Richard Wright's fiction taken in chronological order embodies an ever-widening scope. His preoccupation with identity and freedom during his first period of fiction writing is dramatized mainly through the naturalistic literary tradition. Nevertheless, there is a steady movement towards existential conceptions in these early writings. Protagonists Aunt Sue ("Fire and Cloud"), Bigger Thomas (Native Son) and Fred Daniels ("The Man Who Lived Underground") transcend their condition through the adoption of existential attitudes.

As the first novel written during the author's self-imposed exile in France, The Outsider¹ attracted much attention. Russel Carl Brignano thinks that much of the scholarly attention paid to this novel is a result of its existential nature.² He also observes that existentialism has become a substitute for older theological systems and greatly

influences post-World War II Western fiction.³

When Wright migrated to France in 1947, he was already an author of international fame. With the publication of Native Son⁴ in 1940, he had become known as a spokesman for the Negro in America. In 1945, he had reinforced this role with the publication of the autobiographical work, Black Boy,⁵ which provides a model for dramatizing "the evolution and the liberation of the consciousness" of the Negro.⁶

In Black Boy, he forces America to consider the situation of the Afro-American in the South, and reinforces the fictional portraits he had earlier presented. The publicity this work received was extensive and Wright took advantage of the additional opportunities arising from this to speak out on racism.

This autobiography was received negatively by many Negroes. One Negro journalist referred to it as a "sorry slander to Negroes generally," and commented on Wright's "failure to see that the clock of history is moving ahead not backward."⁷ Especially disappointing to Wright was Alain Lock's negative comments, which prompted him to write in his journal of January 6, 1946:

I suspect that Negroes will pick my bones for this book, they will hover over me like vultures and hack away at me; for I am convinced that they cannot as yet fathom the motives that made me write this book, they are not emotionally independent enough to want to face the naked experience of their lives.⁸

In spite of Richard Wright's overwhelming literary success, he was still considered as a second-class citizen in America. He was still obliged to use Negro barbershops, restaurants, and public facilities.

Nevertheless, when he expressed his intentions of migrating to

France, artists and intellectuals from both races feared he would lose his American identity. While visiting Paris in 1946, he observed that "there was more freedom in one square block of Paris than in the entire United States."⁹

In 1947, Wright migrated to Paris with his family. Although he did not publish any new books between 1946 and 1953, he was thinking about a new novel as early as 1947. In his journal of August 11, he writes: "I felt more than ever that the kind of book I am writing is needed and comes right out of what people are feeling. Freedom and how one can be free."¹⁰

Before composing The Outsider, Richard Wright had familiarized himself with existentialism by reading authors such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre and Camus. This period, beginning around 1946 and leading up to the publication of The Outsider in 1953, is often referred to as his "existential period."¹¹

Wright himself recognized that he was using existentialism in his works before he had become conscious of it. He remarked to a friend: "they [the existentialist authors] are writing of things that I have been thinking, writing and feeling all my life."¹² He referred to his autobiographical work as existentialist, and quoted:

From the accidental pain of Southern years, I had sought to avoid, from fear that had been too painful to bear, I had learnt to like my unintermittent burden of feeling, had become habituated to acting with all my being. . . . It was a dangerous way to live Had I not been conscious of what I was doing, I could have easily lost my way in the fogbound regions of compelling fantasy.¹³

II

Richard Wright's first major work in the second period of his fiction writing is The Outsider, a novel of ideas.¹⁴ It is a hybrid work whose protagonist, Cross Damon, can trace ancestors from two centuries and several cultures, "the American Adams of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James and Fitzgerald" and also the dispossessed characters of Dostoyevsky, Sartre and Camus.¹⁵

The complexity of the novel derives from Cross Damon's alienation from himself and society. The alienation is deeper than that of his American forbears, on one hand, yet, on the other hand he seems to be more influenced by environmental factors than his European counterparts.¹⁶

This suggestiveness in characterisation is indicative of the crisis in identity which the novel explores. As Robert Bone observes:

The Outsider may be read as a recapitulation of the author's spiritual journey. Books I and II are concerned with Wright's identity as a Negro; Books III and IV with his identity as a Communist, Book V with his identity as a lonely intellectual, disillusioned outsider, marginal man.¹⁷

In keeping with Wright's earlier novels, The Outsider is divided into sections. The titles of the sections, "Dread," "Dream," "Descent," "Despair," and "Decision," use alliteration as well as implication to trace the protagonist's identity-crisis and his quest for freedom. Each section portrays his state of mind under changing conditions.

The name, Cross Damon, is itself suggestive of confusion in identity since Cross represents Christ, and by extension God, and Damon has aural connotations of demon which is also spelled daemon.¹⁸ Etymologically, daemon derives from "daimai" which means to distribute or

divide.¹⁹ The demon is a distributor of destinies.²⁰ Plato associates demon with learning, and in the religious signification it was used to represent gods, intermediaries and the souls of the dead.²¹ As will be illustrated during the course of this study, all these meanings combine to define Cross Damon's complex personality.

In addition to the conflict represented through the symbol and the etymology connected with the name of the protagonist of The Outsider, there is his race. Contrary to the omniscient narrator's assertion, "there was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, any man who had had an opportunity to flee and seized it,"²² Cross is also defined by his race throughout the novel. When he asks for a loan at the post office, his superior, Mr. Finch, remarks: "You colored boys get into a lot of trouble in the South Side" (p. 70). In another instance, Cross automatically springs to the defence of a Negro waiter during his train journey to New York (p. 124).

His Negroess defines his relationship with other people as well. Father Seldon and District Attorney Ely Houston are anxious to discuss the problems of Negroes with him. Gilbert Blount, a leader of the Communist Party, asks for his help in a fight against racism. He meets and eventually murders Langley Hendon, "a dyed-in-the-wool Negro hater" (p. 195).

Besides, Cross Damon has ancestors in Wright's earlier fiction. In his ennui with his post-office job, and request for a loan from his employers, as well as his extra-marital sexual activity, he bears a remarkable resemblance to hero, Jake Jackson, of Lawd Today.²³ Like Bigger Thomas of Native Son,²⁴ he also kills to establish an identity

and assert his autonomy. Finally, the subway accident in which Cross is assumed dead is reminiscent of the underground sewers in which Fred Daniels of "The Man Who Lived Underground"²⁵ gains a new perspective on life, and mocks western civilisation. After the accident, Cross also gains a new perspective by attempting to live outside society.

Significantly, there is no single principle which defines Cross Damon. His ambiguity is a controlling metaphor in the novel. Besides evoking God and the devil, he has "an ambiguous smile" (p. 3), he is "a man standing outside society" (p. 6), and he is "Mr. Death" (p. 21). Also, he is a practical joker, as well as a student of philosophy. His problems include feelings of isolation, hatred for the world and himself, thoughts of suicide, and the "relationship of himself to himself" (p. 8).

In addition, he is caught in an environmental trap. His job is boring and he is short of money. He must support his estranged wife, Gladys, and his three young sons. Dot, his pregnant teen-aged mistress, is threatening to have him charged for statutory rape if he does not marry her, while his wife, Gladys, is obstinately refusing to negotiate divorce. Adding to his misery is the exorbitant demands Gladys is making for money. In the face of all these problems his God-fearing mother makes him feel guilty.

Through the description of his circumstance, his personality, and the contradictions inherent in his name, Cross is portrayed in the first section of the novel as a man who cannot determine which direction to take. His predicament is evocative of the problems treated by existential philosophy which

. . . embodies the self-questioning of the time, seeking to reorient itself to its own historical destiny. . . . [It deals with]

alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence, the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat.²⁶

III

Early in the novel, Cross Damon begins preparation for escape from his environment. He feigns a dementia, slaps his wife, and is consequently asked to leave the family home. When questioned about his books, he replies: "I've put away childish things" (p. 7). This implies a readiness for action.

Through the contrived literary device of a subway accident, Cross is assumed dead and seizes the opportunity to escape from his problems. The idea of letting the public believe he is dead appeals to him and he experiences "an intuitive sense of freedom" (p. 83). Believing that the chance to start afresh would solve all his problems, he realizes that all his life "he had been hankering after his personal freedom and now freedom was knocking at his door" (p. 84). This quest for freedom seems to be influenced by his desire to "escape his identity, his old hateful consciousness[and] shape . . . the kind of life he felt he wanted" (p. 86).

Nevertheless, this decision does not bring the long-sought happiness, because he soon realizes that he is bound to live in a world that demands an identity, which implies limitation. Under these circumstances he is filled with anxiety, which is existential in orientation:

For Heidegger as for Tillich and (sic) Kierkegaard, "fear" has

a definite object; angst, whether translated as "dread" or anxiety has no object, being instead the reaction of a man becoming himself.²⁷

He starts his new life by assuming the identity, Charles Webb, a Negro from the Deep South, who had worked as a porter in a drugstore. In making this choice he is reliving something he knows well, which does not "tax too greatly his inventive powers" (p. 88). This illustrates the simultaneous desire for and fear of the unknown which helps to define Cross.

Living under the name Charles Webb does not transform Cross. Practical joker that he is, his amusement and curiosity about the reports of his death imply much more than a concern for legally establishing himself dead. It is a manifestation of his interest in society. His desire for alcohol and sexual gratification remains unabated, indicating that his personality has not changed. Although he would like to break all ties with his past, he experiences a morbid curiosity about the reactions of his wife, Gladys, and his mistress, Dot. On the other hand, he is saddened by the thought of not seeing his sons again. As he looks at his mourning mother, he feels "hot tears stinging his cheeks for the first time since childhood" (p. 98). He longs to confess and beg for forgiveness, but is afraid she might die of shock.

As Cross, alias John Clark, student from Chicago, witnesses "his funeral" from a rented room overlooking the church's entrance, he is bothered by a very human concern. He would not be able to discuss this with anyone because he has alienated himself from society. This incident dramatizes his predicament; because of his non-identity he is robbed of the freedom to communicate with other people.

Shortly after "his funeral" he feels compelled to reveal

himself to the prostitute, Jenny. Luckily, she does not believe him, for a few minutes later, he murders his friend, Joe, who has recognized him. Cross' ambivalence is evident; he murders Joe because he fears that his dream of being free would be destroyed; on the other hand, he expresses a desire to leave this dream-world by confessing to Jenny.

One of the techniques used in The Outsider (as well as in Wright's subsequent novels, Savage Holiday and The Long Dream), is the juxtaposition of a dream-world with the world of reality. The protagonist sorts mail "like a sleepwalker" (p. 12), and he feels his life has "the disorganized character of a nightmare" (p. 25); later he speaks "out of a dream" (p. 131). Nevertheless, to maintain his non-identity he has to pay attention to reality which requires discipline and negates his absolute freedom.

In retrospect, Cross is not sure whether he is justified in murdering Joe, but he realistically plans to escape to New York, and thus divert suspicion from himself. As he journeys to New York, he realizes: "He was free from everything but himself . . . he knew where his sense of dread came from; it was from within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, yet not really known to him . . ." (p. 117).

Cross seems to be experiencing the Kierkegaardian dread connected "with man's ability to determine himself."²⁸ Kierkegaard describes dread as: the "dizziness of freedom which occurs when the spirit would posit the synthesis (of soul and body), and freedom then gazes into its own possibility."²⁹

During the journey to New York, Cross, alias Addison Jordan, graduate of Fisk University, is still defined by his Negroness. He discusses the problems of his race with Father Seldon, and district attorney Ely Houston. The Negro waiter, Bob Hunter, identifies with Cross,

and he in turn attempts to help the waiter during an accident involving a white woman. However, he soon realizes that he will be unable to testify on behalf of Bob Hunter, because of his false identity, and his non-identity. As he assesses his problems he concludes: "To live amidst others without an identity was intolerable. In the strict sense he was not really in the world, he was haunting it, pleading for entrance into life" (p. 132).

Cross' anxieties, expressed in this interior monologue, conflict sharply with his dictum, "man is nothing in particular" (p. 135). He realizes that in order to belong to the world, he has to be something in particular, or, in other words, have an identity. His problem is that he cannot define what he wants to be.

Another device Wright uses effectively, to illustrate the identity-crisis in The Outsider, is the juxtaposition of the omniscient narrator's perception with that of the protagonist. When Cross arrives in New York, the narrator believes he "is without a name, a past, a future, no promises . . . bound him to those about him" (p. 138). In contradiction, Cross realizes that he is not free, and makes plans to do something "practical about his problem of identity" (p. 141).

When he decides to take on the identity of a dead man³⁰ (manifesting his affinity with death, as implied in his name) he goes about it methodically, looking for the name of someone with his own racial background, and around his own age. By doing this, Wright depicts his protagonist's lack of freedom. Later, he plays the part of an illiterate, ignorant Negro, and deceives the Bureau of Vital Statistics into giving him the birth certificate of Lionel Lane. Ironically, while he is striving to achieve absolute freedom, he is obliged to live in a world

which thrives on stereotypes and demands conformity.

IV

In attempting to provide a credible tie between the hero's psyche and his environmental conditions, Wright relies on psychology and existential philosophy. Katherine Fishburn correctly observes that Cross Damon is neurotic.³¹ In the words of Samuel Greenberg:

The neurotic is not a realist, he is too frightened to see himself objectively. He is chasing a mirage . . . he constructs a picture of himself . . . and then tries to live up to this . . . His self image leads to distortion in his attitude not only towards himself but towards the world . . . he is constantly afraid of failure and the collapse of the entire neurotic structure he has built up with so much effort.³²

The notion of himself as God, and his mirage of absolute freedom, are indicative of Cross' neurosis. Reinforcing this neurosis is that in his desire to protect his dream-like world he murders his friend, Joe. Again playing God, he brings about justice by killing the Fascist, Langley Herndon, and Communists Gil Blount and Jack Hilton.

The description of Damon Cross' childhood experiences and his mother's influence supply enough information through which the sources of his attitude may be traced. His father, a philanderer, had deserted his mother when he was an infant, and had died a year later in a drunken brawl in Harlem. To assuage her sense of rejection and distress, his mother had turned to the comforts of religion and had tried to impress the importance of righteousness on her young son.

Because of his mother's instruction, he had "symbolically telescoped . . . God into an awful face shaped in the form of a huge and crushing

No . . .," in his adolescent years (p. 18). As the narrator points out:

This God's No-face had evoked in his pliable boy's body an aching sense of pleasure by admonishing him to shun pleasure . . . had too early awakened in him a sharp sense of sex by thunderingly denouncing sex as the sin leading to eternal damnation; had posited in him an unbridled hunger for the sensual by branding all sensuality as the monstrous death from which there is no resurrection; had made him instinctively choose to love himself over and against all others because he felt himself menaced by a mysterious God whose love seemed somehow like hate. Mother love had cleaved him: a wayward sensibility that distrusted itself, a consciousness that was conscious of itself. Despite this, his sensibilities had not been repressed by God's fearful negations as represented by his mother; indeed, his desire boiled in him to a degree that made him afraid. Afraid of what? Nothing exactly, precisely . . . And this constituted his sense of dread. (p. 18).

Thus, experiences and personality combine to define Cross' attitude to life. He embodies many of the consequences of neurosis, such as alcoholism, overdependence on logic, repetition of mistakes, depression, alienation from himself, and self-hatred. As an adult he experiences a "mood of self-loathing, a mood that had been his longer than he could recall, a mood that had been growing deeper with the increased complexity of the events in his life" (p. 16). Although he knows himself too well not to recognize the meaning and the sources of his mood, he is unable "to escape the morass in which his feelings [are] bogged" (p. 17). And he realizes, "intimately and bitterly, that his dread had been his mother's first fateful gift to him" (p. 17).

Judging from the biographical information given up to this point, his neurosis seems to be engendered to a great extent by society's treatment of him as a Negro. He is frustrated because he lives in a capitalistic society where economic wealth is closely associated with manhood. Contributing to his malaise is the lack of power (which has been the lot of the Negro individually, as well as collectively) to influence the course of his own and other lives. Some critics, including Morris

Beja, believe that the fundamental reason for his alienation from himself and society is his color.³³

But Cross can be defined by his race as well as his outlook which echoes existential philosophy. William Barrett summarizes the views of Jean Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger in this definition, which can be applied to Cross: existential man is "a creature who actively creates himself through his own projects."³⁴ Nevertheless, the protagonist of The Outsider seems to answer to all these definitions: "his physical blackness and the resentful self-hatred that may have resulted from being a Negro, provide a practical image to embody the darkness of existential dread."³⁵

V

Throughout the novel, Wright uses a combination of symbol and event to dramatize Cross' quest for freedom. The hero's involvements with members of the Communist Party, Fascist Langley Herndon, and impressionist painter Eva Blount, illustrates this.

Having arrived in New York and painstakingly created the alias Lionel Lane, Cross ventures into the world of modern political realities and becomes intrigued by the power of the Communist Party. One of its organizers, Gilbert Blount, defines the stance of the Party as follows: "The Party wants you to obey! The Party hopes you can understand why you must obey, but even if you don't understand, you must obey" (p. 183). Cross joins the Party hoping it would "transform his sense of dread, shape it, objectify it, and make it real and rational for him" (p. 188).

He identifies with the Communists' will to power because they like himself had "reached far back into history and had dredged up from its black waters the most ancient realities: man's desire to be a God" (p. 198). In keeping with his ambivalent nature, he loathes this will to power, while he himself aspires to absolute freedom. Thus, by pitting his will against that of the Communists, he is symbolically fighting against himself and fulfilling the premise of his name.

As Cross observes Gilbert Blount wielding power over his wife, Eva, and Bob Hunter, he recognizes that the Communist Party operates on a system of master and slave. Besides identifying with the Communists, he also experiences an affinity with the impressionist artist, Eva Blount, who has been trapped by the Communists and prevented from displaying her work. He himself, is an artist who creates new identities. His assessment of the artist's problem is similar to that expressed by Paul Tillich:

The violent reactions against modern art in collectivist (Nazi, Communist) as well as conformist (American democratic) groups show that they feel seriously threatened by it The creators of modern art have been able to see the meaninglessness of our existence, they participated in its despair. At the same time they have had the courage to face it and express it in their pictures and sculptures. They had the courage to be as themselves.³⁶

By identifying with the oppressor symbolized by the Communists, as well as the oppressed symbolized by impressionist painter, Eva Blount, Cross again portrays his predicament. Gilbert Blount, the Communist, and Langley Herndon, the Fascist, are presented as symbols of the two political temptations of modern man.³⁷ Cross murders both of them while they are engaged in deadly combat, ostensibly over his presence as a Negro in Herndon's apartment building. In fact, in a more profound

sense, they are fighting for power over each other. He kills them because he is impelled by an "imperious feeling," but he "had no plan when he dealt those blows by death" (p. 227).

Although he admits that he has murdered deliberately, he cannot define his motives. He seems to be in the process of distilling his ideas. He later rationalizes by observing that he had killed "two little gods" (p. 230). With characteristic perceptiveness, he realizes that he himself "had acted like a little God" and had become "trapped in the coils of his own actions" (p. 230). Cross' interior monologue is one of the literary devices used to portray his mental state of confusion, perception, irrationality and logic. (After the murder he carefully destroys evidence, and creates an alibi.)

Later, Cross commits another logical murder. He kills Communist Jack Hilton who has discovered his crime and is planning to enslave him. During the murder he feels "possessed," a reminder of his demonic nature. He also makes careful plans to divert suspicion from himself: he leaves a note for the dead man at his hotel's desk.

After this murder he grasps the folly of his action and is seized by a "nauseous depression" (p. 305), an indication of his humanity. However, his logic soon comes to the rescue and he justifies the murder by observing it had redeemed "Bob's betrayal," "Sarah's indignation," "Eva's deceived heart," and his own sense of outrage at Hilton's attempt to enslave him. Albert Camus' explanation is helpful in understanding this logical murderer.

We are living in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children . . . on the contrary they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy which can be used for any purpose.³⁸

The Communists eventually shoot Cross because they cannot under-

stand him.

VI

In dramatizing the story of Cross Damon's life, Wright employs a symbolic death and rebirth cycle that is frequently used in Afro-American literature. Towards the end of the novel, Cross Damon, Negro, neurotic, philosophy student, and existential man, is reborn to the world of reality. He longs for human companionship and confesses his crimes to Eva Blount, hoping she will give him the moral support needed to return to society. However, she is so shocked that she commits suicide, and he is once more an isolate.

It is not surprising that the protagonist of The Outsider wishes to take his place in society after a bizarre life of deception and crime. Characterized by his scholarly disposition, he carries the experiment of living with false identities and striving for absolute freedom to a point which proves its futility. Early in the novel he is questioned about the books he reads and replies, "I was looking for something" (p. 7). At the end of the novel he confides: "The search can't be done alone Alone a man is nothing" (p. 439).

Although the novel is dominated by ideas, and philosophy takes over to the detriment of art, it has its own uniqueness. In order to portray the complexity of the experience it presents, it blends racism, the naturalistic literary tradition, psychology, and existential philosophy into a memorable novel. Its structure derives from its depiction of man's

pursuit for an understanding of his identity and sense of freedom.

Ihab Hassan's description applies to The Outsider:

As the fictional Hero attempts to mediate the contradictions of culture and even create a new consciousness, so does the form of the novel itself attempt the task on a deeper level. Realism and surrealism . . . event and symbol tend to fuse in evasive forms, equal to the perplexities of the day.³⁹

On his death-bed the hero of The Outsider makes a plea for human understanding: "I wish I could ask men to meet themselves We're different from what we seem Maybe worse, maybe better We're strangers to ourselves" (p. 439). He also rejects the illusion of absolute freedom by remarking: "Man is returning to the earth For a long time he has been sleeping, wrapped in a dream. He is awakening now, awakening from his dream and finding himself in a waking nightmare." (p. 440).

Cross Damon critically portrays the predicament of living without an identity, or with false identities. He also illustrates that the desire for absolute freedom is an illusion.

His behaviour seems to be a response to his racial and social environment, which by denying him the recognition he sought, drove him to extreme measures in pursuit of an identity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to sympathize with the logical criminality that emerges out of his confused sense of identity and his illusion of complete freedom which he only relinquishes on his death-bed.

At the end of this investigation, Wright proposes that man should try to find the meaning of his life within a given social structure. His two subsequent novels, Savage Holiday, and The Long Dream are studies in which the implications of this proposal are elaborated.

Notes for Chapter I

- 1 Richard Wright, The Outsider, (New York: Harper and Row, 1953).
 - 2 Russel Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man And His Works, (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 155.
 - 3 Brignano, p. 155.
 - 4 Richard Wright, Native Son, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
 - 5 Richard Wright, Black Boy, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
 - 6 Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 282.
 - 7 Ben Burns, "Chicago Defender," March 3, 1945, rpr. in Fabre, p. 281.
 - 8 Excerpt from Wright's journal rpr. in Fabre, p. 281.
 - 9 Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), p. 247.
 - 10 Fabre, p. 314.
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Chapter 2

Savage Holiday: A Quest For The Unity Of Self

For a person's and a people's identity begins in the rituals of infancy, when mothers make it clear with many preliterate means that to be born is good. . . .

Erik H. Erikson

It is imperative that our sense of identity be reinforced by significant others. . . . An identity is a fragile thing when it stands by itself.

William Kilpatrick

Richard Wright's preoccupation with the root causes of human behaviour manifested itself long before he wrote the overtly Freudian novel, Savage Holiday¹. As early as 1932, he confided to Mary Wirth, a caseworker assigned by the Cook County Welfare Office to his destitute family, that he was interested "in sociology and psychology as tools towards understanding character."² She arranged for him to meet her husband, Dr. Louis Wirth, a famous sociologist associated with the University of Chicago. Dr. Wirth gave him a list of readings in sociology and obliged later by discussing the material with him.³

Among the several jobs Wright procured through the relief office in Chicago was the one at the South Side Boy's Club. The ages of the people who attended the club ranged from eight to twenty-five years. As they participated in games, swimming and drawing, Wright was intrigued with "their talk of planes, women, guns, politics and crime."⁴ He often kept notes of their stories and converted them into sketches.⁵

The publication of Native Son⁶ in 1940, brought its author international fame, as well as many letters from the general public and prisoners who either sympathized or identified with the novel's protagonist. Wright was specially attracted by a letter from an elderly woman, requesting the release of Clinton Brewer, who had been imprisoned for eighteen years for murdering a mother of two because she refused to marry him.⁷

Consequently, he visited Brewer, and wrote to the governor of New Jersey, Thomas A. Edison Jr., on March 30, 1941, requesting that Brewer be paroled.⁸ Unfortunately, Wright was mistaken in thinking that Brewer who had read books and periodicals and had studied music composition in prison was reformed enough to make a second offence improbable. Three months after being released Brewer murdered another woman under circumstances similar to those which accounted for his first crime.⁹

In 1941, Wright read Dark Legend¹⁰ by psychiatrist Frederic Wertham. This book presents a Freudian analysis of matricide linked with the story of Hamlet. Soon after, he corresponded with Dr. Wertham about Clinton Brewer, and the psychiatrist's intervention saved Brewer's life.¹¹

In 1945, Richard Wright collaborated with Dr. Wertham in founding the Lafargue clinic in Harlem. Both men agreed that "a negro was an exaggerated American--his problems were the problems of all other people only more naked and obvious because of oppression."¹²

The psychiatrist Benjamin Karpman, who wanted to make a synthesis of his study of black patients, was also a friend of Wright. In 1944, Wright devoted several months to visiting schools, houses of correction and juvenile courts, accompanied by a welfare official who was associated

with the Wiltwyck School for juvenile delinquents.¹³

He also increased his knowledge by studying several books on sociology and reports of clinical cases sent to him by Dr. Benjamin Karpman.¹⁴ Around this time he held frequent discussions with Dr. Wertham.¹⁵ During the composition of American Hunger he depended on Dr. Wertham's expertise to help him ratify his memories.¹⁶ He also allowed himself to be used by Dr. Wertham in an experiment "on the association of ideas" and "the relationship between writing and psychoanalysis."¹⁷

In 1946, Wright himself wrote "Psychiatry Comes to Harlem,"¹⁸ and "Juvenile Delinquency in Harlem"¹⁹ was published the same year. With this background, it is not surprising that Wright was increasingly motivated to find a fictional form to express his strong interest in the psychology of human behavior.

I

Savage Holiday, the second novel written during Wright's exile in France, was published in 1954. It is unique among Wright's novels because it does not concern itself with racial conflicts. Significantly, it is dedicated to the convicted murderer, Clinton Brewer, in whose case Wright was actively involved in 1941.

The composition of Savage Holiday, began shortly after the publication of The Outsider,²⁰ and was accomplished within a very short time, December 24, 1952, to March 3, 1953.²¹ The outline for this novel was partly motivated by an article the author had read in The Paris Tribune, about a New York businessman who had been trapped nude in the

corridor of his apartment building.²² Wright used this incident to outline a novel in which he expressed his long-standing interest in psychotic acts, especially matricide.

Despite the remarkable chronological closeness between Savage Holiday and The Outsider, and their treatment of identical themes, each takes a clearly different approach. In The Outsider, the outlook is mainly philosophical, and the hero attempts to solve his problems by opting out of society. On the other hand, Erskine Fowler of Savage Holiday tries to resolve his identity-crisis, and acquire a measure of freedom, by outwardly conforming to society. In doing this he adopts a pragmatic attitude and attains a certain measure of freedom by using the "arts of intelligent social control."²³ As the narrator observes:

Erskine could deal swiftly and competently with the externalities of life. If something went wrong he called in a lawyer, an accountant or a policeman and matters were righted at once.²⁴

However, Erskine Fowler is never free from unpleasant childhood memories that haunt him. He shares the problem of Cross Damon of The Outsider, which is the problematic "relationship of himself to himself."²⁵

Since Savage Holiday was published only in paperback, it was never seriously reviewed by American critics. Russel Carl Brignano remarks:

As a work of art it merits scant attention, for it is faulty in structure and inappropriately melodramatic in plot. Its violence is sensational and seemingly senseless. . . . Yet Savage Holiday is an interesting small annex to the larger concerns around which Wright built so much of his fiction and non-fiction.²⁶

Edward Margolies believes that the novel can be categorized as psychological "in far too obvious a way;" Wright's "psychoanalytical interpolations" are "too condescending" and the character of Erskine Fowler "is designed"

almost embarrassingly on a Freudian pattern."²⁷ Another critic dismisses Savage Holiday as "a curiously incoherent little potboiler about which the less said the better."²⁸

Nevertheless, the novel was welcomed enthusiastically in Europe, and translated into French, Italian, German and Dutch.²⁹ It was serialized in Jean Paul Sartre's Les Temps Modernes.³⁰

Although there is enough sensational action in Savage Holiday to justify its categorization as a potboiler, this action is always used as a device for triggering off the indirect interior monologue through which Erskine Fowler's mental processes are revealed.

II

Savage Holiday traces the development of its main character's confused personality and his efforts to control the traumatic memories of his childhood relationship with his prostitute-mother. In dramatizing the themes of this novel Wright uses one of the basic archetypes of all literature: "the female as mother and whore, split asunder into two contrasting characters or co-existing in the same person."³¹ Erskine Fowler's mother is a prostitute, and after her death she is mirrored in Mrs. Mabel Blake.

The central concern of this novel is the moral and psychological pressures that are imposed on man by society.³² Consequently, it embodies "another presentation of the problem of The Outsider."³³ According to Edward Margolies Savage Holiday is a fable constructed around the following questions:

In what respects is an individual morally obligated to uphold social values in a society that treats him shabbily--that denies his identity? Why is freedom so crushingly oppressive? Is freedom at all possible? If an individual is ridden by unconscious drives, wherein does his guilt lie?³⁴

The novel embodies two movements which work simultaneously with the help of flashbacks and dreams. The external movement delineates the series of events which lead to the murder of Mabel Blake; while the internal movement, which occurs in Fowler's consciousness and moves backward, traces his unhappy childhood and the symbolic murder of his own mother.

In a sense, the novel deals with the real and shadow lives of the protagonist. Therefore, with reservations, Savage Holiday is an expansion of Wright's story, "The Man Who Killed a Shadow,"³⁵ which was published in English in 1949. (Originally published in French.)

The identity of the novel's protagonist is examined with an assiduity which converts the other characters and events into devices for assisting in this examination. Consequently, Mabel Blake, Fowler's neighbour, is conveniently designed as a mirror-image of his own deceased prostitute-mother, and Mabel's son, Tony, is a mirror-image of Fowler as a child. As he listens to Tony banging on his drums he recalls his faraway childhood. . . he too once romped and played alone . . . and there'd been no mother to look after him either. . . And, too, wasn't it maybe because Mrs. Blake--alone, sensual, impulsive--was so much as he remembered his mother that he found himself scolding her and brooding over her in his mind? (p. 34)

This memory occurs when Fowler is forty-three years old. Although he is, at this stage, ousted from his executive job with Longevity Life Insurance Company, he remains an affluent and respected member of the community. He is the superintendent of the Mount Ararat Sunday School, a member of the Rotary, and a thirty-second degree Mason.

In addition, he lives in an elegant apartment, has a bank balance of forty thousand dollars, and more than one hundred thousand dollars in solid securities. At this point he tries to convince himself:

He'd conquered that dark, shameful episode . . . His life no longer touched the dark, strange, twisted actions of his mother or his own agonized past reactions to her. (p. 37)

Ironically, however, Erskine is never free from the effects of his traumatic childhood experiences. His job and other social and religious affiliations are actually masks to cover up his inner emptiness.³⁶ Like the neurotic protagonist of The Outsider, Fowler is aware of the problems but refuses to admit to them.

Before he is ousted from his executive job, he functions well as a mask. The third-person omniscient narrator emphasizes:

Work had not only given Erskine his livelihood and had conferred upon him the approval of his fellowmen, but above all it had made him a stranger to that part of himself he feared and never wanted to know. (p. 30)

He also explains that Erskine had "assumed towards himself the role of policeman" and had sentenced himself to "labour for life" (p. 30).

When he is discharged from his job he thinks about a method to "outwit that rejected part of him that Longevity Life had helped to incarcerate so long and so successfully" (p. 30). Fowler, afraid of his true identity, experiences (like Cross Damon of The Outsider) the Kierkegaardian dread of the "dizziness of freedom which occurs when the spirit would posit the synthesis (soul and body) and freedom than gazes into its own possibility."³⁷

Fowler's extreme reaction to the loss of his job indicates an emotional maladjustment, which is illustrated through his dreams, masks and interior monologues. Erik H. Erikson is helpful in explaining this maladjustment:

The display of a total commitment to a role fixation . . . as against free experimentation with available roles has an obvious connection with earlier conflicts between free initiative and Oedipal guilt in infantile reality, fantasy and play.³⁸

The reaction Fowler manifests when he loses his executive job conforms with his use of other social masks to illustrate that he has an idealized image of himself. This leaves little to disprove his neurosis.³⁹

Erskine Fowler functions well as an executive of Longevity Life Insurance Company, and a member of several organizations, because he is able to maintain his idealized image of himself in these capacities. However, when he is left in a situation that demands free initiative he is unable to cope. He seems to be afraid of facing his true identity.

Fowler fortifies his neurotic world through the use of religion. His sorrow, feelings of guilt, fear and confusion which follow Tony's fatal accident, are almost miraculously assuaged when he enters the Mount Ararat Baptist Church. The world of religion seems safe and solid and it inspires confidence in him "with its sunlit faith from which all confusions are banished by the boon of God's great grace" (p. 80). Moreover, he needs religion because, like his job, it protects him from the "dark faceless strangers knocking at the doors of [his] soul . . ." (p. 80).

There are other ways through which his religious faith helps him. Having experienced a very unhappy childhood, he finds comfort in the notion of "GOD'S ETERNAL FAMILY" (p. 81), and the biblical verse: "For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."⁴⁰

Reinforcing his neurotic use of religion as a mask is the fact that on reading this biblical verse he thinks that it is "a clear call for him to regard Mrs. Blake as his sister in Christ" (p. 82). He rationalizes by wondering whether God had chosen him as an instrument, when he innocently caused Tony's death.

Ironically, however, while he is in the sanctuary of the church he still depends on his "colored pencils" for safety. Throughout the novel he touches the tips of four colored pencils when he is anxious or afraid. Although he is at first unconscious of the origins of this symbol of safety, towards the end of the novel he remembers that his previous memory of crushing a doll's head in with a dirty bat and telling his childhood playmate, Gladys: "There's my mama. . . . I killed her; I killed her 'cause she's a bad woman. . . ." (p. 214) was in reality, only the memory of a childhood dream. As the omniscient narrator explains:

It was what he [Erskine Fowler] had angrily daydreamed one day when he'd been playing games with Gladys and her dolls; they'd been coloring paper with colored pencils and he'd drawn the image of a dead, broken doll and he had imagined Gladys telling on him and his mother branding him as bad. . . . He'd pictured vividly to himself what he'd wanted to do to his mother for having gone off and left that night when he'd been ill. . . . He now understood the four pencils! (p. 218)

Thus, by extension, the pencils had become a symbol of safety to protect him from anxiety and fear, emotions which he often experienced during his childhood relationship with his prostitute-mother.

Another symbol which is used effectively in Savage Holiday is nudity. When Fowler is accidentally locked out of his apartment in the nude, there is a symbolic stripping of his masks or defences.

His hairy body, as he glanced down at it, seemed huge and repulsive, like that of a giant, but when he looked off, his body felt puny, shriveled, like that of a dwarf. And the hallway in which he stood was white, smooth, modern, it held no gothic recesses, no Victorian curves, no Byzantine incrustations, in or behind which he could hide (p. 42).

Symbolically stripped, Fowler sees himself simultaneously as a towering adult and a defenceless child.

It is this nudity that causes the fatal accident of Tony and precipitates the series of events that eventually lead to the unmasking of Fowler. Five-year-old Tony is a mirror-image of Erskine Fowler as a child. Tony, having observed his mother and her lovers indulging in sexual activities, comes to believe that nude men are fighting his mother. Therefore, when he sees Fowler in the nude he becomes terrified, loses his balance, and falls off the balcony to his death.

Fowler's religious interpretation of Tony's death and the role he played in effecting it leads him to believe that he must redeem the child's death. He blames Mrs. Blake and feels impelled to purge the world of "ignorantly-lustful" women who "spun webs of evil to snare men and innocent children" (p. 101). He adopts the stance of a saviour and makes plans to marry Mabel Blake in order to save her from a life of prostitution. Thus, besides using religion as a sanctuary, and a mask, he also uses it as a means of wish-fulfillment. In a sense he epitomizes Wright's definition: "The Protestant is a brave blind man cursed by destiny with a burden which he has not the inner grace to accept wholeheartedly."⁴¹

In order to assuage his feelings of guilt about Tony's death, Fowler rationalizes that he is God's chosen instrument to save Mabel Blake from a life a sin. Less admirable is his explanation that God had taken Tony to heaven. As a neurotic, Erskine Fowler "lives in his imagination where nothing is impossible."⁴² Like Cross Damon of The Outsider, he assumes a god-like stance to right the wrongs of the world,

and in so doing is deflected from combatting his personal ills.

In Savage Holiday (as well as in The Outsider and The Long Dream) the protagonist's existence is characterized by a dream-like quality. Fowler has daydreams and dreams while he's asleep. These dreams are indispensable in tracing the source of his emotional disturbance because they portray his childhood experiences especially as they relate to his mother.

During his childhood Fowler experiences an "impotent rage," the cause of which he attributes to his mother's licentious behaviour. Since he is helpless, and feels jealous and degraded, he "dreams of growing up and getting a job and taking his mother into some far-off land where there'd be no one to remember what had happened" (p. 36-37). However, this dream never materializes because his mother dies during his childhood.

As an adult he is haunted by dreams while he is asleep. In keeping with the overt Freudianism that is manifested throughout this novel, these dreams are almost self-explanatory because they reflect his mother's behaviour, and his relationship to her. His two major sleeping dreams serve to reinforce his distaste as well as his preoccupation with his mother's licentious behaviour.

In the first of these he is walking through a forest of "stalwart trees" and sees a "criminal looking" man cutting "furiously into a v-shaped hollow of a giant tree. . . ." (p. 34). As he rushes to ask the man to stop stealing his trees and leave, he is crushed by the falling "giant tree."

The interpretation of this dream centres around the "forest" and

the "v-shaped" hollow. His wandering in the forest is related to his unconscious.⁴³ The "v-shaped hollow" is an obvious visual representation of the female sexual organ, and the "criminal looking" man symbolizes his mother's lover.

The trees, in this instance, are associated through the "v-shaped" hollow with his mother. Therefore, the act of furiously cutting into the tree is highly evocative of sexual intercourse. Appropriately, the dreamer is crushed by the falling tree, just as Erskine Fowler was crushed psychologically in real life by his mother. The interpretation of this dream is also indicative of the protagonist's frustration of not having his wish fulfilled, and the danger of contemplating incest.

In the second sleeping dream he is a child walking down the centre aisle of a church to the "sounds of sad organ music" (p. 168). He suddenly sees a beautiful silver coffin containing "a dead woman who was lovely and young and lying in a flowing white muslin dress. . . ." (p. 168). He also observes "a strange man whom he felt he had seen before" and feels that the man is "asking his permission to open the coffin so that he could see the entire body of the woman. . . ." (p. 168). As he opens the lower half of the coffin, the woman's body begins to rot before his eyes and he feels he is about to inhale the "awful smell of putrefaction" (p. 168).

In this dream, the beautiful dead woman dressed in white, a symbol of purity, is rotting in the lower half of her body. The juxtaposition of purity and putrefaction resembles Fowler's relationship with his mother; on the one hand, he manifests a pure love for his mother; on the other, he is disgusted by her licentiousness as symbolized by the putrefaction in the lower half of her body. The "strange man", like

the "criminal looking" man in his earlier dream, is representative of his mother's lovers, who are his rivals for her affection.

In both dreams, there are indications of his possessiveness towards his mother; in the first, the trees are his, and the "criminal looking" man is stealing them; in the second, the corpse belongs to him because the "strange man" craves his permission before looking at it. Indicative of his hostility towards his mother's lovers are the adjectives "criminal" and "strange."

But the "strange man" as well as the "criminal looking" man who crave possession of his prostitute-mother may also be representations of Erskine Fowler himself. They prefigure the role he will later play in killing Mabel Blake, the prostitute-mother, who refuses to let him possess her.

Even while he is awake, he lives in a dream-like world. There is a "shifting curtain of wobbly images" hovering before his consciousness, and they grow in density and solidity and then become real (p. 33). A little later he drifts into a "semi-dream state" (p. 35). While he is awake he sees "images" of men around his long-deceased mother. He recognizes that Tony's mind is a "strange shadowland" (p. 76) from which he creates his own nightmares. The scene in which Tony falls from the balcony becomes a "tableau of horror" to which a "hopeless nebulosity" and something "irresistibly unreal" are attached (p. 54).

IV

Erskine Fowler's relationship with his deceased prostitute-

mother, continues through memories and dreams as well as in her "reincarnation" in the person of Mabel Blake. Having accidentally caused the death of Mrs. Blake's son, Tony, he rationalizes that he would save her from a life of prostitution by marrying her. The fleeting moments of desire which he had formally felt for Mrs. Blake consolidate into what he imagines to be love.

In a sense, Tony's death represents the symbolic death of Erskine Fowler's childhood, and engenders a process of rationalization which he hopes will culminate in sexual union with the mother figure. However, the jealousy and love-hate relationship which characterized his childhood attitude towards his own mother again predominate and defeat his purpose.

His courtship and proposal to his "reincarnated" mother, Mabel Blake, clearly derive from his Oedipal inclinations. He confesses, "I know I love you! You're haunting me. I can't get you out of my mind Mabel . . ." (p. 159). On another occasion he acknowledges that she is just a "simple slut" (p. 167) and a little later, threateningly demands to know how many men she is sleeping with. Just before he kills her, he screams: "You're no damned good!" (p. 212). His irrational jealousy and attempts to control Mabel Blake's sexual life implies that he murders because he is thwarted in his desire to completely possess the mother figure.

Towards the end of the novel, he realizes that his notion of having "killed" a doll was a "shameful daydream of revenge" (p. 218). Ultimately, he murders Mabel Blake because she evokes a dream he had buried for thirty-six years. In doing this, he illustrates that "the boundaries between the external and internal are fluid. Perceptions and subjective states

of mind often flow together in such a way as to be indistinguishable."⁴⁴

The murder of Mabel Blake is the climax of the investigation into Fowler's emotional disturbance, because it fuses his dream-world with the world of reality. He realizes his childhood desire to kill his mother, and in so doing consummates his desire for incest through violence:

Although the act of murder unifies his fragmented personality by fusing his two worlds, it simultaneously ends his trauma and entraps him in society's legal system. Nevertheless, he momentarily gains a personal freedom by understanding and accepting the reasons for his behaviour.

Notes for Chapter 2

- 1 Richard Wright, Savage Holiday (New York: Avon Publications Inc., 1954).
- 2 Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), pp. 107-108.
- 3 Webb, p. 108.
- 4 Webb, p. 111.
- 5 Webb, p. 111.
- 6 Richard Wright, Native Son, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
- 7 Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1973) p. 236.
- 8 Fabre, p. 236.
- 9 Fabre, p. 236.
- 10 Frederic Wertham, Dark Legend, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941).
- 11 Fabre, p. 236.
- 12 Webb, p. 229.
- 13 Webb, p. 271.
- 14 Fabre, p. 272.
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- 16 Fabre, p. 292.
- 17 Fabre, p. 292.
- 18 "Psychiatry Comes to Harlem", Free World No. 12 (September 1946) pp. 49-51.
- 19 "Urban Misery in an American City: Juvenile Delinquency in Harlem," Twice A Year, no. 14-15, (Fall 1946 - Winter 1947), pp. 339-45.
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- 21 Webb, p. 314.
- 22 Webb, p. 314.
- 23 Sidney Hook, "Pragmatism and The Tragic Sense of Life," in Contemporary American Philosophy, Second series, ed. J.E. Smith, (New York: Humanities Press Inc., 1970) p. 193.
- 24 Richard Wright, Savage Holiday, (New York: Avon Publications Inc.,

1954), p. All further references to this work appear in the text.

²⁵ The Outsider, p. 8.

²⁶ Russell Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, (Pittsburgh: University Press, 1970), pp. 133-134.

²⁷ Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, (Illinois, Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 141.

²⁸ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Search for Beliefs: Fiction of Richard Wright." University of Kansas City Review. XXIII (Winter 1956), p. 135.

²⁹ Webb, p. 317.

³⁰ Webb, p. 317.

³¹ Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter, (New York: Doubleday 1970), p. 152.

³² Margolies, p. 138.

³³ Margolies, p. 138.

³⁴ Margolies, p. 138.

³⁵ The story presents Negro protagonist, Paul Saunders, who was born and raised in a small Southern town. As he grows up he realizes that the world is divided into two; a black, and a white one which are separated by a million psychological miles.

During his middle age, he works as a janitor in Washington's National Cathedral, and is constantly taunted by the suggestive antics of a forty-year-old white virgin librarian, Miss Houseman. One day she calls him "black nigger" and he reacts to a lifetime of buried humiliations by killing the librarian and disfiguring her body in a surrealistic scene.

In doing this, he destroys the shadow that followed him all his life, and prefigures Erskine Fowler's murder of Mrs. Blake in Savage Holiday. While Miss Houseman is a symbolic shadow of the consequences of miscegenation for Paul Saunders; Mabel Blake is the shadow of Fowler's prostitute mother. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Killed A Shadow," In Eight Men (New York, Pyramid Books, 1969), pp. 157-170.

³⁶ The literary device of masking is well known to Richard Wright, and he uses it often. However, in most of his other works he uses it in a racial context. In Black Boy he explains: "I began to marvel how smoothly the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them . . . ; There had been developed in them a delicate sensitive controlling mechanism that shut off their minds and emotions from all the white race had said was taboo." Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) p. 216.

³⁷ See Chapter I, Note 30.

³⁸ Erik H. Erikson, Identity Youth and Crisis, (New York: W.W. Norton, and Company, Inc., 1968), p. 184.

³⁹ Samuel I. Greenberg, Neurosis Is a Painful Style of Living, (New York: The New American Library Inc., 1971), p. 40.

- 40 St. Matthew, 12:50, The Bible, rpr. p. 82 of Savage Holiday.
- 41 Richard Wright, White Man Listen!, (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957), p. 56.
- 42 Greenberg, p. 41.
- 43 J.E. Cirlot, "Forest," A Dictionary of Symbols, Trans. by Jack Safe, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
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Chapter 3

The Long Dream: A Pyrrhic Victory

One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Why is image so central to man's self-definition? Because all images, and especially created images, represent a certain way of focusing on the world outside, and therefore they represent a certain point of view.

Carolyn F. Gerald

The Long Dream¹ is Richard Wright's last published novel as well as a seminal work which contributes greatly to the understanding of his earlier novels. Although this novel was published twenty one years after Wright's autobiography, Black Boy,² these two works contain a striking similarity in dramatizing the devastation of the Afro-American's personality. Both works portray the growth from childhood to manhood of a Negro male in the South.

A study of Black Boy alongside The Long Dream is instructive. During their childhood years, both Wright and Rex Tucker, the protagonist of The Long Dream, dread abandonment by their mothers, and discover that their fathers are committing adultery.³ The fact that Wright, like his creation, Fishbelly Tucker, does not directly experience the brutality of the white world until he becomes an adolescent is a possible explanation for the independent spirit and defiance of caste ordinances which charact-

erize both of them.⁴ Such independence results in their rejection of the traditions and values of both the black and the white societies in Mississippi. Consequently, they are obliged to search for a meaningful life in a foreign environment.⁵

The Long Dream examines the conflict between the black and white societies in Clintonville, Mississippi. It is a highly significant element of its author's literary vision because it traces "the sources of isolation and alienation in black men."⁶ By virtue of this, it becomes an invaluable key to establishing the psychological and emotional basis for the characterization in the earlier novels: Native Son,⁷ The Outsider,⁸ and the earliest though posthumously published Lawd Today.⁹

Like Wright's other novels, The Long Dream is divided into sections. These are entitled "Daydreams and Nightdreams . . . ," "Days and Nights . . . ," and "Waking Dreams" Each of these titles suggest the contradictions and confusion which characterize Fishbelly Tucker's existence. Richard Wright himself explained that the title of the novel is ironic because its protagonist's dream of identifying with white values is endless.¹⁰

The structure of this novel may be described as "a parody of a romance or a tragedy in the ironic mode, characterized by such demonic imagery as the nightmare, the mob, the sacrificial victims, the whores, and the fire that destroys."¹¹ Consequently, although the action of this novel is similar to a romance, since it confronts the hero with a series of test situations, its accomplishments are the reverse. While the ironic hero of The Long Dream "goes forth into the world in quest of an identity," like the hero of a romance, he is rejected by society and therefore fails to accomplish his mission.¹²

Reinforcing its structure as a parody of a quest-romance are the numerous rituals and dreams embodied in The Long Dream. As Northrop Frye emphasizes:

The quest-romance has analogues to both rituals and dreams, and the rituals examined by Fraser and dreams examined by Jung show the remarkable similarity in form that we should expect of two symbolic structures analogous to the same thing. Translated into dream terms the quest-romance is the search for fulfillment that will deliver it from anxieties of reality but will still contain their reality.¹³

In compliance with this structure The Long Dream portrays the quest for identity and freedom by two Negroes as they struggle against racial prejudice in Mississippi. Tyree's quest portrays the complex political and sociological arrangements between the Negro and white communities in Clintonville, Mississippi, while Fish's quest is described by tracing his growth from childhood to manhood in social and psycho-sexual terms.

The portrayal of Rex Tucker's identity crisis commences with a change in his name in the first chapter of the novel. When he is a young boy, his father returns from a fishing trip and entertains him by blowing up a fish's bladder. Unable to distinguish between a bladder and a belly, Rex insists on calling the bladder a belly. His playmates, Sam, Zeke, and Tony are amused by the misnomer and consequently, they give him the sobriquet Fishbelly, which is later shortened to Fish.

Bearing in mind Wright's proclivity for using symbolically charged names such as Bigger Thomas (Native Son), and Cross Damon (The Outsider),

the name change from Rex to Fishbelly is fraught with suggestion. Both Rex and Fish are associated with Christ who holds the titles "King of the Jews" and "Fisher of Men." In addition to these Christian connotations, the fish is also a symbol of regeneration.¹⁴

The hero's confused identity and lack of fundamental human rights are described in psychosexual terms. In describing the abrogation of the Negro's manhood and the attendant effects on his personality, Wright consciously or unconsciously fashions Rex (King) Fishbelly Tucker after the mythological Fisher King. In the original myth, the Fisher King is emasculated by a wound between his thighs. Since the fertility of the land and the prosperity of the kingdom are magically linked (in this myth), the Fisher King becomes a symbol of sterility or ruined potential.¹⁵

The name change from Rex to Fishbelly is indicative of a change in destiny.¹⁶ His status is changed from that of a king (Rex), to that of a fish. It also portrays a conflict and blemishes the young boy's identity.¹⁷ Throughout The Long Dream, Fish Tucker lives under the threat of castration. When he succeeds to his father's business "kingdom" he is already psychologically emasculated. His emasculation is a consequence of society's definition of him as a "nigger" whose full humanity is not recognized. To keep him in his place it attacks his manhood.

As The Long Dream, the story of the Fisher King deals with identity. When he succeeds the Grail King, he is already crippled (like Fishbelly is, psychologically), and there is an implication that unless he is healed there will be a breakdown of order in the kingdom.¹⁸ If the knight Perceval had asked the crucial question about the procession of the grail, he would have found out his true identity and would have realized he was the heir to the throne.¹⁹

Reinforcing the link between The Long Dream and the myth of the Fisher King, is Rex Tucker's first dream which occurs shortly before he acquires the sobriquet, Fishbelly. In the dream he associates his father with fishes. Significantly, his father's virility is accentuated throughout the novel--he has a mulatto mistress, owns a whorehouse, and is co-owner of a dancehall which is used as a recruiting centre for prostitution; in addition, he also indulges in sexual relations with the clients at his undertaking establishment. In the dream, Chris Simms, a Negro youth, who is later castrated and mutilated beyond recognition for having an affair with a white prostitute, is transformed into a fish. The dream-fish approaches Rex with "gleaming red eyes."²⁰ Shortly after this dream, as Fishbelly stealthily observes his father copulating with a strange woman, he sees "upon a bed the shadowy outlines of his naked father: two staring red eyes, a strained humped back; and he heard harsh breath whistling in an open throat." (p. 23). The whistling that he heard during this sexual act causes him to associate his father with a train. Consequently, the train becomes linked with sexuality in his later dreams.

Also prefiguring the importance that sexuality will play in his search for a viable identity is the confusion which Rex (Fishbelly) Tucker experiences about the fish. In his dream he associates the fish with virility as represented by his father and Chris Simms. Nevertheless, on seeing a live fish for the first time, he associates their smell with his mother's body and an image of pregnant Mrs. Brown (p. 7). Thus, the fish's symbolic significance is extended to prefigure the sexual confusion which will dominate Fishbelly's life.

As a child, Rex (Fishbelly) Tucker²¹ takes his first glimpse at a pair of fish: he sees "a mass of white-bellied objects" (p. 6). In a later dream he sees a fishbelly covered with hair, under his mother's chair, an obvious representation of the female sexual organ. The "white bellied objects" that he observes as a young child are later developed into a symbol of the white woman, the greatest threat to Fishbelly's life. Through a network of associations the fish's belly becomes a symbol of his constant sexual appetite and fear of castration. The symbolic associations of the fish "honors the book's basic premise that Fish is an innocent victim ruined by a sick society's concept of sexual mores."²²

II

Besides the changes in name, Fishbelly's identity-crisis is depicted in several other ways. The most important are his relationship with his father, his dreams, and society's definition of him as a Negro.

As the son of the most powerful Negro in Clintonville, Mississippi, he is alienated from the lower-class Negroes. At age seven, his mother informs him: "Son, they your color but they ain't your kind" (p. 20). On the other hand, he is cautioned to respect whites and sees no possibility of friendship with them. Consequently, he is isolated from both blacks and whites.

Before his twelfth birthday Fish becomes involved in an argument with his playmates, Sam, Zeke, and Tony and reaches another step towards his "un-manhood."²³ Sam starts the argument by stating: "A nigger's a

black who doesn't know who he is" (p. 37). Influenced by Marcus Garvey's conviction, Sam tries to convince his friends that they should think of Africa as their true home. As Sam attacks his friends for straightening their hair to look like whites, Fishbelly shifts uneasily and tries not to think of his motives for having his hair straightened. Sam concludes the argument by pointing out: "You niggers ain't nowhere You can't live like no American, 'cause you ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing!" (pp. 41-42).

Angered and shamed by their disagreement about their identities, Fish and Sam fight each other.²⁴ When Fish returns home after the fight, he realizes that he did not want to fight his friend. Distraught by the negative image he has of himself, he spits at the reflection of his face in a mirror and whispers, "Nigger."²⁵

Fish and his friends have other experiences which present a negative image of the Negro, and thus teach them to hate themselves. At the local farm fair they discover a grinning Negro who allows himself to be hit with a baseball as part of an act called "HIT THE NIGGER HEAD." As Fishbelly looks at this he again experiences a hatred towards a fellow Negroes:

Fishbelly felt that he either had to turn away from that grinning black face, or, like the white man, throw something at it. The obscene black face was his own face, and to quell the war in his heart he had either to hate it or accept it in love. It was easier to hate that degraded black face than to love it (p. 57).

The scenes in which Fish collects rent from Tyree's black tenants also portrays his sense of isolation from his race.²⁶ He is distressed by the mentality of the lower class Negroes who constantly complain of being oppressed but do nothing to change their situation.

He cannot, as Tyree advises, forget these people, and ultimately he begins to regard them as parasites.²⁷ Fish's experience up to this point amply describe his predicament; hatred of the self, and a desire to identify with the white race.

III

Two patterns emerge from the archetypal study of The Long Dream; the first is cyclical, the other dialectic.²⁸ The cyclical describes Fish's life from childhood to a symbolic death and rebirth (portrayed through his imprisonment and eventual release). The dialectic pattern involves the tension between fantasy and reality, which is a dominant factor in the protagonist's life.

Fishbelly's maturation is portrayed as the controlling archetypal metaphor in the novel. It is supported by several rituals (or recurrent acts of symbolic communication), such as sexual encounters, the murder of Chris, dreams, imprisonment and death (which is reinforced symbolically by Tyree Tucker, the undertaker).

One of the most important rituals that Fishbelly observes, is that in which Chris Simms is murdered and castrated for having a white mistress. This occurs when Fishbelly is twelve years old, and his father uses it to point out the dangers of miscegnation to his son. He warns: "NEVER LOOK AT A WHITE WOMAN! YOU HEAR?" (p. 83). Although the twelve-year-old boy does not fully understand the meaning of this admonition, he is afraid because of his father's fear. Grieved by the shadow

of castration which could affect her son, his mother symbolically embraces him as an indication of his "taking leave of his childhood of his innocence" (p. 185).

Too young to understand why Chris Simms is killed for being with a white woman, Fish goes to the bathroom and tears out a newspaper photograph of a "white woman clad only in panties and a brassiere, . . . smiling under a cluster of tumbling curls . . . her hands on her hips, her lips pouting, ripe, sensual" (p. 89). As he nockets this photograph, he thinks its subject is pretty and there is no "hint of evil or death about her" (p. 90).

Fish decides to keep the photograph, until he solves the "mystery of why that laughing white face was so radiantly happy and at the same time charged with horror" (p. 90). He keeps it in his wallet until he is arrested by the police three years later and threatened with castration for staring at a white waitress. At this time, he swallows the photograph and moves a step further in his understanding of the white woman as an embodiment of danger. Still later, the symbolic photograph becomes reality when the police actually send a white prostitute to his apartment and imprison him on a trumped-up charge of attempted rape.

When the mutilated body of Chris Simms is found, Tyree takes his son to observe the autopsy. The image of this castrated corpse remains embedded in his mind, and often haunts him in dreams and while he is awake.

IV

In his fifteenth year, Fishbelly experiences his most significant initiation into the realities of black life. He learns how blacks are treated by the police, how blacks manipulate whites, and what having a woman is like. This initiation commences with a rebellion against his mother's wishes and terminates in a commitment to violate the sexual code which denies him access to white women. It establishes the pattern of his life.

Defying his mother, Fish participates in a mud fight and is arrested by two white policemen for trespassing. In the eyes of the courts, he is a man, but he himself feels like child and longs to be back in the sanctuary of his Black Belt, and see familiar black faces. Although he longs for the Black Belt, he feels that it has lost "its status and importance in his life" (p. 147). Significantly (for this constitutes the dilemma of his identity), he considers the white world to be the real one.

To initiate the hero to his true status as a black man in Clintonville, Mississippi, he must be made aware of the sexual boundaries which will limit his life style. Wright depicts this through the archetypal image of castration. Fish faints three times as he is threatened with a penknife by the police. He is so filled with hate for his tormentors that he controls himself and manages to remain conscious the fourth time. He resolves to die if necessary, to preserve his dignity.

Tyree Tucker's cringing intervention to secure the release of his son, gives the latter an insight into his father's degraded existence. The short episode of imprisonment draws the father and son together, in a struggle for survival. This relationship between the father and

son, up to the former's death, portrays a movement on the son's part from rebellion against the father's philosophy to its partial acceptance. It also illustrates the innate difference in sensitivity between the father and son.

Tyree is married to Emma, a woman of high moral standards and a strong believer in God's goodness. He is completely devoted to his only son, Fishbelly. His mistress, Mrs. Gloria Mason, is a beautiful mulatto who is fiercely loyal to him.

Although he is illiterate, Tyree conducts his business with impeccable efficiency and tact. He owns an undertaking establishment and tenements. With Dr. Bruce, another prominent citizen of Clintonville, Mississippi, he is co-owner of a dance hall, The Grove, which is used as a recruiting centre for prostitution. He also allows Maud Williams, a madam, to run a brothel in one of his tenements. Tyree is able to do business with the prostitutes by bribing the law, in the person of police chief Gerald Cantley.

A pragmatic view of life²⁹ and the ability to exploit the weaknesses of his ostensible "superiors" by "acting" (in the sense of performance) and assuming masks of pretence, are indispensable for Tyree's survival and the measure of success he attains. Wright elaborates upon the motion of acting by explaining in White Man Listen!

I'm not speaking of the theatre. I'm saying that the situation of their (Asian and Africans and colored people) lives evokes in them an almost unconscious tendency to hide their deepest reactions from those they fear would penalize them if they suspected what they really felt. Do I mean to imply that American Negroes are not honest people, that they are agents of duplicity? I do not. They are about as honest as anyone else, but they are cautious, wise, and do not wish to bring undue harm upon themselves. Hence, they act.³⁰

In effect this type of acting which Tyree is obliged to do, in order to survive, represents his psychological emasculation. When Tyree visits Fish while he is imprisoned, the latter is grieved and repelled by his father's ostensible subservience to the whites. He feels a sense of isolation as he becomes aware of his father's condition; on the other hand, he realizes how much he depends on his father.

The next day, Fish is paroled because of his father's influence. As he walks home he automatically slackens to a "kind of shuffling gait," when he sees white faces. Although unaware of it, he too, is imitating his father's "act" (p. 174). Later, he consciously assumes masks of pretence, like his father, in order to survive.

V

The Long Dream is distinguished among Wright's novels as the only one which deals with a father and son relationship. It is also the author's unique treatment of a successful Negro businessman. Despite its heavy reliance on archetypes and symbols, the moving portrayal of its subject endows it with a poignancy that compares favourably with Wright's earlier works.

Tyree Tucker is the fullest characterization ever to appear in Richard Wright's fiction. Belonging to the category of the anti-hero in modern literature his "problem . . . is essentially one of identity. His search is for existential fulfillment, that is for freedom and self-definition. What he hopes to find is a position he can take within himself." 31

The stance Tyree adopts and imposes on his son is that of accommodation to a racially prejudiced white society. But his accommodation is tempered with an extraordinary ability to manipulate his oppressors. Having taken pains to understand the white man's definition of himself as superior to the Negro, Tyree, among all of Wright's heroes, achieves an unprecedented social success. He becomes the successful businessman who can bargain with the whites.

Nevertheless, despite the degree of his success, he remains a tragic figure. Evoking the tragedy of Tyree's emasculation is his portrayal as a version of a powerful, stock character, the buffoon.³² He uses his laughter to placate his white oppressors as well as to hide his hatred for them. He unsuccessfully attempts to give his son a feeling of security by simulating joviality. His laughter becomes a defence mechanism, an almost involuntary way of putting a distance between himself and his emasculation.

The day Fish is released from jail he is no longer fooled by his father's "joyless," "gratuitious," "counterfeit," laughter (p. 189). He feels that his father is someone who makes a mockery of fatherhood. In his first reaction to the strategy of "crying or grinning," he counterpoints: "But, Papa, crying and grinning ain't winning" (p. 188). In the argument that ensues, Tyree convinces his son of the limits of his power as a black father, and the practicality of accommodating the whites in order to survive. Dejected by this knowledge, Fishbelly weeps for "his father's fear and weakness, for the trembling he hid . . . behind false laughter, for the self-abrogation of his manhood. He knew in a confused way that no white man would ever need to threaten Tyree with castration; Tyree was already castrated" (p. 195).

By contrasting the difference in outlook between Tyree and his son, Wright is clearly depicting two approaches to the problems connected with the Negro's struggle to maintain his manhood in the face of racial oppression. Tyree's philosophy echoes the advice of Booker T. Washington who "linked the idea of self-improvement to that accommodation" ³³ On the other hand, Fishbelly espouses the attitude of W.E.B. DuBois, who emphasized: "We want full manhood suffrage and we want it now. . . . We are men! We will be treated as men." ³⁴

Realising the danger inherent in his son's independent attitude, Tyree informs him, "I got to break your goddamn spirit or you'll git killed . . ." (p. 196). In a scene in which the father and son confront the problem surrounding their identity as Negroes, Tyree, fearful of his own emasculated condition, slaps Fish into submission and makes him promise complete obedience.

Ironically, just after Tyree has symbolically castrated his son, he plans to take him to a prostitute for a sexual baptism, and remarks: "I'm going to see that you are a man from this night on" (p. 199). While this signifies the father's desire for safe permissible sexual relations for his son, it also implies a restricted manhood.

Tyree's concern for his young son and the pains he takes to make him understand the necessity of conforming to the identity that has been imposed on him as a Negro, is indicative of the danger inherent in such an identity. Justifying Tyree's attitude is John William's comment that blacks "love their children as much as any others. . . . But, because they are black, the parental burden is greater." ³⁵

VI

Fishbelly quits school when he is fifteen years old, against his father's wishes. He is gradually introduced to the secrets of his father's illicit business operations. As he learns about his father's affluence, his antagonism changes to admiration, and he absorbs the lessons of his father's duplicity.

The father's hope is that one day his son will be an educated leader of the Negro people in Clintonville, Mississippi. In a sad urgent voice he tells Fish: "How the white folks look at you's everything. Make 'em mad and you licked 'fore you start. Make 'em feel safe, and the place is yours" (p. 201).

As the confidant of his father, Fishbelly is a careful observer of his father's strategies for survival. Although Tyree grieves over the black man's condition, he feels no compunction in exploiting them. Part of his income is derived from the earnings of black prostitutes, and he gratifies his lust by indulging in sexual relations with distressed Negro women who bring their dead to his undertaking establishment.

Significantly, he satisfies his vanity by keeping a mulatto woman, Mrs. Gloria Mason, as his mistress. In choosing Gloria Mason, Tyree comes as close as he can within the law to having a relationship with a "white" woman. His mulatto mistress is a compromise which offers a safe substitute for a white woman. It is not surprising that Fishbelly later chooses the tragic mulatto, Gladys, as his mistress.

In their choices of mistresses, both father and son reveal a fundamental cause of the Negro's identity-crisis. Because they live in a society which recognizes and promotes white supremacy, they come to equate whiteness with beauty and power, yet, they simultaneously realize that

they themselves have a self-worth which society forces them to suppress. Consequently, they vacillate between two identities.

The awareness of this vacillation develops into shame, then self-hatred and rage, characteristics of Richard Wright's Negro protagonists. It is such a seething rage that accounts for Jake Jackson's (Lawd Today) frustration, which he alleviates through the use of narcotics, illicit sex, and outbursts of violence toward his wife, Lil. In the later novels, the rage is manifested in the outrageous violence of Bigger Thomas (Native Son) and Cross Damon (The Outsider), which culminates in murder. Although shame and self-hatred dominate Fishbelly Tucker's life he is able to avoid committing acts of violence.

Tyree Tucker's social and financial success is achieved through his pragmatism and his ability to assume appropriate identities. Aware of his ability to manipulate the whites, yet recognizing his ultimate powerlessness, he maps out a strategy for his own survival. Unable to save his race, he becomes a "strawboss" who assists the whites in their suppression of Negroes.³⁶

For ten years he has been bribing the police chief, Gerald Cantley, who has enough confidence in Tyree to accept the bribes in cheques. Tyree's good relationship with the police enables him to exploit his fellow Negroes with the sanction of the law.

Reinforcing the structure (a parody of a romance) of The Long Dream, is the fact that Tyree's world of delicate arrangements is destroyed by a fire. When the dancehall, The Grove, which he owns, with his partner Dr. Bruce, burns down, causing the death of forty-two Negroes, he appeals to his accomplice in crime, the police chief, for help.

The meeting between the chief of police and Tyree depicts his resourcefulness, as well as the degree to which he is enmeshed in a trap set up by the whites. The police chief, Gerald Cantley, aware that he also could be implicated by the fire because he accepts bribes from Tyree, moves instinctively to save himself by demanding the cancelled cheques which he supposes Tyree has. He also warns Tyree against mentioning their association and remains noncommittal when he is asked to assist in settling the case.

Facing the biggest crisis in his life, Tyree's ability to handle the whites is put to a severe test. First he sets up an act in which he burns one cheque and temporarily convinces the police chief that he had burned the others. Next, relying upon his long association with the police chief, he tries to get an out-of-court settlement by explaining: "I know too goddamn much to sit on a witness stand! How can I protect Doc, me and you . . ." (p. 330). When this fails, he proposes that an illiterate Negro, Fats Brown, be bribed to accept the responsibility for the fire. Although the chief of police easily assents to this proposition of one Negro exploiting another, the scheme does not work because they soon discover that Fats Brown is dead.

When every other plan falls through, Tyree begs the police chief to arrange for six Negroes to sit on the jury. Anxious to maintain his posture of inferiority and deference to whites he emphasizes: "I'm just a nigger trying to save his skin--my life's savings for my son . . . I ain't never been for no social equality" (p. 337). In a scene which causes Fishbelly to weep for shame his father prostrates himself, grabs the chief's legs and begs for help. As Fish witnesses this scene he observes: "There were two Tyrees: one Tyree was resolved

unto death to save himself and yet not daring to act out his resolve; the other was a make-believe Tyree, begging, weeping -- a Tyree who was a weapon in the hands of the determined Tyree" (p. 341).

Again, the acting by which Tyree hopes to save himself is very convincing. In spite of his ostensible prostration, he maintains a calculating attitude; when the chief leaves with a dubious promise to help, Tyree remarks to Dr. Bruce: "I done saved up enough evidence against that goddamn chief to send 'im to jail for ten years!" (p. 343).

When Mayor Wakefield visits Tyree and promises to help him as soon as he finds out what his resources are, Tyree realizes that the whites are after his fortune. Since his entire life's struggle, and the resultant hard-won identity, are intertwined with his money, he whimpers in despair: "Gawd, I'll kill 'fore I lose all my money . . . I'll kill, kill, kill" (p. 354).

As far as Tyree is concerned his fortune represents his life. Determined not to leave his son destitute, he decides to implicate his white accomplices. He takes some cancelled cheques to a radical politician, Mr. McWilliams, who promises to send them to the jury. After describing his illegal business operations and his bribing of the police chief, he justifies himself by stating:

. . . if we niggers didn't buy justice from the white man we'd never git any. I ain't got no rights my papa never had any, and my son sitting there ain't got none but what he can buy . . . Ain't no use in you talking to me about law and justice. That ain't got nothing to do with me. (p. 375)

He then summarizes the basic condition of his entrapment, by informing Mr. McWilliams: "We niggers 'cause we can't do nothing that's free" (p. 337).

The next day his words ring true when the corrupt white officials

steal his cancelled cheques as they are being taken to the jury. As he senses his impending doom he cheers his son by remarking: " . . . no matter what happens . . . we done won something. They can't git no money from me" (p. 30). Later the same day he is tricked into his house of prostitution, shot by the police, and left to bleed to death as his son looks on helplessly. On his death-bed he urges his son not to accuse the police of murdering him. But even in dying, Tyree maintains a defiant attitude, he whispers to Fish:

We won, son! . . . I won my fight! They didn't git my money and the chief's done for . . . You'll see. I'll be fighting that sonofabitch from my grave! You got to go it alone. They done me in, but forgit it. We won look at it that way. (p. 409)

Tyree's triumph is contained in his ability to understand the racial and political circumstances that surround him. Though denied basic human rights he is able, as suggested by the above quotation, to mask his true feelings even on his death-bed. He achieves a freedom which "consists of a revolt against morality, against the social order," against history."³⁷ He stands out among Wright's other major characters who can be categorized into certain emotional, intellectual or ideological types, because he is a type of anti-hero who is oblivious of his stature as well as his meanness.³⁸ He symbolizes "the fittest of the oppressed in a racist community."³⁹

VII

Although Fishbelly Tucker's life is so closely intertwined with his father's, he remains an isolate because he never trusts anyone completely. He instinctively tells his first lie when as a six-year-old,

he is forced to throw dice for a white man, who rewards him with a dollar. He lies, telling his father that he had found the dollar on the street. This establishes a personality trait that manifests itself throughout Fish's life. During the course of the novel Fish lies continuously: to Tyree, his mother, Jim, Maud, and the police. He lies because of his insecurity, and because he wants to survive. Nevertheless, the lying contributes to his loneliness; because it makes him conscious of his isolation from everyone, including his father who has taken him as a confidant.

Another aspect of his life which he does not share with anyone is his dreams. Fishbelly Tucker is tantalized by his glimpses of the white world, and is constantly desirous of violating the sexual code: unable to fulfil this desire, he becomes possessed by it. Forever intensifying his problem and providing the dialectic tension is the memory of Chris Simms, who yielded to temptation and was consequently murdered.⁴⁰ Fishbelly partially satisfies this desire by following his father's footsteps and taking a mulatto mistress, Gladys.

Significantly, the controlling image of The Long Dream is the dream. It is pervasively emphasized in the title, epigraphs, Fish's dreams, the section headings, and the comments made by Tyree Tucker. The dream motif reiterates the tension between desire and reality that is depicted in the novel. Finally, dreams are used to complement the rituals through which Fish is initiated and eventually expelled from society. Fish's major dreams occur the night after he witnesses the autopsy on Chris Simms, the night of his first sexual experience, and after his father's death.

The night he witnesses the autopsy, he dreams he is in his

parents' bedroom. He sees a "stinking crumpled" fishbelly under his mother's chair and as he bends to examine it a white clock thunderingly commands, "Don't, Don't." A locomotive's smokestack touches the belly and it swells to an enormous size. It eventually bursts sending out a flood of blood, and he sees

. . . the naked bloody body of Chris with blood running on all sides of the room round his feet at his ankles at his knees rising higher and higher he had to tiptoe to keep blood from reaching his mouth and it was too late it was engulfing his head and when he opened his mouth to scream he was drowning in blood . . . (p. 108)

The sources of the imagery and the symbols in this dream derive from the racial conflict presented in the novel. The white clock is the white law which warns Negroes against desiring a white woman. While the fishbelly obviously represents the female sex organ, the locomotive earlier associated with his father's sexual activity becomes a phallic symbol.

The uncontrolled enlargement of the fishbelly is symbolic of the sexual mystery which the twelve-year-old boy faces. The blood in which Chris Simms floats is clearly symbolic of the violence associated with miscegenation.

The second important dream which Fish experiences has the same interpretation. It is a wish-fulfillment dream, which is also indicative of his anxiety. In this dream he is in a locomotive with a white engineer who keeps commanding him to stoke the engine. While carrying out these commands, he uncovers a naked white woman who attempts to seduce him by grabbing his shovel. Sweating with fear he jumps from the train amidst the laughter of the woman and the engineer. In making his escape he tumbles over some cinders, hits his head against a wall, and eventually finds himself lying on his back. At this time he sees

Maud Williams, the madam, who laughingly scolds: "Honey, you know better'n to hide a white woman in a coal pile like that! They was sure to find her . . ." (p. 215).

The third major dream again deals with the protagonist's relationship with the white world, and occurs shortly after Tyree is dead and Fish has taken over his business operations. He dreams that the mulatto women, Gloria, and Gladys, who are respectively mistress to his father and himself, come to his office, kiss him, and then give him bundles of green paper money. When he protests they coerce him into taking the money by explaining: "We stole it for you from white men . . ." (p. 382). A few moments later the chief of police enters and accuses him of stealing the money. As he swears at Gloria and Gladys, they laughingly reply: "You're black and we're white and you'll believe anything we say!"

As he is about to be handcuffed, he escapes into a backroom which is filled with coffins. Taking the advice of his mother, he lies down in a coffin and pretends to be dead. When he opens his eyes, he sees the chief, Gladys, and Gloria looking down at him and laughing. The chief informs him: "All right nigger. Either you're dead and we'll bury you or come out of there and go to jail." (p. 238).

This is clearly an anxiety dream foreshadowing the later event, where Fish will be framed by the chief with the help of a white woman. It also embodies the choices that will be available to him: resisting the police and being killed, or going to jail for a crime he did not commit.

Katherine Fishburn correctly defines Fish as a neurotic.⁴¹ Because of the psychological emasculation he suffers as a Negro, he

develops a "neurotic condition in which the real self is separated from, and scorned, by the idealized self."⁴² It is this neurotic conflict which "produces a fundamental uncertainty about the feeling of identity,"⁴³ which he experiences.

As in the case of his predecessors, Cross Damon of The Outsider, and Erskine Fowler of Savage Holiday, an important source in the formation of Fish's personality is the troubled "relationship of himself to himself."⁴⁴ This relationship revolves around the shame he experiences because of his helplessness which causes him to reject his Negro-ness and long to be part of the white world because of the power it manifests.

As Tyree dies, Fishbelly at age sixteen, succeeds to his father's (business) "kingdom" (like his mythological predecessor, the Fisher King). At this point, the characterization of the father and son merge into one. Fish steps into his father's shoes and attempts to manipulate the police. He is unsuccessful because the police, who have recently witnessed Tyree's duplicity and show of strength, are still worried they rightly suspect Fish has some of the cancelled cheques that could implicate them.

The appearance of the white woman, in Fish's flat, culminates the development of the symbolic white fish bellies that Rex (Fishbelly) Tucker observes when he is a small boy. Her presence evokes the horror that the consequences of miscegenation hold for Negroes.⁴⁵ Appropriately, Fish, who has lived under the shadow of castration all his life, dies symbolically, when he is imprisoned for two years on this trumped-up charge of attempted rape.

During his imprisonment he is often questioned by the police about the cancelled cheques. Like his father, Tyree, he keeps up his masks of pretence even in the face of death. Having had the double advantages of being the son of the most powerful Negro in Clintonville, as well as that of being his father's confidant, and witnessing his struggle for survival in a society that denied him basic human rights and dignity, Fish is able to embrace a reality that transcends his father's understanding.

When Fish is released from jail, he leaves without telling anyone except his dead father: "Papa, I'm leaving I can't make it here." (p. 522). In making this decision Fish maintains what Jean Paul Sartre refers to as an "essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that cannot be taken from a man [that] is the right to say No."⁴⁶ He refuses to allow the whites to exploit him as they had exploited his father. As he leaves Clintonville he becomes "a man on the prowl to regain his selfhood."⁴⁷

Emulating his father, he survives because of his pragmatic approach to the problems facing him. As he is about to leave the United States, he strikes back at his oppressors by sending the politician, Mr. McWilliams, the cheques and a covering letter which could implicate the corrupt police. In doing this he continues the quest for the equality of rights between Negroes and whites that his father had started.

Fishbelly's triumph lies in the fact that, unlike his predecessors, the heroes of Wright's earlier novels, he does not resort to violence as an act of self-definition. He survives because he is able to play the role which the ruling white society forces on him a role which he will continue to play until he can escape to a more tolerant society.

In other words, he remains alive because he respects the limits of his personal freedom.

Notes for Chapter 3

- 1 Richard Wright, The Long Dream, (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1958).
- 2 Richard Wright, Black Boy, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1937).
- 3 Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 149.
- 4 Margolies, p. 149.
- 5 Margolies, p. 149.
- 6 Katherine Fishburn, Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim, (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1977), p. 13.
- 7 Richard Wright, Native Son, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1940).
- 8 Richard Wright, The Outsider, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1953).
- 9 Richard Wright, Lawd Today (New York: Walker and Company, 1963).
- 10 Margolies, p. 151.
- 11 Fishburn, p. 46.
- 12 Fishburn, p. 46.
- 13 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 193.
- 14 Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company 1974).
- 15 Richard Cavendish, King Arthur and the Grail: The Arthurian Legends and Their Meaning, (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1978), p. 140.
- 16 The biblical myths which change the name of Abram to Abraham and Jacob to Israel, illustrate that a change of destiny often accompanies the change in names.
The Bible, Genesis 17: 1-8.
Genesis 32: 28-30.
- 17 Fishburn, p. 22.
- 18 Cavendish, p. 140.
- 19 Cavendish, p. 140.
- 20 Richard Wright, The Long Dream (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1958), p. 5. All further references to this work appear in the text.

21 From this point, the names Fish and Fishbelly will be used interchangeably.

22 Fishburn, p. 22.

23 Fishburn, p. 23.

24 The notion of Negroes fighting each other appears in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, as well as in Richard Wright's autobiography, Black Boy. In these two works they are coerced into fighting each other. However, in The Long Dream, a later work, there is no blatant coercion as in the earlier works; nevertheless, the earlier works provide a background against which the fight between Sam and Fish can be understood in greater depth.

25 The associations with black and white have conditioned people to accept white as a symbol of goodness and purity, and black as the symbol of evil and impurity. Therefore, the negative reflection of Negroes is in the white man's system the reverse side of his positive projection of himself. See Carolyn F. Gerald's "The Black Writer and His Role," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle Jr., (New York: Double Day Inc., 1971), pp. 351-2.

26 David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth, ed., Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1973).

27 Ray and Farnsworth, p. 178.

28 Fishburn, p. 25.

29 Sidney Hook explains: "the pragmatic perspective on life . . . is an attempt to make it possible for men to live in a world of inescapable tragedy . . . which flows from the conflict of moral ideas . . . Pragmatism denies nothing about the world or men, which one truly finds in them, but it sees in men something . . . more wonderful, more terrible than anything else in the universe the power to make themselves . . . better or worse." In Sidney Hook's "Pragmatism and The Tragic Sense of Life," in Contemporary American Philosophy, 2nd ed. J.E. Smith (New York: Humanities Press Inc., 1970) pp. 189-190.

30 Richard Wright, White Man Listen! (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1957), p. 17.

31 Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1974), p. 31.

32 The prevalence of this stereotype is emphasized in the following explanation: ". . . the Negro has long been a comic literary figure . . . The popularity of the strictly comic image is due in large part to its continued use in minstrel shows . . . Its popularity can be seen also in the frequency of its appearance over a thirty year period in "Saturday Evening Post" stories written by Irving S. Cobb, Octavus Roy Cohan and Glenn Allan . . . The influence of popular periodicals in perpetuating literary stereotypes that reflect particular social attitudes is considerable" Catherine Juanita Starke's Black Portraiture in American Fiction, (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1971), pp. 65-66.

- 33 Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in Black and White, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p. 129.
- 34 Silberman, p. 127.
- 35 John Williams, Sissie (Garden City, 1969) pp. ix-x.
- 36 A "strawboss" is a Negro chosen by the whites to serve their own ends, and act as an intermediary between the races. Silberman, p. 196.
- 37 Hassan, p. 29.
- 38 Margolies, p. 158.
- 39 Margolies, p. 159.
- 40 Fishburn, p. 31.
- 41 Fishburn, p. 30.
- 42 Fishburn, p. 31.
- 43 Karen Horney, Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Towards Self Realisation (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1950), p. 188.
- 44 Richard Wright, The Outsider, (Harper and Row Publishers, Inc.), p. 8.
- 45 Bigger Thomas of Native Son experiences this same horror in Mary Dalton's bedroom. See John Reilly's explanation on p. 14 of this thesis.
- 46 William Barrett, Irrational Man, (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1962), p. 24.
- 47 Ray and Farnsworth, p. 80.

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