"That Preacher's Going to Eat All the Chicken!": Power and Religion in Richard Wright.

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“THAT PREACHER'S GOING TO EAT ALL THE CHICKEN!": POWER AND RELIGION IN RICHARD WRIGHT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in partial fulfillment of the
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in

The Department of English

by

Tara T. Green
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Abstract

This dissertation explores the ways that Richard Wright’s work reflects both history and his own personal experiences (memories) of the South. These two elements—history and memory—served to inspire Wright’s, the writer’s, imagination, and to fuel Wright’s, a Black man’s, anger and hostility. Wright’s technique of (re)writing or mastering the images of Black males, as they struggle in environments they perceive as hostile, is compounded by his feelings about religion. Although Wright rejected organized religions, whether Christian, tribal, or Communism, he, ironically, used the figurative language similar to that of sermons, including Biblical stories and symbols, to appeal to his readers and to develop his themes.

Wright’s ideology about religion as a means of control echoes the teachings of the philosopher, G.F.W. Hegel on the Master-Slave relationship, described in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel maintains that the master’s power is bound to and identified through the slave. In turn, the slave, though he is in the social position of inferiority, has limited power over the master by denying the master complete control over him, particularly in the area of labor, and subsequently forces his master to rely on him psychologically. While the master is preoccupied with control, the slave remains consistently conscious of freedom.

The Black protagonists in Wright’s fiction resist control in their search for freedom. I argue that Wright read and actively used Hegel’s concepts; yet, as I demonstrate in certain sections of this study, Hegel’s dialectic is not the only approach.
useful in understanding the origins and manifestations of Wright’s views about power and religion.
Chapter One
"That Preacher's Going to Eat All the Chicken!": Power and Religion in Wright

In his essay, “Traditional and Industrialization,” Richard Wright says of his
religious beliefs,

I was born a black Protestant in that most racist of all American states:
Mississippi. I lived my childhood under a racial code, brutal bloody,
that white man proclaimed was ordained of God, said was mandatory
by nature of their religion. Naturally, I rejected that religion and would
reject any religion which prescribes for me an inferior position in life; I
reject that tradition and any tradition which proscribes my humanity.
(White Man, Listen! 55)

The above quotation reveals the two influences that most affected Wright’s fiction and
non-fiction—racism and religion. Wright, an African-American writer, who was
perhaps unwillingly, but inevitably, a part of American, Southern, Christian tradition
saw “that religion” as a means to control and to hinder the individual’s movement
towards and for freedom. In an effort to have freedom in his own life, Wright, the
writer, not only rejects the religious beliefs of his grandmother, mother, and of
African-Americans in general, he also professes control by rewriting early historical
and cultural images in which Black males were passive and powerless “Uncle Tom”
figures. Wright’s work reflects both history and his own personal experiences
(memories) of the South. These two elements-- history and memory--served to inspire
Wright’s, the writer’s, imagination, and to fuel Wright’s, a Black man’s, anger and
hostility. Wright’s technique of (re)writing or mastering the images of Black males as
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Wright's ideology about religion as a means of control echoes the teachings of the philosopher, G.F.W. Hegel on the Master-Slave relationship, as he describes it in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel maintains that the master's power is bound to and identified through the slave. In turn, the slave, though he is in the social position of inferiority, has limited power over the master by denying the master complete control over him, particularly in the area of labor, and subsequently forces his master to rely on him psychologically. While the master is preoccupied with control, the slave remains consistently conscious of freedom.

At the core of Hegel's philosophy is the context. Hegel maintains that the slave has the ability to control the master only if the slave is willing to risk his life: "The individual who has not risked his own life may well be recognized as a person, but he has not attained to the truth of his recognition as an independent self-consciousness" (114). What is important to our understanding of Hegel's philosophy is that the slave must become conscious of his power: "the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own" (119). However, "having a mind of one's own" is, according to Hegel, "a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude" (119). In other words, the slave may make a conscious decision to have a free mind, but his/her body is still subject to the superior status of the master; thus, the slave's power is limited.
Ultimately, the slave becomes a Master of “some things, but not over the universal power and the whole of objective being” (119).

Wright extends Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic and uses it to describe the Lord-Servant / Master-Slave relationship in which slaveholders demand that their slaves not only call them “master” but that they also honor them: “Servants be obedient to those who are your masters…” (Ephesians 6:5). In her book, The Future of Partnership, Letty M. Russell identifies other Lord and Servant relationships:

Because the image of Lord has been used as a religious reinforcement of the superiority of the masters who “represent” the Lord, some want to use the imagery of equality in reference to God such as Sister-Brother….On the other hand, the image of servant or slave has been reinforced in Western culture as a Christian example important for those assigned to the servant role of society, and theology has provided the rationale for racism, sexism and classism. (63)

Generally, “Master” refers to a structure of meaning about one who has control over the action of another or others. In his work, Wright develops several relationships of “domination/subordination” (Russell 2) including mother-son, husband-wife, whites-blacks, clergy-laity. These relationships feature one who lords his/her power over the other; and, simultaneously, each “servant” must make a conscious decision to obtain mental and spiritual freedom from the power of the lord or master.

For Wright, “master” refers to a belief that has control over the actions of others, or over the possessor of the belief, as religion does for those who abide by its doctrines. Though he rejected religion because it was used to prescribe an “inferior position” for Blacks, Wright was influenced by it, and he uses religious language to

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1 I use Lord-Servant here to represent any religion where a supreme being is worshipped.
react against mastering religious doctrines. Yoshinobu Hakutani briefly notes that one of the forces that Wright had to ward off in "his struggle for independence" was religion: "Throughout his youth he witnessed how deeply superstitious religion had trapped the minds and hearts of black people" (73). Wright as both a writer and as an American citizen, although he died an expatriate, like his male protagonists, makes a conscious decision to have "a mind of his own" in the way that Hegel describes (119).

**Douglass Demonstrates Dialectic**

The runaway slave, Frederick Douglass, is a perfect example of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. Although Wright does not mention having read Douglass, he was at least a precursor for Wright, as Robert Stepto implies. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass, describes how he began to "abhor and detest his slaveholders" after he read *The Columbian Orator*, a book containing "mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation" (84). Later, Douglass makes it clear that his work as a slave hired out to Mr. Covey, a "professor of religion—a pious soul—a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church" (Douglass 100) was "simple requiring strength rather than intellect" (107). Douglass also makes it clear that Covey was a hard-working man, implying that Covey was not an intellectual type but was one fit for nothing more than physical labor. At this point, readers can see that Douglass has power as the writer of his own narrative, a point I will expand in Chapter Two, but he also has power as the protagonist. Moreover, not only is Douglass capable of intellectual thought while his "master" is not, but he is also aware of his capability. Having assessed his intellectual capabilities, Douglass is
now able to describe how he transcends to a point in which he can tell his readers:

“You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (109). After having been savagely kicked because he was too sick to continue his assigned task and after being denied a change of venue by the master who hired him out to Covey, Douglass describes how he physically resists Covey’s attack on him and how Covey never gets the best of him again:

Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. (italics mine; 113)

This act of “rising” signifies the moment in which Douglass makes a conscious decision to free himself of the mental restraints of slavery. The restraints were tightened by Covey for six months and made Douglass feel “broken in body, soul and spirit”:

My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (105)

Douglass’s fight with Covey momentarily includes Hughes who Douglass kicks in a successful effort to ward off capture: This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes but Covey also. When he saw Hughes, bending over with pain, his courage quailed (113). Under Hegel’s philosophy, Douglass is the master of Covey who fears both Douglass’s physical strength and Douglass’s leap towards spiritual freedom. Covey is weak, while Douglass is strong. Both the master and the slave must be aware of this transference of power; and, in this case, both are.
Douglass decides that the "master" may own his body, but not his mind: "I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact" (113). Ultimately, Douglass becomes the master of himself in the way that Hegel teaches: The bondsman "becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to him" because he "exists essentially and actually in his own right" (118). As though responding to Hegel, Douglass says,

The battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my manhood.....It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. (113)

Douglass "rose" with physical power—the power to take away Covey's life, and spiritual power—the power to call attention to the fact that he was no longer subject to Covey's psychological hold over him.

Wright's works, like Frederick Douglass's Narrative, demonstrate Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. The protagonists in Wright's fiction resist control in much the same way as Douglass. I argue that Wright read and actively used Hegel's concepts; yet, as I will demonstrate in certain sections of this study, Hegel's dialectic is not the only approach useful in understanding the origins and manifestations of Wright's views about power and religion.

Hegel and Wright

Above, I have given a detailed account of how a theory of Hegel, notably a German (1770-1831) can be applied to works written by African-Americans. Why use the theory of an European who expressed his dislike of Africans to analyze the works of an African-American male? Should I not use an "Afrocentric" point of view?
There are several answers to these questions. One is that Wright himself was intrigued by and used the works of Europeans, even Hitler and Stalin. Furthermore, Wright, according to Michel Fabre, owned three of Hegel’s books: *Science of Logic, The Logic of Hegel, The Phenomenology of the Mind* (Books, 69). Significantly, *The Phenomenology of the Mind* also contains Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic, suggesting Wright’s awareness of the theory.

What is perhaps most intriguing is the fact that Wright did not purchase Hegel’s books until after 1940, yet his early work reflects his ideas. This reflection has much to do with the similarities between the two authors’ interests. Both Wright and Hegel were concerned about the “common people.” Wright was a poor Southerner who found himself a member of the Communist Party during the Depression. Although Hegel was of the middle class, he was influenced by the “upheavals in rural Germany that attended the dismantling of feudal privilege and emancipation of the peasantry class [which] created a landless proletariat” (MacGregor 6).

Furthermore, since Marx was admittedly influenced by Hegel, Wright certainly became familiar with Hegel as a result of his affiliation with the Communist Party. The connection between Marx, one of the co-authors of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and Hegel is not debatable; in fact, Marx, in *Capital* openly “declares himself a pupil of Hegel” (MacGregor 11). Wright owned a copy of *Capital* and alludes to it in his own work. Wright’s connection to Marx, who was influenced by Hegel, shows Wright’s connection to Hegel.
Wright may have also shared common religious beliefs with Hegel. Richard Wright was clear about his religious beliefs as stated in the opening quotation, but there is some dissension among Hegelian scholars as to whether or not Hegel was an atheist. MacGregor maintains that Hegel could not have openly denounced Christianity for fear of Prussian authorities (55). What scholars do not disagree about is that Hegel was a religious thinker, but Hegel himself said, “Philosophy has thus placed itself in opposition to religion” (Lectures on the History of Philosophy, qtd. MacGregor 54). In other words, religion is inferior to philosophy (MacGregor 54).

Lastly, there was no Afrocentric point of view which Wright and other Blacks could draw from to develop a theoretical construct of power similar to Hegel’s. Wright and other Negroes (not yet called African-Americans) were barely able to find a connection to their own land, America, much less Africa. Not until the 1950’s with the publication of The Long Dream, did Wright’s work begin to take on an Afrocentric slant. However, even when Wright visited Africa, he felt his “twoness”:

The American Negro’s passionate identification with America stemmed from two considerations: first, it was a natural part of his assimilation of Americanism; second, so long had Africa been described as something shameful, barbaric, a land in which one went about naked, a land in which his ancestors sold his kith and kin as slaves—so long had he heard all this that he wanted to disassociate himself in his mind from all such realities…. (Black Power 72)

Wright not only describes myths about Africa, which made Blacks want to separate themselves from Africa and embrace America, but he goes on to express his personal dilemma with the myths:

The bafflement evoked in me by this new reality did not spring from any desire to disclaim kinship with Africa, or from any shame of being
of African descent. My problem was how to account for this "survival" of Africa in America...(Black Power 73)

Interestingly enough, Wright who was at this time a resident, though not a citizen of Paris, inquires as to how the African part of him can live in unity with that part of him that is American in America. Wright poses the question asked by Countee Cullen years before: "What does Africa mean to me?" Did Wright, who left Africa and returned to Paris where he died, ever find the answer?

Ultimately, Wright was a part of western culture, and he used theorists to understand how he and other Blacks can assert themselves as members of this culture. But this does not mean that Wright wholly accepted all aspects of Hegel’s or any other European ideas. In other words, as Hegel believed Africans were savages without a conscience, Wright, through his contemporary images of Black males, disproves him. He succeeds in doing what he tells Nkrumah to do at the end of Black Power: "So be it! Whatever the West or East offers, take it, but don’t let them take you….Be on top of theory; don’t let theory be on top of you" (392). Thus, Wright succeeds in making his work the master narrative. As a Black Southern born American male, nothing could have been more satisfying to Wright than to transfer the power of the master narrative unto himself.

Review of Wright Criticism

Within the context of Wright’s use of Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic, the issue of religion is a major factor. In my analysis of the Master-Slave/Lord-Servant relationship, I join the dialogue of critics who have analyzed Wright’s use of religious symbols, songs, verses, and Biblical allusions in his work. In his biography on
Wright, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, Michel Fabre focuses on the central influence religion had on Wright’s life. From Fabre, we learn details about Wright’s upbringing in his devout, Seventh-Day Adventist, maternal grandmother’s house. According to Fabre, Wright’s exposure to sermons, which Wright describes in *Black Boy* as being “clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fires, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones,” both influenced his ability to “decipher the system of representation” found in the sermons and teachings and enabled him to transform the Biblical symbols into his own works (35).

Equally important to my study are critics who examine the relationship between Wright’s Black women characters, namely the mothers, and their religious beliefs. In her article, “Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright,” Sherley Anne Williams notes that the Black mothers in Wright’s “Long Black Song,” *Native Son, The Outsider*, and *Black Boy* are “ineffectual in the face of poverty and racism” as a result of their sole reliance on their religious beliefs. Jane Davis in her article, “More Force than Human: Richard Wright’s Female Characters,” asserts that Fishbelly’s mother succeeds in alienating her son because of her “desire to dominate him and to force her religious convictions” on him (72). In her article, “Bitches, Whores, and Woman Haters,” Maria Mootry argues that religion is one of the “anodynes” used to “narcotize [the] intelligent, questioning spirit” of women in *Laud Today, Black Boy and Native Son* (119). Finally, Trudier Harris focuses on the characterization of Mrs. Thomas who uses her “God and…religion as a way to keep black men humble and confined to the places
assigned to them by larger society” (65). These critics rightfully argue that Wright
deals harshly with Black women, but they do not fully examine why Wright depicts
his mothers as “religious matriarchs,” nor do they discuss the history of American and

In contrast to Wright’s treatment of Black women, at least two writers have
examined the Biblical representations of white women in Wright’s fiction. In his
article, “Richard Wright’s The Long Dream as Racial and Sexual Discourse,”
Yoshinobu Hakutani notes that the image of the white woman as seen in The Long
Dream is a symbol of the Virgin Mary. He goes further to note that in Pagan Spain
Wright also examines the symbol of the Virgin Mary and its relation to Spanish
women. In his analysis of Uncle Tom’s Children, John Lowe examines the role of
whites, including white women, and their relationship to Old Testament and New
Testament typology. Lowe offers the only full typological analysis of religion in any
one of Wright’s publications.

All of these critics and others have contributed to our understanding of Wright
and his treatment of religion. However, few of them analyze the religious doctrines as
tradition and why Wright, an African-American writer, saw religion as a means to
control and limit the movement towards racial equality. At least one writer focuses
on Wright’s treatment of religion as it relates to the Black characters in his short
stories. In his article, “Wright’s Craft: The Short Stories,” Edward Margolies
examines Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children and Eight Men. He argues that the
characters in “Down by the Riverside,” “Fire and Cloud,” and “Bright and Morning
Star” arrive at their sense of realization “by applying basic Christian principles to the situations in which they find themselves” (76). These characters represent the African-American religious tradition.

In many ways, Wright separated himself from the folk traditions of his people, his family, and his race through his work. Ultimately, Wright’s separation from the folk meant that he had to replace traditional beliefs, namely reliance on religion, with other beliefs, doctrines, and/or teachings. In addition to analyzing how Wright uses religion, critics have sought to discover what Wright believed could work in African-Americans’ struggle for freedom. One critic looks at how Wright replaced religious beliefs with existential philosophy. In his article, “Wright’s The Outsider and The Long Dream,” Eberhard Alsen argues that Cross Damon’s belief in Jean Satre’s humanist ethics combined with his belief that God does not exist is Wright’s “very own brand of existentialism” (217).

African-American Religion

The African-American tradition that led to the need for Wright’s protest literature—that is, his protest against racism and African-Americans embracing of white dominating religion—is a direct result of colonization. Wright realized that Christianity is at the heart of colonization and slavery. In V.Y. Mudimbe’s analysis of the effects of African colonization, he examines the Inter Coetera Bull, an influential doctrine issued in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI:

Among other works well pleasing to divine majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and everywhere
increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to faith itself. (30)

The release of this document legitimized colonization of foreign lands by Europe, based on Christianity. Mudimbe notes that the doctrine has two important implications: First, that the Pope is a “representative of God himself,” and second, that non-Christians have no right to “possess or negotiate any dominion…” (30). In short, the Pope claimed the God given authority to place restraints on humans’ right to freedom. Wright rejects the idea that Christians, or those “ordained by God,” have the right to dominate others.

Colonization directly resulted in the evolution of slave religion, which eventually became known as African-American religion. It is described by Gayraud S. Wilmore as being a “complex concatenation of archaic, modern, and continually shifting belief systems, mythologies, and symbols, none of which can be claimed as the exclusive property of any religious tradition—yet sharing a common core related to Africa and racial oppression” (3). According to Eugene Genovese, slave religion evolved when African slaves began to see “some element of safety” in Christian conversion “if only because it gave them stronger claims to the sympathy of their masters” (183). This conversion did not, as the slaveholders made clear, make slaves equal or give them “human claims upon other men.” Nevertheless, it was not until around 1760, “when black conversion to Christianity started to assume noticeable proportions” (185). This eventual acceptance of Christianity was probably a result of “pressures of life in a new environment and under a new regimentation” at a time in which the slaveholders feared slaves who were not Christians and who may have
perhaps been "superstitious" or had no "spiritual life at all" (185). Yet, African priests, not whites, were some of the early preachers to the slaves, most of whom already had religious experiences with a Supreme Being (3).

During the period 1790-1830, "Antislavery feelings in the churches began to dissolve under pressure from slaveholders, who naturally dominated institutions based on participatory democracy within a slaveholding society" (Genovese 185). The slaveholders came to see Christianity as a means of control. James Cone notes, "After the Nat Turner revolt, whites began to set up stricter laws to govern the behavior of the slaves" (101). White preachers were paid to teach the gospel to the slaves, many of whom were banned from learning to read the Bible, an avenue to literacy. Although Christianity was as controlled as literacy, both would have, (and eventually did) provided access to knowledge, which led to demands for social change.

From the hope that they could somehow make their lives as slaves easier, slaves began to accept the religion of their oppressors. According to Charles Long, "The slave had to come to terms with the opaqueness of his condition and at the same time oppose it" These two warring factors resulted in "new cultural forms" (27). The Africans acceptance of Christianity resulted in a transcendence and transformation of the two religions—tribal and Christian: "[As]... Africans took over the Christian God they simultaneously extended, rather than transcended, their own particularistic practice" (Genovese 211). For instance, it was easy for West African believers of a supreme god that could be accessed through "an appeal for the intercession of a lesser

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2 There are reports that some slaves were taught to read and were allowed to preach.
god” to accept Catholicism, wherein believers reach God by the intercession of Virgin Mary and saints. Baptists and Methodists preached the “celebration of the individual soul” an idea not foreign to practitioners of West African religion, who “affirmed life and linked concern for the deceased and belief in rebirth not with suffering but with celebration” (Genovese 212). However, Africans did recognize the hypocrisy of Christians owning people. Wilmore argues further that, “Even though they adopted the outward appearance of Christian conversion, they took from it only what proved efficacious for easing the burden of their captivity and gave little attention to the rest.” They knew that the God who made them feel the fire in their bones, was not the God of the slavemasters (Wilmore 11). Genovese’s assertion that the slaves, though they accepted the Christian religion, “reshaped the Christianity they had embraced; they conquered the religion of those who had conquered them” (212), is a fair assessment of the African-American religious tradition. Wright would disagree with Genovese by counteracting that it is the religion that conquered them (slaves and all those who practice religion).

Through his fiction and essays, Wright draws on his own experiences with his Seventh-Day Adventist grandmother. Seventh-Day Adventism rose from a movement started by William Miller who believed the second coming was to occur between March 1843 and March 1844. When Miller’s interpretation of Daniel’s prophecy did not come to fruition, the Millerites group dispersed, but two of the members, James and Ella White, remained and worked to form what was by 1860 called the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. The newly formed denomination thrived on the notion that the
Lord would guide those who trusted Him in the past. Thus, the church teaches the “imminent return of Jesus Christ, but with Miller’s time-setting” (37). Seventh-Day Adventists enunciated the following beliefs at the General conference of 1863: first, the just and unjust will be raised when Christ returns and the righteous will receive immortality from Christ; second, Baptism by immersion; third, Jesus is the mediator between God and man; the existence of “doctrines of the judgment and the millennium existed”; they must warn the world and prepare its people for the millennial ultimate event; fifth, the spirit of prophecy is given by God to certain chosen people for the interpretation of the Bible; healing, practicing and teaching laws of health; finally, the education of children through the establishment of schools and publishing programs (Jordan 66-67).

Most important to my assessment of Wright’s grandmother’s connection with this religious denomination is the fact that the Adventists were adamantly opposed to slavery and supported the abolitionist effort. In 1871, Elbert B. Lane established the first Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the south. From this first church in Tennessee to another in Kentucky, Adventist views were accepted in the southern United States. However, many rejected the practice of integrated worship, although Blacks and whites sat in separate parts of the church. As a result, in 1910 the Negro Department in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church was formed. Separate churches were established, and Black ministers were ordained. In spite of the hostility of white Southerners, the Adventists established schools to educate Black children and adults. As we can infer, Wright’s grandmother was not unlike the slaves described by
Wilmore. She most probably joined the Adventist faith because of its efforts to include African-Americans and not because it was the faith of her owner, who may have attempted to control her with his own Christian beliefs. If Wright's grandmother joined the Adventists in an effort to practice her religious beliefs and to be a part of something that made her feel human, she was not much different than her grandson when he joined the Communist Party.

For Wright, whose grandmother burned his books because she thought of them as works of the devil and whose education was limited by Jim Crow Society, religion and racism are inseparable. As influenced as Wright was by the religion in his home, he was likely just as influenced by religion in the Black community as well. James Cone notes that the "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League (and later the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) were created because of the failure of the black church to plead the cause of black people in white society"; leaders of Black churches decided to cooperate with the system (106). During the Great Depression, Black churches shamefully failed the community, but Cone notes that the failure is "partly understandable" because Black church leaders who resisted put themselves, their families, and their church members in danger: "they would have been lynched and their churches burned" (107). As I will discuss in Chapter Five, it was during the Great Depression that most Black people joined the Communist Party.
This dissertation is organized historically, and thus corresponds with the publication of Wright’s published works. In my second chapter, I begin by examining Wright’s rewriting of American slavery images. In the wake of the publication of slave narratives, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which broke sales records. In Stowe’s novel, the master is at times clearly an individual: Master George, Master St. Clare, or Master Legree. Yet, looming over the heads of the slaves is the master called Christianity, with its teachings and doctrines. What we find in the novel is Uncle Tom, a slave who has the trust of his white owners because they know that he would never go against the Biblical teaching: “Servants honor your masters” (Ephesians 6:5).

Approximately eighty-six years after the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Richard Wright, a native of Mississippi who sought “freedom” in the North, reacted against the ideal relationship of the master and the dutiful Christian servant we see depicted in Stowe’s novel. When Wright introduced into literature his version of protest literature, he named his work, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, causing the work to fall into a literary tradition identified by Robert Stepto. In his important work from *Behind the Veil: A Study of African American Literature*, Stepto describes the idea of the “call and response,” initiated more notably by African-American ministers to their congregations, to analyze literature:

‘The Call’ begins with a discussion of slave narratives… and… ‘The response,’ where I demonstrate how certain major Afro-American narratives written in what is unhelpfully termed the ‘modern era’ answer the call of certain prefiguring texts. I am interested… in the contrapuntal dialectical aspects of the relationship between these two
period formations—that is, in how they speak to one another and also speak as one—than in how they may be discrete units. (Stepto xvi-xvii)

Stepto’s theory places both Stowe and Wright into the literary tradition that he describes. Wright, an author of the “modern era,” deliberately responds to Stowe’s “prefiguring text.” In naming his collection of fiction Uncle Tom’s Children, Wright suggests that his characters are the fictional descendents of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. In turn, the protagonists of Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children rebel against the master—racism and religion—both physically and psychologically as did Douglass; they react against the Uncle Tom image that Stowe created which, according to J.C. Furnass, “is no longer a boot-licking, servile type of Negro in...his relationship with whites, also a yes-man to anything proposed by whites which did not seem to favor Negroes. Now it may mean a weakling or a coward, a traitor,...one who engineers a race sell-out or one who for any reason failed to speak-up for his race at an important point” (9). Although Stowe may not have meant Uncle Tom to become “an Uncle Tom,” he did.

Chapter Three further develops the mastering beliefs we see in Wright’s Black mother characters. Considering that Wright’s grandmother allowed her Christian beliefs to control the way in which she lived her life, she is an Uncle Tom type: Wright’s grandmother does not seek freedom, but waits for freedom to come to her in the after-life. Freedom is what faithful servants receive as a reward for diligent service. That faithfulness includes the practice of converting others and the idea of not questioning tradition or social practices. Neither Uncle Tom nor Wright’s grandmother, as Wright presents her, question oppression or seem to recognize its
existence. The Black mothers of Wright’s fiction closely resemble his grandmother and some aspects of his mother, both of whom he describes vividly in Black Boy.

According to Wright, Black Boy is not autobiography in the traditional sense: “An autobiography is the story of one’s life, but if one wants to, one can make it more than that and I definitely had that in mind when I wrote the book.” He goes on to say, “I wrote to tell a series of incidents strung through my childhood, but the main desire was to render a judgment on my environment” (Conversations 64). This environment is the South, where “[under]nourished Negro human beings” live (65). The South is the larger realm that engulfs the people within its confines. These people include, but are not limited to, the women—his mother and grandmother—who cared for young Richard the best way they knew how. According to Cobbs and Grier,

> The care and rearing of children falls even more heavily on the wife; she is the culture bearer. She interprets the society to the children and takes as her task the shaping of their character to meet the world as she knows it. (61)

In spite of Wright’s mother’s and grandmother’s good intentions, many of their actions are apparently lost on young Richard. Through the depiction of Black Boy, we the readers, get a sense of how Wright felt while growing up in the oppressive South and his impressions of religion. What is important when assessing Black Boy is what Wright, the writer, decided to let Black Boy, the persona, experience.

The autobiographical persona that Wright creates is “surrounded” by women who stunt his growth—physically with lack of food and intellectually with limits on his educational experiences. These limits are motivated by religious beliefs. However, not all of their rules and actions are influenced by their religious beliefs, as when
Black boy’s mother severely beats him for setting his family’s house afire and for telling his grandmother when she is done drying his buttocks to kiss it. Significantly, there are times when these religious women, though justifiably outraged by his behavior, come close, in Black Boy’s view, to “killing him” (*Black Boy* 8).

The mothers, both fictional and non-fictional, are like slaves, and religion is their powerful master. With the notable exception of “Bright and Morning Star,” Wright succeeds in presenting mothers and sons whose relationships are strained because of the mothers’ overbearing Christian beliefs and their insistence that their sons adopt their religious practices as their own.

In Chapter Four, I argue that Wright’s female characters are present to make the male protagonists more aware of themselves. The Black women, in sharp contrast to white females, serve as oppressors to the freedom the Black males seek. Sherley Anne Williams asserts, "Wright seldom loved his black female characters and never liked them, nor could he imagine a constructive role for them in the black man's freedom" (206). The white women, on the other hand, serve to bring welcomed changes to the life of the protagonists, and, in some cases, they contribute to the tragic death of the protagonist. Either way, white women’s presence in Wright’s novels foreshadow inevitable change.

In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Savage Holiday*, *The Long Dream* and *Pagan Spain*, Wright develops bad/good Mary figures. Biblical Eve and Mary are mothers, givers of life. Eve, according to Genesis, is the “mother of the living” and Mary is thought of as the “Second Eve.” Wright fictionalizes the historical
era in which American white women are treated as sacred beings: they were forbidden
to be touched, thought about, or talked to by Black men—to do so meant certain and
brutal death. All protagonists reach a moment of realization through their relations
with white women; the protagonists become free.

Chapter Five shows how in Wright’s fiction, “Fire and Cloud,” and Native Son
characters attempt to combat economic and racial inequality through Communism.
Wright parallels Communism to religion. I examine the appeal Communism had on
both African-Americans and on Richard Wright. Eventually, Wright finds that
Communism is just another “god of oppression.” In his autobiographical work
American Hunger (a continuation of Black Boy), and in his essay “I Tried to be a
Communist,” Wright tells why he broke from the Communist Party. Eventually
Wright replaces Communism with existentialism, which he illustrates in The Outsider.
However, Wright ultimately rejected the practice of being subject to an organization of
ideas.

Although Wright began his literary career, in effect, “preaching” to African-
Americans against their religious beliefs, he ended his career exploring the ways in
which all people suffered from religious beliefs, as he does in Pagan Spain. Wright
was keenly aware of the traditions or the effects that religion had on people of color.
His work reveals the overt faults of societies who embrace racism through religious
oppression and suggests to us the repercussions of not seeking solutions to these
problems. Ultimately, Wright’s works, his literature, his poetry, and his essays,
preface the question posed by James Cone in 1969, “How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?” (11).
Chapter Two
Stowe’s Call and the Wright Response: Assessing the Power of Religion

In his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin argues that African-American protest fiction began with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and that “the avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed” (152). Eighty-six years after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in direct response to Stowe’s novel, Richard Wright introduced his version of protest literature—an exposure of twentieth century American racism—and in it, he developed characters who not only openly and actively protest against racism but who also protest against African-Americans’ ineffective use of religion alone to fight for racial equality.

Wright begins *Uncle Tom’s Children* with his description of an Uncle Tom:

The post Civil War household word among Negroes—“He’s an Uncle Tom!”—which denoted reluctant toleration for the cringing type who knew his place before the white folk, has been supplanted by a new word from another generation which says:—“Uncle Tom is dead!”

Following his definition is a collection of short stories, which redefine the post Civil War definition of “Uncle Tom”; Wright’s collection acts as a response to Stowe’s novel, and thus becomes a sequel. Dan McCall notes,

In calling his book *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright refers us to this mystic father [Uncle Tom], makes his characters the progeny of a stereotype and brings his book into the family of protest literature. These children are different. They refuse to be like a father, an object of pity. (24)

In effect, the characters in *Uncle Tom’s Children* personify the description that James Cone provides us of Black Power: “It means that the Black man will not be poisoned by stereotypes that others have of him, but will affirm to the depth of his soul: ‘Get
used to me, I am not getting used to anyone’”(8). Wright, whose *Uncle Tom’s Children* acts as a precursor to Cone’s work, certainly ignored any positive aspects of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; Wright reacts to the aspects that cause the Black man’s image to be poisoned by stereotypes.

In this chapter, I argue that in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright uses religious language--Christian spirituals, characters who possess Christian values, and Biblical symbols--to show African-American Christians that they must not be a “cringing type,” passive and servile like Uncle Tom. In essence, Wright rewrites the Uncle Tom stereotype and replaces it with African-Americans who proactively embark on an earthly quest for freedom and equality. Thus, Uncle Tom’s children are case studies for Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic. As the stories progress, we are introduced to Blacks who make conscious decisions to risk their lives for spiritual freedom; furthermore, they realize that they are “still enmeshed in servitude” or, by twentieth century standards, limited by Jim Crow laws. Nevertheless, they possess and assert a limited amount of power.

Before analyzing Wright’s short stories, I must discuss the novel that so greatly influenced Wright’s first published work of fiction. The history of Uncle Tom that sparked African-American protest literature, as described by Baldwin, began when installments of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared in the abolitionist journal, *National Era*, in June 1851. The series was widely accepted, not only for its abolitionist fervor, but also for its sentimental appeal. In March 1852 when *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared as a novel, it broke sales records. According to Richard Yarborough, “Frederick Douglass
reported that the first edition of 5,000 was gone in four days and that in one year *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sold more than 300,000 copies,” and as Yarborough points out, the sales of the book were phenomenal when one considers that America boasted a population of “roughly 24 million…[but] much of the South has to be excluded from any serious estimation of Stowe’s readership—both because of the huge population and because the novel was banned in many communities.” Yarborough further informs us that illiteracy was not uncommon in mid-nineteenth century America nor was the widespread practice of sharing books uncommon (*New Essays* 45). The novel was to be a weapon in the abolitionist fight against slavery, but whether or not it had a significant impact on the abolitionist movement is debatable;³ what is not debatable, however, is that the novel had a significant impact on white America’s perception of Blacks. Eric Sundquist argues, “Any reformation of the canon of American literature that sets out to give *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the central place it deserves cannot afford to take lightly, much less ignore altogether…the cultural images it has engendered” (*New Essays* 4). As Wright implies in his description of Uncle Tom, he felt compelled to respond to Stowe by rewriting “the cultural images [*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] has engendered.”

³ Harry Birdoff argues that although the novel was the subject of much discussion, it was overlooked in the presidential election. He refers to one observer who noted, “the novel deepened the horror of servitude but did not affect a single vote” (*The World’s Greatest Hit* 58). Additionally, Thomas F. Gosset notes, “it became clear that even the greatest success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the North and abroad would not have any effect in changing opinion in the South” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* 65).
The impact the novel has had on molding America's cultural perception had much to do with Stowe's knowledge of slavery when she wrote the novel. In the third person, Stowe wrote in her “Concluding Remarks” that:

Since the legislative act of 1850, when she heard, with perfect surprise and consternation, Christian and humane people actually recommending the remanding escaped fugitives into slavery, as a duty binding on good citizens, --when she heard, on all hands, from kind, compassionate, and estimable people, in the free states of the north, deliberations and discussions as to what Christian duty could be on this head, --she could only think, These men and Christians cannot know what slavery is; if they did such a question could never be open for discussion. And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a living dramatic reality. (Uncle Tom's Cabin 470)

Stowe sought to show white Americans that slaves have families, emotions, and morals, like any white person. However, since Stowe lacked first hand knowledge about slavery, she had to rely on the testimony of others, freed slaves and slaveholders.

As a result, she succeeded in sparking the debate argued by Sundquist and others.

Stowe's claim that “the separate incidents that compose the narrative are, to a very great extent, authentic, occurring, many of them, either under her own observation or that of her personal friends” is challenged by J.C. Furnass (UTC 474). According to Furnass, Stowe never visited a slave plantation to observe the relationship between master and slave; however, according to the Beechers, while visiting her brother Edward, an abolitionist, in Boston of 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe was introduced to Josiah Henson, a pious runaway slave, the original Uncle Tom. Later that year, Edward's wife urged Stowe to write “something that will make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is.” Stowe told herself she would. She reported that “the scene of the death of Uncle Tom seemed to pass before her....” at a communion
service. Later, when she wrote it, her children and her husband were moved to tears. Setting aside the Beechers’ account, Fumass notes that the basis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* involves “her writings for the religious and antislavery press certain moral short stories, lay sermons, verses and chatting bits. One of these dealt with a runaway slave, a decent master and a Quaker connected with the Underground Railroad.” For eight years, Stowe lived in Cincinnati, a stop on the Underground Railroad, which was just across the river in Kentucky. Additionally, she sought the testimonies of Frederick Douglass to describe a cotton plantation, and those of her brother who had lived in New Orleans. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom's Cabin* influenced American society by leaving in the minds of whites a vision of the Blacks, whom many hardly knew. In his essay, “Strategies of Black Characterization” Richard Yarborough argues, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the epicenter of a massive cultural phenomenon, the tremors of which still affect the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States” (*New Essays* 46).

In *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe refutes critics who question the validity of her novel. She maintains that “the writer did not come to her task without reading much upon both sides of the question, making a particular effort to collect all of the most favorable representations of slavery which she could obtain” (8). The problem with many of the representations that she relies upon is that the slaveholders themselves wrote them. “Chapter III: Mr. And Mrs. Shelby” includes an account of slavery written by Mr. J. K. Paulding, a Virginia planter. In the account, Paulding tells

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4 I have paraphrased J.C. Fumass’s account of Stowe’s research as documented in his book, *Goodbye*.
his audience to note that "the treatment of slaves in this state is humane, and even indulgent, may be inferred from the fact of their rapid increase and great longevity" (11).

Stowe's lack of first hand exposure to the subject of slavery undoubtedly affected her development of Blacks. John Adams describes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as being "one of those Victorian novels in which, according to a common practice, the adventures of two groups of characters are alternated to give an inclusive picture of society and to provide a variety of emotional appeal" (46). The novel has two subplots, which involve the issue of slavery: one chronicles the life of Uncle Tom; the other depicts the lives of Eliza and George. The setting, the Shelby plantation, joins both plots. The major difference between the Shelby slaves is each character's reaction to the prospect of being sold. Eliza flees upon hearing the news that her only child will be sold, but Uncle Tom stays after hearing he will be sold.

Although there are two alternating plots, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as the title implies, is mainly the story of the pious Black male slave, Uncle Tom, who when faced with the decision to escape slavery, would rather remain than to put his fellow slaves at risk, especially his own family. Tom remains on the Shelby plantation to keep the other slaves from being sold in his place, until the slave trader transports him; later on the Legree plantation, he does not flee with Cassie but remains so he can help save the souls of the Legree slaves.
As a result of his "sacrifice," many critics have labeled Tom as a Christ figure, a hero. He would rather die than to become a "Sambo" like Legree’s slave, Sambo. He outright refuses to become an overseer—one charged with inflicting pain on others—because of his Christian principles. Tom fears not man, but as a Christian, he exhibits fear of God: “No! no! no! my soul an’t yours, Mas’r! You haven’y bought it,—ye can’t buy it! It’s been bought and paid for, by one that is able to keep it; no matter, no matter, you can’t harm me!” (382). Tom’s decision is a moment of true Christian heroism. He would rather risk his physical life as not to jeopardize his spiritual after-life. Thus, Hegel’s philosophy cannot be applied to the relationship between Legree and Tom. At no time does Legree appear to be psychologically controlled by Tom. Furthermore, Tom’s mind is not free in a Hegelian sense because Tom does not have a mind of his own; rather he thinks as one controlled solely by his Christian beliefs, as many slaveholders (with the exception of Legree) preferred. Tom is under the power of Christianity.

The issue of power is extended to Stowe who, through her characterization of Uncle Tom, becomes powerful; her success was a gratifying feat for a woman of this era. Stowe’s power as a writer places her in the realm described by Houston Baker in reference to Frederick Douglass. Baker argues that Douglass’s former master, Mr. Auld, who tried valiantly to keep literacy from him, “is contained and controlled within the slave narrator’s abolitionist discourse because Auld is a stock figure of such discourse.” Baker maintains that Auld becomes “the penurious master corrupted by the soul-killing effects of slavery who appears in poetry, fiction, and polemics devoted
to the abolitionist cause" (39). On one hand, Stowe, like Douglass, is in control of her readers' perceptions of the oppressors, those who own slaves and sell them. On the other hand, she is also in full control of Uncle Tom.

As the creator/controller of her literary subjects, Stowe maintains that she presents the "very fairest side of slavery" in her presentation of the Shelbys because there is "no kind of danger to the world in letting" them see this side. In her attempt to show perhaps what she regarded as the ultimate evil of slavery --the separation of happy families, as we see when Tom and Henry (Eliza's son) are sold-- Mrs. Stowe overlooks the possibility that a fair-side of slavery supports claims that slavery isn't all that bad as long as the slaves are cared for.

When we first meet Uncle Tom, he is sitting in what the narrator calls a "cottage," or the cabin assigned to him by Master Shelby, a "good" master:

In one corner of it stood a bed, covered neatly with a snowy spread; and by the side of it was a piece of carpeting, of some considerable size. In fact, that corner was the drawing room of the establishment. In the other corner was a bed of much humbler pretensions, and evidently designed for some use. The wall over the fireplace was adorned with some very brilliant scriptural prints, and a portrait of General Washington. (31)

The "cottage" also has a "rough bench in the corner and a table, somewhat rheumatic in its limbs...and covered with a cloth displaying cups and saucers" (31).

According to Eugene Genovese, in an effort to protect the "health and reproductive powers of their chattels....from the late 1830s to the war southern agricultural journals mounted a determined campaign to improve the quality of slave housing" (525). The journals called for
log cabins of sixteen by eighteen (or twenty) feet, ... and equipped with large windows and large if unglazed windows. By the 1850s the great majority of the slave cabins in all parts of the South met the specifications as to size and one family unit. (525)

Genovese goes on to note that only “more patriarchal planters” steadily carried out these ideal specifications. Many argued that peasants and workers traditionally lived in dirty dilapidated dwellings. Slaves generally made their own furnishings; rarely was it bought for them by the masters, many of whom felt their Negroes had no need of furniture (531). There is no indication, however, that any of the slaves’ quarters held as much furniture as did Uncle Tom’s.

Josiah Henson describes his cabin as a “hut” where they lodged “on the bare ground.” He states further that

Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women and children... There were neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners and boxed in with boards; a single blanket the only covering.... The wind whistled and the rain and snow blew in through the cracks, and the damp earth soaked in the moisture till the floor was miry as a pig-sty. (18)

Of course, we have no reason to doubt his account considering that he next tells us how, in spite of his surroundings, he grew to be “a robust and vigorous lad” who could “run faster, wrestle better, and jump higher than anybody about him” (18-19).

Although Stowe does not choose to use Henson’s description of an actual slave cabin nor any other slave’s description which are similar to Henson’s, she does choose to use the description of Henson’s physique to describe Tom, a “large, broad-chested, powerfully made man, of a full glossy black” (32).
Uncle Tom is certainly reminiscent of Josiah Henson. Henson, upon whom Uncle Tom is said to be based, was born in Maryland in 1789. A white minister converted him to Methodism. Henson believed that as a Christian he must practice love and forgiveness. After having gained the complete trust of his master, he was asked to take a group of his master's slaves from Maryland to Kentucky without the supervision of a white person. The slaves wished to escape once they reached Cincinnati, but Henson convinced them to remain in slavery. Some of them were later sold down South where they were subjected to horrific treatment, and Henson later regretted preventing their departure. Henson was not sold only because his master's son, while on a trip to New Orleans to sell Henson, became ill, and required nursing on their return trip to Kentucky. By then Henson had resolved to escape slavery, and he later did so with his family. Although he suffered many hardships during his escape to Canada, he returned to Kentucky to help other slaves escape.5

Henson's trustworthiness is Tom's most revered character virtue. Before we meet Tom, we are told about his "trusting" disposition. In an effort to settle his debts, Master Shelby describes Tom as being a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow....I let him go to Cincinnati alone, to do business for me, and bring home five hundred dollars. 'Tom,' says 'I trust you, because I think you're a Christian,—I know you would n't cheat.' Tom comes back sure; I knew he would. Some low fellows, they say, said to him, 'Tom why don't you make tracks for Canada?' 'Ah, master trusted me, and I could n't—they told me about it.' (12-13)

5 I have summarized the events as described in Henson's narrative.
Of course, the incident described by Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* parallels the actual event as it occurred in the life of Josiah Henson. What we do not ever see in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the regret that Henson felt for having taken such pride in being a slave that he trusted the wrong master—an earthly one:

> Often since that day has my soul been pierced with bitter anguish at the thought of having been thus instrumental in consigning to the infernal bondage of slavery so many of my fellow-beings. I have wrestled in prayer with God for forgiveness. (Henson 53)

What Henson realizes most of all is the power that his Christian upbringing had over him which influenced his decision not to allow the slaves to remain free: “The duties of the slave to his master as appointed over him in the Lord, I had ever heard urged by ministers and religious men” (52). At the time of his indecision, he felt as though “the devil was getting the upper hand of [him].” Yet, Henson honestly admits to falling prey to one of the deadly seven sins: “Pride, too, came in to confirm me. I had undertaken a great thing; my vanity had been flattered all along the road by hearing myself praised; I thought it would be a feather in my cap to carry it through thoroughly…” (52).

Shelby, Tom’s master, who is in some way modeled after Henson’s, realizes, just as Henson’s did, the power that religion had on Tom: “He got religion at a camp-meeting, four years ago and I believe he really did get it……” Although he is sorry to “part with Tom” he notes that the sale of Tom, a pious slave, should be allowed “to cover the whole balance of the debt; and you would, Haley, if you had any conscience” (Stowe 13). The idea of any one of these individuals having a
“conscience” is ironic considering the subject of their conversation: the sale of humans to settle a debt.

Unlike Henson, Tom never attempts to escape. Near his death, Tom is given the opportunity to do so, but he chooses to remain behind to comfort the souls of Legree’s other slaves. It is the lighter skinned Negroes who are brave enough to attempt escape and who are successful. In contrast to her portrayal of Uncle Tom, a “darky,” Stowe has been criticized for her treatment of the mulatto characters as opposed to the darker ones. Louisa S.C. McCord argues that Stowe’s final act of freeing the “half-breeds” sends the message that freedom belongs to those of white descent (New Essays qtd. 113). I add that only those of white descent, or I should say, the men of white descent, have the intellectual ability to question slavery: George, a slave, and Augustine St. Clare, a master, are both capable of intellectual thinking.

Since George realizes that Christianity and slavery do not mix, he is able to escape slavery physically, because he has already done so mentally. In a conversation George has with Eliza, after his opportunity to work in a creative job has been blocked by his jealous white master, George questions slavery: “My master! And who made him my master? I’m a man as much as he is” (26). George identifies the Master-Slave/Lord-Servant relationship, wherein whites assume a God-like position by asserting social power on their slaves. He, like Henson, realizes the power of Christianity over slaves. This realization encompasses the side of Henson that Tom lacks. Eventually, George will lead his family to safety after staving off his aggressors.
with a gun. George, not unlike Henson, makes a conscious decision to risk his life for freedom.

Eliza, on the other hand, demonstrates the power that the term “master” had psychologically on some slaves. In response to George’s plan to run away, she does not talk about how risky it is, but she does talk about how unchristian it is. Eliza begins with the implication that it is acceptable to be mistreated by one’s Master: “Well it is dreadful, but after all, he is your master, you know” (26). We then see the effect the Master-Slave relationship has had on Eliza. She says, “I always thought that I must obey my master and mistress, or I couldn’t be Christian” (26). It is not surprising that Eliza is not willing to see beyond Christianity to the core of slavery.

According to the narrator, Eliza is more noted for her beauty rather than for her intellect: according to the narrator, she possesses that softness of voice and manner, which seems in many cases to be a particular gift to the quadroon and mulatto women. These natural graces in the quadroon are often united with beauty of the most dazzling kind, and in almost every case with a personal appearance prepossessing and agreeable. (21-22)

Again, we see how Stowe’s lack of knowledge results in the development of yet another stereotype regarding mulatto women. Yarborough notes that Eliza’s “unshaken piety….constitute[s] virtually the entire range of her characterization; we see little real psychological depth or intellectual vigor” (52). Eliza is convinced by the Shelbys that she must remain in service to them in order to reach heaven where she may eventually be happy. She must “trust in God” (28).
Eliza’s sentiments are similar to those of Jupiter Hammon’s servant persona as expressed in his poem “Dialogue Entitled, The Kind Master and Dutiful Servant.”

Hammon’s persona identifies the existence of this relationship:

Master
Come my Servant, follow me,
According to thy place;
And surely God will be with thee,
And send thee heav’nly grace.

Servant
Dear Master, I will follow thee,
According to thy word,
And pray that God may be with me,
And save thee in the Lord. (O’Neal 190)

Hammon, who was a slave of the Lloyd family of Lloyd’s Neck, Long Island is described by Sondra O’Neal as having created personae “who were stereotypical of the eighteenth-century slaveholder and slave” (191). She notes further that,

On the surface, the slave feigns placid obedience to the Master. Yet beneath the poetic line, the slave (or “Servant” as Hammon prefers to call him) articulates subtle rebellion against the Master’s position...(191)

Houston Baker counters O’Neal’s assertion and argues that Hammon is a clear example of how slaves adopted “the God of his masters.” What is significant to my analysis of Hammon and Eliza is the two slaves shared belief that there is a connection between the heavenly master and their earthly one. They both felt that obedience to the “M/master” ensures a reward of “heavenly grace.”

Baker argues further that

The justification he [Hammon] gave for committed service to one’s earthly master was that it might enable one to better one’s lot through moral suasion based on biblical precedents. Moreover, if one had a “kind” master, one could follow him straight to heaven....(5)
Fortunately, although Eliza does not question the validity of the kind master teaching, she does not allow her Christian training to hinder her desire to remain with her son.

The questions of slaveholding masters and a heavenly Master is interrelated to the argument that the novel was written to save the souls of the whites as well as the lives of Blacks (Baldwin 152). In his article “Wright Writing Reading: Narrative Strategies in *Uncle Tom’s Children,*” John Lowe suggests that the white people in Wright’s short story, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” take “on the role of God” (63). Lowe’s analysis of Wright is equally applicable to the whites of Stowe’s novel and to any white, fictional or non-fictional, who subscribed to the M/master ideology. In asserting their right to be “God-like” towards the slaves, the owners were from, in Stowe’s point of view, breaking a commandment by forcing the slaves to obey them: “Thou shall have no other Gods before me.” Stowe was heavily influenced by religious debates that raged during the time period and gave claim to the idea that slavery is an “unforgivable sin.” In fact, John McKivigan notes that the abolitionists taught slave owning was “a sin-always, everywhere, and only a sin” (26).

The Baker/O’Neal debate discussed above is representative of the debate which rages regarding the characterization of Tom and Stowe’s intent when she developed Tom. Certainly, we will never know exactly what Stowe had in mind when she wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* just as we will never know what a slave had in mind when he wrote about a “master.” The novel rejects slavery, but decades later, Wright and others recognize the power the novel has had in shaping America’s stereotypical perception of Blacks.

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Nevertheless, Stowe’s religious disposition, especially as it relates to the
development of Uncle Tom, is in accordance with her Christian background. Lynam
Beecher, Stowe’s father, was a member of the abolitionist crusade. Beecher was,
according to Joseph Washington, “an original American Civil Religion theoretician
and practitioner (347). Although Stowe was raised as a Calvinist, according to John
Adams, she “broke away from her father’s Calvinist church and became Episcopalian,
like her aunt” (52). Stowe seems to have been influenced by Charles Finney, leader of
the movement known as Christian perfectionism. Finney, is described by Thomas
Gosset as “a Presbyterian revivalist and one of the opponents of Lyman.” Gosset
notes further that the two ministers differed over what Finney regarded as the ill effect
of “old-fashioned Calvinist orthodoxy” that had a “shriveling effect upon the
Christian convert” (104). Gosset explains the differences in the teachings of the two
religions,

The question at issue was nothing less (and frequently nothing more)
than the salvation of his soul. The convert might urgently desire
salvation, but all he could do to achieve it was to throw his mercy of
God and hope that he was one of the elect....In its place, Finney
substituted a religion which gave the convert the right to choose
whether he would be damned or saved. (104)

Gosset states further that although there was no indication that Stowe admired Finney
and followed his teachings, there was a subsequent “shift in attitude toward religion”
in her writing (104).

St. Clare’s conversion is an example of Finney’s school of thought, and his
actions support the idea that Stowe believed in the convert’s “right to choose whether
he would be damned or saved.” Upon the death of Eva, Uncle Tom remains so that he
can convert, St. Clare, his “white master,” and save his soul. At the brink of death, St.
Clare accepts Tom’s religion and we assume that the conversion is completed. St.
Clare’s dying words are, “…it is coming HOME, at last.” The narrator notes further,
“Just before the spirit parted, he opened his eyes, with a sudden light, as of joy and
recognition, and said ‘Mother!’ and then he was gone!” (341-42). Through Tom’s
help, St. Clare chooses to be saved. Stowe’s development of Uncle Tom fits into the
teachings of Finney. Gosset analyzes Tom’s Christian beliefs in relation to Finney’s
teachings:

Tom shares with Finney a rejection of the idea that one cannot choose
salvation. On the other hand, he differs from Finney on an important
point. The terrors of hell as preached by Finney fully matched those of
Josiah Henson himself. Tom...emphasizes the love and mercy of God.
(104)

These influences of religion play a major role in the development of Tom. Gosset also
notes that

The modern reader is likely to note at once that Tom has racial qualities
which now connote a degrading stereotype, but he may pass over too
quickly the fact that Tom has religious traits which Stowe sincerely
admired—and not just in blacks. (103)

While many of her white characters are hypocritical Christians, Tom remains
consistently and admirably a true servant of God.

Yet, his Christian practices jeopardize his relationship with his wife and
children. Tom’s only real wish is to go back to his “old lady” on the Shelby plantation
and not to be free, but this can be done after he saves the soul of St. Clare, one who
initially does not have faith in God, unlike his daughter, Eva. When St. Clare
announces to Tom that he will soon be set free, the narrator says, “The sudden light of
joy that shone in Tom's face as he raised his hands to Heaven, his emphatic 'Bless the Lord!' rather discomposed St. Clare” who says, “Why Tom, don’t you think, for your part, you’ve been better off than free?” Tom replies, “...Mas’r St. Clare; Mas’r been too good; but, Mas’r, I’d rather have poor clothes, poor house, poor everything, and have them mine, than have the best, and have ‘em and man’s else,—I had so, Mas’r; I think it’s nature, Mas’r” (329). Significantly, it is St. Clare who broaches the subject of freedom and not Tom. This is the first time readers learn that Uncle Tom would prefer freedom to slavery, but he does not prefer freedom over what he feels is his Christian duty. Tom tells St. Clare he will “stay with Mas’r as long as he wants me,—so as I can be any use....When Mas’r St. Clare’s a Christian” (329). In essence, Tom allows his Christian beliefs to hinder him from obtaining freedom. In reference to Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, Houston Baker notes that Washington does not apologize for or justify rebellion: “Instead of apology, or the justification of rebellion, one finds....gratitude—even joy—that the self has been swept along by the current and acknowledged for aiding its progressive flow” (*The Journey Back* 46-47). Baker’s description of Washington’s memoir is applicable to Uncle Tom’s passive disposition about slavery. Uncle Tom never talks about the horrors of slavery. As long as Tom is willing to remain in the South as a slave, he will never be free.

This scene between master and slave has added significance. Without realizing it, by getting St. Clare to convert to Christianity, Tom is the one in power in a Hegalian sense. Tom tells St. Clare shortly before St. Clare is fatally wounded, “I’s willin’ to lay down my life, this blessed day, to see Mas’r a Christian” (325). There
becomes a transference of social roles which Hegel says is inevitable in the Master-
Slave relationship: "...the lord achieves his recognition through another
consciousness; ...both by its working on the thing, and by its dependence on a specific
existence" (Hegel 116). St. Clare relies upon the hope that he is needed by Uncle
Tom: In order to be the master, the servant must be dependent on the master, and as a
result, the master relies on the slave's dependency on him in order to solidify his
position as master. In this way, Tom has power; but his power is not absolute.
According to Hegel, "the other consciousness sets aside its own being-for-self, and in
so doing itself does what the first does to it" (116). Tom's power is limited and does
not parallel that of his master because the lord's "essential nature is to exist only for
himself" (116). Thus, when St. Clare dies, he has not done much for Tom in
comparison to what Tom has done for him. Tom is not free in this world, but his
master who was free in this world finds freedom, with Tom's help, in the next. What
is tragic is that Tom lacks the intellectual capability of realizing the power he
possesses. Stowe, the rhetorical master, controls the narrative; she controls the image
that her large readership has of Tom, including his life in his happy "cottage," his
pious disposition as expressed in the "childlike earnestness of his prayer" (Stowe 41),
and the slave's presentation of the "wild, grotesque songs common among the
Negroes" (Stowe 13).

Many of those who saw Uncle Tom's story dramatized were not exposed to the
exchange between Shelby and Tom. Almost immediately after the publication of

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the *National Era*, without the consent or aid of Harriet Beecher

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Stowe, the novel was made into a series of plays, most of which did not accurately portray the characters that Stowe had developed. As a result of these unauthorized plays, Stowe's characters were reinvented. Although the novel had not completely appeared in the *National Era*, on January 5, 1852, Stuart Robson advertised the very first dramatization of Stowe's novel as *Uncle Tom as It Is: The Southern Uncle Tom!*. The play was a failure. Five months after the novel appeared, the play *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared; C.W. Taylor the playwright, took noticeable liberties with the plot construction. "Many were familiar with Mrs. Stowe's novel, but had the greatest difficulty recognizing the characters—the names had been changed….Uncle Tom was depicted as a sort of Caliban to the Little Ariel; the martyrdom was left, and it all ended happily" (Birdoff 25).

Troy, New York marked the place of the most legendary and successful Tom play. *The Death of Uncle Tom, or The Religion of the Lowly* by G.L. Aiken, who also played George Shelby, opened on September 27, 1852. The three-hour play was a four-act drama, which concluded with the death of little Eva. A sequel was added to appease the demand of theatre patrons and eventually the two short plays became a six-act drama, which attracted "the clergy and thousands of devout secretarians who had never crossed the threshold of a theatre" (Birdoff 53). By 1899 there were an estimated 400 Tom troupes. After the Civil War, Blacks were allowed to play a few of the leading roles, but white actors in blackface appeared in the early films. By the time Richard Wright published *Uncle Tom's Children*, there had been numerous film versions of the novel: in 1935, Sherley Temple starred as Eva and Bill "Bojangles"
Robinson as Tom in *The Littlest Rebel*; in 1938, Judy Garland starred as Topsy in *Everybody Sing*; and Abbott and Costello starred as Simon Legree and Eva in the *Naughty Nineties*. There was also a cartoon version starring Felix the Cat. For Americans who had not or simply could not read the novel, surely the stage and film versions had an even more serious impact on their perception of Blacks and white Southerners.6

I have not developed all of what may be considered “good” about this novel such as, the admiration that Stowe has for family values, which we see when Tom wants to return to his; when Eliza risks her life to remain with her son; and the reunion of George and Eliza with their families at the end of the novel. I have chosen to present the aspects of the novel that undoubtedly influenced, or I might say, outraged Richard Wright. Wright began his career presenting African-Americans as oppressed victims of white racism, which according to James Baldwin “actually reinforce…the oppression they [protest writers] decry” by rejecting “life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (Baldwin 155). Wright presents Black protagonists who are not in situations which may warrant a hopeful outlook; the protagonists are representative of his Southern upbringing in a home dominated by Christianity.

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6 The summary of the film versions was taken from Richard Yarborough.
Richard Wright ends his memoirs on life in Mississippi by saying, “This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled” (303). This culture was influenced, in no small part, by the kinds of people depicted in Stowe’s novel, including the white Southerners and the Black slaves. Wright’s memories of his childhood in the South influenced his works, especially his protest fiction. In his essay “Between Memory History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” Pierre Nora discusses the different aspects of memory:

> On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory—unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth—and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces. (285)

Wright admitted that *Uncle Tom’s Children* is autobiographical “with liberties” and that he used his “imagination to give it a form which would make it appeal to the emotions of other people” (*Conversations* 7). Uncle Tom is a link between Wright’s experiences and those of his/their ancestors which indirectly influenced his own life.

Both Stowe and Wright endured similar kinds of criticism. In Wright’s words, his short stories were analyzed by reviewers and readers based on, “the validity of the, life pictured”—the same idea was applied to Stowe, hence the publication of *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The “validity of the life pictured” or the authenticity of the two authors’ works is no doubt partly measured by the speech patterns of the characters. Both authors use dialect. For example, Mann, the protagonist of “Down by the Riverside,” tells the white soldiers who demand that he help with the flood rescue

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7 The quote is from the HarperPerennial edition of *Black Boy*. 45
effort, "AHM TIRED! LEMME GO WID MY FOLKS!" Similarly, Uncle Tom sings Negro spirituals to Eva and speaks in the vernacular: "they are so full of tickle all the while, they can't behave theirselves" (35). Houston Baker provides a perfect description of how Wright's life experiences effected his work: "It is only in recent years...that black writers as an extensive and articulate group have been able to travel all the way back to origins and record their insights in distinctive forms designed for a black audience" (53). The use of dialect confirms the author's standing as one who is familiar with the culture because he is of the culture. As such, he is credible and his Black and white listeners can trust the writer/preacher.

While Stowe's novel was ideally directed at those male Americans who could end slavery, and towards white females who could influence their white male counterparts, Wright wrote to an audience of his brethren and to whites who supported racism by either ignoring it or taking part in it. In 1937 he asked, "Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, molding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?" As Wright seeks to remind whites of their cruelty, he also molds "the lives and consciousness of those [Black] masses toward new goals"—that is, to shun reliance on religion because as Rev. Taylor says in "Fire and Cloud," "Freedom belongs to the strong" (220). Wright, as Baker notes, resists white hegemony, [through] the preservation of unique meanings in the black semantic domain, the seizure of language as a weapon of liberation and being, the employment of distinctive literary strategies
that led to unique verbal structure—all of these have resulted in works of art that allow one to chart the way back (53).

Wright’s work stands as a reinvention of southern history depicted by Stowe.

Both authors draw upon their Christian ideals and their own Christian upbringing to develop their themes and to appeal to their audiences. According to Samuel Hill,

In order to know Southerners, their family life, personal responses to human existence, convictions, values, attitudes, tastes, and styles, as well as their public structures...we need to investigate the ways in which they interact. Religion is one of those ways....It is a language, an idiom, a form of popular discourse... (Hill 1-2)

Hill’s description of Southerners and their religion is applicable to both Stowe and Wright. As mentioned earlier, both Wright and Stowe were raised by pious members of Christian communities. Their work shows the influence of their rearing. Stowe’s chapters begin with Bible verses and her plot and characters develop Christian teachings; Wright commonly uses Biblical names and stories to develop the situations in which his characters are placed. However, the similarities between the authors Christian experiences to appeal to their audiences stops there.

Although the two authors use religion in their fiction, their intent differs. Uncle Tom’s reliance on religion for survival on earth is not enough for Uncle Tom’s children; they must have more. Wright uses the language of Christianity to appeal to the emotions of the Black community. In Unc Toms Children, Wright implies that their Christian experiences serve to inspire Blacks’ conversion to a more active means of survival. Christianity alone does not save the Black protagonists from the wrath of their white aggressors any more than it does for Uncle Tom, who dies a slave.

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In my analysis of *Uncle Tom's Children*, I will concentrate primarily on the decisions made by the male protagonists in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” “Down By the Riverside” and “Long Black Song.” The other stories and other aspects of these stories will be discussed in the chapters to follow. In these three short stories, the protagonists are motivated by free will and self-definition. According to at least two critics, although Wright was not familiar with existential philosophers until the mid-1940’s, existential philosophy is present in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Existentialism, which emphasizes the supremacy of the free will, is not much different than Hegel’s philosophy about free will or what he calls the “independent self-conscious.” Edward Margolies argues that “these first short stories [are] a kind of black nationalism wedded to what has been called Wright’s existentialism—the principal characteristics of Wright’s last phase of political and philosophical thinking” (75). Edward Jay, likewise, argues that “in those early stories, freedom of the will and sanctity of the individual are used to counter the pessimism of the black person’s fate in a deterministic world” (2). I agree that Wright’s protagonists exercise free will; however, these critics’ arguments do not take into account the power struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor. We must not overlook the Black protagonists spiritual escape to freedom which coincides with their attempts to free themselves physically. Their actions are not only a triumph for the self, but a triumph over those (slave masters) who depend on their dependence.

*Uncle Tom’s Children* begins with “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the story of Big Boy and three of his friends who get caught trespassing at a white man’s lake. Two of
his friends are killed while trying to escape, but Big Boy and BoBo escape to their homes. Big Boy’s father and his friends plan the boys’ escape to Chicago in a friend’s truck, but unfortunately, BoBo is caught, burned, tarred, and feathered. Fortunately, however, Big Boy escapes to the north.

Wright immediately calls upon his Christian upbringing to develop the short story. Wright, as John Lowe argues, sets up a scene similar to that of the Biblical Garden of Eden (Lowe 63):

Laughing easily, four Black Boys came out of the woods into cleared pasture. They walked lollingly in bare feet, beating tangled vines and bushes with long sticks. (17)

Looming in their minds is the threat of what will become reality, “what would you do ef ol man Harveyed come erlong right now?” (28). Here we find that Black males, as Wright demonstrates time and again in his works, are never really safe, even when basking in God’s nature.

Although the story’s title features his name, it is no surprise that Big Boy survives; not only is he a big boy, physically stronger than the others, but also his name suggests his inevitable rebirth into manhood. Lowe perceptively argues that Wright symbolizes rebirth through the images of water and fire; and, the act of Big Boy witnessing BoBo’s demise from the kiln is a rebirth ritual for Big Boy (Lowe 70). I argue further that the rebirth process begins the last time Big Boy emerges from the water. Big Boy is “born again” when he emerges from the lake and is forced to take part in the horrific actions of murder. This baptismal process of being born means that one must take part fully in the ritual and not simply witness it. Although he is not
quite a man, Big Boy’s life will never be that of the carefree innocent child he was when he and his friends plunge into the waters in the forbidden garden.

After the murders, Big Boy instinctively runs home where his community comes together to save him and BoBo. As we will see later in the short stories “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star,” the protagonists who actually survive their bouts with the representatives of the racist south do so through the joining together of people—Black people. In his introduction to *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Richard Yarborough notes, “the Black community, while distraught over the imminent explosion of white retaliation for Big Boy’s act, nonetheless mobilizes to protect him with a practiced nearly ritualistic set of strategies which eventually enable him to escape” (xxiv). Those who stand alone, die alone. The “Brothers” (Brother Sanders, Brother Morrison, and Elder Peters—titles, incidentally, of Seventh-day Adventist church leaders) help Big Boy develop a plan of survival, and as I will discuss later in Chapter Four but will mention briefly now, the mother’s response is merely “only Gawd can hep yuh now” (37). Wright contradicts her laments with Big Boy’s action, and more specifically his will (and literally Will, the driver of the truck), to survive through flight/escape.

Comparatively, the short story reads like a slave narrative. An angry white mob with dogs hunts a Black male, and he must flee to the north in an effort to enjoy the freedom he will never have in the South. In his “Master Plan for Slave Narratives,” James Olney provides a descriptive outline of the slave narrative; at least one of the characteristics can be applied to “Big Boy Leaves Home”: a “description of
patrols, of failed attempt[s] to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs” (153). BoBo, who along with Big Boy is pursued by men with dogs; BoBo fails to escape and is killed.

The dogs barking outside the hole are not only reminiscent of documented searches for bold runaway slaves and perhaps the fictional search by Legree for Cassie. Earlier, Big Boy, along with the other boys, hears a train whistle, and readers are reminded of the North:

Far away a train whistled.
“There goes number seven!”
“Headin fer up Noth!”
“Blazin it down the line!”
“Lawd, Ahm goin Noth some day.”
“Me too, man.”
“They say colored folks up Noth is got ekul rights.” (“Big Boy Leaves Home” 28)

Later, as Big Boy awaits his “coach” to the North, he remembers the time prior to the incident when he and his friends played in the kilns: “He heard number nine, far away and mournful. The train made him remember how they had dug these kilns....Big Boy wuz Casey Jones n wuz speeding it down the gleamin rails of the Southern Pacific” (48). There was a time when the kilns were used strictly to please the children, but now the kilns are a part of the underground railroad, a secure place to hide from the mob.

Both the underground hole and the train whistle are reminders and symbols of the underground railroad and the constant threat of death. Eber M. Pettit, “a conductor,” documented a description of an event similar to that of Big Boy’s:

As soon as it was dark a man took Kate and Nancy away. They walked along the track to a cross road, and along the road some distance, then started for Baltimore in a coach, driven by a Negro. The boys did not
awake until an hour after the women were gone, when they were aroused by a pack of hounds. The dogs were moving carefully about, as they often do when the track is old, occasionally giving out a sharp yelp. (Underground Railroad Sketches 40)

Big Boy’s decision to kill the dog proves his willingness to survive. Houston Baker notes that Big Boy “violently confronts the green-eyed hound that threatens his (w)hole” (157). Similarly, James Cone asserts that one who “embraces Black Power does not despair and take suicide as an out, nor does he appeal to another world in order to relieve the pains of this one. Rather, he fights back with the whole of his being” (12). Big Boy’s attempt to escape is successful. Unlike Uncle Tom, Big Boy will not accept his fate, but will escape with his life.

The dog that invades Big Boy’s hiding place is a reminder of the past, but not Big Boy’s personal past. Rather it is a reminder of the past that Big Boy is a product of and though he is in the twentieth century, he is still effected by; Big Boy experiences Uncle Tom’s past. Melvin Dixon notes, “Memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself” (19-20). Nora provides a more comprehensive link between memory and history:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. (285)

Nora’s description is applicable to Big Boy who represents both history and memory—Wright’s memory and the history of the South. Big Boy knowingly, yet unknowingly,
plays out a historical role. Once he runs home, he makes it clear that a white woman was present at the lake. The boys are aware of the danger caused by the white woman’s presence: “‘It’s a woman!’ whispered Big Boy in an underbreath. ‘A white woman!’” (29).

Before the dog, Big Boy is faced with the danger of being killed by a snake. The snake which was also a threat to the Biblical prelapsarian Garden of Eden, threatens Big Boy, who for the whites at Harvey’s lake is seen as a snake, a threat to the purification of the white woman. The snake also, as Margolies argues, “suggest at one and the same time his terror and burning hatred of whites” as seen later when he fantasizes about killing whites the same way as he killed the snake (78). Not only does the snake threaten Big Boy’s life, it simultaneously serves as a reminder that he can never be safe as long as he is in the South.

Although Big Boy undergoes a metaphorical rite-of-passage--his transition from childhood and initiation into Southern manhood--he is still childlike. As he sits in the kilns, he does not accept responsibility for the part he played in the incident, or at least for allowing the opportunity for it to occur. The boys should have been school, and although Big Boy knows this, he blames his mother for expecting him to go: “He shoulda went on t school tha mawnin, like Ma told im t do. But hell, who wouldn’t git tireda awways drivin a guy t school! Tha wuz the big trouble, awways drivin a guy t school. He wouldn’t be in all this trouble now ef it wuznt fer that Gawddam school” (50). The adolescent side of Big Boy would like to place blame elsewhere, significantly on his mother. Margolies asserts, “To be sure Big Boy is a cut above his
companions, yet despite his developing maturity, at the moment of truth he remains a boy…” (78). Big Boy, although he survives, lacks the ability to intellectualize his situation. He reacts solely on natural instinct.

In comparison to Uncle Tom, Big Boy, a young adolescent boy can afford to take more risks. Big Boy is not a father, but a son. However, as Wright makes clear, his family is still affected by his actions, but they are willing to take the risk. Big Boy, like Uncle Tom, does not possesses or exercise an ability to reason. When faced with the importance of making a decision, however, both rebel against their white aggressors. The major difference is Tom knows he is in danger and remains on the Legree plantation until he is killed, but Big Boy chooses flight and freedom in the north.

The next story “Down by the Riverside,” takes place during a flood. Brother Mann fatally wounds Henry Heartfield, who shoots at him in an effort to retrieve his boat which Mann’s brother-in-law stole for the purpose of getting their family, primarily Mann’s ailing wife who is in labor, to a hospital. The story ends when, Mann, who is forced by the soldiers to return to the scene of the crime in an effort to save Heartfield’s family, is identified by the Heartfields and is later shot by the white soldiers.

The story revolves around the song, “Down by the Riverside”:

Ahm gonna lay down mah sword and shield
Down by the riverside....
Ahm gonna lay down mah sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Ah ain gonna study war no more. (72)
What’s ironic here is that the Black characters do not have the same “sword and shield” as their white counterparts—an army of men protected by guns and laws. Before the characters sing “Down by the Riverside,” the preacher prays, “yuh said believe in the blooda your son Jesus, n today was believing n waitin far Yuh t hep us! N sofen the haard heats of them white folks there in the town, Lawd!” (72). The prayer proves to be useless. When Heartfield spots Mann, it is Heartfield who shoots at him and Mann who realizes that he must, if he is to survive, shoot back. Later, he admits that he wanted to get Lulu to the hospital and then he would have returned the boat.

Mann’s decision to shoot back is the beginning of a conversion process. Albert Raboteau defines conversion as being “not just a change in behavior but metanoia, a change of heart, a transformation in consciousness—a radical reorientation of personality, exemplified in the stories of St. Paul the Apostle and the St. Augustine of Hippo as a life changing event brought about by the direct intervention of God” (Fire in the Bones 152-153); this is a description of Mann’s state of mind at the end of “Down by the Riverside.” We assume that Mann has already gone through some form of Christian conversion since he is part of a Christian community, but on some level, “trust in Gawd” as he thinks and professes it is unreliable; before the prayer and after the warning from Bob about “the white folks makin trouble,” Mann “eased his pistol out of the top drawer and slipped it into his pocket” (71). The implication is that Mann is open to the possibility that prayer will not be able to save him. Mann’s willingness to ward off attacks places him in opposition to Uncle Tom. Mann, like

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Uncle Tom, may be a child of God, but he is willing to “stake his life” to save himself and his family from the forces of nature and from racist whites. The two forces are, according to Jaye, symbolically linked. Jay notes that Mann’s struggle to battle the current is symbolic of “the current of determinism which threatens to control [his] life”:

For a moment the current of deterministic forces threatens to sweep Mann away. ‘He felt weak from fear: he had a choking impulse to stop: he felt he was lost because he had shot a white man: he felt he was no use in rowing any longer.’ But after the shooting, the boat becomes unwedged, and Mann is able to continue upstream....Mann’s awareness of his own will has been awakened.

His conversion to Christianity will ultimately aid him in understanding his circumstances and will affect his final actions.

Wright makes it clear that not only is Mann placed in the position of having to defend himself and his family, but he is placed in the position by whites. According to Bob’s testimony, when he tried to trade for the boat, he was unable to do so under fair terms. The “white folks” are the ones who possess the armory which is used to commandeer the boat that is not Mann’s to save other “white folks” from the flood. They also force Mann to be separated from his family, just seconds after he is told that his wife and baby are dead: the soldiers response is, “All the rest of the niggers are out there, how come you don’t want to go?” (92).

What Wright makes explicitly clear is that “trust in Gawd” as Mann says, is not going to help him out of the social prison into which he has been born. Ultimately, Mann’s power comes to him when he decides he will determine the moment of his death. Mann picks up where Big Boy leaves off. Mann is older and reacts to the threat
upon his life differently. The significant difference between the two characters is that
Big Boy makes it clear that if he had “a sword and shield,” the last thing he would do
is put it down. What makes Mann one step ahead of Big Boy even though he is killed
while Big Boy is not, is that Mann goes through a conversion and recognizes the
necessity of this conversion before he is killed. By the end of the story, this creation
of Wright comes to a realization; he has a “change of heart.” God can’t save him from
the wrath of the white soldiers so he decides when he will die:

His fear subsided into a cold numbness. Yes, now! Yes, through the
trees! Right thru them trees! Gawd! They were going to kill him. Yes,
now, he would die! He would die before he would let them kill him.
All die fo they kill me! All die...(123)

Mann had no power, but recognizes that he has a limited amount at this point. The
Black man(n) who had limited choices all of his life—could not be with his family,
could not volunteer to help with the rescue effort, could not save his family from the
flood without a stolen boat—chose when he would die. As Jay notes, “His death is a
release into ultimate freedom, where the forces which shape this world can never reach
him. His will has set him apart and freed his soul” (6). Only through death and
through the act of death, could Mann be free.

Silas of “Long Black Song” reacts to his position as the oppressed in Jim Crow
Society in much the same way as George of Uncle Tom’s Cabin does. Silas evicts his
wife and child from their home and shoots at the white clock salesman his wife, Sarah,
has had sex with in their marital bed. As a result, the salesman returns with an angry
white mob who burn Silas alive in his house, but not before Silas shoots as many of
them as he can. His actions are not rash, but are, in a very real sense, carefully thought
out. Yarborough notes, “Silas is far more mature and self-aware than either Big Boy or Mann…Silas’ militant resistance even in the face of apparently empty options dramatizes Wright’s belief that one must finally impose his or her own meaning on reality” (xxv).

Silas’s name is Biblical. John Lowe directs readers to Acts 15 where Paul and his companion, Silas, are imprisoned. Lowe notes, “Like his Biblical counterpart, Silas refuses flight and elects to stay “in prison,” ironically, his home; he lets the enemy come to him” (66).

What brought Wright’s Silas to the point of death has more to do with his attempt to attain respect by imitating whites, than the act of sexual betrayal by his wife with a white man. Lowe notes that Silas “has devoted his life to capitalist acquisition to make this come about. Unfortunately, in so doing, his paterfamilias domestic self has atrophied, thereby leading to the collapse of his overall goal” (66). When we first meet Silas, he tells Sarah of the money he has earned and the new land he has purchased which he plans to hire somebody to tend because “Ef yuh gonna git anywheres” Silas tells his wife, “yuhs gotta do just like they do” (140). In reaction to Sarah’s infidelity, Silas tells his narrative:

> From sunup t sundown Ah works mah guts out t pay them white trash bastards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in my house! Ah cant go into their houses....Fer ten years Ah slaves lika dog t git mah farm free, givin ever penny Ah kin t em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in my house....(143)

What Silas implies is his desire to be like the masters. Silas, like George of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* who possessed a skill he is sure his master was jealous of, has proven his
self-worth and his ability to think on the level of those socially superior to him by purchasing the land that he once sharecropped.

Silas’s feelings are representative of those colonized individuals described by Franz Fanon in his book, *Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon describes the colonized native’s desire to gain respect and power through the acquisition of those items owned by the settler: “The look that the native turns on the settler’s town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible” (39). The latter half may refer to Wright as I discuss in Chapter Four, but certainly not Silas who feels betrayed by his “own blood” (39). What Fanon implies is that the colonized individual equates power and respect with possessions. Those who have enviable possessions are in power, those who don’t are not in power. Silas’s conflict involves more than the possession of power, he is “separate but equal.” In other words, Silas recognizes that whites will never accept him, but he desires to at least own what they own. More importantly, he would also like to own the dedication of his wife.

There are two stories here: Silas’s and Sarah’s. While Sarah would prefer to be loved, as we see when she reminisces about her former lover Tom who has left a hole that Silas cannot fill, Silas struggles to possess. He provides his wife with a house, brings her cloth and shoes, but that’s all he can truly do for her. When he finds that she is not loyal and dedicated to his plans, he attempts to horsewhip her (much like an overseer would do to a slave). His anger and his final actions are a culmination of the two opposing views to life. Once Silas realizes that Sarah cannot be the wife he would
like her to be and once he looks at how he has lived his entire life, struggling to become a master, he realizes that he will never be able to achieve his goal:

 Ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothing. Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah ain got nothing. It don make no difference which way Ah go. There ain nothing in yo whole life.... yuh kin keep from em! They take your freedom! They take yo women! N then they take your life! (152)

As a result of his desire not to be a part of a society that sees him as inferior, he chooses the symbolic act of death:

 Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ah’m gonna be hard like they is! ... When they come fer me Ah’m gonna be here! N when they git me outta here theys gonna know Ahm gone! (152)

According to Fanon, “He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force (84).

Finally, as if referring directly to Silas, Fanon supports the explicitness of Silas’s verbal sentiments: “The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force” (84). In essence, Silas has become like the master to conquer the master. Thus, his decision to remain in his house is not a rash one, but one that is the result of a lifetime of living under Jim Crow. Silas’s death is the result of his survival.

Silas is what Uncle Tom would never be: angry and violent, especially towards his wife. Silas places blame when Uncle Tom does not. Both men, however, are willing to accept death in opposition to whites, but their reasons differ. Legree is satisfied with beating Tom, but Silas’s aggressors are given no such satisfaction.
I have discussed two kinds of “conscious decisions” in this chapter: those motivated by fear and those motivated by intellect. Tom is willing to die because of fear of God, and not of man. This fear of God keeps him unwillingly in a position of inferiority to the masters, both St. Clare and Legree. Although Eliza and Big Boy are motivated by fear, they are forced to make a decision based on the immediate threat to their lives. They react by fleeing and braving nature. Ultimately, they do not remain victim to mastering beliefs, or as Richard Wright says, “a racial code white man proclaimed was ordained by God.” On the other hand, George, Mann, and Silas are motivated by reason and they are case studies of Hegel’s philosophy. All three risk—and two even lose—their lives for freedom. All three also move towards freedom through the use of a gun. They are conscious of their actions before they react and their symbolically rebellious actions place them, as opposed to their oppressors, in control of their fate.

As Yarborough argues, the characters in Wright’s Uncie Tom’s Children mature from story to story. As they react against the racist situation they are placed in, they also react against Stowe’s stereotype of passive Blacks. Wright, like Stowe, uses Christianity, but unlike Stowe, he suggests to his Black readers that they must actively rebel against racism, if not physically then intellectually; every triumph is a triumph indeed.

Of the Negro race, Harriet Beecher Stowe says, “The Negro race is confessedly more simple, docile, child-like and affectionate, than other races…” (Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin 25). Through the characterization of the tragic heroes, the new
generation who say, “Uncle Tom is Dead!” Richard Wright responds to Harriet Beecher Stowe. In his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” notably published the year before *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright addresses the “simplicity” of the Negro:

> The life of the Negro people is not simple; The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence should be there. (103)

Wright lets his readers know that he will present the complex side of Negro life. What Wright implies but does not state is: there is nothing simple about slavery or racism; there is nothing simple about being oppressed.
Chapter Three
Mommy Dearest: Wright’s Mothers and Sons

Well, son, I’ll tell you:/Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it./And splinters,
And boards torn up./And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare./And turnin’ corners./And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light./But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on/And reachin’ landin’s
So boy, don’t you turn back./Don’t you set down on the steps
‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard./Don’t fall now—
For I’s still goin’, honey,I’s still climbin’
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
--“Mother to Son,” Langston Hughes

In Hughes’ poem, a fictional mother tells her son that although her life has not
been easy, she intends to keep on living it and encourages him to do the same. In effect,
the mother persona, created by Hughes’, a Black male, uses her words to both nurture
and encourage her son, a contrast to the mothers depicted by Richard Wright’s.

The relationship between Black mothers and their sons in Richard Wright’s
works most closely fit the description offered by psychologists Price Cobbs and William
Grier:

When black men recall their early life, consistent themes emerge. For
example, the mother is generally perceived as having been sharply
contradictory. There are remembrances of stimulation and gratification
coeexisting with memories of deprivation and rejection. There is always a
feeling that the behavior of the mother was purposeful and
deliberate…The black man remembers [that]…the mother who sang
spirituals gently at church was capable of inflicting senseless pain at
home. (61-62)

There is no more compelling illustration of the psychologists’ analysis than the
relationship between young Richard and his mother and grandmother in Black Boy,

Richard Wright’s autobiographical creation of his life. In Black Boy, Wright presents not
only a scathing indictment of the conditions of growing up Black in the Jim Crow South but also an emotionally charged, psychologically strained relationship with various family members, particularly his mother and grandmother.

Cobbs' and Grier's analysis of the relationship between Black males and their mothers is most helpful. There is, to say the least, an inadequate amount of research regarding the relationships between Black mothers and their sons. As I make connections between Wright's own relationship with his mother and the relationships between his Black male characters and their mothers, I will include psychoanalytic and sociological studies where appropriate.

The basis of all mother/son relationships, regardless of race, has everything to do with how the mother rears the son during his first few years. Nancy Chodorow, in her analysis of "good mothering" notes,

> Because of the infant's absolute physiological and psychological dependence, and the lack of development of its adaptive ego faculties, the mother must initially make "total environmental provisions" for her infant. This provision includes more than simple fulfillment of physiological needs and relief of drives. Maternal care is crucial for the infant's eventual ability to deal with anxiety and to master drives and the environment. (82)

Chodorow's assessment of the "maternal role" is helpful in analyzing Wright's relationship with his mother which is projected in his fiction. However, the relationship theories (Chodorow's and others) are not always applicable to African-American mothers who must also brave racial discrimination, leaving them sometimes unable to provide even the physiological needs.8 Wright's mother was especially unable to

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8 According to Patricia Hill Collins, white perspectives are problematic for three reasons: 1.) there is an assumption that mothering occurs in a two-parent nuclear family and denies how sufficient resources have been
provide a "total environment" for her children because of her husband's desertion, which left them emotionally and financially bankrupt.

Additionally, we must keep in mind that the psychological theories involving the son's perception of his mother apply to Wright's reaction to his mother, but the theories do not take into account the motives behind his mother's reaction to him, which I argue, are more characteristic of her position as an African-American mother and as the daughter of a former slave. According to Evelyn Bassoff, the process of separation normally begins between the ages of three and five, however, the separation between Wright and his mother is compounded by each person's (mother and son) experiences with racism.

Since the publication of *Black Boy* in 1945, debates have raged about its status as an autobiography. There are several scenes that are not historically correct, including the episode regarding "Uncle Hoskins and the Mississippi River" (2). According to Constance Webb, a Wright biographer, it did not happen to Wright, but to Ralph Ellison who told the story to Wright (305-306). The central figure of *Black Boy*, a young Richard Wright, is not intended to be a historical portrait of its author, but rather a portrait of the South as Wright knew it. James Olney argues, "The bios of *Black Boy* is Richard Wright's past life, his past experience, his existence as 'Richard' or as 'black boy' (247). In essence, we find that Wright's *Black Boy* encompasses a dual existence composed of both the past and the present.

denied because of racial oppression; 2.) strict-role segregation is less common in Black families; 3.) Black mothers routinely work outside the home as well as fulfill their duties within the home.

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Although I do not consider *Black Boy* to be an autobiography, but rather an autobiographical novel, there are three significant experiences, pivotal in the life of young Richard, Wright's literary persona, that are relevant to this study. Michel Fabre has documented the historical accuracy of these three scenes and all are significantly linked to Wright's religious mother and devoutly religious grandmother. The first is the opening scene in which young Richard sets his home afire as his ailing grandmother lies in bed. According to his description, young Richard was beaten so severely by his mother that the doctor was called:

I was afterwards told that he ordered that I be kept abed...that my very life depended on it....But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me. (7-8)

Fabre notes that "he certainly did regard the punishment as a betrayal. It not only Seriously inhibited his independent spirit but also caused him to doubt his relationship his mother" (10).

This scene is representative of Wright's extensive studies in psychoanalysis which he did while he composed an unpublished work he hoped would portray "the pathological behavior resulting from fear and anger" (Fabre 271). In her analysis of Wright's novels, Diane Long Hoeviller finds psychoanalytic themes in his published works as well: "His increasingly self-conscious treatment of the Freudian theme centers on the relation to and influence of the mother. . . . Consequently, the hero is inevitably engaged in a fruitless quest for the mother's undivided loyalty" (65). Wright gives a highly Freudian description of young Richard's response to the punishment described above:

66
Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to drench me with some terrible liquid. (7-8)

The "huge wobbly bags" symbolize his mother's breasts. Young Richard feels dominated by his mother, as though he will drown in her liquid. Furthermore, like Hoeviller, DeCosta-Willis notes that the image signifies an apparent "Freudian manifestation of Richard's ambivalence" involving his "struggle for his mother's undivided love," but he is also repelled by her sexuality" (548).9

The image of the white liquid has further implications; not only does the symbol of the "huge wobbly white bags" signify Wright's feeling of being dominated by his mother, but by white racists as well. The feeling of domination found in this scene is replicated throughout Wright's works. In *Black Boy*, young Richard wants to know more about his grandmother and why she is white. "Mama, is Granny white?" he asks his mother as they sit on the Jim Crow car. His mother later, "without emotion," tells him his grandmother is "of Irish, Scotch, and French stock in which Negro blood had been infused" (56). His grandmother represents the embodiment of racism and religion. There are other symbols—representative of racism—found in Wright's works. In *Native Son*, a white cat with "two green burning pools—pools of accusation and guilt" stares at Bigger Thomas as he stuffs Mary's body into the furnace. The image of the white cat is not unlike the poster of Buckley, the District Attorney, which features "a white face fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the
street at each passerby...Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: YOU CAN’T WIN!” (13). Of course, this scene foreshadows Buckley’s involvement in Bigger’s murder trial. All of these symbols collectively and individually represent the idea of hovering domination—an omnipresent phenomenon. Wherever a Black person goes, he is not free from the hegemonic gaze, or from the pointing finger of the powerful dominant being — white racism.

Regardless of how Black Boy perceived the punishment at the time of the incident, his mother certainly saw her response to her son’s actions from a completely different perspective. Joyce King and Carolyn Mitchell argue the tragedy is that young Richard’s mother does not realize that her son has probably already learned his lesson; and, as a result, Wright undoubtedly perceived his mothers actions, in the words of Cobbs and Grier, as an infliction of “senseless pain.” Nevertheless, young Richard’s mother’s actions are in some way justified: “Perhaps mothers feel that a black man-child duly ‘chastened’ or broken at home will pose less of a threat to a society already primed to destroy him” (King, Mitchell 10). She may have been consciously preparing her young Black son for survival in the South.

The second significant incident occurs during the period of young Richard’s life before his father deserted the family. Young Richard kills a cat at the "direction" of his father. In an effort to force him to take responsibility for his action, his mother verbally appeals to his sense of guilt:

...my mother...being imaginative, retaliated with an assault upon my

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9 As I will discuss later in this chapter, the hovering bags appear in a new form as the “Godface” of Cross’s mother.
sensibilities that crushed me with the moral horror involved in taking a life. All that afternoon she directed toward me calculated words that spawned in my mind a horde of invisible demons....As evening drew near, anxiety filled me and I was afraid to go into an empty room alone. (14)

"Black Boy" describes further how his mother made him bury the cat and ordered him to repeat a prayer of forgiveness after her, "...while I sleep tonight, do not snatch the breath of life from me..." (15). Although in retrospect, Wright seems to understand why his mother appealed to him psychologically, he appears to disagree with the way in which she did. The image of God struck a chord of horror in young Richard at the impressionable age of five, an impression that grew with him. By this point, it is apparent that Black Boy was disappointed by his mother’s attempt to, as he saw it, manipulate and dominate him. While she was overwhelmed with the problems of her marriage, she was faced with the task of teaching her son about the gravity of taking a life. Bassoff sees Blacks Boy’s view as normal:

We mothers know that we are not endowed with magical powers of domination and control; we know that we are ordinary human beings who are often confused and sometimes overwhelmed by all that is expected of us as parents. But our young sons do not know this of us. For every little boy mother—the woman from whose body he came; the woman who feeds, dresses, shelters, and watches over him—is invested with superhuman powers.... (61)

To add a cultural perspective, Patricia Hill Collins argues: “Even when they are aware of the poverty and struggles these women face, many Black men cannot get beyond the powerful controlling image of the superstrong Black mother in order to see the very real costs of mothering to Black women” (116). This “superstrong Black
mother" image will significantly impede the growth of their relationship once the father deserts the family.

A few years later, Nathan Wright deserted his family to live with his mistress. “After my father’s desertion, my mother’s ardently religious disposition dominated the household” Later, when their preacher comes over to eat dinner, Black Boy finds that the man is eating too fast and too much: “That preacher’s going to eat all the chicken!” (31). The act of eating “Black Boy’s food,” which he has not seen much of since his father’s desertion, is metaphorical as well as physiological. The preacher is a threat to him for two reasons. First, Black Boy probably perceives the preacher as his father’s replacement; and as I will describe later, Black Boy associates hunger with his father. Secondly, the preacher is representative of Black Boy’s mother’s religion; he is the one who provides his mother with religious instructions. Chodorow asserts, “The child does not originally recognize that the mother has or could have any separate interests from it. Therefore, when it finds out that its mother has separate interests, it cannot understand it” (79). Although Chodorow is referring to the mother’s relationship with her male partner, which is applicable to the first part of my analysis, I argue that Wright’s mother’s religion was an interest that he did not understand and this lack of understanding, as a child, was the beginning of his rejection of religion—a system of dominating beliefs.

Eventually, Ella Wright, finding it difficult to raise her two young sons alone, and while recovering from an illness, leaves them at an orphanage. However, her guilt
and the boys' constant complaints, along with young Richard's attempt to run away, prompted her, eventually, to remove them from the home. Still, Wright was mentally scarred by the experience. He describes his feelings in *Black Boy*:

> During the first days my mother came each night to visit me and my brother, then her visits stopped. I began to wonder if she, too, like my father, had disappeared into the unknown....(34-5)

Young Richard knew that his mother was doing all she could to provide for him and his brother: "My mother hated to be separated from us but she had no choice" (35); judging from Wright's description, however, he apparently did not get over what he felt to be his abandonment in the orphanage. *Black Boy*'s separation from his mother is more complex because it is forced upon both mother and son as a result of circumstances beyond their control. Bassoff notes further,

> Less fortunate little boys, [those who do not have fathers to turn to when they choose to separate from their mothers] however, grow up feeling that they can turn to no one; having relinquished the comfort-giving mother [in Wright’s case, forcibly relinquished] and finding no comfort from father, they may go through life believing that they must bear all their hardships alone. (56)

Finding himself without a home and a father at the age of seven, Wright's world seemed to be crumbling around him, and he probably began to realize then that he would have to be the "man of the house" (Fabre 15). Eventually, the family went to live with Ella's mother.

The third, and perhaps the most significant experience for Wright, involves his grandmother's religion. Margaret Bolden Wilson, whom he called, "Granny" was a devout Seventh-day Adventist who expected her family to uphold strict religious
doctrine. His grandmother hoped to "save" Richard's soul by taking him to church, a scene he vividly describes in *Black Boy*:

The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent,... (119)

But much to the dismay of his grandmother, young Richard refuses to acquiesce. He explains why:

While I listened to the vivid language of the sermons I was pulled toward emotional belief, but as soon as I went out of the church and saw the bright sunshine and felt the throbbing life of the people in the streets I knew that none of it was true and that nothing would happen. (119)

These startling images serve only to inspire Black Boy's imagination; ironically, he learned through the Church, through his Christian experiences, the power that words or "language" could hold over the listeners; and later, as he demonstrates in *Black Boy*, the power his words could have over his readers. Wright, through his mode of "testifying" to move his Black listeners/readers, resembles the black preacher. Dolan Hubbard argues that the black preacher "moves the spirit of the people beyond the boundary of hierarchical social order to the creation of new forms of human consciousness" (5).

Hubbard further uses the argument of Stephen Henderson who maintains that the 'mascon' is the energizing agent in the universe that issues forth out of black American expressive culture, which is dominated by the emotional sovereignty of the black folk sermon. By 'mascon' he means certain "words and constructions [that] seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and [spiritual] weight, so that whenever they are used they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels." (6)
Wright uses the language of the sermon to appeal to his audience, emotionally and spiritually.

In doing so, Wright uses the highly charged, metaphorical “black folk sermon” language to describe the emotional relationship of Granny and Black Boy. Wright’s description of his grandmother also serves as an illustration of the analysis of the mother-son relationship offered by Cobbs and Grier. Not only does Granny launch verbal assaults upon her grandson, she also mercilessly whips him at times when he arguably deserves it and at times when he does not. At one point, while he bends over so his grandmother could scrub his buttocks, he tells her, “When you get through, kiss back there” (48). Without explaining to him how he offended her with “words whose meaning [he] did not fully know [which] had slipped out of [his] mouth” (48). She “rose slowly and lifted the wet towel high above with all the outraged fury of her sixty-odd-year-old body, leaving an aching streak of fire burning and quivering on [his] skin.” The older Wright says, “I had not realized the meaning of what I had said; its moral horror was unfelt by me, and her attack seemed without cause” (48).

Confused, young Richard runs. His mother finishes the beating when his grandmother is unable to catch him:

I had no way of measuring the gravity of my wrong and I assumed that I had done something for which I would never be forgiven. Had I known just how my words had struck them, I would have remained still and taken my punishment, but it was the feeling that anything could or would happen to me that made me wild with fear. (49)

Although the mothers react to teach him a lesson, it is a lesson that he cannot learn from a beating alone. Once again the lack of communication between mother and son, and in
this case, two Christian mothers and their son, results in the son suffering from both the pain of having unwittingly offended them and the fear of not being forgiven by the two.

Fabre finds Wright’s description of the relationship young Richard had with his grandmother as historically accurate:

…she treated him as an evil presence that might contaminate her household. This contradictory desire to draw him into the bosom of the Adventist Church and to keep him at a distance because of the danger he represented, prevented her from trying to understand the child himself….This become an open war that lasted for years. Richard was fighting for his survival. (33)

Young Richard’s fight for survival included struggling with his grandmother’s unwillingness to allow him to satisfy his hunger for knowledge. Her religious practices eventually spread to his intellectual development. In Black Boy, Wright describes an encounter between young Richard and his grandmother involving his first exposure to literature. Ella, a young teacher, tells young Richard the story of Blue Beard and His Seven Wives. He says his grandmother quickly cut off this early exposure to literature, considering it "Devil stuff" (45). The stories were offensive to Granny's religious, conservative disposition. Consequently, she sent the teacher packing. The youth is highly disturbed by his grandmother's reaction. He declares that he

hungered for that sharp, frightening, breathtaking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me, and I vowed that... I would buy all the novels there were and read them to satisfy that thirst.... No words or punishment could have possibly made me doubt. I had tasted what to me was life, I would have more of it, somehow, someway. (emphasis mine 46-47)
The use of the word “tastes” signifies both his physical and spiritual hunger—a hunger supported by Granny’s religion, as it precluded certain foods from his diet. In the section preceding the Blue Beard scene, Black Boy describes his diet:

No pork or veal was ever eaten at Granny’s, and rarely was there meat of any kind. We seldom ate fish and then only those that had scales and spines. Baking powder as never used; it was alleged to contain a chemical harmful to the body. For breakfast I ate mush and gravy made from flour and lard (120).

He also describes his clothes as being “so shabby that he was ashamed to go to school” so he decided to “have it out” with Granny about working weekends (143).

His childhood experiences are highly reminiscent of Frederick Douglass’s.

According to Douglass,

The slaves received their monthly allowance of food, and their yearly clothing ....Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers... The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two course linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they were naked until next allowance-day. (54)

I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from any thing else than hunger and cold. ... We were not regularly allowanced. Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called mush. (71-72)

Although Wright was not a slave, he certainly lived in conditions that limited Blacks in ways similar to that of slaves. Wright was not only limited by his grandmother’s religion, but by the poverty his family was subjected to in the Jim Crow South. Religion and racism became synonymous for Wright at an early age.

Through their conflicts, Wright implies that he saw religion as a form of domination to keep the Black community in a state of placation, and Granny became the "conspirator to the oppressor" (Mootry 118). The Blue Beard scene further demonstrates
Black Boy's spiritual hunger and in doing so, it again responds to Douglass's call, as identified by Robert Stepto; Black Boy's memory is comparable to a memory of Douglass where Douglass describes his master's prohibition against educating him:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A,B.C....Just at the point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further...., He said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. (78)

As a result of his master's harsh words, Douglass comes to a "realization" about the power of literacy:

It was a new and special realization.... I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man....From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. (74)

Douglass was freed mentally with his new realization about the power an educated man can hold against his oppressor--a power which is later manifested by the publication of his narrative.

Young Richard, like Douglass, also comes to realize the power of words when that power is withheld from him by the "oppressor"—his grandmother, the woman whom Wright describes as "nearly white as a Negro can get without being white, which means that she was white" (Black Boy 46). In his analysis of Douglass's narrative, Robert Stepto notes,

At the heart of the episode is the ancient call of literacy's possibilities, occasioned by the narrator's first fleeting glimpse of the vibrant word—and the equally ancient response of admonition or suppression, made by a representative of the most immediate oppressing social structure. (140)
The oppressor's attempt to stop Black Boy's exposure to literature merely piques in him the curiosity that Douglass describes, and he becomes obsessed with learning more. He too learns the "pathway from literacy to freedom." Like Douglass's Narrative, Wright's Black Boy becomes a powerful vehicle for combating racism. Stepto notes further, "for Wright, as for others, including most notably Frederick Douglass, literacy and ascent are the interwoven contours of the road to freedom" (134).

Douglass and Wright differ in one important aspect: religion. On one hand, Douglass, a Christian, did not blame God for slavery, but rather condemned "slaveholding religion" and recognized that there is a difference between “the Christianity of the land and the Christianity of Christ” (Douglass 153). On the other hand, Wright, saw no difference; Christianity was oppressive no matter who practiced it or why it was being practiced. Wright found religion worthless as it did not feed him, allow him to read fiction, or improve his mother’s health. During a conversation between young Richard and a Black preacher, Black Boy sums up his “attitude toward God and the suffering in the world”: He provides “a statement that stemmed from my knowledge of life as I had lived, seen, felt, and suffered it in terms of dread, fear, hunger, terror and loneliness…. ‘If laying down my life could stop the suffering in the world, I’d do it. But I don’t believe anything can stop it,’ I told him.” (135).

Clearly, Wright’s religious experiences affected his writing. We see the same kind of metaphorical language in his fiction as he describes as having heard in his grandmother’s church. Finally, Wright admits that she inspired, but not wholly, the creation of “The Man Who Lived Underground”:

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The concept has slept somewhere within my head since my childhood awakening now and then to baffle me, to fill me with new insight into myself and my environment. The whole idea is centered around the ardent religious disposition of my grandmother who died in Chicago in 1934. ("Memories of My Grandmother" Unpublished Essay 1)

"The concept" involves the protagonist, Fred Daniels, who Wright calls an "invisible man." Invisibility, according to Wright, "dates back" to his grandmother whose religious "disposition was based upon something invisible"; the unattainable concept of religion was incomprehensible to Wright, and by extension, it is incomprehensible to Wright's Black male protagonists as well.

While Wright's grandmother may have acted as an oppressor to Wright's intellectual development, his mother, in contrast, encourages it: "On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words" (26). Finally, when Black Boy leaves home, his mother tells him to make sure he sends for her quickly because "I'm not happy here" (244). Black Boy's mother, a schoolteacher, was more sensitive than was her mother, a former slave; thus the relationship she had with her son was not an estranged one—though filled with moments of misunderstandings and miscommunication— but one that Wright seemed to come to understand (though not wholly) as an adult; this is undoubtedly, why he dedicated Native Son to her: To My Mother/ who, when I was a child at her knee, taught me to revere the fanciful and imaginative" (Native Son). The estranged relationship between Wright and the aspects of his mothers that are motivated by religion is relived in the relationships between his fictional protagonists and their mothers.
Recent criticism has rightly deemed Wright’s mothers as being religious matriarchal figures who use their religion as a crutch—the only means to battle society’s ills. As Trudier Harris notes, "These religious strong women are portrayed as ineffectual in the face of the poverty and racism of their lives and as acknowledged allies of the society in keeping black men in their place" (405). Harris’ description of the women in *Native Son* provides a paradigm by which we can analyze the women of Wright’s life, especially his grandmother. The mother characters’ dependence on their religious faith as their only support causes them to become short-sighted, not seeing beyond the day-to-day task of survival other than the anticipation of an after-life. Furthermore, the mothers are incapable of communicating with their sons except through demeaning, insensitive words.

However, at times, as I will demonstrate, we find these women to be loving nurturers and their sons to be receptive of their love, even though these sons do not understand the motives behind their mothers’ harsh actions. As a result of their overweening religious practices, they alienate their sons, who find religious dependence useless in the face of conflict: in this way, these religious matriarchs are a hindrance in the protagonists’ quest for freedom—equality, respect, and power.

Before I discuss the relationships between the Black protagonists and their mothers, I must note that the women are additionally problematic for many female critics because they do not represent sociological reports of women of Wright’s era. Miriam Decosta Willis notes,

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10 For a list of these scholars and their arguments, see my description of this chapter in Chapter One.
One of the most controversial aspects of Richard Wright's works is his characterization of Black women, particularly at a time when creative writers, literary critics, and feminists have demanded a reassessment of the Black women in American literature and history. (540)

DeCosta-Willis is well justified in her criticism of Wright’s female characters.

Jacqueline Jones is among those who contribute to what DeCosta-Willis calls “a reassessment of the Black woman in America.” She records statistical data which confirm Willis’s assertion: “Black female labor force participation remained steady from 1940 to 1950” (Jones 241). When *Native Son* was published in 1940, women, including Black women, were seizing labor opportunities left open by men drafted into World War II. According to Jones,

> Hundreds of thousands of southern black women migrated north during the war, eager to find heavy industry jobs that offered higher wages and shorter hours compared to domestic service and agriculture labor. (241)

Jones notes further that by “1950 one-third of all black wives were in the labor force compared to one-fourth of all married women in the general population” (269). This is the world in which Wright was writing and living and the world in which at least two of his mothers, Mrs. Thomas of *Native Son* and Mrs. Damon of *The Outsider* lived. Both of these women are southern women who migrated north and both rely on their sons to support them financially.

Sherley Anne Williams argues that the mothers of Wright’s fiction appear in “cameos and vignettes”; this is especially true of the mothers in Wright’s short fiction (396). During their often brief appearances, they are not helpful in solving their son’s dilemmas. As a result, the Black sons see their mothers as women who are more against them than for them. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the men are the ones who immediately
react to the threat that Big Boy and BoBo face for having killed a white man. Big Boy’s mother’s response is, “Only Gawd kin hep yuh now” (37). Big Boy, frightened by his mother’s seeming resolve to give him up for lost says, “Ma, don let em git me.” Immediately, certainly by no mistake, “his father came into the doorway” (37). The mother’s response to her son’s dilemma which requires an immediate plan of action, leads readers to wonder what she would do to help her son, if the men were not there to implement a proactive plan. In Wright’s novels, as I will discuss later, the answer to the question is suggested in the actions of the mothers. She would most likely tell her son to pray, and might, in addition, fall to her knees and beg the white tormentors for mercy. It is clear that the mother is not, in the words of Hegel and as suggested by the successful plan of flight, willing to “stake [her] life for freedom.”

In “Down by the Riverside,” Mann faces a decision of saving his wife who is experiencing labor pain by riding in a boat his brother-in-law, Bob, has stolen, or yielding to guilt his mother-in-law places on him for wanting to use the boat: “Son, yuh a fool t go stealin them white folks boats in times like these” (68). Bob makes it clear to her that their choices are clear cut: get in the boat and take the chance of getting caught, or wait there to drown in the rising flood waters: Bob says, “Ef Ah hadn’t stole tha boat yuh all woulda had t stay here till the watah washed yuh erway” (68). Since Bob has stolen the boat, he is aware of the dangers and warns Mann about what may happen (of course we know that he is foreshadowing what will happen) if Mann takes the stolen boat to town: “ef anything happened to yuh, yuh just couldn’t git erway” (69). Mann knows that his options are even more limited: he can either get in the boat and go to the
hills or try to save the lives of his wife and their unborn child. Or, of course, he can stay in the house and do nothing at all. He leaves for the hospital, and Grannie, reluctantly (although her daughter is dying) goes with him. Grannie's reluctance is later countered by Mann's actions, which I have described in the last chapter. It is he who would rather protest racism by risking his own life, and she who would rather stand idly by and wait to be washed away in the flood. Through this contrast in behavior, Wright makes a point about how religious beliefs can be debilitating to Blacks.

The mothers of Wright's novels are more complex, or rather, their role as mother and the influence they have had on the rearing of their sons are more pronounced. Bigger's mother is a type formed from Wright's mother and religious grandmother. She too sings spirituals and inflicts pain—that of "depravation and rejection." In spite of her destructive behavior, I argue that at times, her actions are representative of a mother who wishes to prepare her son for survival in a hostile world, especially since she has made him responsible for her and her family's survival; unfortunately, as a result, she becomes guilty of communicating to and not with her son.

In the opening scene of the novel, Mrs. Thomas projects a sense of guilt on Bigger by maintaining that he is a failure as a man because he is hesitant about accepting a job from a white family. Mrs. Thomas appears in only a few scenes in the novel, and, in each earlier scene, she urges her son to be "the man of the house." She does not ask him if he wants the job with the Dalton's or offer any alternatives. Trudier Harris asserts that Mrs. Thomas succeeds in casting a sense of guilt on her son, and in doing so she becomes, in part, responsible for Bigger's later behavior (65). Her goal seems to be to
cajole Bigger into accepting responsibility for the family by launching vicious verbal attacks on Bigger's manhood: "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you." Bigger's response, "Aw, don't start that again" suggests that she belittles him and attacks his manhood regularly (7). These insensitive words succeed in further alienating her from her son. They are additionally alarming because they come from a Christian mother who lacks compassion for her son. Wright's Christian mother is as manipulative to her son, as Christian slaveholders were to their Christian slaves.

The mother's behavior is unhealthy, making her hold on him problematic for yet another reason. Harris notes,

Mrs. Thomas is a defeated woman, one who urges her son to take responsibility for a family in which he is son, not husband or father. .... Bigger must provide the support that such relatives could have provided. Her expectations for Bigger, Wright implies, are too extreme. (66-7)

Bassoff further extends Harris's assertion: "If he is fortunate, the son is blessed with a mother who helps him pass through his separation from her without undue pain and without permanent impairment" (66). On the contrary, Bigger's mother makes him solely responsible for her family, making it virtually impossible for him to separate and to become independent. According to Bassoff, "Although from the time he is about three a boy normally pulls away from his mother and seems to tune her out, he does not stop taking to heart the things that she tells him; on the contrary, he clings to her words and draws on them even when he is grown" (201). Surely a statement such as "Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you," (6) has an irreparable effect on Bigger -- as his response indicates: "Maybe you oughtn've. Maybe you ought to left me where I was."

Her hostile tone is bitter: "Bigger, honest, you the most no-countnest man I ever seen in
my life” (7). Again, his response implies that she has dumped this mountain of mental anguish upon him many times before: “You don told me that a thousand times” (8). Bassoff notes further, “A mother’s words can also undermine the son’s self-confidence” (203). We find this to be true in the case of Bigger Thomas.

Bigger is acutely aware of his responsibilities. The narrator says,

He hated his family because he knew that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. (9)

The narrator implies that Bigger would like to be more a man, but he is teetering on the edge of the psychological abyss of racism. Bigger must not only contend with the harsh reality of racism, but he also experiences feelings of alienation in his own home. Bigger’s dual reality reminds us of young Richard, who remained at constant odds with his grandmother and the Jim Crow South.

Although Mrs. Thomas’s relationship with her son far exceeds that of a nurturing mother, at times her actions are arguably expressive of the love only a mother can have for a son. She certainly does rely too heavily upon Bigger to support her entire family; however, her actions are consistent with those of slave mothers. She attempts to prepare her son to survive in a world where he is convinced from the day he is born that he “can not win.” During slavery, Black mothers began to prepare their children for work under the dominance of whites at an early age. According to Jacqueline Jones, “The adults provided with their strict disciplinary measures some protection for the children because, as historian Eugene Genovese observes ‘parents knew that soon enough the
indulgence [of slave owners] would give way to the whip. Better they instill elementary habits and according to their own measure” (251). The harsh words Mrs. Thomas employs are as calculating as the words and actions young Richard’s mother used to teach him the importance of valuing life when he set the family’s house afire and when he killed the kitten. Both mothers, though their young sons would disagree, use words as a “strict [though extreme] disciplinary measure.” After she attacks his manhood, she tells her son before he goes to the “other side of town,” “Be careful, son” (49). Here, she shows concern about her son’s safety, as he journeys deeper into the heart of racism, or in the tradition of Joseph Conrad, “the heart of darkness.”

As Bigger walks to his job, he thinks he could “take the job and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve” (12). He has few choices. Later as he stands apprehensively in front of the Dalton’s house and contemplates whether to enter at the back door or the front, he is aware of his status as a Black man in a world (the neighborhood and American society) that is not his: “Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought he was trying to rob or rape somebody” (49). Bigger’s awareness of his race and his inferior social status heightens while he is in the Dalton home. Mr. Dalton questions Bigger about the one room “garbage dump” he and his four-member family live in—a dump owned by Dalton himself:

“How much rent do you pay?”
“Eight dollars a week.”
“For how many rooms?”

11 I am referring here to the statement that Bigger makes to Max during his interview in which he states, “you whipped before you born”(407).
"We just got one, suh?"
"Now you have a mother, a brother, and a sister?"
"Yessuh, there's four of us," he stammered, trying to show that he was not as stupid as he might appear....(55)

The description of the room parallels descriptions of slave quarters. According to Booker T. Washington, he was born in a typical log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet square. In this cabin I lived with my mother and a brother and sister till after the Civil War, when we were all declared free....The cabin was without glass windows; it had only openings in the side which let in the light, and also the cold, chilly air of winter. (95)

In addition the cabin had a "cat hole," but Washington could not see the purpose for it when "there were at least a dozen or half dozen other places in the cabin that would have accommodated the cats" (95). Comparatively, the Thomas's small, one-room apartment with its "thinly plastered walls" has two beds and is separated into living and dining areas by a thin curtain. The walls apparently have holes large enough for large rats to enter through, as we see at the beginning of the novel. The two poorly inadequate dwellings—the slave cabin and the tenement— owned by whites, are constant reminders of how American society regards its Black inhabitants as inferior.

The Thomas's shabby living conditions bind the family by a sense of shame which surfaces when they dress in the mornings; it is as if the dawn of a new day serves as a reminder of their impoverished existence. Its occupants feel constantly ashamed of one another's gazes, and they must "put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed," but clothing themselves does not take away their feelings (2). Even when Bigger is clothed, he feels ashamed and anxious. When he is at home he "wishes he could rise up through the ceiling and float away from this room for ever" (115). As he
thinks this, he makes his sister, who is dressing, feel ashamed. James Evans asserts, Vera’s fear that Bigger has looked under her dress, is an expression of what Bigger has actually seen: “the emptiness of her life.” Evans notes further that “the curtain has become translucent and Vera’s violent reaction is her response to the shame of not being able to hide her private disgrace” (106).

Later, Mr. Dalton, the owner of the small room, who lives in “the big house” makes Bigger feel ashamed. At the Dalton home, he is made to acutely feel his social status, and as a result, he remembers the survival training taught to him by his mother: “He suddenly remembered the many times his mother had told him not to look at the floor when talking with white folks or asking for a job.” Yet, Bigger still feels inferior: “He lifted his eyes and saw Dalton watching him closely. He dropped his eyes again” (55).

Mrs. Thomas’s character as a mother is incomplete. When Bigger has been arrested for the rapes and murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears, Mrs. Thomas’s religion places a barrier between her and her son. She offers her minister as a means of comfort to a son who has clearly never had faith in God. In a later scene between Bigger and Max, they discuss the subject of religion:

“Your folks were religious?”
“Yeah; they went to church all the time.... I didn’t like it. There was nothing in it. Aw, all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn’t get ’em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it don’t get ’em nothing. The white folks got everything.... The white folks like us to be religious, then they can do what they want with us.”(italics mine, 412)

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Bigger, an undereducated young man, implies that religion is a ploy introduced by whites to dominate Blacks. Mrs. Thomas, however, does not view religion this way, anymore than does “Granny.” As a result, she is limited to thinking in terms of religion only. Mrs. Thomas does not offer him any other comfort or assistance. She does not talk to him to find out if he is guilty or ask why he committed the crimes he has been accused of committing. Trudier Harris notes that she does not try to “talk with the lawyers or judges, try to influence public opinion (or) get her minister to take a more active role in Bigger’s defense” (70). Harris agrees that Wright limits Mrs. Thomas’ character to make a point about “the ineffectiveness” of religion: “He allows Mrs. Thomas to give up her son; by enabling her to transcend her earthly problems, Wright shows the practical failure of religion in this world” (70). Bigger’s mother has clearly allowed religion to be the only active agent in the raising of her son even when he is facing death. Mother Thomas, unlike Hughes’s mother, sits helplessly on the stair.

In the last scene in which she is present, Mrs. Thomas embarrasses Bigger by falling to her knees and begging the Daltons to have mercy on Bigger. Significantly, she approaches Mrs. Dalton first. Certainly an appeal to a mother from a mother would be effective, but this act has greater literary significance. Mrs. Thomas says, “Don’t let ‘em kill my boy” (349). Mrs. Dalton replies, “There’s nothing I can do now,” …“It’s out of my hands. I did all I could, when I wanted to give your boy a chance at life. (348). Not only does Mrs. Dalton choose not to assert her power as a mother and as a wife of a prominent man to help to save Bigger, but she also absolves Mrs. Thomas of the guilt she feels for being the mother of a murderer: “You’re not to blame for this” (348). Thus,
Mrs. Dalton, a blind woman who is dressed in flowing white, replicates Mary, Mother of God, the one charged with giving lost souls “a chance at life.” Mrs. Dalton, whom Wright has made into society’s idea of purity and justice, is blind to the contributions she makes to discrimination and blinded by the ones she makes to the Black community.

Mrs. Dalton, as a Mother Mary figure, has the power to intercede between God and man, but she does not. Mr. Dalton simultaneously represents God/Master, and his faithful servant is Mrs. Thomas, who tells Mr. Dalton that he is “rich and powerful” and offers to work for them if they let her son go, is unsuccessful. Mr. Dalton, reiterates what his wife has said, “This thing is out of our hands. Up to a certain point we can help you, but beyond that….People must protect themselves. But you won’t have to move” (349).

The kneeling scene gives a clear sense of Wright’s negative perception of religion as used by Blacks. Mrs. Thomas’s act of kneeling to the Daltons signifies the Lord-Servant/Master-Slave relationship. These Godlike figures who have done “a lot for Negroes” prove to be icons that many respect, but the Dalton’s clearly have no sincere respect for Blacks.

Tragically, even though they say they cannot influence the outcome (although they haven’t even tried), they allow Mrs. Thomas to remain in poverty, which they control. Tragically enough, she is thankful that they allow her to remain in the one room slave cabin. Mrs. Thomas has taught Bigger how to survive physically, but not mentally; she has not taught him how to survive adversity by instilling in him a sense of pride. She does not seem to realize that her son needs more than food and a place to live. Harris says, "Mrs. Thomas's thanking of the Daltons for not forcing her to move is another slap
at Bigger's dignity, for perhaps he would have preferred seeing his family move to seeing his mother humiliate herself before the people who have made him feel less than a human being" (69-70). Although her act of pleading with the Daltons to have mercy on her son can be construed as an act of love, her previous act of informing them that she has been evicted overshadows her act of love. Mrs. Thomas's inability to pay them the rent for their property still allows them control. She has not learned from her son's violent acts, and her willingness to remain in the psychologically depressing/oppressing "slave cabin" is evidence of this. If Mrs. Thomas does not seek freedom for herself, how can she be expected to assist her son in his quest? Wright effectively demonstrates how religion works against the bond between mother and son.

We see a similar conflict between mother and son emerge, in Wright's next novel, *The Outsider*. Darwin Turner states, "*The Outsider* is a revision and redefinition of *Native Son*" (164). Cross Damon of *The Outsider*, perceives his mother's religious faith as a means to control him and as a result, they lack a healthy mother/son relationship. The description of Mother Damon easily fits into the negative stereotype of Wright's mother characters. Mother Damon is insensitive, rejecting, and, in many ways, an absolute nuisance -- character flaws which contribute to Cross' distorted, morbidly deranged mind-set. Like Ella Wright, Mother Damon was a "country school teacher in a small Southern town" (*The Outsider* 27) when she met and married her son's father, who like Nathan Wright, was unfaithful and deserted his family.

Cross Damon, resembles Wright even more closely than Bigger does, not only because Cross is as well read as Wright was, but also because of his religious beliefs.
Cross believes in the Nietzchean philosophy: "God is dead" (Alsen 215). Cross, like Bigger, is 20 something, a liar, promiscuous, and a murderer alienated from his mother because of her religion. In Darwin Turner's words, "Both rebel against their mothers, who typify an older generation which urged Negro children to live according to the ethics taught in Christian churches and prescribed for Negroes by a society dominated by white men" (168).

Wright presents a detailed description of Cross Damon's unstable relationship with his mother, from whom he was alienated at an early age. The narrator says that in response to her failing marriage, Mrs. Damon (like Mrs. Thomas, she has no first name) "took her sorrow and infant son to God" (28). From that point on, she apparently let God be the ruling force in both their lives. Her religion becomes the only means by which she communicates with her son whom she named "after the cross of Jesus" (29).

From an early age, Cross associates his mother with a vindictive God:

His first coherent memories had condensed themselves into an image of a young woman whose hysterically loving presence had made his imagination conscious of an invisible God--Whose secret grace granted him life--hovering oppressively in space above him. His adolescent fantasies had symbolically telescoped this God into an awful face shaped in the form of a huge and crushing NO, a terrifying face which had, for a reason he could never learn, created him, had given him a part of Himself (22)

To Cross, God is an oppressor in the guise of his mother. Sherley Anne Williams notes, "Strength in black women is seen increasingly as ... a kind of religious hysteria--Cross Damon's mother in The Outsider...or Richard Wright's grandmother in Black Boy" (404-405). Mother Damon lacks the ability to communicate with her son, but she would rather communicate to him her beliefs based
on her religion. Like the grandmother in *Black Boy* does with books, Cross’s mother awakens in him, through her admonitions, an interest in the very thing that he was to avoid: sex.

This God’s No-Face had evoked in his pliable boy’s body an aching sense of pleasure by admonishing him to shun pleasure as the tempting doorway opening blackly on to hell; had too early evoked awakened in him a sharp sense of sex by thunderingly denouncing sex as the sin leading to eternal damnation. . . . he felt himself menaced by a mysterious God Whose love seemed somehow like hate. (22)

Cross’s early childhood memory of the lingering image of a dominating mother is reminiscent of young Richard’s memory of the “huge wobbly bags” which I have argued is a representative of young Richard’s feelings of domination. According to Bassoff, feelings of the “all-powerful mother” is characteristic of sons: “To the very young boy—and in the unconscious of every grown man—mother is alternately experienced as a life-affirming, benevolent force and as a fierce and terrifying one” (60). Cross has ambiguous feelings about his mother. He both loves and despises her; needs her but repels her. She has given him life, hence the image of God, but inhibits his need to grow spiritually and mentally.

Mother Damon does not recognize that her son’s problems have much to do with her. Instead, this Christian mother rarely speaks kind words of encouragement to her son, but holds an iron rod of religious discipline over him like a master’s whip. Furthermore, since she places her religion between her son and herself, he cannot confide in her to find solutions to his multitude of problems:

he could never speak to her about this difference in emotional similarity; he could only pretend that it did not exist, for not only did his deep love
of her forbid it, but he did not possess enough emotional detachment from her for that to happen. (21)

Mother Damon, like Mother Thomas, does not offer her son any advice (other than to pray) or tell him that he should assume responsibility for Dot’s baby; instead she tells him to confess: "If you feel you can’t master yourself, then take your problem to God. He’ll teach you how to live with others before it’s too late" (29). This statement is significantly troubling to/for Cross. According to Chodorow, mothers are responsible for teaching their sons how to “master drives.” Thus it is the mother’s job and not God’s to help her son.

This issue of “mastering” will emerge, as I will discuss in Chapter Five, later in the novel. For example, when Cross contemplates why he murdered Gil and Hemdon he concludes, “they alone knew how far cut off from life one was when one assumed the role of the godlike” (388-389). Communism, like religion, is a means by which others can “master” others. Mother Damon’s admonishments “fall on deaf ears”: Cross like Bigger, has long ago rejected belief in God and rejects any advice associated with God.

Like Mrs. Thomas, Mother Damon succeeds in projecting a sense of guilt on her son. However, Mother Damon invokes guilt in her son by admonishing his relations with women. Critical of Cross for his relationship with Dot, she projects upon him the harsh feelings she has about men in general—feelings she has harbored since her marriage to Cross’s father, which ended with the man’s desertion. Cross apparently believes that his mother has emotionally replaced her husband with him:

She was blaming him somehow for its (her marriage) having gone wrong, confusedly seeking his masculine sympathy for her sexually blighted life...This image of his mother’s incestuously tinged longings
would linger with him for days and he could curse himself for living in a crazy world that he could not set right (21).

Again, we see another mother who does not allow her son to mentally separate from her. “Her incestuously tinged longings” are a result of her failed marriage: “It is usually women who have been treated abominably by significant men in their lives who vent pent-up feelings of rage, fear, or contempt against their innocent male offspring” (Bassoff 75). It is interesting that Wright uses long passages to describe the relationship between Cross and Mrs. Damon, but as with most of Wright's female characters, the dialogue she is given is minimal, sharp, and antagonizing. What is not minimal is the description of the relationship; it is described with words such as "dread" and "frigid." Significantly, Wright also uses the word "dread" to describe how he felt when he thought his mother had abandoned him and his brother in the orphanage: “Dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being...I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others” (Black Boy 35).

Cross also feels abandoned by his mother; yet, he feels unwittingly attached to her emotionally. He separates from her emotionally and physically when he leaves Chicago to begin his new life as Lionel Lane, and when he hears of her death, he realizes that “his mother had been dead for him for years, and that was why he had been able to reflect upon her so coldly and analytically when she was living...To him his mother’s reality was that she had taught him how to feel what he was now feeling” (512). Likewise, Wright expresses similar feelings when he realizes his detachment from his mother the night she tells him she wants to die: “that night I ceased to react to my mother; my feelings were frozen. I merely waited upon her, knowing that she
was suffering....her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women
I was to meet in the future....(117). I am not implying that Wright’s mother was dead
to him as was Cross’s; in fact, Wright was much more compassionate towards his
mother than Cross. While Cross blames his mother for his deranged mental state,
Wright argues that his relationship with his mother affected the way that he reacted to
his life’s experiences, including his notable writing career. Significantly, the
relationships that both men have with their mothers, who were in some way suffering
victims of circumstances beyond their control, succeed in “setting the emotional tone
of their lives.”

The emotionally complex relationship between mother and son extends to The
Long Dream, the last novel published by Wright. Mrs. Emma Tucker, like the mothers
previously mentioned, is not wholly developed. We see her through the eyes of
Fishbelly and Tyree, who describe her as a woman who does not understand things as
men do. Harris accurately describes the chauvinistic perception that Tyree holds:
"Instead of trusting her, he views her as a pathetic, church-going buffoon who is more
a burden than a wife; the origins of his contempt are not made clear (48).
Unfortunately, Tyree passes his negative perception of his wife on to his son.

Although Emma is similar to other Wright mother characters, she differs from
the earlier mothers in that she is the wife of a well-to-do man, but like her literary
sisters she does become a widow. The fact that she is a wife distinguishes her from
the other two mothers, whose husbands are absent. Though Mrs. Tucker is in another
economic class, she is, like the others, an undeveloped character who tries to control
her son with her religious beliefs. In a second scene involving Fish and his mother, the narrator describes an illness that left Fish bed-ridden for days with a high fever that caused ghastly hallucinations. Once the fever breaks, Fish’s mother "absented herself for hours to do work for the Mount Olivet Baptist Church," telling Fish that "Lots of folks is much sicker’n you, son" (58). As a result, Fish is forced to get his own food. While reaching for a pan of cornbread in the top warmer, he stumbles and falls, hitting the right side of his neck "upon the sweltering metal" (59). The doctor tells Fish’s parents that had the "bums gone a quarter of an inch deeper, he could not have saved the boy" (60). This scene is significant for two reasons. First, Mrs. Tucker chooses to care for other people at the expense of her child’s well-being. Here, readers are reminded of slave mothers who were unable to remain home to care for their own children because they had to either work in the fields or care for the children of their master’s. The difference, of course, is that slaves had no choice. Emma does not recognize how much her behavior is influenced by her religious belief. She is “enmeshed in servitude.” Furthermore, Fish’s mother places service to God in front of caring for her own son whom she left at home alone without easy access to food. Fish’s mother, like Wright’s grandmother, places the importance of charity outside of the home over the care of members of her own family.

This scene is significant to the character development of Fishbelly. The narrator says that Fishbelly clung to his mother and she, feeling guilty, allowed him. This formed a pattern for him, “The comfort he drew from her was sensual in its intensity, and it formed the pattern of what he was to demand later in life from
women” (60). Although the novel is divided into parts in reference to dreams, it is also divided into two parts that deal directly with Fish’s development into manhood. In the above quote, the narrator refers to a part of Fish’s life that readers will not see, Fish as a man in Paris. This early incident, writhed with guilt, affects his later relationships with women. According to Chodorow, “The earliest relationship and its affective quality inform and interact with all other relationships during development....In later years as well, the relation to the mother informs a person’s internal and external relational stance” (79). We’ll find this to be true in his relationship with Gladys.

While still an innocent child, Fishbelly has his first encounter with whites. As he journey’s to see his father, Fish is accosted by white males who are shooting dice in the alley. Since one of them considers him, a “crying nigger” to be good luck, he is made to shoot the dice. This scene does not only mark the first time Fish has an encounter with white males, but it also foreshadows the illegal relations he will have with white males and the “tears” he will shed as a result. More significantly, Fish is forced by the white man to throw the dice; he has no control over his own actions, no choices. He has “luck” according to one of them and is able to make money. The one who makes the money, in turn, gives Fish a dollar. Fish chooses to keep this interaction a secret, even from his father, who will later reveal secret dealings with whites to Fish with the expectation that Fish will “inherit and run the business.” Thus, Fish’s innocent hands on the white cubes with the “black dots staring at him” undoubtedly symbolize the risk he will eventually take in dealing with the police chief. He will become a part of a business that seeks to control the lives of Clintonville
Blacks which Tyree makes clear are outnumbered by whites, making them “little black dots.” Tyree’s attempt to control is like shooting dice; it’s a gamble, and Tyree ends up fighting “his friends” from the grave after they kill him. Ultimately, as evidenced by Tyree’s murder and Fish’s flight, the power belongs to the whites.

The father-son relationship is unique to The Long Dream and may be Wright’s attempt to satisfy his “father hunger”—a term which describes a son’s “deep craving for physical and emotional interaction with his father…and the loss and emptiness felt as a result of being deprived of such interaction” (Bassoff 95). Although “father hunger” is a recent term, Wright himself admits that he hungered for his father: “As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness” (18). Again, Wright uses his writing to exorcise his hunger for what he lacked as a child. The Long Dream features a father who takes charge of teaching his son how to survive in a hostile world. The lesson begins the day Chris is lynched: “I got to tell you what life is for black folks. Tonight you git your first lesson and you got to remember it all your life.” The father goes on to tell his son, “This is what you got to live with each day. But I don’t want it to keep you from being a man, see? Be a man, son, no matter what happens” (66).

While Mr. Tucker offers commentary to his son about the lynching, Mrs. Tucker would rather he not know about the southern taboo, but her husband has the last word on the subject: “He’s old enough to die, so he’s old enough to know! (64). Chris’s lynching notably marks not only Fish’s realization about the dangers Black
males face, it also affects his opinion about his parents. Fish is stunned and ashamed by his parents' reaction to what has occurred, and his shame regarding their fear succeeds in distancing him from them emotionally. The narrator implies that the rite of passage for Fish has begun and the rite includes his emotional separation from his mother: "His mother rose and embraced him, taking leave of his childhood, of his innocence. "It's alright, Marna," he mumbled, struggling for self-possession"(64). Here Fish struggles not to be dominated or controlled by his mother's emotions.

Although Fish's desire to be separated from his mother is normal, the circumstances—awaiting Chris's lynching—are not normal. In this way, Fish is not different from Black Boy, Bigger and Cross, all of whom separate themselves from their mothers emotionally at a young age. Race, shame, guilt and dread are intertwined throughout Wright's novels.

After the town's excitement over Chris's lynching dies down, Mrs. Tucker tells her son, "When the weather's like this, it means Gawd's talking to man....He's warning us about the evil of our ways..." (99). Jane Davis notes that Fishbelly is alienated by his mother's harshly moralistic warnings to him to behave the way she thinks God wants (Davis 73): "He held his tongue, realizing that the world his mother saw eluded him" (100). Mrs. Tucker never explains exactly what she means by what she says. Later, Mrs. Tucker forces her moral convictions on her unwilling son when she discovers that he has been smoking: "Son, God don't want you to smoke...Smoking's a sin, son...." (101). The narrator notes that "her moral rage startled him....She was so positive about God's desires that he felt that she had come fresh from a conference
with Him" (101). When he refuses to accept her moral laws, she slaps him (102). Religion thereby becomes associated with violence. Davis notes further, "Fish's mother's use of religion is a means of exerting her own control over him" (73). Through her attempt to dominate her son with religion, she succeeds in alienating him from her. This is the end of their relationship. Within the next few hours, Fish is arrested and released into the corrupt world of Tyree.

Fish and Zeke are arrested while playing mudball with their friends. The charge is trespassing. The scene is similar to that of Big Boy and his friend's trespass. Although there is no white lady present at the pond where the boys are arrested, there is one present on the ride to the police station. As a result of Fish's uncontrollable urge to stare at her, a police officer threatens him with castration, a threat that causes him to lose consciousness. By the time he leaves the police station, he is threatened with castration and passes out again, much to the delight of the white officers. Like Big Boy, Fish is treated like a man who desires to be with white women—thought to be every Black man's fantasy. As a result of this incident—baptismal through experience—Fish, like Big Boy, loses his innocence: "A clap of white thunder had split his world in two; he was being snatched from his childhood. The white folks treated him like a man, but inside he was crying and quaking like a child. Lawd, don't let em hurt me, he prayed" (113). Fish's arrest brings him closer to his father who takes him into his confidence.

According to Evelyn Bassoff, "to acquire his identity, ...., a little boy cannot pattern himself after his mother. At his earliest, he must begin to turn away from her
and toward his father.” Bassoff states further that “he must begin to make an effort to separate himself imaginatively, or to ‘dis-identify,’ from the female whom he was once joined… and to ‘counter-identify’ with the male who unto this time has been an ‘outsider’” (52). Fish’s separation begins the day of Chris’s lynching when Fish frees himself from his mother’s embrace, making Bassoff’s assessment of the normal separation of mother and son applicable to the Tucker’s relationship. Consequently, we are able to better understand why Fish is increasingly “embarrassed” by his mother’s presence and why he is “annoyed” by her “bossing” of the house (100). He, like the average adolescent, is forging his identity. Once the son leaves the mother, he is expected to bond with a father who is willing to teach him how to be a man. Tyree teaches his son, as he should, how to treat women; however, Tyree’s influence on him is not healthy. He tells his son, “Son, your mama’s awright, but she’s getting a little odd. It just happens like that with women. Don’t know why. She’s starting to gabble in a funny way…” (100). Tyree implies that Emma should be tolerated, at best. Later while Tyree tells Fishbelly how to survive, he also advises him on how to treat his mother, “…go easy on your mama. Just say ‘yes’ and humor her along, see? That’s the way to deal with women, Fish. Arguing with ‘em is a waste of time. They just don’t understand these things” (148). Thus, Mrs. Tucker’s religious morality, which she offers to Fish every time she speaks to him, compounded with Tyree’s father’s advice, is never taken seriously. She is, in Fish’s eyes, “gabbling.”

The act of counter-identifying with Tyree places Fish in a corrupt world. Fish becomes aware of the running of the “shop” (the mortuary) and the other “businesses,”
including a whorehouse and run down tenements. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Tyree introduces Fish to "meat" and gives him his first lessons about women in general (as we see above). Furthermore, he attempts to teach Fish how to survive in his corrupt world with whites. For Tyree, survival in the corrupt world means survival in the South. However, Fish brings shame into his new experience of his parents’ fear of whites. For instance, when Tyree visits him in jail, Fish is "dismayed" by what he perceives as Tyree shamelessly "crawling before white people" and he thinks Tyree "would keep on crawling as long as it paid off." As if Tyree can read his son’s mind, he says, "I’ll show you how to twist these no-good white folks 'round your little finger" (100). Later, Tyree shares with his survival secret with his son: "A white man always wants to see a Black man either crying or grinning. I can’t cry, ain’t no crying type. So I grin and git anything I want" (149).

After The Grove burns down, we find Tyree, in spite of himself, to be the "crying type." Tyree, a silent partner in The Grove, finds himself facing charges of murder for the forty-two people who are killed in the fire. The police chief, who took bribes from Tyree to ignore fire hazards, tells Tyree that he will be indicted by the grand jury. Tyree has an alternative solution. During the meeting with the chief about their trouble, he "sat for several seconds, mute, frozen; then he sprang tigerishly forward, sliding to the floor and grabbing hold of the chief’s legs...Tell 'em to try a mixed jury, Chief. Just for once, just for me, for poor old Tyree..." The narrator describes further how "He lifted his sweaty face and glared at the chief. “You can’t let this happen to me,” he spoke with almost human dignity. Then as though afraid, he let out a drawn-out moan
of a woman with ten children telling her husband that he could to never leave her.

(263) After a series of “timed moves”—verbal pleas and facial expressions—by Tyree, the Chief resolves that he will speak to the judge about putting Blacks on the jury, which would be an unprecedented occurrence. After the Chief leaves, Tyree tells his audience (his son and Doctor Bruce): “I did all I could Doc” (265).

Fishbelly’s interpretation of the scene is ambiguous. Earlier he has regarded his father as someone that he must tolerate: “He unconsciously reasoned in his manner: ‘Papa, you are black and you brought me into a world of hostile whites with who you have made a shamefully dishonorable peace. I shall use you, therefore, as a protective shield to fend off that world, I’m right in doing so’” (169). During the crying scene, Fishbelly is described as being “transfixed”: “Was that his father? It couldn’t be. Yet it was…” (264). Then he resolves that there are “There were two Tyrees: one was a Tyree resolved unto death to save himself and yet daring not 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.” (264)

Ironically, Tyree’s act of “falling to his knees to beg the white folks for mercy,” greatly contrasts Bigger’s mother’s behavior described earlier in this chapter. Tyree’s plea is sincere; he is desperate and hopes that his request will be granted; however, his emotional plea is an act of manipulation. He deliberately attempts to control the chief, and any other whites who seek to destroy him. Tyree is threatening to whites; for this reason, Tyree’s son respects him, while Mrs. Thomas’s son is embarrassed by her. Tyree’s goal is to keep his financial assets, something that Mrs. Thomas does not possess.

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nor does she seek. She lacks power in virtually every aspect of her life, and she does not think in terms of possessing control over whites.

When Tyree’s behavior proves to be ineffective, he implements “plan B”: he resolves that he will not be the one to take full responsibility for the deaths. Finally, we understand what motivates Tyree to live a corrupt lifestyle. In an emotional conversation he has with Mr. McWilliams, he explains his actions: “Niggers ain’t got no rights but them they buy” Tyree, like Silas of “Long Black Song” wants the same as his white counterparts: “I want a wife. A car. A house to live in. The white man’s got ‘em. Then how come I can’t have ‘em? And when I git ‘em the only way I can, you say I’m corrupt” (290). At the end of Tyree’s emotional social commentary, we are told that Fishbelly saw his father for the first time. Fishbelly heard him speak out the “shame and the glory that was theirs, the humiliation and the pride, the desperation and the hope” (290).

Although Tyree is killed, Fishbelly inherits more than his father’s businesses; he inherits the ability to do what he feels is right despite the odds. His act of leaving Mississippi is what his mother would rather he do, and sending the checks to McWilliams is what his father preferred he do. Leaving the country, however, is his own decision, and it serves to solidify the separation between a growing boy and his parents. However, the separation is complex; as a Black male, the psychoanalytic separation involves his separation from a country which supports racial discrimination. Fish’s decision undoubtedly changed the trajectory of the lives of his own descendants: In the United States, “His people possessed no memory of a heritage of a glorious past to
which he could cling to buttress his personal pride, and there was no clearly defined, redeeming future toward which he could now look for longing” (381). These words could be written only by a Black male who experienced their meaning. In Europe, as Wright had hoped for his own children, freedom does not come with emotional strings attached.

Fish’s move from the United States to Europe has added significance. Readers cannot overlook the means of travel; Fish chooses to travel by plane and not by boat. The plane, which is in the shape of a silver fish, is symbolic of a woman’s womb or, more specific to this novel, a fish’s belly. As a result of relocating to Paris, Fishbelly will be born again, but as his name implies, he will never be completely free of his memories of his mother nor of American racism.

This is not the first time that Wright uses the image of the plane as a symbol of motherhood and birth. In *Savage Holiday*, Tony uses two large planes, one representing a male and a female, to produce little bombers, which fall out of the planes’ bellies after a “fight.” Tony, a small boy, interprets the fighting as the sexual behavior he sees his mother engaged in with men, and he has inferred from her conversations that “fighting” can lead to “having babies” (102). Tony’s death, prompted by his fear of sex which surfaces when a naked Erskine charges towards him, means an end to his life. However, a new life for Erskine, whose mental instability will surface before the novel’s end, begins. Thus, the image of the plane provides yet another way to view the relationships between mothers and sons in Wright’s works.
We have discussed the ambiguous relationships between Wright’s Black mothers and sons, but no assessment of Wright’s mother characters would be complete without discussing his most admirable heroine and mother, Aunt Sue of “Bright and Morning Star.” The story is alluded to in Black Boy. According to that version, an old Black woman goes to pick-up the body of her husband who was killed by a white mob. Once there, she prays at her husband’s body, but when she finishes, she pulls out a gun she has hidden in a sheet and kills four white men. Wright notes that he does not know whether the story is “factually true or not,” but “would emulate the black woman if I were ever faced with a mob” (86). Wright does emulate this power in his writing.

When readers meet Aunt Sue, she has already replaced her Christian beliefs with those of Communist ideology. As she finishes her wash, she remembers a song from the “far off days of her childhood”: “Hes the Lily of the valley, the Bright n Mawnin Star. Hes the fairest of Ten Thousand t mah soul.” The theme of the song can be found in the following excerpt from it: “In sorrow he’s my comfort, in trouble He’s my stay.” The emotional sentiment of the Christian hymn is representative of the comfort she now finds in Communism. Sue has already expelled her childhood beliefs in the man who “nailed in agony to the Cross, His burial in a cold grave, His transfigured Resurrection, His breath and clay, God and Man—all had focused her feelings upon imagery which had swept her life into a wondrous vision” (224). Much like her creator, Richard Wright, her Christian upbringing has served to give her a means by which she can relate to the ideas of Communism: “sometimes…while toiling under a strange star for a new freedom the old songs would slip from her lips with beguiling sweetness” (226). Edward Margolies
notes that Aunt Sue converts to Communism “only when she discovers Communism is the modern translation of the primitive Christian values she has always lived” (76). She longed for something that would work immediately: “But as she had grown older, a cold white mountain, the white folks and their laws, had swum into her vision and shattered her songs and their spell of peace” and Communism fulfills her longing for “peace” (224).

The significant difference between Aunt Sue and the other mothers discussed in this study is that she takes up the charge of her two sons, Communist organizers. “The wrongs and suffering of Black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection” (225). Notably, the other mothers expect their sons to follow them, and in doing so, they hinder their quest for freedom. The narrator tells us that she loved her son “and loving him she loved what he was trying to do” (229). Loving him meant that she would have to let him be free to make his own decisions, which included recruiting people that he did not know, and that she did not know or trust: “white folks” (234).

The narrator says that they barely communicated with one another: “All day long they could sit in the same room and not speak” (230). When they do communicate, Aunt Sue exercises her ability to impart mother wit, something we do not see with the other mothers:

Son, Ah knows ever black man n woman in this parta the country,” she said, standing too. “Ah watched em grow up; Ah even heped birth n nurse some of em; Ah knows em all from way back. There ain none of em that coulda told! The folks Ah know just don open they dos n ast
death t walk in! Son, it wuz some of them white folks! Yuh jus mark mah word n wait n see! (234)

Her son, who says that he does not see white and black, refuses to listen to his mother.

His mother, as we will find out later, is right.

When the sheriff bombards her home and beats her in an effort to find the location of her son, she fights valiantly for him. Unfortunately, once she gains consciousness, she gives the names of the Communist comrades to Booker, who claims to be her friend, but is actually a traitor. Once Aunt Sue realizes that she has betrayed her son and his work, she fearlessly enters the woods to kill Booker and perhaps, to kill her beloved son before they can.

Aunt Sue’s actions are a sharp contrast to her literary sisters. She respects what her son does and helps him. She also never invokes feelings of guilt in him, and she even turns down his offer to give her money. Wright implies that if a Black mother can relinquish her Christian beliefs, both Black males and especially Black women can move pass their traditional religious upbringing and be more assertive in the fight for racial equality. Certainly, Wright admires a woman who is willing to risk her life for the freedom of herself, her son, and others who will benefit form the Communist cause.

The autobiographical Black Boy is important in the assessment of Wright’s perception of women. Wright says in Black Boy that he was able to forgive his father and that he pitied him (41). However, he expected more from his mother, whom he had bittersweet feelings for. Harris asserts accurately that "So anxious is Wright, even in small ways, to place blame on black women for Bigger’s personality that he is willing to distort natural bonds of affection between mothers and children to achieve that goal"
(69). This statement is applicable to all of Wright’s fictional mother and son relationships, with the exception of “Bright and Morning Star.” There, Wright shows his readers that they must sacrifice their religious belief and fight for equality.

We find parallels in the characterization of the mothers in both Black Boy and his fiction. In much the same way that Mrs. Thomas alienates herself from her son with her harsh words and religion, Wright felt alienated from his grandmother. As Granny "oppressed" young Richard’s budding interest in literature, Mrs. Thomas, Mother Damon, and Emma Tucker are also "oppressors." Furthermore, as "Black Boy" is not allowed to develop intellectually by his grandmother, Bigger, Cross, and Fish and the other male sons are jeopardized mentally, emotionally and physically by the psychological restraints their mothers place on them with their cold, demeaning words. Although the mothers remain slaves to their religious beliefs and by association to racism, the sons, through their rejection of their mother’s religion and oppressed way of life, transform from servants to Hegelian masters. In the depictions of the relationship between mother and sons, there is no doubt that Wright’s life experiences determine the depth of the fictional representations of women.
Chapter Four
"Woman as Image of a Body": Wright's Black and White Lovers

In the previous chapter, I argued that Wright's mothers' (fictional and non-fictional) religious beliefs cause their sons to feel alienated, resulting in an emotional separation between mother and son. Here, I argue further that Wright's mothers greatly affect their sons' earliest perceptions of women and thus influence their adult relationships with women. According to Carole Klein, "most [analysts] accept the premise that, one way or another, a man's mother greatly affects his romantic life" (31). This "premise" extends to the relationships the Black males, and Wright's one white male protagonist, Erskine Fowler, have with their lovers.

In interviews, Wright admitted that he studied Freud's psychoanalytic theories (Conversations 164, 182, 210). Wright certainly used this knowledge to develop his work, as Claudia Tate suggests, to understand his own life: "Wright accords himself greater freedom for symbolizing the 'plowing up' of his own consciousness as the mode of creation" (94). Many scenes in his work, such as the one in Black Boy when young Richard is made to bury the cat he kills at his father's insistence, have psychoanalytic implications. Tate asserts that the "feline, a symbol of the female" represent "a repressed guilty and hostile wish directed at the mother, a wish that would negate her demand and the boy's fear as well" (104). Fabre records an incident in Wright's childhood when he was told by a cousin to "look at and touch her vagina. As a result," Fabre concludes, "Richard very early felt the taboo surrounding sex and became fearful of women. This terror could have sprung from an exceptionally strong Oedipal conflict in which every woman...was the incarnation of his mother" (13). This childhood incident could explain
the symbols and feelings found in Wright’s works. I agree with Tate and Fabre’s assessment of Wright’s feelings of “fear” “guilt” and “hostility” in his relations with women, which resulted from his relationship with his mother. His own feelings extend to his work where there is an inseparable connection between the sons’ relationship with their mothers, and subsequently, with their lovers.

In this chapter, I will expand my arguments made in Chapter Two about the influence of Stowe on Wright and the language he uses to, in effect, rewrite the Uncle Tom image through the language of sermons. Wright also uses the Biblical image of Mary, the mother and bride of Christ, to develop his white female characters who stand in striking contrast to his characterization of Black women. Both the Black and white female characters enhance the role of the male protagonist. More specifically, the Black women always serve as “co-conspirators to the oppressors” (Mootry 118), and the white females, because of their historical identity with purity and sacredness, succeed in helping the male protagonists transcend to a state in which they are changed only because of their dealings (either positive or negative) with white females.

Before providing a historical context for Mary as a cultural icon and analyzing how Wright uses the image of Mary as a model for his white female characters, I will demonstrate how Black women are misrepresented and mistreated by Wright. Black female lovers in his works are described as "Bitches and Whores" by Maria Mootry. Wright portrays these women as uneducated, promiscuous and oftentimes money hungry. Mootry notes further that "Food, Sex, and Religion are the anodynes with
which these women are associated—everything to narcotize an intelligent, questioning spirit" (119).

Wright’s literary persona, Black Boy, meets promiscuous and controlling women like Bessie in *Native Son*, Dot and Gladys in *The Outsider*, and Gladys and Gloria in *The Long Dream* on his quest for freedom. The first of these women is Bess, the daughter of his landlady, whom Black Boy meets in Tennessee. He describes Bess as "young, simple, sweet, and brown" (248). Bess’s mother “offers” her as a wife, that is if Richard is willing to "tame her":

"A gal's a funny thing," she [Mrs.Moss] said.  
"They has to be tamed. Just like wild animals."....  
"You like Bess, Richard?" Mrs. Moss asked suddenly....  
"Now. I mean do you like her? Could you love her?" she asked insistently.

I stared at Mrs. Moss, wondering if something was wrong with Bess. What kind of people were these?  
"You got something in you I like," she said "Money ain't everything. You got a good Christian heart and everybody ain't got that."

I winced and turned my head away. Her naive simplicity was overwhelming.... (250)

Although Black Boy is seventeen years old, he is repulsed by the mother’s proposal to a young man whom she hardly knows. Furthermore, her insistence that he has a "good Christian heart" is ironic, since he rejects Christianity. Again, Christianity is connected in his mind with the mental weakness of a mother, but this time the victim is her daughter whom she is willing to give away to a complete stranger based on a mere "feeling."

What is further disturbing about this scene is the daughter’s willingness to go along with her mother’s idea. The retrospective narrator notes,
They [Bess and her mother] had no tensions, unappeasable longings, no desire to do something to redeem themselves. The main value in their lives was simple, clean, good living and when they thought they had found those same qualities in one of their race, they instinctively embraced him, liked him, and asked no questions. But such simple unaffected trust flabbergasted me. It was impossible. (252)

Despite Black Boy's resistance, the "courtship" continues. Young Richard is confused by their lives, which strongly contrasts with the one he lived in Mississippi. He and Bess have nothing in common, and he is not impressed with their behavior towards him. More importantly, he is interested in leaving the South to pursue a career, and since she "ain't so good in school," she is of no interest to him. Literally and metaphorically, Richard is going somewhere and Bess is not (Black Boy 251).

Fabre finds that Wright did live with a "Moss" family (Fabre withholds their real names) on his journey northward, but there is no evidence that this particular incident took place. Since Wright presents the Moss women in this manner, what is important is that we get a sense of Wright's feelings about women. Fabre notes, "...it reveals his attitude toward a certain type of woman" (Fabre 64). That type of Black woman is one who is not interested in education, only "love"; she is satisfied with a menial existence. These are the kinds of women found in Wright's novels as well.

Later, in American Hunger, an older Richard describes a poor Black woman he slept with as payment for the insurance he sold to her. She is described as having only one request of him which is that he take her to the circus:

I had a long, tortured affair with one girl by paying her ten-cent premium each week. She was an illiterate black child with a baby whose father he did not know....After I had been with her one morning, I sat on the sofa... and began to read a book... 'lemme see that,' she said... I gave her the
book; she looked at it intently. I saw that she held it upside down. (*Black Boy* 340-41)

Although Richard is in Chicago, he is in contact with the same "type" of woman that he held in contempt in Tennessee, but this time he indulges himself. Yet, his attitude is still the same—he judges her as harshly as he does the Moss women. She too has nothing in common with him. "The nameless illiterate" is useless to him other than to satisfy his sexual appetite.

We revisit the "nameless illiterate" and Bess Moss in three of Wright's novels. In Bessie of *Native Son*, we find the earliest example of the stereotypical Black female lover presented by Wright. Trudier Harris describes Bessie as "living an empty life, one in which there is little excitement and few opportunities for change." Harris asserts further that "Bessie prefers existence on a mundane, routine level—going to work, coming home and getting drunk or having sex with Bigger, going to work again" (74).

In essence, Bessie seems unwilling and, perhaps, incapable of deviating from her daily cycle of events—work, sex, and alcohol. Bessie Mears is a first cousin to "the nameless illiterate" and Bess Moss (note the similarity in the initials—B.M.).

She depends on Bigger to such a point that she is incapable of saying no to his ransom plan even after she admits that she knows that it is wrong: "But I don't want to do it Bigger. They'll catch us God knows they will" (206). However, she says that she will do it because he asks her. Her unwillingness to be independent of Bigger is similar to Bess and the illiterate, both of whom desire "Black Boy" to help them—the illiterate by providing her and her baby with insurance in exchange for sex (with Bessie it's alcohol in exchange for sex), and Bess by remaining in the South and running her
mother's house which she stands to inherit. None of these women seek anything outside
the environment in which they live, a striking contrast to the ideology of the men they
desire. Both Black Boy and Bigger have "bigger" plans.

Bigger has dreams of a kind Wright would never permit his women characters--
for example, dreams of flying airplanes: "I could fly a plane if I had chance" (17). Even
before the murder of Mary, we find Bigger desiring freedom (which he will find through
the murder of Mary). Bigger also "plays white" with Gus. The act of role playing
suggests his desire to have a different life and to have a chance for equality, or at least to
have what the whites have. Calvin Hernton notes, "Though he knows not what, Bigger
yearns to be 'something.' . . . Bigger feels trapped, thwarted, is nagged by an underlying
sense of impending doom" (Hernton 62). Similar to Silas of "The Long Black Song,"
the "something" that Bigger longs for is freedom to "be white," or, more specifically, to
have the choices that white men have. Bessie, in contrast, dreams of nothing at all.

Bessie, like Bess, is an obstacle to the protagonist's quest. Harris analyzes the
connection between Wright's biographical persona and fictional protagonist:

For Wright, who also writes out of his experience, Bessie's freedom with
her body might go back to a young woman he knew in Memphis...She
saw her body as a way of getting him; if she became pregnant, that would
only solidify the commitment. ("Native Sons" 73)

Harris's observation echoes those of Richard himself who at seventeen saw the danger
that sexual relations with Bess(ie) could pose:

Was I dumb or was she dumb? I felt that it would be easy to
have sex relations with her and I was tempted....What if I made
her pregnant? I was sure that the fear of becoming pregnant did
not bother her. Perhaps she would have liked it. (256)
Wright posits himself as a potential victim; if he accepts the offer he will most likely never leave the South. James Olney supports Harris's assertion: "Bess ... exists, in the mind of the protagonist, the young Richard Wright, as a trap that threatens to keep him in the South, unable to realize his destiny as a writer" ("Early Works" 524). Bess is a hindrance to young Richard's quest for intellectual freedom. If he allows her to, she, the "dumb," "childish" "peasant," will trap him in an oppressive abyss -- the South.

Bessie, likewise, hinders Bigger's physical quest for freedom, or his attempt to escape the wrath of the police. Her purpose in the novel becomes evident at the end: to destroy Bigger, the Black protagonist. She fulfills her purpose when it is revealed at Bigger's trial that he beat her to death. His fate is sealed when the prosecution reveals Bessie's letter to Bigger, discussing the murder and her unwillingness to take part in the extortion plot seals his fate. Keady notes that Bessie "functions as a road block to the actions and pursuits of the male character" (125). Bessie is a "co-conspirator" to the oppressor even after her death.

In The Outsider, Wright continues his pattern of stereotyping Black female lovers. When the novel opens, Cross clearly is in a situation that he desperately wants to escape. As he sits with his friends, they are alien to him, and he thinks, "Now more than ever he knew that he was alone and that his problem was one of a relationship of himself to himself" (14). His internal problems stem from the idea that the women in his life have trapped him. Cross has fallen into "traps" because of his longing to fill an unidentifiable void. We can infer from the conversation he has with his friends that he
read numerous books because he “was looking for something.” But he confesses, that he
does not know what that “something” is (8). What we do know is that the void is not
filled after he marries Gladys. This void is filled when he becomes Lionel Lane, lover of
Eva; that is, if the void is ever really filled.

Cross and Gladys’s marriage has apparently occurred as a result of what Cross
perceives as Gladys’s emotional manipulation. Shortly after they met they became
involved sexually, and he married her to ease her shame about the questionable
reputation she acquired after living with him while he was sick. The narrator says she
assumed "emotional authority" over him while he was sick. He later comes to realize
that "he did not love her and probably had never loved her" (71).

Cross’s perception of Gladys as a bitter woman is ironic considering his
intentions when he met her:

He had been more than ready for Gladys when she had first risen on his
horizon. He had congratulated himself on having tumbled upon a naïve
girl who was gratefully receiving his amorous attentions. (63)

Throughout Wright’s works, especially this novel, Black women are described as “ naïve
girls.” Though naive, they succeed in becoming the enemy:

….it was not until long afterwards that he had discovered that she had
waited patiently while he had gropingly strayed into her domain, and then
she had quietly closed the trap door over him. If some ironic enemy had
been intending to tangle him in an ill-suited marriage, his self-enforced
abstinence could not have better prepared him for her. (63)

Later he describes her as having “enough sagacity to clear ample psychological ground
about her so that he could move in at ease and without knowing that she was luring him”
(64). As a result of the “fat, black, religious landlady” who could no longer permit his
girlfriend, Gladys, living in his room after he had become well, he proposed marriage:

"He felt that if he had said that he was through with her, she would have accepted it, humbly. And it made him feel guilty" (69). Soon after the marriage they bought a house, at Gladys's insistence, and on the night his first child was born, he had an affair with a woman. The marriage ends when Cross, wearing the mask of a cold, insane man "unknowingly" slaps Gladys on two separate occasions, provoking her to put him out of their house and out of her heart. Then he was "free."

Within Cross's thoughts about his relationship with Gladys, we find a man who not only blames Gladys for having some degree of emotional power over him, a dominant theme in this novel, but he also blames the religious woman, a description that may remind readers of his mother (Black and religious) for making him end his "carousal" with Gladys and for "making" him marry her—a thought that he had not previously entertained. We cannot forget, however, that all of Wright's women characters seem to have some degree of power over the Black protagonists, a kind of power that makes them wish they could "blot the women out" with a wave of their hands. According to Margaret Walker, "For Wright, a woman was an enemy, who failed to give him love and happiness by frustrating him in his search for meaning and success" (107). In Cross's search for meaning, he encountered "the enemy." This enemy, Gladys, entered his life when Cross was studying philosophy at the University of Chicago.

Cross admits that he made Gladys into a spiteful person. She bitterly refuses to give him a divorce. Instead, she demands that he borrow $800 from the post office so he
can complete payments for the house and car, which he must give to her. If he refuses, she plans to ruin him by publicizing Dot's claims of "statutory rape" and the pregnancy, which would cause him to lose his job and face criminal charges. His wife appears selfish, cruel, and greedy. Cross's initial belief that women are dependent on men emotionally is ironic considering his idea that "men made themselves and women were made only through men" (66). She was indeed made into what Warren describes as "an intractable bitch... cold, vindictive, and calculating..." as a result of Cross's behavior (68).

By the time Cross meets Dot, he is certainly not “free” neither emotionally nor psychologically, even though he is separated from Gladys. When the novel begins, we find Cross has taken up drinking to dull the problems of the "four A's -- Alcohol. Abortions. Automobiles and Alimony" (The Outsider 4). He is trapped in a bad marriage, his mother has a psychological hold on him, and then he lets in Dot. The narrator identifies Cross’s feelings about women and their “hold” on him,

All his life he had been plagued by being caught in relations where others had tried to take advantage of him because they had thought him supine and gullible; and when he had finally confronted them with the fact he knew that they were playing him, they had hated him with a redoubled fury for his having deceived them! And he dreaded that happening with Dot. (37)

Dot, is what Nagueyalti Warren describes as a "weeping and wailing" (69) promiscuous young girl— in the tradition of "Black Boy's" girls -- who attempts to trap the protagonist with her sexuality. Warren notes further that, "She represents the amoral teen-aged whore, producer of illegitimate children" (68). During their first meeting in the liquor section of a department store, Cross fondles her left breast with his elbow. She does not
protest and later engages in a sexual relationship with him, all the while leading him to believe that she is seventeen.

Again, Wright presents us with a young, Black female who is neither intellectually nor mentally compatible with her Black male lover. The narrator describes Dot as "a passionate child achingly hungry for emotional experience.... He would try to talk to her and as he talked he could tell that she was not listening; she was pulling off her dress..." (41). Dot perfectly fits the description of the illiterate girl young Richard sleeps with while he is an insurance agent: "I could not talk to her....Sex relations were the only relations she had ever had; no others were possible with her, so limited was her intelligence" (Black Boy 341). Sherley Anne Williams notes, "Though she is a passionate child, Dot has little of that 'terrible simplicity' that characterized Bess Moss and the nameless illiterate of Wright's early days in Chicago" (Williams 411). Unlike the young Richard with the nameless illiterate, Cross is able to talk to (not with) Dot: "... he never quite knew how much of what he told her she understood, but she always listened patiently" (43). However, "He came at last to believe that she accepted the kind of talk in which he indulged as a mysterious part of a man's equipment, along with his sexual organs" (43). His desire to connect with her on a level other than a sexual one is unmet.

Eventually, Cross's relationship with Dot leads to a pregnancy for which he is unwilling to accept responsibility. Dot threatens suicide to get him to remain in a relationship with her, but to no avail. Warren asserts that "... she typifies the hysterical depreciated sex object" (68). Dorothy "Dot" Powers uses her sexual prowess against Cross. She obtains legal counsel and tells Cross's estranged wife and his elderly mother...
about her pregnancy. As a final tactic, she threatens to use the fact that she is 15 to get charges of statutory rape filed against him.

Cross feels as though he knows the women in his life better than they know themselves, and better than they know men. As discussed in the previous chapter, the first woman that Cross knows intimately is his mother; the same thought of his “omniscience” about her is extended to Dot. When he goes to speak with Dot about her pregnancy, he notes mentally that

He could almost see the little wheels turning in the brains of both girls [Dot and her roommate] as they planned their next move. Men had to consult together for concerted action; women simply gravitated together spontaneously, motivated by their situation in life as women. They knew without prior consultation the most effective assaults. Cross was conscious of their consciousness. He knew them as women better than they knew him as man. (54)

Again, we see another instance where Cross shows respect for women. But the respect that he has for these “girls” is comparable to the respect man has for a lion who valiantly hunts his prey. These girls have the instinct that all females have—to manipulate men’s emotions in an effort to control them: “He knew that her pretended naivete’ was particularly dangerous, for it was a pathetic appeal for love that his heart yearned to answer” (57). Cross has studied many women, as he has admittedly had many sex partners, and feels that he knows their tactics. Though they act instinctively, as women are bound to do, their instinct cannot be confused with intelligence or the ability to know him nor any man better than a man can know a woman.

In Wright’s last novel, *The Long Dream* we find promiscuous, naive women depended on strong knowledgeable Black men. Tyree Tucker encourages his son’s
sexual appetite by taking, his son, Fishbelley to a brothel he owns. There the boy becomes involved with "meat" (his father's term). To satisfy his whetted appetite, Fishbelley becomes involved with the kind of young, illiterate, promiscuous women who frequent Wright's works. Fish meets Gladys, a young mulatto who has a mulatto, illegitimate child. She fulfills Wright's pattern of uneducated, promiscuous women who depend on men to save them. Furthermore, she is characterized as childish, and Fish finds that "poor little Gladys was just a woman and didn't know. He would take this woman and teach her" (219). Similarly, Keady notes, "Gladys in The Long Dream is portrayed as an unintelligent and passive woman who is grateful that Fish intends to save her from the whorehouse" (125). The idea of Fish saving and teaching anyone is ironic considering that he is a high school drop-out and under his father's guidance himself. However, he is never characterized as simple-minded or childish. 

With each work after Native Son, Wright increased his use of psychoanalytic symbols as his knowledge in the area developed. Michel Fabre argues that Wright's Oedipal conflict was "most likely that in constantly living in crowded quarters, Richard was an unwilling and guilty witness to sexual relations between his parents, a scene which recurs in his novels almost obsessively" (13). The Long Dream is filled with sexual symbolism and overt sexual events. Rex's nickname, Fishbelly, has sexual implications. During the first scene in the book, when Rex smells the fish his father brings home, he immediately associates their smell with his mother. He soon after becomes known as Fishbelly, because of his insistence on calling a fish bladder, "fishbelly." Symbolically the name change foreshadows the sexual initiation and taboo
that Fish will soon encounter. After the lynching of Chris, Fish has dreams worthy of psychoanalysis. Katherine Fishburn analyzes the Freudian implications behind Fishbelly’s dreams where he sees a locomotive that touches a fish’s belly which is lying on the floor of his mother’s room. The fish belly with hair on it stands for the female sex organ (21). The locomotive is a reminder of the sound Fish hears when he, at the age of 6, finds his father fornicating with a female customer.

There is yet another significant Freudian implication. Gladys, Fish’s lover, in a Freudian sense is a replacement—a surrogate or stand-in—for his mother. During one scene, Gladys tells Fish that she likes to watch him sleep because he looks like a child and he remarks, "Mebbe my mama did when I was a kid" (182). Wright implies that Gladys, a mother, acts towards Fish as perhaps Fish’s own mother has. Furthermore, we see that Fishbelly subconsciously seeks an "incarnation of his mother" in his female companion.

There are significant similarities in all of Wright’s works. Wright’s Black female characters are obstacles the protagonists must face and overcome. The women then become the enemy, the oppressor—not unlike Wright’s mothers who seem to hurt their sons more than help them. By contrast, the men, in spite of their violent actions, become valiant heroes. While Black women anger the Black male protagonist and make him more aware of his struggle to survive in a hostile world, Wight’s white females push the males along his journey towards self-actualization and spiritual growth. White women act as spiritual guides. Calvin Hernton notes that "According to the myth of white supremacy,...the white woman...is the 'Immaculate Conception' of our civilization.
Her body is a holy sacrament...[She] is the great symbol of sexual purity,...[the embodiment] of grace,"(84-85).

Hernton’s description of the Immaculate White Woman, as we find her in literature, owes much to the historical perception of Mary, a young Jewish woman who bore a son in 7-4 B.C.E. (Cunneen 27). What we know about Mary largely comes from the four gospels, written by four males “thirty to sixty years after the events they recorded” and are, of course, based on oral tradition and on the memory of at least one writer who knew her; John was the only one who was an apostle (Cunneen 29). Thus, what we know about Mary comes from the perspective of men. These perceptions have influenced the way in which many Christians accept the story of Jesus’ birth.


The source of the controversial fascination with Mary has much to do with the teaching that “God became flesh in and through her flesh”; she is the Mother of God (Theotokos), by Biblical accounts. In 431 the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, named her the “new mother of the church and the human race.” However, she also became a “cultus figure through the course of patristic and medieval history in both Byzantine and Western Christianity” (7).

Harriet Beecher Stowe, although a Protestant, had an interest in the Madonna. Stowe’s interest in the Madonna is evidenced in her art collection. She used the
proceeds of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to go to Europe where she bought a “copy of Raphael’s *Madonna of the Goldfinch*...and [she] owned copies of at least three other sacred Madonnas” (Gatta 54). She also wrote about Mary “in her verse and nonfictional prose—especially as delineated in Woman in Sacred History” (Gatta 54).

Stowe reflected deeply on the Marian Madonna because she identified with and admired Mary’s “palpable experience of womanhood” (Gatta 55). Stowe’s interest in Mary is not to be confused with the kind of obsessive behavior Wright describes in *Pagan Spain*. Stowe believed that “To allow unscriptural legends, iconography, and pagan associations to image a Mary who overshadows Jesus is, she charges, a grave mistake” (Gatta 55). Stowe develops her interest in Mary in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Evangeline “Little Eva” St. Clare is a Mary figure. Mary, whose name has significant meaning, is often described in typological terms as a “second Eve” (Gatta 58). It also has connotations of "stubbornness" and "rebellion" (Boyd 62). When we first meet Eva on the boat, the narrator describes her as a younger version of the Mary seen in paintings (or I should say the image of Mary before her marriage to Joseph and before the birth of the children they had after Jesus was born) mentioned above. Eva is described as an active child who when caught by her guardians

> melted from them again like a summer cloud.... Always dressed in white, she seemed to move like a shadow through all sorts of places, without contracting spot or stain; and there was not a corner or nook, above or below, where those fairy footsteps had not glided, and that visionary, golden head, with its deep blue eyes, fleeting along. (162)

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12 See John Gatta and Sally Cunneen (p. 262) about Stowe’s art collection.
In addition to the relationship the name has with purity, Mary is derived from the Greek name Miriam, meaning "bitterness"—possibly an allusion to "the bondage of Israel" (Swan 386). 13
Eva, a gliding child dressed in white, must (and will) die before this world is able to corrupt her purity and immaculate nature. Additionally, her presence on the boat is admired by all who see her: “A thousand times a day rough voices blessed her and smiles of unwonted softness stole over hard faces....” (162). On her deathbed, her presence is further glorified in Biblical terms: the slaves fall to their knees and “sobbed, and prayed and kissed the hem of her garment” (312). The scene is reminiscent of the hemorrhaging woman who was healed after she “touched the hem of His garment” “for she said within herself. If I may but touch His garment, I shall be whole” (Matt. 9:20-21). Eva does not physically heal any of the slaves, but she increasingly emphasizes the idea of “life after death for those who believe in what she believes”—the power of Christ.

Gatta also argues that Stowe’s novel, which encompasses the idea that the “first become last and the last will becomes first,” does not limit the idea to the mistreatment of slaves who will ultimately be rewarded in heaven for their suffering here on earth, but extends the idea to include the relationship of Eva and her mother, Marie. Through her kindness, Eva, an “evangelical instrument” (Gatta 58) tries to compensate for the cold-heartedness and bitterness of her mother, Marie, who after Eva’s and St. Clare’s death, sells the pious Tom to Simon Legree.

I extend Gatta’s argument even further. Eva, whose name means "mother of all living," made from man and for man (Genesis 3:20) as Gatta argues, offers life to “Topsy, Miss Ophelia, and her father” (58). Gatta’s argument can be supported by several passages in the novel. Eva understands the plight of the lowly more than any
other character in the novel and tries, even on her deathbed to teach others to be as sensitive as she:

But Mamma, it’s so different to be brought up as I’ve been, with so many friends, so many things to make me good.... You believe, don’t you, that Topsy could become an angel, as well as any of us, if she were a Christian? (Stowe 308)

Miss Ophelia, Eva’s older cousin and a hypocritical Northerner (she is just as unsympathetic to the slaves as Marie), is not untouched by feelings of admiration for little Eva: “she’s no more than Christ-like” said Miss Ophelia; “I wish I were like her. She might teach me a lesson” (Stowe 305). However, although I agree with Gatta’s assertion that Eva offers life to Topsy and Miss Ophelia, I stand by the argument I presented in Chapter Two: I suggest that Tom, and not Eva, is responsible for the conversion or the spiritual life that St. Clare ultimately embraces. Nevertheless, Eva certainly did influence her father by her actions and words: “I believe him [Jesus], and in a few days I shall see him” (314).

What is most important to our discussion is that we do not overlook the life that Eva offers to Uncle Tom who is commonly described as a “Christ-figure”—one who willingly offers his life when he remains on the Legree plantation to convert the lost souls of his fellow slaves. After being saved by Tom from the Mississippi River, Eva tells her father to buy Tom, which saves him (although not for long) from being placed on a plantation similar to Legree’s. She also offers him the hope that he will return to his family by reading the letter from his wife regarding her new job and plans to save money to buy him. As I will discuss later, Eva of The Outsider, offers freedom to Cross in much the same way as Little Eva does to Tom (although Cross is certainly no Uncle
Tom figure). Nevertheless, Eva, like Little Eva, is a pure, child-like woman, incapable of doing wrong.

Stowe was probably interested in the Madonna because the sacred mother reminded Stowe of her own mother who died when she was five. According to Gatta, the Madonna certainly reminded Stowe's brother of their mother: "Brother Henry Ward Beecher even testified, 'My mother is to me what the Virgin Mary is to a devout Catholic'" (54). Stowe's brother's connection with Mary may have inspired the connection that St. Clare feels for his own mother, who Eva reminds him of and is named for, in the hope that "she would prove a reproduction of her image" (171). St. Clare describes his mother as being the reincarnation of Mary, the Biblical mother: "My mother," says St. Clare, "she was divine! .... She probably was of mortal birth.... She was a direct embodiment and personification of the New Testament" (243). According to St. Clare, she was Catholic and sang like an angel. She was also against slavery, and did all that a woman of the era could do to make life easier for her slaves by forming a "committee for a redress of grievances" which "repressed a great deal of cruelty" amongst the field slaves. Unfortunately, her husband did not support her humane actions. Clearly she influenced St. Clare more than his father. She died when St. Clare was thirteen, and he does not see her again until the moment of his death.

From Renaissance literature and paintings to American Literature (not excluding African-American literature), images of the Madonna have influenced the way in which white women are perceived, especially the way in which they should act. Not withstanding these codes, Wright, a Southerner, was aware of how he should act in
relation to white women, and as I argue in Chapter Two, also aware of the character

types found in Stowe’s novel. Ironically, Wright was married to two white women, but
he still depicts his white female characters with a considerable degree of ambiguity. His
relationship with these white women has met much speculation by Wright’s critics.
Claudia Tate asserts that Wright was drawn to white women because of his “need to
separate the primary imago of the mother from other female love objects” (115). Michel
Fabre concludes that Wright’s attraction to white women was “revenge for the years of
sexual and emotional frustration during adolescence; he certainly felt additional pleasure
in flaunting the taboos that for a black man in Mississippi, were the equivalent of a
castration.... To possess a white woman was a way of eradicating painful memories...a
black man suffered many humiliations in public places” (197). I argue further that
Wright ultimately avenges those who tried to master him with the white woman code by
controlling the image of this woman in his fiction, much the same way males—i.e.
scholars, writers, religious and political leaders—have done for centuries. In this way,
Wright’s “revenge for the years of sexual and emotional frustration” is not limited to his
personal relationships with white women, but is manifested in his publications.14 This
argument is not to be accepted as an alternative to the psychoanalytic theory supported
by Tate and Walker, but it rather extends and thus increases our understanding of
Wright’s interest in white women.

14 Black Boy was forbidden to talk about white women. This prohibition of speech is indicative of the social climate of Wright’s
time. Ironically, his speech as an artist was depressed even further when the original bedroom scene that described Bigger kissing
Mary was deleted: “to retain such highly charged sexual scenes would risk censorship” (Kinnamon 110). In essence, the targeted
white readership would be offended to find Mary actually responding to Bigger’s sexual advances.
Tate's assertion about Wright's attraction to white women is most relevant to this study. Implied, but not stated, is that the only way Wright could have a relationship with a woman is if the woman was the opposite of his own mother. Not only, according to Tate's theory, did the woman have to be white, but she also had to be a capable and talented woman, one who was not "sick and defenseless" (Tate 115): "With sheer force of willpower, Wright deliberately detached himself from his mother and those who reminded him of her" (Tate 115). Wright's fictional mothers, who influence their sons perceptions of female lovers are, as I have argued, ambiguous figures. They love, but do not nurture. In turn, some Black males find the "nurturing" they need in white women, who represent a certain, but realistic, danger--relations with them usually result in a Black man's death. Black males also, in some cases, "love" destructively (as we'll see with Mary Dalton and Eva Blount). The ambiguous white females are complex and their characteristics fit into many categories.

Anna Maria Chupa links the treatment of white women in African-American literature to myths evolving from Europe and Africa. Chupa ties this in with her theory of the "Terrible Goddess": This Goddess is the combination of all that is desired and despised; she is the Mother of Life and the Goddess of Death. Wright's white women show her many faces: the Destructive/Seductive Bitch, the Benevolent (yet inevitably destructive) Witch, the Mad Woman in the Attic, the Slob-Bitch and the Whores, Mothers and Virgins (10). I will expand upon the descriptions offered by Chupa in my analysis of Wright's white females and the significance of their relationships with Wright's male protagonists. The white female characters can be placed into specific
categories. As we saw earlier, Black women are the enemy for Wright and his protagonists; white women, on the other hand, are both good and/or bad, and this premise became evident, according to Sally Cunneen, in nineteenth century literature:

"Starting from different assumptions, the broadly Protestant culture of England and the United States in the nineteenth century tended to idealize women while still denying them equality or a public voice" (256).

The good/bad characterization of women is not restricted to the "protestant culture of England and the United States" as Wright makes clear in Pagan Spain.

Wright explains the Spanish woman’s dilemma through his description of Andre, a Spanish man who like most Spanish men of Wright’s Pagan Spain, adore Virgins or "good women," but find themselves in the beds of "bad women":

he had to worship her from afar and wait until he had money enough to marry her with the ceremonial blessings of the church. And that is why, he had to go so often to seek “bad” women in the dark and fetid alleyways, and it was why, in his confused and embattled heart, he hated those women and yet had to be with them (87).

Cullen notes further, “Part of this cultural idealization of maternity, however, was a tendency to polarize women into good or bad, describing repentant prostitutes as ‘Magdalenes’” (Cunneen 256-257). Wright also alludes to the “repentant prostitute” of Catholic Spain: “a prostitute can at any time enter a church and gain absolution” (152).

Furthermore, Wright makes a point of noting that “to be a prostitute was bad, but to be a prostitute not Catholic is worse” (21).

The white women of Wright’s fiction are fictional archetypes of the three most notable Biblical women: Mary, the Virgin Mother; Eve, a fallen temptress (both
Seductive/Destructive); and Mary Magdalene, a repentant sexual sinner (both whore and virgin, both good and bad.) Although I use Mariology as the source of this study, all three women are connected in much the same way as the Holy Trinity: There would be no Mary or Mary Magdalene without Eve, the mother of life; There would be no forgiving Eve (for some scholars) without the counteractions of Mary, the mother of the Savior; Mary Magdalene incorporates characteristics of both the temptress and the virgin.

Mary Dalton, the first and most famous of Wright’s white women, fits the description of the Mary Magdalene type. St. Mary Magdalene is probably the most infamous of all Biblical women. Although there is no concrete evidence that she was a prostitute, she has certainly been labeled as such, and notably, men have been the ones to place this label. In two of the four gospels, Luke and Mark, Mary Magdalene was healed of “evil spirits and infirmities.” According to Susan Haskins these spirits could have been “psychological, that is, seen as madness, rather than moral or sexual” (14). Mary Magdalene’s scandalous identity is the result of two factors. One is her birthplace. Her second name indicates that she belonged to the “el Medjel, a prosperous fishing village on the north-west bank of the lake of Galilee.” This town was later destroyed in “AD 75 because of its infamy and the licentious behavior of its inhabitants” (Haskins 15).

Second, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great, declared that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the sinner in Luke were one in the same (the woman, thought to be a prostitute, who washed Jesus’s feet with tears and dried them with her hair in a plea for forgiveness) (Haskins 16). As a result, Mary Magdalene, the woman who loyally
followed Christ, even when his own disciples fled in fear at the time of his crucifixion, has been labeled as a "penitent whore." Whether or not Wright was aware of the lack of evidence to support her identity is not clear, but given his strong religious background, it is more than mere chance that Mary Dalton bears the namesake of the Biblical figure. As mentioned above, Mary means both, rebellious and implies immaculate. Thus, "Mary" suggests a dual symbolism; her image is "multilayered" (Chupa 9). With her name, Wright implies that she is the embodiment of both purity (like Mary) and rebellion (like Eve), reminiscent of Mary Magdalene before and after her mythical conversion. Mary’s rebellious side, the one that gets drunk and dates society’s nemesis, a Communist. Wright portrays her as a young white debutant who will ultimately place Bigger in the situation that will change his life; yet, since she is society’s symbol of purity, Bigger will be condemned for raping her (and others).

Early in the novel, we are introduced to Mary’s "immaculate" side in the documentary Bigger views. She is described as a "a doll in a show window: [with] black eyes, white face, red lips" (Native Son 71). She is described as a rich debutante, basking on the sands of sunny Florida, a scene reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. John Lowe, in a discussion of "Big Boy Leaves Home," notes, "Wright, in glossing the Edenic scene, sets up the first of a series of typological references" (63). This scene in Native Son offers instances of the same typology: “As the scene unfolded his [Bigger’s] interest was caught... He saw images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach. The background was a stretch of sparkling water. Palm trees stood near and far” (34). This movie is followed by an exotic African one where Black men
and women dance to the sound of beating drums. According to James Evans, Bigger’s
response shows that

he is drawn to them because they show the reality to which he essentially
belongs. He is repelled by them because they are merely caricatures to
which he has no existential connection. He is torn because he is
western/American and African. He seems to exist in both worlds and
wholly in none (101).

As mentioned earlier in this study, Wright’s study of European philosophy shows that he
sought a relationship with the Western world in which he belonged, and a means by
which “common people” could attain equality and freedom. Bigger seeks freedom also
which causes him to envy the Africans freedom—“men and women who were adjusted
to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria” (38). Bigger
searches for a similar kind of freedom, a kind that will allow him to feel at home and
secure. Yet, he does not seek to be viewed as a savage, which is how he will ultimately
be perceived once he is arrested for the murder of Mary Dalton.

The movies not only set up a dichotomy between the Europe and Africa—as it
relates to America’s way of thinking, but they also set the tone for the contrast between
the Black and white female characters found throughout the novel and in many of his
fictional works published after Native Son. Wright has been criticized not only for his
glorification of white women, but also for the way white women like Mary and Eva (The
 Outsider) contrast dramatically with the Black women characters. For example, while
Bigger is helping Mary up the stairs, he notes that "she was much smaller than Bessie,
his girl, but much softer" (96). Butler notes that the differences in the physical
descriptions "represent the extreme poles of his [Bigger's] divided self":

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Whereas Mary represents a side of Bigger which may be called "romantic" because it is centered in an idealized set of longings for a radically new life based upon expanded possibilities, Bessie epitomizes an aspect of his personality which may be called "naturalistic" since it is severely conditioned by the economic, political, and social pressures of his actual environment. (11)

Later, Bigger becomes an unwilling participant in a very dangerous situation because of what Wright depicts as Mary's wild and careless irresponsibility. Mary is hardly the ideal daughter of her prestigious parents. She apparently drinks often, and against the wishes of her family, she associates with the Communist Party; she even goes so far as to date Jan, a Communist. We find, then, that Mary is as rebellious as her name implies, yet the dual symbolism in her name cannot be overlooked. As Mary, the mother of Jesus, provided the world with the Savior and subsequently a chance for a renewal of life, Mary inadvertently does the same for Bigger.

Upon Mary's death, Bigger feels like an unstoppable superhero of sorts -- he aims his gun at Jan, and then he confidently boards a bus and sits among the white passengers. He feels so confident in his new found "power" that he tries to extort money from the Daltons through a kidnap note--all this while still working for them. Bigger finds a road to freedom by accidentally murdering Mary Dalton, and he is able to accept the society that he simultaneously views as oppressive. Chupa notes that "The Witch may perform the function of driving the individual toward 'positive development and transformation' when he is forced to 'fight with the dragon.' Only when Bigger confronts the dragon by killing the white woman does he feel like he has truly become human" (45). After killing "the dragon"--the symbol of oppression--Bigger erupts with a sense of spiritual freedom that he feels will allow him to exist with ease in a world in
which he has previously felt excluded: "Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence" (Native Son 23). As in the gospel song "Amazing Grace"—"I once was blind, but now I see,"—Bigger thinks he now can "see":

Things were becoming clear; he would know how to act from now on...just like others acted, live like they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted. He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded ..... there was one way of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit. . . . The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it. (120)

This is perhaps the most revealing passage in the novel. Bigger has developed a plan of survival the logic of which one can discern in W.E.B. DuBois's remarks about the "veil":

the Negro ...gifted with second-sight in this American world -- a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world....One ever feels his twoness,- - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.(5)

Bigger, although he does not possess the articulateness of DuBois, can "see," whereas his family--unaware of the veil, and whites--not being gifted with the veil--cannot. By contrast, Mrs. Dalton is the symbol of blindness. When we meet her, Mr. Dalton tells Bigger she's blind. Next, Mr. Dalton tells Bigger that she has a very deep interest in colored people. Later, Peggy informs Bigger that Mrs. Dalton had millions when she married him and she is the reason why Mr. Dalton is a successful businessman and a philanthropist. What Wright implies is that she is guiltier than her husband—hence,
she is blind and he is not. Her charitable acts may make her feel better, but in the
scheme of things, they do nothing to help Negroes. In fact, Wright makes this point
clear when Bigger tells Max that his gang planned the robbery in the boy’s club where
the Dalton’s had donated money for equipment. Perhaps, if she had asked what was
needed in the community and visited some of the homes that her family rents to the
members of the community, then she could better serve their interests. Wright implies
further that Mrs. Dalton had the choice to act differently when Peggy tells Bigger, that
Mrs. Dalton lost her sight ten years. She was not born socially blind, but she became
that way through the choices she made.

Eventually, Bigger is snatched back to reality when Mary Dalton’s bones are
found in the incinerator. According to Chupa, white witches were condemned to die
by fire. Thus, Bigger is "justified" in murdering her. Darwin Turner notes that "He has
destroyed the white force smothering him, and he has smashed the black chains binding
him" (166).

The new spirit of confidence and strength that emerges in Bigger is destructive,
however, and his brief encounter with Mary Dalton plays an integral part in the fate that
awaits him. In her, Wright creates another example of a female who causes a Black
protagonist to reach a tragic end. Bigger becomes a victim of Mary’s recklessness.
Bigger had no desire to be involved with this white family, but once he gets settled, he
thinks:

The only thing bad so far was that crazy girl... some remote part of his
mind considered in amazement how different the girl had seemed in the
movie. On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with
her what he liked. But here in her home she walked over everything, put herself in the way (62).

Immediately, Bigger sees past the image of the pure white lady presented on the Florida beaches, and recognizes her as a threat to his livelihood—to his quest for freedom. Ultimately, he senses her rebellious nature and would like to steer clear of the "crazy girl." Later, Bigger tells Max how she offended him:

"You say you hate her?"
"Yeah; and I ain't sorry she's dead."
"But what had she done to you? You say you had just met her."
"I don't know. She asked me a lot of questions. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry...." Aw, Mr. Max, she wanted me to tell her how Negroes live. She got into the front seat of the car where I was..."
"But, Bigger, you don't hate people for that. She was being kind to you..."
"...All I knew is that they kill us for women like her. ...To me she looked and acted like all other white folks...." (405)

Max and Bigger clash because of historical and cultural conditioning. Max, a white man, can never understand how Bigger feels, and neither could Mary, in spite of her good intentions.

Bigger's sense of freedom is counteracted by Mary Dalton, who even at her death seals his fate. He must suffer physically for having known her. However, through Mary's murder, Bigger is able to see, while all the others, including Bessie, are "blind." Sherley Anne Williams finds that Wright's white women "are never more than cardboard characters...." They are "red necks" who cry rape or are the "forbidden fruit"—"sweet little girls who symbolize a freedom beyond a black woman's wildest imaginings" (406). Mary Dalton snugly fits the latter part of Williams' description.
Thus, through the murders of first Mary, and then Bessie, his quest for freedom is complete: He reaches spiritual (not physical) freedom. Bigger risks his life for freedom by accepting responsibility for Mary’s death, but his freedom is limited by virtue of his race. He will indeed pay for his freedom. In a very real sense, even though Mary is limited in characterization and dialogue, she serves a primary function, as do most of Wright’s female characters: to drive the protagonist to his bitter end, but, in a tragic way, he benefits.

The predominant figure of the Mary trinity is Mary herself. Eva Blount of *The Outsider* is a Mary figure who closely resembles that of the highly revered Biblical figure. Eva, like Stowe’s Eva St. Clare, is the embodiment of innocence. Moreover, since Wright’s Eva is older, she is also a sexual being, but a pure one. According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was conceived before Mary and Joseph “came together;” and this is confirmed when the angel tells Joseph, who is convinced that she has had relations with a man, “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 7:20). As Mary is a servant to God who will redeem the world with His son, Eva Blount serves as a symbol of “freedom” for Cross—freedom from a mother who was psychologically overbearing and freedom from Dot and his wife Gladys, both of whom he never loved. Sylvia Keady identifies Eva’s purpose as being “Cross’s cure from his aimless life and self-hatred” (127).

Perhaps Wright would agree. In *Pagan Spain*, when he goes to visit the Black Virgin with the Catholic priest Wright states, “Man senses that if there is anything at all really divine or superhuman in us, it is linked to, allied with and comes through sex, and

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is inescapably bound up with sex” (64). He then gives a brief history on the concept of virgin worship: “The concept of the Virgin Mary antedates Christianity by some two thousand years. Maya, the mother of Buddha, was supposed to have been a virgin…” He also asserts that the black color of the statue which has “either Roman or Oriental” features “does not come from paint. Neither is its blackness racially representative. It is highly likely that that statue turned black from the smoke of incense that pagans burnt before it” (65). Every time Cross sees a woman, he thinks that she is “body of woman,” an image of a body—a sexual being. Cross worships women in much the same way that the Spaniards must, in Wright’s view, worship the Black Virgin. The need to worship a virgin is interrelated with Cross’s need to have a woman. Cross has been taught that sex is a sin, causing him to want the very thing he was forbidden to have. Likewise, in Spain, sex, unless it is in the marital bed with one’s spouse, is a sin. Wright states further, “The Spanish mentality, branding prostitution as sin, is incapable of dealing with it as a social problem—a social problem born of economic conditions buttressed by a political system” (190). In Cross’s life and in the Spaniard’s life, religion is the only means by which problems are “solved.”

In a letter to his editor, Paul Reynolds, Wright said, "I must confess that she [Eva Blount] is still the weakest character in the book, but I cannot think of anything else to do with her" (Fabre 368). Critics agree with Wright’s assessment of Eva, who is a “childlike”, innocent, pure and “lovely girl” (The Outsider 319, 347). Eva, an artist, is the wife of a Communist and finds out late in the marriage that her husband Gil has married her as part of a political move by order of the Communist Party. She is too
distraught to paint certain colors and feels trapped by Gil and the rest of the Communist Party. Eva is incapable of demanding liberation from people she apparently never wished to be involved with. Her dislike of the Party makes her a perfect match for the protagonist. Both Eva and Cross are outsiders. The Party, whose ideology she does not accept, traps Eva, and Cross is a Black man who is an intellectual outside the realm of his family and friends. As an intellectual, the only one of Wright's protagonists who is, Cross represents a type:

Wright felt that even if Cross Damon's experiences were influenced by his color, he was more representative of a type whose intelligence made him grapple with the ethical and metaphysical problems of a society which had lost the sense of the sacred and in which the collapsing of traditional values meant that everything was permitted. (Fabre 369)

Cross finds his soul mate only in Eva Blount. They both know what it is like to be trapped, to have limited freedom. Once Cross becomes aware that Eva is an outsider, he bonds with her as with no other woman because no other woman could understand Cross's life as an "outsider": "he knew that Eva, too, had been forced to live as an outsider; she, too, in a different sort of way was on his side" (The Outsider 350).

The relationship between Cross and Eva piques when she opens herself up to Cross:

Her soul was reaching gropingly toward him for protection, advice, solace. Cross smiled, feeling that he was listening to her words as perhaps God listened to prayers...A wave of hot pride flooded him. She was laying her life at his feet. With but a gesture of his hand he could own her, shield her from the Party, from fear, from her own sense of guilt.... (The Outsider 348)

At this point she is not different from the Black women who are dependent on the Black protagonist for emotional support. Later, however, the difference in the power of this
white woman compared to the Black ones changes when Cross lays his life at her feet. 

When initially he confesses to her, she understandably thinks he is delirious:

He had told her his horror and had expected to hear her scream and run from him; and now she was surrendering herself, giving her gift to the man she loved, hoping to cure his distraction of his mind by placing a benediction upon his sense. (432)

As a result of her giving herself to him, body and soul, he, for the first time, shows feelings of unselfishness and moves towards spiritual reconciliation: "something close to a prayer rose up from his heart...show me a way not to hurt her...Not to let her know...I don't want to kill this sweet girl clinging to me...I should not have let it happen...." (433). Cross’s state of mind is reminiscent of the “conversion experience,” which I have discussed in Chapter Two, where a person undergoes a literal “turning”; there is a change in behavior and a “change of heart” (Raboteau 152). Not long after this confession, however, Cross defends his freedom and asserts his power by killing Hilton, a Communist. Nevertheless, he begins the process of conversion, in Christian terms. The process ends when, on his death bed, Cross says to Houston, “Tell them not to come down this road...Men hate themselves and it makes them hate others...We must find some way of being good to ourselves” (585). Cross, as Darwin Turner notes, "learns to love only when he meets sensitive, artistic Eva Blount, the first woman who becomes mind as well as body for him” (169). He has come to a point of self-realization only because of his relationship with Eva. Cross finds a connection with Eva unparalleled by his mother, Gladys, and Dot, whom he rejected in a desperate act to be free. With Eva, he finds freedom.
Eva's image is one of the "Immaculate" figures Hemton describes. When she becomes aware of Cross's activities he, not being a Christian, begs Eva to "save" him from the guilt he feels and to absolve him of his sins: "I'm praying to you to understand me...I'll die if you don't understand me" (532). Eva, however, is unable to offer Cross the saving grace that he desperately needs. Instead, repulsed by Cross's heinous acts, she throws herself out of a window. Warren notes, "morally she is superior even to Cross. When faced with his demonic acts of murder, she commits suicide to escape the reality of her situation" (69). Eva is naive and pure like a child and incapable of accepting the gravity of Cross's malicious actions— the murders and his abandonment of his family. She is unable to look upon the face of sin.

Unlike Cross whose story takes place in the north, Wright's protagonist Fishbelly of *The Long Dream* must avoid the third part of the Mary trinity, Eve— the Southern white woman. In her analysis of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Nehama Aschkenasy argues that John Milton further develops the first three chapters of Genesis, making Eve appear to be sexually destructive. In the Biblical story, Eve is associated with evil "since she is the one who first surrendered to temptation and violated God's law." Second, she is primarily a "sexual being" which she puts to use "by going master over man." Third, only Eve has "dealings with the serpent" showing that she has an "affinity with the devil" (Aschkenasy 39-40). Thus, Eve is a seductress/temptress whom men should avoid. Wright plays on this Biblical configuration in his works set in the South.

*The Long Dream* acts as a continuation of the lynching theme introduced in "Big Boy Leaves Home." Of course, Big Boy is forced to flee his home because of his
nakedness in close proximity to a white woman, a sequence already established as a Biblical Edenic scene. But this is not just any woman; it is, as Big Boy makes clear to his mother “a white woman.” John Lowe notes that Big Boy’s mother’s concern about her son’s situation increases when she finds out a “white woman” was present: “just how much is not clear until she hears the dreaded words ‘white woman’ intrude into the narrative” (63).

Although Fishbelly learns from his father that “white women means death,” he explores his curiosity of the forbidden fruit through Gladys, a mulatto with Caucasian features. The narrator says that Gladys represents for Fish a "shadowy compromise that was white and not white" (219). Wright leaves no doubt that Fish is attracted to her because of her Caucasian features: "he loved her tawny skin,...her tumbling brown hair....He loved her because she was whitish" (215). Although Fish will not admit his obsession with “white meat” either consciously or verbally, Maybelle, a dark skinned prostitute turned down for the lighter-skinned girls, acts as his verbal conscience:

I ain’t blind!" They want white meat! But you sluts ain’t white! You niggers like me! But you the nearest thing they can get to white! If you all just dying for white meat, why don’t you go 'cross town where there ain’t nothing but white meat? You scared of being killed like a dog!

(177-178)

She acts as the voice of the social consciousness. All are aware of the danger Black men face.

The taboo that Black Boy could not discuss in the South is the taboo that Bigger is accused of violating. In The Long Dream, we find the other women of Williams’ analysis—"those who cry rape”—or Eve, a sexual temptress who serves to destroy men;
she is the proverbial forbidden fruit. Fish is initiated into the environment that breeds the mythical taboo through the lynching of Chris: "This was a ceremony. He did not think it; he felt it, knew it. He was being initiated; he was moving along the steep, dangerous precipice leading from childhood to manhood" (The Long Dream 64). Tyree gives him instruction on the taboo: "NEVER LOOK AT A WHITE WOMAN! YOU HEAR?" .... When you in the presence of a white woman, remember she means death! (64) Later, Tyree says that Chris had to die: "Chris died for us" (71). Thus he becomes a Chris(t) figure, not unlike BoBo in "Big Boy Leaves Home." Harris notes that "There is nothing Christian about the act...unless it is viewed as a crucifixion" (Exorcising 103). There is a lesson found in Chris's death as in Christ's—to avoid temptation. While Christ rejected temptation, Chris does not. Similarly, Katherine Fishburn finds that "Chris is innocent of the crime of rape but is brutally and incongruously murdered; he, like Christ, is the archetypal scapegoat" (19).

Unfortunately, on the night of Chris's murder, Fish's interest in the forbidden is piqued. While seeking time alone in the bathroom during the heat of Chris's lynching, he finds a picture of a white woman in a magazine:

Why had black men to die because of white women? The mere fact that Chris had been or would be killed (and that was the most awful part of it; his father had assumed that Chris had to die!) fastened his imagination upon the seductive white face in a way that it had never been concentrated upon any face in all his life. (69)

Fish asks the question that Bigger is forced to answer eighteen years earlier:

I don't understand, Bigger. You say you hated her and you say you felt like having her when you were in the room....
Yeah; that's funny, ain't it?"  "Yeah; I reckon it was because I knew I oughtn've wanted to. I reckon it was because they say black men do that anyhow .... Mr. Max when folks say things like that about you, you whipped before you born. (*Native Son* 405-407)

Hakutani notes, "The problem of miscegenation Fishbelly faces is also similar to that confronted by Bigger Thomas, for the image of forbidden sexual relations is central to Fishbelly's dream as it is to Bigger's tragedy" (254). Although Bigger accidentally murdered Mary and chops her head off so her body can fit easily into her family's furnace, he is systematically lynched for the rape (not the murder) of Mary Dalton, a crime he did not commit. Harris notes that since "the scenery has changed from the rural area" with trees they take Bigger through the court system (114). Yet, although the novel is set in the northern city of Chicago, the attitude of the society is similar to the south's: "Kill 'im," "Lynch 'im!" "That black sonofabitch!" (*Native Son* 313-314). Thus, both Bigger and Fishbelly are victims of Chupa's "Terrible Goddess"--the "Seductive/Destructive" type; Bigger is victimized physically, emotionally, socially and Fishbelly is emotionally and socially.

Eventually, Fish's interest in the Eve—"the forbidden fruit" becomes a part of him mentally and physically. When he is in the back of the police car, he remembers that he still has the picture of the white woman in his wallet. In a desperate attempt to prevent the police from finding the picture, he eats it. The narrator says, "It was inside of him now, a part of him, invisible. He could feel it moving vaguely in his stomach,...burning with a terrible luminosity in the black depths of him" (118). The image of the white woman becomes a part of his "solar plexus," as Bigger says is true of white people in general. Earle Bryant notes that "Fish's ingestion of the newspaper
photograph is one of the most telling incidents in the novel, for it indicates that Fish has enthroned within himself the image of the white woman, has incorporated it into his being forever" (430).

We find out later the full meaning of Fish's curiosity about white women, after he loses his virginity:

Despite the cruel crucifixion of Chris, he knew deep in his heart that there would be no peace in his blood until he had defiantly violated the line that the white world had dared him to cross under the threat of death. The threats designed to create fear in him fostered a secret surging of hot desire. A harsh challenge: You are nothing because you are black, and proof of your being nothing is that if you touch a white woman, you'll be killed! (165)

His desire is not about love or even about sex. Fish feels that white women are an extension of Jim Crow. To have one would be an act of social defiance no different than drinking from a whites only water fountain. Perhaps Lazarus of Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice says it best, "Every time I embrace a black woman I’m embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I’m hugging freedom....I will not be free until the day I can have a white woman in my bed and a white man minds his own business" (161).

Mentally, Fish lives his desire through his dreams. He dreams about a thundering white clock under his mother's chair and a Fishbelly covered with hair. Then a locomotive touches the fishbelly and it swells. Finally, the fishbelly bursts and blood pours out, whereupon he sees

the naked bloody body of Chris with blood running to all sides of the room round his feet at his ankles at his knees rising higher he had to tiptoe to keep blood from reaching his mouth and it was engulfing his
head and when he opened his mouth to scream he was drowning in blood....(83)

The dream has obvious sexual symbolism, which Fishburn analyzes. This dream, one of several in the novel, is portentous. In it we find that there is no escape for Fishbelly from the oppressive white codes involving the sanctity of white womanhood. Fishburn notes that the face of the white clock symbolizes the "white code and the blacks who enforce it by warning him continually against desiring white women" (20). Hakutani further asserts that Fishbelly feels that "in a free, democratic society he has the right to associate with women of his choice" (Hakutani Racial Discourse 254). His eventual "flight" from Mississippi will be an attempt to free himself from the restraints of these codes that oppress him racially and sexually.

Finally, Fish, having grown up with the threat of a rape accusation and lynching, finds himself in jail under such a charge. The police, in an effort to find Tyree's incriminating checks, know that the only way to jail Fish without question is to have a white woman "cry rape." Harris notes, "the role she plays in the drama is just as historically determined as is the role Chris plays" (Harris Exorcising Blackness 123). The police know as well as the white woman that history allows them to arrest Fish on such a charge and that there is literally nothing that he can do about it. "Mrs. Carlson" and the police play their historical roles effectively. Since Fish is reared in the South, Wright implies that dark shadows loom over his head. One such shadow is the specter of death that will descend if Fish acts upon his forbidden desire to have sex with a white woman. By the time Fish reaches a level of understanding through his involvement with
the white woman myth, he "sees" the limitations that surround him. While he is in
prison for the "rape" of "Mrs. Carlson," Fishbelly conducts a mental review:

He was unencumbered with emotional luggage, but there was no
adventurous journey he wanted to make, no goal toward which he sought
to strive. Other than a self-justifying yen for imitating the outward
standards of the white world above him, there had not come within the
range of his experience any ideal that could have captured his
imagination. (356-57)

In "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright says,

Any Negro who has lived in the North or the South knows that
times without number he has heard of some Negro boy being
carted off to jail and charged with "rape." This thing happens so
often that to mind it had become a representative symbol of the
Negro's uncertain position in American. (532)

As a result of their experiences and the realization of this "symbol," both Wright and
Fish become expatriates.

The white women of these three novels are role players determined by
history. They have dual roles, acting both as a threat to the Black protagonists and as
a link to the freedom the Black men desire. Bigger's act of accidentally murdering
Mary and his acceptance of his act may help him to come to a point of self-realization,
but he is condemned to death as a result. Cross forms an emotional connection with
Eva and eventually confesses his malicious acts, but his transference into the role of
the master as a result of killing "the masters," causes her suicide and his murder.
Finally, Fishbelly, after enduring the tragedy of his father's murder and his initiation
into manhood through association with sexual taboos, realizes that the only way he

15 The fish belly is a symbol of the female sex organ, and the locomotive is reminiscent of the sound he
heard prior to finding his father having intercourse with a female customer (20-21).
will be physically free will be to leave the oppressive South. All of these protagonists find spiritual freedom through their dealings with Eve and her daughters.

Ultimately, all of the patterns that we have discussed thus far come together in *Savage Holiday*. To date, the novel has been viewed as a psychological tale, and certainly this view is a valid one. Tate argues that Wright’s rage not only involves his feelings about racism, but is also motivated, as are his protagonists, by an obsession with sex originated by “the lost mother.” The lost mother includes the “child’s earliest principal, and most enduring erotic fantasies about the mother that are suppressed” (88-89). Tate’s argument about Wright’s aggression—sexual and racial—are relevant to my argument about Wright’s development of the Mary trinity, which is more dominant in *Savage Holiday* than any of Wright’s other works (fictional and non-fictional).

When the novel opens, Erskine Fowler is being honored by his employers and colleagues at a retirement dinner. We later learn that he has been forced to retire at the age of forty-three after having worked there for thirty years, so the boss’s son can have his job and add a “younger generation” spin to the insurance company. The next day, Fowler, in an effort to collect his newspaper that has been left in front of the door of his apartment, is inadvertently locked out; unfortunately, he is naked. Literally fearing the idea of being found nude and after failing to contact the superintendent of the building for help, he attempts to climb to the open window of his bathroom above his balcony. Fowler charges outside to the balcony where his neighbor’s child is playing, trips over the child’s tricycle, and scares the child who falls over the balcony to his death. Once Fowler climbs through his window and the child’s body is found, he, a Christian, decides
not to confess his involvement to the police. While at church (all of this happens on a
Sunday morning), Fowler, who has never missed a Sunday service, reaches an epiphany;
he thinks that God has allowed him to take part in the child’s accidental murder so that
he can save the child’s promiscuous, drunken mother. Fowler befriends the mother,
Mrs. Blake, and convinces himself that he will marry her to keep her from suspecting his
part in the child’s murder. Yet, although he is repulsed by her behavior, he is also
attracted to her. We later find out, after he stabs her numerous times in the stomach, that
his attraction to her has much to do with the relationship he had with his own
promiscuous mother, and his desire for her to die: she was a “bad mother.”

The scene that has been overlooked by critics, but is vitally important to my
assessment of the Mary figure in Wright involves the scripture that Fowler reads and
interprets to the congregation, just a few hours after Tony’s death. The scripture is St.
Matthew 12:46-50 and is prefaced by the narrator’s description of the Sunday School
book illustration: “A murky illustration depicted Jesus speaking to a vast crowd at the
edge of which stood Mary, Jesus’ mother, and her sons.” The Biblical passage involves
a visit from His “mother and brethren” who desire to speak with Him. Jesus asks, “Who
is my mother? And who are my brethren?” He answers his own question when he
stretch[s] his hand toward his disciples, and [says], “Behold my mothers and my
brethren. For whoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is
my brother and sister, and mother.”

This scene also appears in a slightly different version, in Mark. According to
Marina Warner, Jesus’s friends decided he had “lost his mind, and wanted to prevent
him from teaching (Mark 3:21). The sequence of events implies strongly that Jesus’s ‘friends’ have marshaled his mothers and relatives to help their relatives to stop his ministry. Thus Jesus rebuffs His earthly family to embrace the larger family of His spiritual fellowship” (14). Although it is certainly possible that Jesus has a conversation with his mother after this public incident. He certainly does seem to separate Himself from his earthly family, especially his own mother, to embrace a spiritual family. Wright seems to make a mockery of the relationship between Christ and his mother in much the same way he shows the contradictions of his Christian mothers and what he perceived as their abusive actions towards him. Additionally, this Biblical reference to the son’s rejection of the mother is a reminder of how Erskine Fowler mentally suffers from being forcibly separated from his own mother.

It is in this Biblical text, however, that Fowler seeks a clue: “Wasn’t this a clear call for him to regard Mrs. Blake as his sister in Christ?” (86). In his need to associate Mrs. Blake with his own moral convictions, he must disassociate her with his life. By now we know that Fowler does not see Mrs. Blake as a “sister,” but as his mother: she is “alone sensual, impulsive...[and] he remembered his own mother” (38). The memories of his own mother are not good ones; they include “Images of the of the many men who always surrounded her laughing face—men who came and went, some indulgent toward him, some indifferent. Gradually, as he’d come to understand what was happening, he’d grown afraid, ashamed” (38). These feelings--fear/dread and shame/guilt-- are typical of Wright’s male protagonists.
The two ways of looking at woman, as mother and as lover, has a connection to Immaculate Mary as well. She has become known as “both lover and mother of bridegroom Jesus….She is wedded not to Joseph but the overshadowing and impenetrating Spirit-Christ. And within biblical tradition this bridal conceit is supported, once again, by erotic language from the Song of Songs and by poetic accounts of Lady Sophia presented in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastics and Wisdom” (Gatta 7). But again, I am relying on the notion that Mary is a “second Eve”; thus, Immaculate Mary’s relationship as the bride of her Son is not as relevant as Eve’s dual role as mother and temptress (Warner 58). Certainly there is a significant difference between Immaculate Mary, a “good woman/mother” and Wright’s Mabel Blake, who is representative of the “bad woman/mother.” Mabel Blake is a “bad mother” who later confesses to Fowler that she met Tony’s father, married him almost immediately, and conceived the day before her husband went off to the war where he was killed and that it was his idea that she become pregnant, not hers. Warner describes Eve as “cursed to bear children rather than blessed with motherhood” (58).

The Eve symbolism is developed further in Fowler’s thoughts about the accident while he is at church. He thinks “that accident was God’s own way of bringing a lost woman to her senses….God had punished her by snatching little Tony up to Paradise—had garnered Tony home from the evil of this world” (87). Fowler, who associates Mrs. Blake with his own mother, becomes like Cain who sacrifices Abel for Eve Mrs. Blake’s own good: “He, Erskine, was but God’s fiery rod of anger!”
Of course, it is Mrs. Blake’s fault that her son dies, just as it is Eve’s fault that her son Cain killed her other son, Abel; Eve is responsible for bringing sin into the world. She, in the eyes of Fowler is a temptress: “How right he’d been in refusing to accept blame for Tony’s death; it hadn’t been his fault at all. Only an ignorantly lustful woman could spin such spider webs of evil to snare men and innocent children!” (105). Both Fowler’s mother and Mrs. Blake are Eve figures.

According to Bassoff, “For mothers and sons, separating is a normal part of their relationship; severing the bond between them is not” (65). The relationship between Fowler and his own mother is severed. Mrs. Blake is killed by the surrogate son, Erskine Fowler, who wanted to kill his own mother because he was ashamed of her and, consequently, ashamed of his own body/sexuality. Tate argues that the act of killing the mother is an “extreme redemptive measure [causing] a repetition and displacement that links Mabel’s fate to the boy Richard’s prospect at the hands of his family” (103). The surrogate mother is killed by Wright who creates “surrogates of his imagination. But unlike Fowler, whose mother dies shortly after his guilty wish, Wright must rely on his authorial power to kill and kill again the imaginary mother” whose mother lives until a year before his own death. I do not wish to imply that Wright wanted his own mother to die, but he perhaps wanted to kill the image of her as a helpless invalid that he was powerless to save from her misery. The act of murdering has an additional significance to the novel. Mrs. Blake’s death frees Erskine from his past. He is now able to remember those parts of life, previously suppressed, and he is additionally able to “confess his sins” to the police officers.
Prior to the murder, Erskine Fowler is timid and shy. He cannot express his feelings of outrage to his employers who have forced him to retire, nor can he even admit to himself that he is outraged. Erskine’s state of freedom and ability to talk or to confess is reminiscent of Wright’s most famous murderers, Bigger and Cross.

The novel may avoid the overt racial conflicts, but it exposes several themes inherent in race and American culture. As mentioned above, Fowler does search for freedom and only finds some form of it when he kills Mabel. Unlike the Black heroes, *Savage Holiday* ends with a confession, but does not end with the hero’s resolution. Secondly, Fowler is representative of the world that Wright’s Black male characters have fought with and against. As Lale Demirturk points out, he has power by the very nature of his skin color, his gender, and his wealth. Thus, as Demirturk argues even further, his killing of Mabel, a woman he cannot “tame” is a way in which he can assert this power (136). I extend Demirturk’s argument even further and remind readers that Fowler’s attempt to control Mabel comes through his religious beliefs; the narrator says, “his emotions became religious” (105). Since God spoke to him through the Bible lesson, it was his job to teach Mabel how to be “moral”, or “civilized.” Thus, his desire to marry her is a way to control her, to assert his power: “She was so broken, abandoned... But was this not his chance to save this woman, to own her, to hold her in his arms so that no one could, would want to claim her?” (122).

Religion certainly does not make Erskine compassionate towards his Black maid. The brief exchange between Fowler and his maid, Minnie, may appear to be an insignificant scene, but it is important. Although she, like Wright’s other Black
female characters, makes a “cameo appearance,” we are able to assess the character of Fowler, a religious man. After Minnie inquires about Tony’s death, the narrator says, “Erskine didn’t believe that servants were quite human, but he felt that having them around brought one some standing; one could always depend upon them for simple, human reactions” (140). To Erskine, Minnie is like a fixture in his well-to-do-life. Other than that, she is not worth much more than a pet who he can communicate to. Thus, the theme of the novel may be universal or non-racial, but Wright still makes a point about race. In fact, Wright glimpses inside the heart of racism itself: the subliminal form of racism.

According to Wright, the novel is non-racial. He explained what he had in mind when he wrote the novel: “I have become concerned about the historical roots and the problems of western whites which make them aggressive toward colored peoples…” He states further that his goal was to understand the oppressor in order to understand the oppressed: In this novel, I have attempted to deal with what I consider as the most important problem white people have to face: their moral dilemma” (Conversations 167).

As Demirturk argues, “the racelessness of the novel then serves as Wright’s analysis of the dilemma of the white American patriarchal man who fails to deal with ‘personal freedom’ because he defines it solely in terms of `sovereignal freedom,’ the act of possessing and dominating the Other” (Demirturk 138). Wright seems to confirm this assertion in Black Power: “until they set their own houses in order with their own restless populations, until they have solved their racial and economic
problems, they can never—no matter what they may say to you at any given moment! Deal honestly with you (387). Although Wright was referring to European rule over Ghana, his assertion is applicable to *Savage Holiday*. Wright’s point is that if the oppressor, whether it be an American white or a European one, has problems attaining freedom on any level, then those who are socially inferior will have a problem attaining freedom as well. Thus, Hegel’s theory does not apply to Erskine Fowler. He is a master, and he does not struggle with a servant—another being—to maintain and retain freedom. Erskine’s struggle is an eternal one. He subconsciously (not consciously, as Hegel teaches) struggles to maintain control of himself, namely his Oedipal conflict, and as a result, Mabel becomes a victim of Erskine’s struggle.

In *Genesis* the serpent convinces Eve to eat the fruit saying, "Your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil" (*Genesis* 2:5). After they eat the fruit, "the eyes of both were opened" (*Genesis* 2:7). Just as Eve helps to open the eyes of Adam by convincing him to eat the forbidden fruit, Wright’s Eves help to open the eyes of his male protagonists. The Eve, Mary, and Mary Magdalene figures give the male protagonists a chance for a new life either through death or in another venue. Although Wright turned away from those who remind him most of his mother (Black women), the icon of motherhood—the mother of all creation—lives in his fiction. Men may see women as the enemy, albeit mothers or lovers, but they seek and crave their presence in their lives.
Chapter Five

“I don’t want to be organized”: Richard Wright’s Politics

When Richard Wright went to Chicago, he desired to quench his American hunger—“a sense of the inexpressibly human” (Black Boy 453). He sought to know what it is to be an American. Wright says he felt “that the Negro could not live a full human life under the conditions imposed upon him by America; and I felt, too, that America, for different reasons, could not live a full, human life (Black Boy 350). The Negro problem, for Wright, was an American problem. Thus, not only did he hunger, but all of America hungered as well. As a result of the American problem, Wright joined the Communist Party in 1933 to promote social change.

In this chapter, unlike my treatment of Black Boy, I am treating Wright’s American Hunger (now part of Black Boy under the HarperPerennial edition) as an autobiography. Herbert Leibowitz asserts that American Hunger lacks the imaginative and unforgettable aspect found in Black Boy (331). Clearly, Wright’s intent was different. Black Boy was to represent the voiceless masses, while American Hunger focuses more specifically on Wright and the beginning of his writing career. Wright graciously tells his readers why Communism was influential for him as a writer and as a Negro. As a result, we learn that Wright was highly concerned about communicating with and to those Blacks who Communists could not and did not know how to reach. Fortunately, Wright’s interest in Communism coincided with his goal to become a published writer. Leibowitz notes that the Party “promised to redress injustices, to find jobs, bread and shelter for the needy of all races, and to foster an ethical cause [....] But [Wright] had another motive...The party seemed prepared to encourage his
writing talents” (347). In 1933, Wright joined the John Reed Club whose “1932 national draft manifesto” states, “Allies from the disillusioned middle-class intellectuals are to be welcomed. But of primary importance at this stage is the development of the revolutionary culture of the working class itself” (Foley Radical 90). According to Barbara Foley, “a year later… the Chicago John Reed Club, included among its various functions the goal of ‘assist[ing] and developing (through cooperation with the Workers Cultural Federation and other revolutionary organizations) worker-writers and worker-artists’” (Radical 91). Although his literary career was launched as a result of his affiliation with the Communist Party, Wright, according to Harold McCarthy, “joined the Communist Party for all the wrong reasons” (71). Wright was a writer and not a political activist, and his eventual break from the Party reflects his inner conflicts about being a member of an organization and the Communists’ fear of Wright’s “irrepressible individuality” (McCarthy 71). Communism proved to be another way in which ideas were used to master the minds of oppressed people. For Wright, Communism was an organized political religion.

Not one, but a series of events lead Wright to the Communist Party. The most significant is, of course, his move from the South to the Northern city of Chicago where he felt life would be better. Secondly, his isolated past: “I was meeting men and women who were to form the first sustained relationships in my life” (373). Third is the Depression, which forced Wright to go to a relief station. While there, Wright is able to see his plight as not unique, but one shared by others:

As I listened to the talk [Blacks share their stories with one another] I could see black minds shedding many illusions. These people now
knew that the past had betrayed them, had cast them out; but they did not know what they wanted. Yes, some of the things that the Communists said were true .... (353).

Consequently, Communism becomes a means by which he is able to find a solution to the “Negro problem.”

According to Wright, Stalin’s *The National and Colonial Question*, impressed him:

Stalin’s book showed how diverse minorities could be welded into unity, and I regarded it as a most politically sensitive volume that revealed a new way of looking upon lost peoples. ... I had made the first total emotional commitment of my life when I read how the phonetic experts had given these tongueless people a language, newspapers, and institutions. I had read how these forgotten folk had been encouraged to keep their old cultures, to see in their ancient customs meanings and satisfactions as deep as those contained in supposedly superior ways of living. And I had exclaimed to myself how different this was from the way in which Negroes were sneered at in America. (394)

Apparently Stalin’s words spoke to Wright like the sermons of religious preachers spoke to their congregations. Wright made an “emotional commitment,” as a result of Stalin’s ideology about how to unify the forgotten folk, and his identification with Stalin’s book is similar to the moments of epiphany his characters experience. Like his characters, notably Mann and Aunt Sue of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright, undergoes a conversion; he transforms his experiences as a Southerner raised in a Christian home into a new identity as a Communist.

Wright’s “emotional commitment” coupled with his determination to become a great writer, dominates *American Hunger*. In his autobiographical work, food and knowledge are synonymous, and they signify Wright’s act of feeding his physical and
spiritual hunger: "While I crammed my stomach, I read Stein's *Three Lives*, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Dostoevski's *The Possessed*, all of which revealed new realms of feeling." He says that he also read heavily in psychology related to crime and family (327). Not only does he establish his authority as a learned individual by describing his reading habits, but he also describes the way he taught himself how to write. His goal was to "fasten the mind of the reader upon words so heavily that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response" (330). Significantly, he says he "strove to *master* words"; the act of mastering is an issue relevant not only to Wright's writing, but to his life as well.

According to Daniel Aaron, "proletarian" writing encompassed the feelings and experiences of real people who suffered from the Depression and social forces. Wright became a part of this movement. Alan Wald notes that Richard Wright and others "proclaimed their fiction to be explicitly within Marxist culture, and accordingly built a body of literary criticism that contemplated the centerpiece of their fiction" (2). Americans interest in the Communist Party was stimulated by the news that the European economic system was more stable than America's. While Americans suffered from "unemployment, the labor violence, the social disorders [and] the widespread despair in the United States, Russia, during the early thirties, "seemed to hive of happy industry." Russians were not suffering from unemployment, as were Americans. Thus, American writers, who were also members of the working class, found a home in the Communist Party: "a few were dedicated socialists, spiritually thirsting for community. For them the party was the beneficent agency
through which the good society would be inaugurated and mankind released from its long bondage, and they felt strengthened as writers, less weak and vulnerable and useless, when they gave themselves to the revolutionary cause" (Aaron 158). Writing, significantly, made Wright and others feel powerful. As a result of his work as editor of the *New Masses*, Wright becomes a member of the Party; his belief in the ideas as professed by Stalin solidified his willingness to join.

The Communist Party’s appeal to the proletariat included Blacks, but Black Americans certainly had other reasons for wanting to be a part of the Communist movement. According to Robin Kelley, “the Communist publications carried articles describing the struggles in Africa and the Caribbean” (94). Furthermore, Communist organizers created Marxists—learned individuals who attended ten-week courses at the Worker schools where they became knowledgeable about socialism and other political issues (Kelley 94-95). Finally, some were also required to travel to other countries where they received freedom unparalleled in America (Kelley 95). As a result of these experiences, Black Americans felt pride and acceptance.

Although Wright shared their feeling of acceptance, his informal education makes him feel isolated from the Black Communists. This separation is present in his relationship with the Black Communists:

The more I learned of the Negro Communists the more I found that they were not vicious, that they had no intention to hurt. They just did not know anything. They felt that all questions had been answered, and anyone who asked new ones or tried to answer old ones was dangerous.

(389)
They could only regurgitate what they had been told by the Communist leaders. In Wright’s view, these Black Communists are not much different than Uncle Tom. Like their fictional predecessor, they did not question the restraints placed on them, allowing them to go along willingly and passively with the power structure. Wright, on the other hand, is more like Douglass, a self-taught educated man. In his autobiography, *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass describes the difference between him, a literate slave, and his fellow illiterate slaves:

The more I read, the more I was lead to abhor and detest my enslavers...As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that the very discontent that Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing...I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. (84)

A similar paradox exists between Wright, a Black self-taught “intellectual”—a term he seems to detest—and these “tongueless” Communist Negroes. The Black Communists, following the lead of the white Communists, view Wright as a dangerous Trotskyite rather than a potential savior for the Negro race.

Much as Jesus taught his followers about morals through parables, Wright’s goal is to get the Communist message to Blacks in a way that they can understand:

In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words and try to put some of that meaning back. I would address my words to two groups: I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I will tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them. (*Black Boy* 377)
To his disappointment, however, he cannot find an ally in the Black Communists who seem unable to think freely and independently as he does. What we see in his description of his goal is the same kind of emotional intensity we see in *Black Boy* when Wright declares that he will “buy all of the books in the world and read them,” in defiance of his grandmother’s act of evicting Eloise Crawford. This is the kind of emotional intensity missing in *American Hunger* and the only time Wright gets close to it is when he speaks about the way Communism could help to unify America, making the country more sensitive to the needs of Black people.

According to Wright, the only way to help Black people was not to openly criticize their religious beliefs: “That was not the way to destroy people’s outworn beliefs” (*Black Boy* 350). Wright is critical of a Black Communist who openly threatens God: “I’ll reach up there and grab Him by his beard and jerk Him down here to this hungry earth and cut His throat.” The Black spectators look at the man in “shock” and “silence” (350). Later, Wright’s mother unknowingly plays a part in influencing Wright’s appeal to Black Christians, a technique he develops in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. At one point, Wright says she enters his room and picks up a copy of the *New Masses*, a Communist magazine which allowed for the publication of creative writing and news stories. On the cover, she sees a cartoon of a raggedly dressed man with bulging eyes surrounded by a group of women, men and children “waving clubs, stones, and pitchforks.” Wright says that he saw the cover “with my mother standing at my side, lending me her eyes.” Through his mother’s point of view, Wright is able to see how the violent nature of the cartoon could be offensive to Christians who
would perhaps be most likely to identify with the Party because of its sermon like rhetoric and its system of organized ideas. Wright concludes, “My mother’s face showed disgust and moral loathing. She was a gentle woman. Her ideal was Christ upon the cross. How could I tell her to march in the streets, chanting, singing” (376). The Party’s approach was too radical.

Wright’s desire to write nor his acceptance of Stalin’s doctrines would make him susceptible to the intellectual limits that were imposed by the Northern Communists; in fact, they reminded him of the white men at the optical company in Mississippi who threatened to kill him when he asked to be trained to make glasses. According to Wright,

It was inconceivable to me, though bred in the lap of Southern hate, that a man could not have his say. I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear. And now I was slowly adding fagots to a flame that would soon blaze over my head with all theee violence of the assault I had sustained when I had naively thought I could learn the optical trade in Mississippi. (405)

Wright’s separation from the Party had much to do with his inability to be “mastered” like the words he put on paper. Initially, when Wright was asked to attend a Communist meeting, he professed: “I don’t want to be organized” (371). Thus, his break from the Party is seen through the paradigm of his childhood experiences with Jim Crow. For Wright, who rejected religion which “proscribed his humanity,” the Communist Party is to racism as fuchsia is to pink.

Furthermore, the Party was no different for Wright than religion. As Leibowitz notes,
In its censorship of members activities and thoughts, the party resembled the Seventh-Day Adventism of Granny Wilson. To be sure, the supernaturalism of granny’s salvational scheme was replaced by a materialistic theology but both insisted that there was only one current doctrine (349).

Organized system of beliefs—Religion and the Communist Party—were both ways to control and to master its believers.

By the time Wright broke with the Party or the Party broke with him at the May Day parade, Wright had already written *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Wright admits in *American Hunger* that after he was forcefully removed from the Communist group at the May Day parade, he no longer had a desire to carry the Communist message to his people:

> I remembered the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honor and glory to the Communist party and I was glad that they were down in black and white, were finished. For I knew in my heart that I would never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life....never again make so total a commitment of life. (451)

In 1930, the Communist Party began to organize Southern Blacks, like those in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. The Party’s 1930 resolution addresses the differences between the needs of Southern and Northern Blacks. While the Northern Blacks sought “integration and assimilation,” the demand for “self-determination—political power, control over the economy, and the right to secede from the United States”—was initiated in the South (Kelley 13). This initiative appealed to many Southern Blacks, especially those who had “Southern rural roots, limited education, and were unskilled or skilled laborers. [Many were also] active in their respective churches and some...participated in local gospel quartets” (25). Two of Wright’s short stories in
"Uncle Tom's Children," "Bright and Morning Star" and "Fire and Cloud," reflect the Communist Party's activities in the South.

According to Dan McCall, Wright's short story, "Fire and Cloud," was inspired by an actual event that Wright became familiar with while he was a reporter for the *Daily Worker*. Angelo Herndon, a Black coal miner, organized masses to march to the courthouse in Atlanta in order to demand that the closed relief stations, be reopened. Reportedly 600 whites and 400 Blacks were in attendance. As a result, $6,000 of relief was provided for the jobless, but Herndon was sentenced to serve twenty years on the chain gang for "inciting to riot." (McCall 29). The Communist Party and the International Labor Defense launched a campaign to free Herndon. In 1937, the Supreme Court overturned Herndon's conviction (Foner xxiv). Wright did not cover this story, but he wrote a story about a Black woman who placed a picture of Herndon on her wall and told her daughters about Herndon (McCall 29). In fact, according to Michel Fabre, "Angelo Herndon was a friend of Wright" (World 24).

Similarly, "Fire and Cloud" is the story about Rev. Daniel Taylor, who is a leader in the Black community during the depression. The Blacks have been denied food and he, a man who has always gotten along well with the white government officials, seeks a way to get food for his people. After being kidnapped by whites and beaten, Taylor ultimately chooses to participate in a march, organized by the Communist Party, and as a result, the Blacks and poor whites are given the food they need. While the Herndon story ends with the imprisonment of the leader, Wright
chooses a more optimistic ending for his story which is certainly meant to inspire hope and trust in the Party.

When “Fire and Cloud” opens, we find a protagonist who is frustrated and is trying to decide what to do to “rid himself of some bitter thing”:

He thought, Thas the way its aways been! Wistfully he turned and looked back at the dim buildings of the town lying sprawled mistily on the crest of a far hill. Seems like the white folks jus erbout owns this whole worl! Looks like they done conquered everything! (157)

Taylor’s bitterness has much to do with the decision that he must make that will affect the Blacks of his community. Significantly, we learn that Taylor is a preacher while he ponders his dilemma; subsequently, we also learn that the Communists have proposed the solution to the problem of “feeding folks”:

Here Ah is a man called by Gawd t preach n whut kin Ah do? Hungry folks looking t me fer hep n whut kin Ah do? Ah don tried everything n cant do nuthin! Shucks, mabbe Hadley n Greens right? (158).

Yet, Taylor’s indecision is complicated by his religious faith: “The good Lawds gonna clean up this ol worl some day!” (159).

Taylor is representative of the “common people,” as Wright calls them. While Rev. Taylor looks at the “road running before him, winding, vanishing, the soft yellow dust filled with the runts of wagon wheels and tiny threads of auto tires,” he fondly remembers a time before he was married and before he was a preacher (159). Wright uses the image of the road and the juxtaposition of the old and modern means of transportation to emphasize the impending change, which is to occur by the end of the short story. Furthermore, this change will, Wright hopes, will affect the “readers and
doers” of his words—those who will change their “out worn beliefs” (Black Boy 350). Later, we find that this memory is inspired by the fact that the whites have usurped the land. During a prayer, Rev. Taylor says, “They don put the lans of the worl in their pockets! They done fenced em off n nailed em down! Theys a-tryn t take Yo place, lawd!” We find out even later that it is unlawful law for Blacks to plant any crops. Again, as we saw in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Wright refers to a prelapsarian Eden—the “good ol days” when there was plenty to eat—which has been disrupted by some whites who have taken a God-like omnipotent role over Blacks and poor whites. Or perhaps, we see a time before primitive lands (i.e. America and Africa) were colonized by European governments and religion.

The description of the land also signifies Old Testament imagery found in the Book of Exodus. As with all of Wright’s stories in his collection, he makes use of nature. Here he describes a land of “milk and honey”: “There had been plenty to eat; the blessings of God had been overflowing.” Then as God spoke to Moses, he speaks to Taylor: “God had called him to preach his word, to spread it to the four corners of the earth, to save His black people...Yes, he had been like Moses leading his people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land” (159).

What Wright makes clear is that Taylor’s trouble has existed since the reverend first formed a relationship with the Mayor, and it has only been the Depression that has caused him to feel (or recognize) his trouble more acutely. Prior to his call to the ministry, he was a “happy” field worker: “they could sing as he had sung when he and May were first married; sing about picking cotton, fishing, hunting, about sun and
rain" (161). Now that the Blacks need relief, Taylor is faced with how to negotiate with the mayor who "has been pretty wid me even ef he is a white man." As he thinks this, the narrator says Taylor's "feet sank softly into the dust he saw [envisioned] Mayor Bolton" (161). The symbolic act of sinking, parallels not only Taylor's feelings of being overwhelmed with the decision of how to proceed, but also the burden that all of his people face if he continues to remain quiet and passive. Taylor, although he is poor and Black, is aware that he must be proactive: "[the mayor] needs something t scare him now, he thought. Hes been runnin over us too long..." (161).

His indecision is the root of the story's conflict: he must figure out a way to help his people and hope that they will "stan by me" and not lose his life, politically and physically, as a result. What he will find by the end of the short story is that there is no compromise, and that he must risk his life on every level, if he is to effect change. Like Mann of "Down By the Riverside," Rev. Taylor will undergo a conversion process separate from his Christian beliefs.

Once Taylor returns home, his conflict becomes manifested by the physical presence of the people who want to influence his decision. Weeping and wailing members of Taylor's congregation await him at the door of his home; Deacon Smith and other deacons await him in the basement—a proverbial hell for those who wish to betray a man of God; Hadley and Green, the Communists, are in the Bible Room—a meeting place for two organized ideologies to either clash or come together; and, the Mayor, Chief of Police, and Chief of the "Red Squad" are waiting for him in the parlor.
The first meeting Taylor has is with his congregation where we hear about the depth of their hunger—many, including their children, are on the verge of starvation. Perhaps the most significant meeting he has, however, is with Hadley and Green, the Communist organizers of the march for relief. Notably, Taylor has the meeting moved from the Bible Room into a bedroom, implying that the protagonist is not ready to fuse his Christian beliefs with Communism. Hadley and Green desire that Taylor allow them to put his name on a leaflet about the march. Taylor refuses and argues, “Ef them whit folks knowed Ah wuz callin mah folks in the streets t demonstrate, they wouldn’t never gimme a chance t git something fer mah folks ergin…” (175). What Taylor will come to realize is that his fear of the whites not allowing him “another chance” is unrealistic because he has never really had a “chance.” His freedom is limited and will remain so until he demands more. The entire short story seems to relate to the question Wright poses in *American Hunger*: “Could a Negro ever live halfway like a human being in this goddamn country?” (411).

The question, at least in the context of this short story, will be addressed by the Communists. Hadley, a white man, clearly states that Taylor must fight for his people and not himself. Taylor’s refusal to do so results in him “standing between [his] people and the white folks” (175). Certainly, Wright is taking a stab at Black religious leaders who were passive in the fight for equality during this time. James Cone would agree with Wright’s literary implication:

The black church lost its zeal for freedom in the midst of the new structures of white power[...]. The black minister thus became a most devoted “Uncle Tom,” the transmitter of white wishes, the admonisher of obedience to the caste system. He was the liaison man between the
white power structure and the oppressed blacks, serving the dual function of assuring whites that all is well in the black community, dampening the spirit of freedom among his people. (106)

Cone’s assessment of Black religious leaders applies to Rev. Daniel Taylor who is afraid to go against “the white power structure,” although his people will surely die slowly from starvation if they are not given food. Dan Taylor is a twentieth century “Uncle Tom” as described by Cone. Taylor, like Josiah Henson before his “change of heart” is liked by his “white master”—the representative of white power who controls the livelihood of Taylor and his people. Taylor is trusted not to lead his people to freedom, but to convince them to remain under “control.” Rev. Taylor also seems to be a precursor to Tyree of The Long Dream. Although Tyree is not a minister, he certainly is more concerned about maintaining his relationships with the white government officials than he is about doing anything to help the poor Blacks, whom he helps to exploit. Taylor’s decision is to march with the people only if they want to march: In essence, he decides that he will be led by the people as opposed to the people being led by him.

Although we have heard much about him, the first time readers actually meet the Mayor, the representative of “the white power structure” is at Taylor’s house. The Mayor begins by introducing the law officials, Chief of Police Bruden and Mr. Lowe, the “head of the fine Industrial Squad” or the “Red Squad” (188) to Taylor, whom he refers to as a “boy” and a “nigger,” terms contradictory to Taylor’s earlier description of the mayor as friendly. What is clear here is that on some level, not only has Dan Taylor accepted the whites’ disrespect, but he also sees it as natural. What also
becomes clear during their verbal exchange is that Taylor, as Hadley implied earlier, is only the Blacks’ leader because the whites want him to be. Through Hadley and the Mayor, Wright poses a question about the legitimacy of God’s call. The mayor makes his authority over Rev. Taylor clear, “Its not every nigger id trust as Im about to trust you…Im doing this because Ive faith in you. I known you for twenty-five years, Dan. During that time I think Ive played pretty fair with you, haven’t I? (181) As implied earlier by Hadley, Rev. Taylor was chosen to be the leader by the whites, and not by God. Ironically, it is a Communist who must get Rev. Taylor to see the extent of how he has been mistreated.

The next meeting presents readers with those representative types who are not for equality as much as they are for holding on to the Christian beliefs; Deacon Smith represents this type. He argues, “AH SAY WE OUGHTNT MARCH! ….Wait and see how things come out!” (191). Deacon Smith is also like Uncle Tom. He is not willing to go against the white power structure and prefers that the other Blacks agree with him. Taylor’s meeting with Smith and the other deacons is interrupted and so is his moment of indecision.

As with all of Wright’s stories in this collection, Rev. Taylor’s turning point involves a physical confrontation with a group of angry white men whose sole purpose is to suppress the Blacks’ move towards freedom. They kidnap him and beat him with a “nigger-whip” which wraps “itself around his neck, leaving a ring of fire.” As he is mercilessly beaten, he is reminded of his position as a preacher through the men’s
ridicule and attempt to master him through humiliation: they make him pray. The narrator describes his pain:

...the pain burned its way into his body, wave upon wave. It seemed that when he held his muscles taut the blows hurt less; but he could not hold taut long. Each blow told him that soon he would give out. (198)

After a few more shocking blows he tells his tormenters, “Awright, kill me! Tie me n kill me! Yuh white trash cowards, kill me!” Like Douglass’s fight with Covey, the physical action is representative of the internal transformation. In a Hegelian sense, Rev. Taylor makes a conscious decision to seek freedom, but in a Christian sense Taylor has been baptized in fire. His conversion is near completion. Surely the point after he raises his head is evidence of this: “the weight of his body rested on his arms; his head dropped to one side” (199). Taylor, like Christ who was beaten before He was crucified, will emerge stronger and more determined to save the lives of his followers.

Taylor’s conversion evolves further as he walks through the white neighborhood to get to his home. His pain is internalized, and he entertains angry and bitter thoughts, more volatile than the ones he has when readers first meet him: “Some day theys gonna burn in Gawd Awmightys fire! How come they make us suffer so?” Wright repetitively uses the word “fire”—Taylor is like a “pillar of fire”; the whites are going to burn; his hate is like “fire.” All uses of the word are relative to Biblical language. The story title refers to the Israelites who were guided by a fire by night and a cloud by day during their journey to the Promised Land. African American sermons often dealt with the story of the Israelites as it gave African slaves hope for freedom.
The imagery also foreshadows Taylor’s move towards fulfilling “his call”; as a pillar of fire, he will lead his people in an act that will procure food for them, and we may assume that this will not be the last of such acts.

Taylor’s propensity towards demonstration is realized during his conversation with his son who wishes his father to be more like a Nat Turner figure. Taylor’s son’s solution to the dilemma is to fight physically: “Ahma git sam n Pete n Bob n Jack n some mo boys together sos if anything happens....” Like the vehicles on the winding road, Jimmy represents a new generation who would rather retaliate violently to effect change. Jimmy is reminiscent of Big Boy; he does not consider the repercussions of such an act, but allows anger and bitterness to control his actions. His father is well aware of the script his son is trying to take part in and warns him about its ending: “Yuh fixin t git us all inter trouble now! ...Ef them white folks jus thought we wuz doin something like that they’s crack down on us! We’d hava riot!” (163). Taylor teaches his son that a successful retaliation must come from an alliance with the people:

N they’ll keep on killin us less we learn how t fight! Son, it’s the people we mus gid wid us! Wes empty n weak this way! The reason we cant do nothing is cause wes so much erlone.... (210)

By this point, we see that Taylor has accepted the ideals of the Communists, who wish to bring together Blacks and poor whites, but he has not replaced his beliefs with Communist beliefs; rather, Rev. Taylor poses a compromise between the two: “Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us.” Yet, there is an implication that God cannot be the dominating force. Taylor asserts that “All the will, all the
strength, all the power, all the numbahs is in the people!” (210). Taylor’s compromise was probably more acceptable to Wright’s Black audience, and this depiction countered people like Communist John Owens who is quoted by Kelley as saying, “the vast majority of southern Negroes are not revolutionary, not even radical. Given a society of peace, prosperity and security, they are content to drift through life” (14). Moreover, according to Kelley, many Southern Blacks viewed white Communists as the ‘Yankees who [had] return[ed] to wage another Civil War on the South and the complete Reconstruction” (99). This belief in the “Second Coming” was met by Southern Christian Communist activists who “In the abandoned houses and isolated churches of rural Alabama...sustained a tradition of singing before and after gatherings, a practice adopted from the rural church services after which they patterned their meetings” (105).

However, although the conversion from passive Christianity to a compromise with militant Communism is completed, but as Foley notes, readers must not overlook the fact that “Taylor’s principal concern remains his black congregation: the white poor with who they will ally remains a vague presence, a faceless stream to be joined with for pragmatic purposes only” (Radical). By extension, I argue that Wright’s “principal concern” was and remained “his black congregation.” Finally, Rev. Taylor, like the Christian Communists described by Kelley, goes to his people and tells them that he will march and invites them to march with him in the name of God: “ah know now whut t do! Wes gotta git close t ernother! Gawds done spoke! Gawds done sent His sign. Now its fer us t ack...” He makes a conscious decision to demand freedom.
With his son by his side, he is successful only because he accepts what Lenin taught (Fabre, *World* 24) "Freedom belongs to the strong!" (220). In other words, those who proactively seek mental and social freedom (equality) will receive it.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Wright's *Native Son*, which he finished in the late winter and spring of 1939, ends (not unlike "Fire and Cloud") with Bigger Thomas reaching a point of self-actualization through his conversations with Max, a lawyer who works for the Communist Party. It is difficult to determine when Wright actually broke from the Party. Fabre notes that "certain confrontations described in 'I Tried to be a Communist'" are placed in a biased context and out of chronological order....Certain insults and public humiliations that he claims to have suffered in Chicago during the thirties seem actually to have taken place in New York during the forties" (*Unfinished* 137). According to Richard Kostelanetz, although Wright "had disengaged himself from the Communist Party's activities as early as May Day of 1936, he still retained his official membership in the party until 1942 and informal ties within certain Popular Front literary groups until 1944. In June, 1941, for instance, he addressed the fourth conference of the League of American Writers" (78). Fabre reconciles Wright's last years of membership as a Communist by noting that he reinstated his membership when he moved to New York in 1937 because "he still believed that Marxist theory was valid" (*Unfinished* 138). In a letter written to his editor, Wright stated,

> Feeling that the Communist Party in New York was more liberal and intelligent, I left Chicago for New York in 1936, and upon arrival, I
was reinstated into the Communist Party and given charge of the Harlem Bureau of the *Daily Worker*. (qtd. Fabre 138)

Wright’s ambiguous feelings about the Party are present in *Native Son*.

Before we actually meet Max, Bigger’s Communist defense attorney, the circumstances which make Max’s appearance plausible must occur. Those circumstances include the activities which take place the fatal night that Bigger, Mary and Jan meet. When Mary tells Bigger to take her to get “his friend,” Jan, a Communist, he thinks about what he knows about Communists:

…what were Communists like, anyway? Was she one? What made people Communists? He remembered seeing many cartoons of Communists in newspapers and always they had flaming torches in their hands and wore beards and were trying to commit murder or set things on fire. People who acted that way were crazy. All he could recall having heard about Communists was associated in his mind with darkness, old houses, people speaking in whispers, and trade unions on strike. (75)

What Wright makes clear is that there is a stigma attached to Communists, which can be likened to the stigma attached to Blacks. What Bigger knows about Communists is the sum total of what he has heard about them, especially from his mother. Likewise, what Bigger knows about whites, results in what he has heard about them. Thus, he fears Mary’s whiteness. The narrator describes Bigger’s inner struggle, “The guarded feeling of freedom he had while listening to [Mary] was tangled by the hard fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do” (74). This word-of-mouth knowledge will lead to Mary’s demise. Ironically, Mary’s own parents’—representatives of white power—act of supporting segregation contributes to Bigger’s fear of whites and to his ignorance of them.
Of course, what Mary and Jan know about Blacks is the result of what they have learned from their parents, the media, and/or any number of biased sources. Both Jan and Mary insist that Bigger treat them like his equal and not like his superiors. They tell him how he should address them, “don’t say sir to me. I’ll call you Bigger and you’ll call me Jan…. How’s that? Bigger did not answer…”It’s all right, Bigger,” she said. “Jan means it,” they also insist that he shake Jan’s hand (75). Bigger is confused about their insistence that he accept them as his “friends.” He is also confused as to why he should accept them as his “friends”:

Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no badge of shame which he knew was attached to his black skin. It was a shadowy region, a world from the black that he stood upon…. (76)

Their friendliness succeeds in making him feel his “Blackness”—the perception that his race is inferior, different. The cultural separation is also physical; Blacks and whites do not live next to one another nor, do they touch. Bigger is forced to live behind an “omnipresent veil” (Native Son 143). Again, we are reminded of DuBoise’s theory of double-consciousness.

During their drive to the Black Belt, Jan tells Bigger about the Communists revolutionary plan for racial and economic equality: “there’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor” (78). Mary follows-up by saying that she has long wanted to “go into these houses and just see how your people live” (79).

Significantly, the word “see” is italicized in the novel. After telling Bigger about her
visits to foreign countries, she says, “I just want to see. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They’re human” (79). What is ironic is that Mary seems to be oblivious to the fact that her family owns some of the very homes she refers to, leaving readers to wonder if she knows that her family owns some of the dilapidated property in the Black Belt. She also overlooks the fact that her own father has made it not only impossible for his Black tenants to live like humans (or like they, the Dalton's, do), but he also makes it so that she never has to know exactly how his tenants live. Mary is almost as blind as her mother; however, Mary's desire to see is the significant difference.

Furthermore, the idea of her literally seeing these people is additionally problematic. She is, in spite of herself, part of the white power structure, who has $3,000 to get Communists out of jail (87), and she also has the power to make Bigger feel ashamed just by “looking” at him. Her look reminds readers of an earlier scene I have described in Chapter Three, where Mr. Dalton makes Bigger uncomfortable while they discuss Bigger’s duties as chauffeur. Joyce Ann Joyce asserts, “Mr. Dalton’s ‘amused smile’ reflects the superiority, power, and emotional distance characteristic of a representative from the godlike world that controls Bigger’s life” (175). The Dalton’s gaze parallels the eyes of their white cat and the “pointing finger” of District Attorney Buckley.

Yet, Mary is not completely blind. She has what may be a sincere interest in helping Blacks. We must keep in mind that we don’t know enough about Mary or Jan to decide whether her interest is sincere or if she sees Blacks as a cause or even as a
way to rebel against her father. What is clear, is that Mary is certainly blind to the fact that she treats Bigger as a tour guide into a culture where he is not even comfortable. The narrator describes Bigger as living “with them [his Black family], but behind a wall, a curtain” (9).

She and Jan abruptly invade Bigger’s world. They tell him how they want to be addressed. They tell him they want to see how his people live, and they make him take them to eat in his neighborhood. What we see here is another version of the power structure that Bigger is already struggling with and against. Mary seems incapable of seeing how she has invaded Bigger’s space, and she does not consider that she may want to make Bigger feel comfortable with her and Jan before making demands upon his behavior and way of thinking which is the sum total of his entire life. Bigger acutely feels their invasion and demands. Nevertheless, he seems willing to be more accepting, but expresses a desire to have more time to become acclimated: “How on earth could he learn not to say yessuh and yessum to white people in one night when he had been saying it all his life long?” (80).

Although Mary is not given the chance, Jan later admits his blindness:

I can understand, even if I didn’t seem to understand that night.....Well, you jarred me....I see now....I’m the one who’s really guilty....I didn’t know we were so far apart until that night....It made me see deeper into men. It made me see things I knew, but had not forgotten. (331-332)

He, as Max will inevitably do, and as the Communist Party certainly did in Wright’s point of view, admits that he treated Bigger like a cause, and not like a man. Until Mary’s death, Bigger and the problem of American racism remained unseen. Richard Wright provided his readers with a greater understanding of Jan’s role: “My aim in
depicting Jan was to show that even for that Party which has thrown down a challenge to America on the Negro Question such as has no other party, there is much, much to do, and above all, to understand....” (quotd. Unfinished Fabre 186).

Ironically, Wright’s attempt to convey a message about social blindness is evidenced in the deletions of the first edition of Native Son. According to Keneth Kinnamon, “cuts involved such topics as anti-Semitism, naïve white liberalism, the social barriers between Bigger and Mary, and analogy—a familiar one in Afro-American literature—between black rebelliousness and the American Revolution” (121). Eventually, Jan places his Communist beliefs into a context in which he hopes Bigger can understand. During a conversation the three have in Ernie’s Kitchen Shack over fried chicken, Bigger tells Jan that his father was killed in a riot when he was a child but nothing was done about it. Jan says, “that’s what we want to stop. That’s what we Communists are fighting. We want to stop people from treating others that way….Don’t you think that if we got together we could stop things like that?” (85). Jan follows his recruitment tactics by asking Bigger if he was impressed with the Party’s success with the Scottsboro Boys case. Bigger, who is a poor Black man merely trying to survive and who is overwhelmed by the fact that he has been made to sit in a neighborhood restaurant with his white employer’s daughter and her white Communist boyfriend, rejects the idea of joining forces with them. These are the people that have made him feel the shame of his Blackness.

Bigger’s eventual act of murder is a culmination of all of the emotions he has experienced as a result of being with Jan and Mary, and that he has felt all of his life.
Mary and Bigger’s return to the Dalton’s home shows that there can never be an alliance between Black and white unless Americans actively work together to eradicate racism. Bigger’s fear of leaving Mary anywhere but in her own room causes him to choose the riskiest of all of his options. She, a Communist sympathizer and rich white debutant points out the direction to her room. Her act of showing Bigger the way to her room is associated with her earlier acts of treating Bigger like “her friend.” This symbolic gesture is an invitation to Bigger to come from behind his veil or the curtain to be a part of a world that he has been barred from experiencing.

In fact, this world has become so comfortable with Bigger’s existence on the other side of the veil, it does not suspect that he would dare come from behind it. Yet, it would rather believe that the preeminent threat of whites who sympathize with Blacks and who threaten the capitalist economic power structure are guilty. The investigators do not see that the ransom letter is written in Black dialect by someone with an eighth grade education: “We got your daughter...Do what this letter say” (202-203). Since he signs the letter “Red,” the whites readily believe that the letter was actually written by a member of the Communist Party and not by their Black chauffeur (Johnson 150-151). The newspapers, which represent the opinions of society, a reporter states, “...[Jan] may be linked to the Negro [Bigger] as an accomplice; they feel that the plan of the murder and kidnapping was too elaborate to be the work of a Negro mind” (283). Thus, Bigger is not seen because he does not possess the cunning needed to plan a kidnapping (murder and rape, yes, but not kidnapping).
Until the bones are found, Bigger is successful in hiding the fact that he has come from behind the curtain. Furthermore, as Laura Tanner asserts,

The narrator ‘reads’ Mary’s murder as an act of creation; by shattering this symbol of white womanhood, we are led to believe, Bigger also shatters the assumptions underlying the master language game and opens up the possibility of rewriting his own existence within a new language game and a new paradigm of reality. (132)

In this sense, we can see how Bigger Thomas, through the writing of the kidnap letter and the subsequent assertion of his power, is able to do as Wright does with Hegel and make the master language, his language. Bigger may not have chosen to kill Mary, but he certainly does choose how he will handle her death.

Although critics, such as Dan McCall, have found Max’s final speech to be a rhetorical “soapbox” designed to reach mass movements” (53), Max is significant to the progression of the novel. Foley responds to those who have ignored the “radical writers of the Depression years,”

Critics treating the proletarian novelists of fifty years ago—even critics apparently quite sympathetic with these novelists’ radical politics—adhere to relatively traditional assumptions about literature and literary value. The requirements of politics, we are told, coexist only uneasily with those of aesthetics; when novelists begin to “preach,” their narratives descend to “propaganda” and lose their imaginative power and integrity. (“Politics” 188)

Wright’s literature, influenced by African-American Southern religion, certainly includes his share of “preaching.” Nevertheless, Max’s presence in the novel is crucial to the theme. Not only does Wright use Max to “tells us what the protagonist’s life means because he cannot assume that his readers’ experience will enable them to provide Bigger with the appropriate context” (Foley “Politics” 197), but also, during
this era, the only way that Blacks stood a chance of being exonerated from criminal charges was if they were represented by sympathetic whites. For example, the Scottsboro Boys conviction was overturned, but Robert Nixon, whose case was tried while Wright wrote *Native Son*, was convicted. Nixon, who was represented by Black lawyers of the National Negro Congress, was a Southern Black male accused of raping and murdering a white female in Chicago. Kenneth Kinnamon suggests two reasons why Wright makes the decision to have Bigger represented by a white man: "As a Communist, Max can articulate a Marxist analysis of Bigger’s situation which clearly derives from Wright’s own conceptual analysis of the effects of racism on the Bigger type.” Wright was also able to contrast “Bigger’s black emotional apprehension of the meaning of his ordeal with Max’s white intellectual interpretation…” (114).

As a result of his experiences with the Communist Party, Wright came to realize that the Party used the Negro question to further their political agenda. In 1928, the Communists determined that oppressed Blacks were “potential allies of the revolutionary proletariat.” In short, the emerging Black peasantry was a perfect fit for the Party’s international plans to organize the working class. They felt that the only way they could “attain influence over the Negro masses” was by proving that they had eliminated racism in their own ranks. In 1930, the Communist Party adopted a policy which would fight for the “same rights for Negroes as were possessed by whites, but also those rights which the Communists demanded for the working class as a whole, i.e., ‘freedom from both economic and political oppression’” (Foner xiii). As a result, the Party actively recruited Blacks. Membership rose from 200 Blacks in 1929 to
1,300 in 1930. During the summer of 1933, Blacks were still being actively recruited, and Wright was one of them. Blacks were impressed by the Party’s aims to fight against “unemployment, lynching, racial discrimination, work in the labor movement, and the defense movement” (xv). At the onset of the Depression, the Communist Party organized the unemployed, while groups like the NAACP did not. Neither did they come to the immediate aid of the Scottsboro Boys, until it made national headlines, courtesy of the Communist Party (xxi). Even James Weldon Johnson, African-American author, song writer and civil rights activist, saw the Communist Party’s willingness to take on laws which were used to oppress Blacks as helpful: “everywhere I went in the South the white people are afraid of the effect of the Communist propaganda on the Negro. As a result, they are willing now more than ever before to consider the program of the NAACP and to make concessions to it… (American Communism xxii).

In Native Son, Wright fictionalizes the history of Communism and their dealings with American racism. Yet, as Foley notes, “The politics conveyed in Native Son are more complex still, since they reflect not only the duality characterizing the Depression-era Communist Party’s line on black liberation but also Wright’s own growing skepticism toward the party as a viable agent for revolutionary change” (Radical 209). Max, the Communist lawyer, speaks about Bigger, for Bigger, but Wright makes it clear that Max is interested in Bigger because he is a cause; Bigger’s case provides Max the chance to speak out against those members of America who are in power:
What is the cause of all this high feeling and excitement? Is it the crime of Bigger Thomas? Were Negroes liked yesterday and hated today because of what he has done? Were labor unions and workers’ halls raided solely because a Negro committed a crime? Did those white bones lying on the table evoke the gasp of horror that went up from the nation? Did the feeling against the Jews in the city rise only because a Jewish lawyer is defending a black boy?...Negroes, workers, and labor unions were hated as much yesterday as they are today (448).

From Max’s point of view, Bigger’s case provides the Communist Party with the opportunity to strike a blow against the bourgeoisie class. Max’s job is to represent the masses.

To the media, representatives of society, Bigger’s impending demise satisfies a Chicago frenzy similar to a Southern lynch mob. The media’s portrayal of Bigger was taken from actual footage about the Nixon case. Kinnamon quotes from excerpts of the articles published about the Nixon case: “he [Nixon] has the charm of speech or manner that is characteristic of so many southern darkies...His hunched shoulders and long, sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his out-thrust head and catlike tread all suggest the animal.” (113). Wright’s version reads as follows: “....the brutish Negro seemed indifferent to his fate, as though inquests, trials, and even the looming certainty of the electric chair held no terror for him. He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species....Thomas comes of a poor darky family of a shiftless and immoral variety....” (323). Bigger is not a person, but an animal.

Prior to his closing, Max converses with Bigger regarding his life as a Negro. Despite his attempt to extract what could be helpful information in Bigger’s “defense,” Max only succeeds in portraying Bigger as a “brute,” an identity which compliments the media’s depiction of Bigger. During his explanation of why Bigger is guilty, Max
attempts to show society that it has made Bigger guilty, making American whites responsible for Mary’s death:

He murdered Mary Dalton accidentally, without thinking, without plan, without conscious motive. But, after he murdered, he accepted the crime. ...It was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. (461)

This scene is a precursor to the words uttered by Jefferson’s white lawyer in Ernest Gaines’s novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*; in the opening scene, Jefferson is called a foolish hog: “I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair” (7). A further assessment of Max’s words is necessary for comparison:

The central fact to be understood here is not who wronged this boy, but what kind of a vision of the world did he have before his eyes, and where did he get such a vision as to make him, without premeditation, snatch the life of another person so quickly and instinctively that even though there was an element of accident in it, he was willing after the crime to say: “Yes; I did it. I had to.” (461)

What both lawyers succeed in doing to their uneducated young, poor Black clients is to take away their human qualities for their white male jury/judge—the clients are described as being animal-like and incapable of reason. Moreover, the white males’ fear of the Black brutes have been inflamed and legitimized. In order for justice to be served, Bigger, like Jefferson, must be killed, like any rabid animal should be.

Although Bigger has shared his feelings about what it is like to be Negro in America, Max does not, or at least cannot, fully understand. Max does not seem to internalize how he has made his client into a non-person, and this is most likely because Bigger is a cause and not a man on trial for murder. This is probably why Bigger cannot understand what Max has said about him: “Bigger heard Max’s last
words ring out in the courtroom.... He had not understood the speech, but he had felt
the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max's voice” (473). However, we find that
Max not only exposes society's harsh treatment of the poor, but he, more importantly,
helps Bigger to come to a point of self-realization: “in Max's asking of those questions
he [Bigger] had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had
never encountered” (417). Significantly, this is done once Bigger hears himself speak,
helping him to access his own thoughts through verbal communication. Bigger,
therefore, masters the language and is also able to help Max “see” him.

Finally, Wright seems to take over the narrative, and Max articulates Bigger's
feelings to Bigger:

If you die, die free. You're trying to believe in yourself. And
everytime you try to find a way to live, your own mind stands in the
way...It's because others have said you were bad and they made you
live in bad conditions. When a man hears that over and over and looks
about him and sees that his life is bad, he begins to doubt his own mind.
(499).

In his essay, “How 'Bigger' was Born,” Wright comments on this final scene: “The
lawyer, Max, was placed in Bigger's cell at the end of the novel to register the
moral—or what I felt was the moral—horror of Negro life in the United States” (539).
Wright is not precise about who is registering this horror, but clearly both Bigger and
Max come to a mutual realization; they too learn a lesson before dying. Bigger will die
knowing how he feels to be an American Negro; Max will leave the jail knowing that
Bigger is more than a political cause. Thus, they both “register the moral horror of
Negro life in the United States.”
Although literary scholars have criticized the last section of the novel for being too philosophical and political, Wright's Communist peers did not see it that way. They criticized Wright for leading with the problem of racism as opposed to exposing "the union of exploited workers" (Fabre 183). According to Fabre, Wright was also criticized for not "adopting a true communist perspective because he did not portray the masses as revolutionary" (Unfinished 184). Some may find the novel to be flawed because of Max's closing argument, but Wright's protest novel was done in the form of a proletariat novel. According to Foley, Native Son is "a black proletarian novel of the 1930's, [which] constitutes an instance of apologue, in that its structure functions primarily to enhance the reader's awareness of the determining social conditions that generate the protagonist's fate" (Foley "Politics" 191). Thus, as mentioned earlier, Wright was deliberate in his use of Max, and perhaps modern critics have overlooked Max's real purpose. Wright's purpose was to apply Marxist theory to the plight of Black Americans, something that he knew the Party was willing to do.

Communists and Blacks, in the eyes of Wright's 1930's society, are inextricably joined. During his closing, Max refers his listeners to this union: "Responsible to nothing but their own corrupt conscience, the newspapers and the prosecution launched the ridiculous claim that the Communist Party was in some way linked to these two murders. Only here in court yesterday morning did the State's Attorney cease implying that Bigger Thomas was guilty of other crimes, crimes which he could not prove" (447). He joins the Negro and Communists several more times during his statement, but he makes it clear that society's prejudices are not limited to
these two groups, but to his Jewish brethren as well. However, as a Communist, Blacks and Jews are joined under the umbrella of Communism, the only organization, as he argues, that promotes “justice for all.”

As a Marxist proletariat novel, we see Wright’s indictment of the capitalist power structure and their mistreatment of Bigger, who is poor and other whites who are also part of the working class. Max’s closing is an indictment of the bourgeoisie class. According to the Manifesto of the Communist Party, “The Communists are distinguished from other working class parties by … the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement of the whole” (22). As Max indict the bourgeoisie for their part in Mary’s death, he exposes their activities: “The state’s attorney…promised the Loop bankers that if he were re-elected demonstrations for relief would be stopped! The Governor of the of the state…has pledged the Manufacturers’ Association that he would use troops against workers who went out on strike!” (449). Max implies that members of the working class will not receive fair treatment in the justice system because the bourgeoisie or capitalists control the justice system. He continues to make the distinction between the classes: “We need but turn our eyes upon the imposing sweep of streets and factories and buildings to see how completely they have conquered. But in conquering they used others, used their lives. Like a miner using a pick or a carpenter using a saw, they bent the will of others to their own” (452). “Their” of course refers to those who own the factories. He states further that, “When men of
wealth urge the use and show of force, quick death, swift revenge, then it is to protect
a little spot of private security against the resentful millions from whom they have
filched it, the resentful millions in whose militant hearts the dream and hope of
security still lives” (472). The bourgeoisie are willing to unabashedly strip the
working class of everything, but they cannot take away their dream for justice.

Setting aside the political implications, Native Son ends with Bigger having
made conscious decisions, which ultimately lead to his free state mind. By the end of
the novel, Bigger feels four significant connections: with himself, Jan, Max, and his
mother. All of these people, before Mary’s death, were the enemy. When Jan admits
that he was blind to Bigger, Bigger says that he saw him as a human and not as a
unfeeling white being: “For the first time in his life a white man became a human
being to him” (333). He decides to disregard Jan’s race to accept him as a friend.
Through his conversations with Max, Bigger is able to understand himself, and
possibly even the culture, which he felt was separate from him. Furthermore, although
he does not accept his mother’s religion, he decides to sympathize with her more now
that he realizes he has achieved spiritual freedom; her freedom in the religious faith,
however, still remains an illusion to him.

By 1953, not only had Wright abandoned his affiliation with the Communist
Party, but in 1946, he moved to France and adopted existentialist beliefs.16 Literary
critics have done extensive studies on the relationship between Wright and French
existentialists, such as Camus, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Since this period of
Wright’s life has already been explored as well as the influence of these French writers on his writing, I will only briefly mention these arguments. Michel Fabre, who informs readers that *The Outsider* was planned and begun before Wright’s first trip to Paris and his acquaintance with French existentialism, argues that *The Outsider* is patterned after Camus’s *The Stranger* and influenced by Sartre and de Beauvoir (*World* 162-163). On the other hand, Michael Lynch argues that *The Outsider* is patterned after Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (257). McCarthy argues that “Although *The Outsider* has been frequently regarded as an existentialist novel...*The Outsider* bears as its deepest level the hallmark of Wright’s compulsion to shape society in accordance with some ideal conception of social justice” (77). While all of these writers and their books influenced *The Outsider*, critics have overlooked the relevance of Cross’s race.

Yoshinobu Hakutani analyzes the work within racial discourse. He argues that Cross is “not as existentialist as critics have thought,” as evidenced by the passages cut out of the original, but included in The Library of America edition. In contrast to an existentialist, specifically Meursalt of *The Stranger*, Hakutani argues, “While Meursault is convinced of the essential absurdity of existence, Damon is not. If one considers human life inherently meaningful, as does Damon, then it follows that his actions to seek love, power, and freedom on earth are also meaningful” (144).

Although I do not agree with all aspects of Hakutani’s argument, I too assert that readers cannot overlook the theme of race in Wright’s work. Wright certainly

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Fabre notes that Wright “withdrew from the Party without scandal” as a result of having been...
would not have abandoned writing social protest after the overwhelming success of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) simply to write an existentialist novel that happened to feature a Black man. In an interview about *The Outsider*,

> It is true that in my early work I was almost wholly concerned with the reactions of Negroes to the white environment that pressed in upon them. Having left America and having been living for some time in France, I have become concerned about the historical roots and the emotional problems of western whites which make them aggressive toward colored peoples. You can see from this that my travels into the Argentine, into Africa and Asia even have an autobiographical inspiration. I was looking for explanations of the psychological reactions of whites. In my novel *The Outsider*, the hero of which is Negro, I had already abandoned the black hero proper. That novel is anchored mainly in reflection and is concerned with problems beset anyone, black or white. (*Conversations* 167)

I have included this rather lengthy quote by Wright for two reasons. One is that we see how Wright’s experiences outside of America greatly influenced *The Outsider* and the works he wrote after its publication. Two, we see how Wright, as I have argued in my analysis of *Savage Holiday*, was always concerned about the problem of racial discrimination which he argues is not “the Negro problem” but is “America’s problem” (*Conversations* 156). Thus, Wright’s publication of novels, essays and other works, his attraction to Marxist theory, his involvement in the Communist Party as well as his break with it, his move to Paris, and his interest in European philosophers, including the existentialists, were all actions that were influenced by his experiences with racism. His focus on the oppressors as opposed to the oppressed only proves his continued search for racial justice. I argue that Wright used the existentialist teachings as well as his Communist background to focus the dissemination of a message about

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reprimanded by James W. Ford for “defending the rights of his own people” (229).

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race in this country. Since adequate studies have been done on *The Outsider*’s connection to existentialist novels, I will concentrate on the issue of race and how social theories influenced the treatment of this issue in America.

As I have argued in previous chapters, there are recurring themes regarding religion, mother/son relationships and white women in Wright’s novels: *The Outsider* is no different. Cross is the only one of Wright’s protagonists who has a formal education; indeed, he is the only one who has attended college. Cross’s academic studies have included the works of Hegel and Nietzsche. According to Eberhard Alsen, Cross’s “pursuit of power” is a reenactment of Nietzsche’s ideology: he considers himself to be one of Nietzsche’s ‘last men’ (215). Although Alsen acknowledges the theme of power, he, like other critics, analyzes Cross’s actions in relation to European philosophers. Cross, significantly an African-American male, is against all of those — Blount, Herndon and Hilton — who represent power, and he retaliates against them by purging society of their presence. Cross is intelligent enough to realize that he, an African-American becomes a master once he kills these men; however, to become a master, he must become like them.

Cross’s search for freedom through the acquisition of power begins before we meet him. During a conversation that Cross’s friends have about him, we learn that Cross liked to play practical jokes on them and others. One such joke included an incident when Cross threw money out of the 11th floor window during rush hour,

And then he’d lean out and watch the commotion of all of them little antlike folks down there going wild, scrambling and scratching and clawing after them few pieces of money and then, when the money was all gone, they’d stand looking up to the window of the 11th floor with
their mouths hanging open like fishes out of water….And Cross’d say that them folks was praying when their faces were turned up like that, waiting for more money (6).

Certainly, Cross was intrigued with the idea of people standing below him, waiting for him to bless them with what they needed. Joe goes on to say, “Cross said that was the only time he ever felt like God” (6). Significantly, Cross, like Wright, does not believe in God, only in the power that people’s belief in God has over them. What does feeling like God mean to a man who does not believe in God?

The novel’s title arguably implies that Cross “is a man standing outside of the world!” *(The Outsider 7).* He is not of the world of his cronies, although they are all Black and they all work at the Post Office; Cross is different. The narrator says that although the three Black men—Joe, Pink, and Booker—like Cross and he likes them, “they were outside of his [Cross’s] life.” He possesses knowledge that his Black family and friends do not. In relation to society, he is an outsider and so is anyone else who is non-white. Wright makes this aspect clear with a statement a man makes in a bar: “For four hundred years these white folks done made everybody on earth feel like they ain’t human, like they’re outsiders.” The man then names different races. Of the Blacks in relation to whites, the man says, “What’s a black man to a white man? An ape made by God to cut wood and draw water, and with an inborn yen to rape white girls” (35). Since Cross sees the world differently, he is not only an outsider because of his philosophical beliefs and his ethnic background, but he is a spiritual outsider because he is outside of the world, not unlike the God he does not believe in whose existence he denies.
Cross's exertion of power through freedom is somewhat successful when he is able to become Lionel Lane. With his new identity, "Lane" is not responsible for his mother, wife, or pregnant girlfriend, all of whom represent a certain amount of power over Cross and a limitation over his power of freedom. Yet, Cross's act of assuming a new name does not allow him to shed his ideals, nor his Black skin. When he meets Gil Blount, he is intrigued by him, and Gil finds a way to use Cross. Gil invites Cross to stay at his home, but it is not until Cross is there that he is told that he will be part of a Communist Party campaign against a Fascist: "Lionel, courts are instruments of the bourgeois law....We are going to try this case in the public mind. Above all, this case must serve the Party's organizational interests" (266). There are definite parallels between Gil's thinking and Max's. The latter certainly does try Bigger's case in the public mind, by making a speech to a judge under a guilty plea. However, the case has already been tried and Bigger has been convicted in the public's mind, as seen through the newspaper reports described above. Max is unable to take control of the "public mind" as the lawyers for the Scottsboro boys did.

Unlike Max, however, Gil would like to bypass the judicial system by manipulating it; he will draw attention to the case of discrimination and garner support for the Communist Party as a result of this publicity. To Gil, Cross is not a man, but he is a catalyst for a cause. The narrator says that "Gil's eyes seemed to become unseeing" as he speaks about how anyone who does not support the Party's plan for housing integration is a "counter-revolution." Surely Richard Wright could have chosen another incident by which Cross can become associated with the Communist
Gil tells Cross that “men are not born masters; they are made masters. We communists understand that” (239). Cross notices the way that Gil handles situations, and the way that people, including Gil’s wife and fellow comrades, Sarah and Bob, react to his authority as a high official in the Communist Party. In fact, when Hilton delivers the news that Bob must stop organizing the Dining Car Waiters’ Union, Gil reminds Bob that he has “no damned feelings” and that the aims of the Party include: “The liberation of the working class and the defense of the Soviet Union” (248). The individual’s desires are irrelevant.

Sarah, on the other hand, encourages her husband to go against the Party and organize: “Read your Marx and organize!” Cross thinks, “Bob was too scared to act alone; he had to have a master” (259). Certainly, Wright drew on his experiences with the Communist Party, particularly those Blacks who preferred that Wright write as a Communist for Communists and not fiction: “The word ‘writer’ was enough to make a black Chicago Communist feel that the man to whom the word applied had gone wrong” (Black Boy 389). Later, Cross is almost disgusted by Gil’s treatment of Bob when the man pleads for Gil to speak up for him so he will not be deported. Cross labels Gil’s actions as an assertion of power:

This was power he saw in action! Gil could lord it over Cross; and, in turn, as his payment for his suffering Gil’s domination, Cross could lord it over somebody else. .... To hold absolute power over others, to
define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or
die and thereby to ravage the whole of their beings... (267)

Cross identifies the philosophy that drives men, like Gil, to act coldly towards others.
His moment of realization is an extension of Wright’s moment of realization when he
broke from the Party. Gil is representative of the god who failed, as Wright describes
Communism in his essay, “I Tried to be a Communist.”

Cross assumes this role of God, though he is not a Communist and rejects
Communism. In an act of rejection of Communism, Fascism and Racism, Cross kills
Gil and Herndon. Hakutani argues that Cross kills Gil because he wants Eva, but The
Outsider is not a love story. Cross kills them because although he admires their
power, he is simultaneously repulsed by it—the God like-stance they take over others:

He had killed Gil and Herndon because they had wanted to play God to
others, and their brutal strivings had struck him as being so utterly
obscene that he had torn their lives from them in a moment of supreme
conviction that he and he alone was right and that they were eternally
wrong. (318)

Yet, he realizes that his deliberate acts of murder make him no better than the ones he
has killed: “If the actions of Gil and Herndon were monstrously inhuman, then was not
what he was doing also devoid of humanity?” Cross becomes representative of
Hegel’s philosophy: in order to transform, the slave must become the master. In doing
so, this slave also acts like the master.

Houston provides us with the psychological make-up of a god; in it, he
compares Cross to world leaders, those who are proponents of communism, fascism,

17 This essay was originally published in Crossman’s anthology of anti-Communist essays, The God Who Failed Me.

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and religion; however, for Wright, there is no difference between the three. Houston asserts,

Only an enemy of Christianity, like Saint Paul, could establish Christianity...we're outsiders and we can understand these Twentieth Century outlaws, for in our hearts we are outlaws too.

....Napoleon, Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler knew what they were doing when they cast their beady eyes upon their subjects....When a man stood accused, objective evidence was of no avail. The dictator had but to glance into his own heart, and he knew at once that the prisoner at the bar was guilty! For, he reasoned, had he been in the prisoner's place, he would have been guilty.... (378-379)

The dictators are able to understand the prisoners of war because they too would be prisoners if they were not dictators. Yet, both the leaders and their captives are prisoners, and they are able to understand each other through a common element, the need to have power over the other. This uncontrollable need makes them "full of criminal feelings" and they "create a criminal code"--there is always a legitimate reason to kill. Cross has a reason also, according to Houston:

He feels towards those two men as those two men feel towards the masses of people...He's playing the same game but on a much smaller scale. Who knows, maybe he's been hurt by both sides? He kills 'em, and with no more compunction than if he were killing flies...That man who kills like that is a bleak and tragic man. He is the Twentieth Century writ small. (379)

Finally, Houston (although he does not know that he is speaking to the murderer) is able to place a label on Cross, the man he has so accurately described: "Like a god!"

...“That's the word I've been groping for....” (379). Ironically, in order for Houston to be able to offer such an accurate description of Cross, he must belong to the same family as Cross. Houston has described himself and Cross as being outsiders, but he

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too, especially since he is a successful district attorney, must possess “criminal feelings.” However, he does not act on them.

Wright describes his own psyche through Cross:

> The thinking of the revolutionary is a cold kind of thinking; he has a realistic insight into history; he has above all, a sense of what power is, what it’s for, both as a means of governing other men and as a means of personal expression....They have to be free from such, for it is precisely the prejudices of others that seek to manipulate for their own uses. (489)

Later, Cross maintains that he is “not a member of anything” and he is “not-anti anything” (523). Cross, like Wright, represents no one but himself. He is free from political aspirations which Wright admired; however, Wright does not condone his violent behavior. Cross has clearly been infected by Communism—a social contagion.

Like Max in *Native Son*, Houston, a white lawyer, serves as a foil to the “imprisoned” protagonist. Houston’s presence allows the protagonist to see his faults and at the end of the novel, like the end of *Native Son*, readers are able to realize Cross’s evolution. Lynch notes that a theme of the novel is Cross’s “evolving awareness of the horror of his actions” (257). Among his final words, Cross says, “Tell them not to come down this road...Men hate themselves and it makes them hate others” (585). According to Alsen, the road is that of “self-realization through striving for power” (216). By extension, the road to power—the killing of other individuals both physically and mentally—is not the way to obtain power through freedom.

Certainly Wright used the novel to develop a theme regarding man’s use of political ideas to exert power. To make this point clear, Cross delivers a speech about
Communism to Communists. He begins with an indictment of Communism: “I admit that the Communists are more intelligent, more general in their approach, but the same power-hungry heart beats behind the desire to rule!...You use idealistic words as your smoke-screed, but behind that screen you rule...It’s a question of power!” (477).

Foley notes that, Communism was in fact devised not only as a response to workers experiences of oppression but also as a consequence of debates with alternative political strategies—anarchist, socialist, liberal—for addressing and interpreting those experiences” (Radical 96). For Wright, there is little difference in political factions and religious denominations.

Significantly, Cross also uses the rat as a metaphorical means to compare the followers and the leaders of Communism.

I think their [industrialists and politicians] crime is a blacker one than mere exploitation. The end-result is that they keep their rats pitched to a mean sordid level of consciousness. ...The point is not so much that these capitalist despise their rats, but that they despise themselves and all mankind. To keep their rats contented, they strive to convince them that their rats’ lives are more glorious, better, richer than at any time in history, and, in the end, they come to believe in their own lies. Consequently, today the content of human life on earth is what these cheap-minded men say it is. (486)

Of course, readers are reminded of the infamous rat found in the first scene of Native Son. The hunted rat symbolizes Bigger, and others--Blacks and poor whites--like him who are victims of the power structure. Again, we see the reflections of the Manifesto of the Communist Party, where Engels and Marx state, “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science,
into its paid wage-laborers (11). In other words, the men of power derive their power from acquiring the loyal dependency of vulnerable followers. The only way to retain that power is to convince the followers that they, the lords, are worth being revered like gods. They do this by asserting their power through the manipulation of their followers’ psychological fears. Even Cross, when he first meets Gil, is fascinated by Gil’s assertion of “power.”

During his monologue, Cross also includes the history of mankind, including how man has been influenced by fear.

Quickening the process of industrialization was the marriage of scientific knowledge and industry... What kind of a queer animal is this being called man who embarked—and without quite knowing it!—upon this program of industrialization? Well, his most dominant characteristic is an enormous propensity toward fear.... The more abjectly frightened the nation or race of men, the more their myths and religions projected out upon the world in front of the real world, or in another world behind the real world they saw.... (479).

Cross asserts that religion and political theories were developed by men to not only assert their power, but to mollify their fears. The two concepts are related. Power and religion led to the colonization of non-European countries and to slavery in this country. Men who seek power, do so as a result of man’s fear of “dangers and uncertainties.” Man must be in control. In fact, Cross himself is in control, as he speaks and demands that either Menti listens quietly or he won’t continue his intriguing analysis.

Regardless of Wright’s political ideologies at the time he constructed a work of fiction (or non-fiction for that matter), Wright saw all treatment of Blacks through the prism of racism. Wright says of Bigger Thomas,
He was an American, because he was a native son; but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp.

All of Wright’s Black male characters, like Wright, are outsiders, and perhaps there was no political philosophy, which could satisfy Wright’s search for political, mental, and spiritual freedom.
Chapter Six

“Religion is the Opiate of the Masses”: The Final Analysis

In his poetic version of the dream Ezekiel, a Biblical character, has about bones in the desert that rise and grow flesh, Wright describes a lynching:

The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by icy walls of fear—
The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones....
And a thousand faces swirled about me, clamoring that my life be burned....
My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as they bound me to the sapling....
Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun... (“Between the World and Me” 247)

Again, Wright rewrites text, this time Biblical text, to make a point about how racism with its “thousand voices which drown out the voice of the black body,” is dominating and inescapable, sometimes physically but always mentally. This poem is representative of Wright’s works. Not only does Wright consistently manipulate religious beliefs to construct texts, but he also develops characters who struggle to free themselves from restrictive forces.

I began this dissertation with a discussion of Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic and the connection his philosophy has with Wright’s fiction. Significantly, although Hegel is a German philosopher, his theory is helpful in explaining the actions Wright’s characters take in their quest for freedom. In Chapter Two, I discussed the link between Wright’s first collection of fiction and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe’s presentation of the Christian servant/slave, Uncle Tom, influenced and possibly inspired Wright’s first collection of fiction, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, where we find his
effort to assert power by rewriting the image of Blacks who had been assigned an identity by white Americans. Indeed, all of Wright's Black characters, those in his short stories and in his novels, are of a new generation who say that "Uncle Tom is dead!" The protagonists of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Big Boy, Mann, Silas, Rev. Taylor, and Aunt Sue, consciously and admirably risk their lives to be free from racial injustice. As a result, according to Hegel, they "attain recognition as an independent self-consciousness" (2).

In Chapter Three, I discuss how Wright's experiences with his Christian mother and grandmother influenced his literature and his prose, namely his depiction of his mother characters. The relationships between mothers and sons are strained mainly because of the mothers' insistence that their sons act as God commands. In Wright's novels, the Black male protagonists make a conscious decision to reject the religion--"that which proscribes their humanity"--of their mothers. As a result, they do as Hegel teaches: they realize "that it is precisely in [their] work wherein [they] seemed to have only an alienated existence that [they] acquire a mind of [their] own" (119).

Chapter Four focuses on Wright's depiction of white women. Wright's white women characters can be placed into three categories: Mary, Mary Magdalene, or Eve. Undoubtedly, Wright's white women characters are the results of his own experiences with racism and religion. As I have argued, religion and racism, are interrelated. Both place limits on people, namely Black people. The male characters who come in contact with these "white sacred beings" attain self-realization. Big Boy and Fishbelly
become “men” and simultaneously become acutely aware of the physical threat of racism. Cross bonds with a woman for the first time in his life and seeks redemption for his malicious deeds. Bigger's life has more meaning as a result of Mary’s death. All of these Black males struggle with white masters to obtain and attain freedom. However, the masters, who wish to keep them in servitude, challenge their quests. Ultimately, these Black men will obtain “freedom [self-realization] still enmeshed in servitude [racial discrimination]” because of the color of their skin. On the other hand, Erskine Fowler, a white male who has led the life of a master by virtue of his race, does not become an “independent spirit” by the end of the novel. His struggle is mental; and his power is not in jeopardy.

As I discuss in Chapter Five, Wright’s Christian background led to his involvement in the Communist Party, where the “preaching” language used by European Communist leaders impressed him. From them, he discovered a way in which he could appeal to African-Americans. When Communism became too restrictive, Wright made a conscious decision to disassociate himself from the American Party. Eventually, he became an existentialist which emphasizes the choices of the individual or “the supremacy of free will” (Jaye). Bigger’s, Rev. Taylor’s, and Cross’s desire to acquire freedom posed a threat to the master (white power structure). Significantly, all three are associated with the Communist Party. Rev. Taylor is successful in his bid for freedom. However, Bigger and Cross pay the ultimate price for their acquisition. Bigger is killed because he comes from behind the veil, thus posing a threat to the power of the masters. Although his entry was
unintentional, his identification of the power he acquired as a result, made him subject to the master’s need to regain control. Likewise, Cross’s conscious desire to possess power similar to the masters—Communists and Fascists leaders—cause him his life.

Richard Wright found power by exposing institutional racism in the American justice system, hypocritical actions of “sympathetic” whites, religion as a means of control, racism as a deterrent to the formation of strong, thriving Black families, and other social problems, but his power, too, was limited. As a writer, Wright’s work was heavily edited and only recently have we had the option of using the “restored text established by the Library of America.” As a Black man, his freedom to enjoy equality was limited, causing him to take up permanent residence in a foreign country. Yet, as both a writer and an African-American, he was acutely aware of his veil which allowed him to see the “real” world, and his writing talents allowed him to share his point of view with the world. Ralph Ellison aptly describes Wright’s dual existence:

As a writer, Richard Writer has outlined for himself a dual role: to discover and depict the meaning of the Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding (Ellison 77).

Certainly Wright hungered/searched for answers to these psychological and emotional problems as he hungered/searched for freedom; the two searches were inextricable.

More recently, Henry Louis Gates has offered an analysis of the African-American literary tradition and the part Wright has played:

Literary echoes, or pastiche, as found in Ellison’s Invisible Man, or signal tropes found in Emerson, Eliot, Joyce, Crane, or Melville (among others) constitute one mode of Signifyin(g). But so does Ellison’s implicit rhetorical critique of the conventions of realism found
in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, “The Man Who Live Underground,” *and Black Boy*. Reed’s parodies of Wright and Ellison constitute a Signification of a profoundly motivated order, especially as found in the text of *Mumbo Jumbo*. (xxvii)

But, certainly, Wright’s contribution to the literary tradition does not end with the more prominent literary figures mentioned by Gates. It extends to writers like Nathan McCall who credits Wright’s *Native Son* with having changed his life while he was serving time for armed robbery. McCall describes his “conversion experience”

> I developed through my encounter with Richard Wright a fascination with the power of words...Most of the books I’d been given in school were about white folks experiences and feelings. I spent all that time learning about damned white folks’, like my reality didn’t exist and wasn’t valid to the rest of the world....But in *Native Son* I found a book written about a plain, everyday brother like myself. (McCall 165)

McCall’s tribute to Wright perhaps subconsciously echoes the thoughts and feelings described by Frederick Douglass when he recognized the power of literacy. Thus, McCall, fifty-four years after the publication of *Native Son*, carries on the literary tradition by publishing his experiences as “a young Black man in America.”

This literary tradition expresses the existence of “a thousand years of conscious culture”(Ellison 89). Not only is there a connection from one generation of African-Americans to the next, but there is a connection between one generation of Americans to the next, and even a connection from America to Europe. Through his work, Wright challenges us to view these connections and to discover our own place in this network. Do we see any part of ourselves within the literary connection as did McCall, Wright’s editors, or those “bankers’ daughters” who cried after reading *Uncle Tom’s Children*? And if we do, with whom do we identify and why? Lastly, what do
we, as readers and members of the literary tradition, plan to do with the knowledge Wright inspires?

We are challenged to follow Wright's way of thinking about all people, the common people or minorities. Whether these minorities were Blacks in America or Protestants in Spain under the scrutiny of Franco and his Catholic centered government, Wright was concerned. For him, there existed no different levels of discrimination.

While in France, Wright said that he never felt his Americaness as much as he did there. In a letter, Wright wrote,

One gets a good look at one's country from this perspective and one learns to see one's nation with double eyes, to feel what we have got and what we have not got. I've learned more about America in one month in Paris than I could in one year in New York. Looking at this country makes all the important phases of the AMERICAN problem fade somewhat and renders the true problem more vivid. (Fabre World 151)

Fabre further notes that Wright also continued to feel identified by race as he became known as the resident expert on affairs affecting Blacks in America. Thus, Wright, regardless of where he presided, was never free of the omnipresent gaze.

Wright remained concerned about the problem of American racism. Whether he wrote about Blacks struggles in America or whether he intrigued readers with a tale regarding the crisis of whites, his literary works were shaped to function both as social commentary and literary masterpieces. Wright continually wrote from the point of view of a Black Southerner, and readers cannot overlook his protest against twentieth century forms of slavery as asserted through religious and political practices. As the
title of this work implies: “That Preacher’s Going to Eat all the Chicken,” Wright
“hungered” for freedom from these oppressive practices.

My goal has been to offer an answer to the question posed at the end of
Chapter One: “How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?”
Wright’s answer: Through the assertion of power, which leads to establishing a way
by which hunger can be fed. Not only does Wright warn his readers to refrain from
being “organized,” but he also tells them to be mindful of their true power: freedom of
the mind and spirit. At least in this way, Black men and women can assert their power
through identification with/in both Black and white worlds. In the words of Wright
himself:

A man between two worlds would be a very complicated thing. He is
not between two worlds, but really of two worlds. He is not apart from
the white worlds and outside of the Negro worlds but in both of them;
and when he speaks in his works, he can speak about two worlds at the
same time, and he speaks in a voice which is at the same time black and
white. (Kinnamon Conversations 220)
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Vita

Tara Tanisha Green was born in Waukegan, Illinois, on October 23, 1973. In 1981, she moved, with her parents, to Harvey, Louisiana. In 1991, she graduated, with honors, from Archbishop Blenk High School in Gretna, Louisiana. She then attended Dillard University where she majored in English and began her research on Richard Wright. She graduated cum laude from Dillard University in 1995. In the fall of that year, she entered Louisiana State University and defended a thesis directed by Professor James Olney in 1997. She continued her studies as a doctoral student, while she worked as a teaching assistant in the Department of English.

During her five years at Louisiana State University, she served on the Chancellor’s Search Committee (1998), the Dean of Arts and Sciences Search Committee (2000), and the African and African-American Studies Program Steering Committee (1998-2000). Her service to the University community was acknowledged by the Black Faculty and Staff Caucus of Louisiana State University (1998) and the African-Americans in Louisiana Higher Education (2000). The degree of Doctor of Philosophy was conferred on Ms. Green at the December 2000 commencement.
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