Chapter III

Oppressing Social System: Liberation from Fear and Hate through Finding Personal Dignity

Richard Wright’s Marxist leanings are undisputed, because he was a member of the Communist party. Wright moved to Chicago in 1927. In 1932, he began attending meetings of the John Reed Club. As the club was dominated by the Communist Party, Wright established a relationship with a number of party members. Especially interested in the literary contacts made at the meetings, Wright formally joined the Communist Party in late 1933. As a revolutionary he has written numerous proletarian poems like *I Have Seen Black Hands*, *Of the Street*, *Red Leaves of Red Books*, for *The New Masses* and other left wing periodicals.

Wright wrote mainly for leftist papers and magazines. The work he did for more popular magazines often involved writing a short story rather than a journalistic article. Wright understood his audience and wrote accordingly. In his work for the communist magazines, Wright advocated support for the party and encouragement for people to find their own voice. His focus is international and political. Wright viewed politics and international relations as one way of curing an ill society. Wright wrote for a very specific audience in his essays and short stories. Wright’s concentrated audience is black America and the oppressors of black America. On the one hand, he is offering voice to the African American male experience and seeking an echo. In his *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, Wright attacks the African American writing conventions that keep writing separate from the Negro experience and are more entertaining than human. On the other hand, he is conveying to white America that not only can African Americans write, but their writing is complex and detailed.
Even after leaving the party Wright did not abandon his Marxist viewpoint. And his devotion to the Marxist principles was unflagging, because the Marxist elements in his writings cannot be disputed. The importance of Wright’s involvement with communism cannot be overemphasized, because it supplied him with what he would later call “the total emotional commitment of my life,” (I Tried to be a Communist 105) a new faith to replace the old beliefs shattered by the disappointments of the Great Migration and the shocks of the Depression. Communism endowed Wright with the same sense of identity it briefly supplied for Bigger Thomas, who toward the end of Native Son can feel stabilized for the first time in his life when Max’s Communist vision helps him see vague relations between himself and others, leading to “a new sense of the value of himself” (334).

Wright’s fierce devotion to portraying the realities of black life in America eventually created problems for him with the Communist party. He resigned from communist party in the year 1942. Instead of being a novel of social protest aimed at condemning racist societal evils, Native Son is an affirmation of life which charts Bigger’s growth into self awareness. It is not enough that Bigger understands his world is racist; what is important is how he deals with himself in such a world. Once he resolves this dilemma, he must move on to understand his relationship to other human beings in society, both black and white. This same belief in humanity caused his disillusionment with the Party and his subsequent rejection of the Party and its hypocrisy. In the essay “How Bigger was Born”, his explanation of the impetus behind the novel illuminates the strategy which underlies his characterization of Bigger Thomas:

The second event that spurred to write of Bigger was more personal and subtle (the first was his work at the Southside Boys’ Club in Chicago). I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of
Uncle Tom’s Children. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. (“How Bigger was Born” xxxiv)

Determined then, to strike the appropriate balance between pity and fear, Wright, intended that the readers of Native Son achieve enough distance from Bigger to question and feel the nature of human existence. Bigger Thomas can be said to have become a myth without first having been a convincing representation of human character and personality. Wright listed five “Bigger Thomases” (11) he had encountered in actuality, five violent youths called bad niggers by the whites in his “How Bigger was Born” in his Native Son.

Wright discusses at length the bond between himself and Bigger. Wright says of one of the Biggers, “he felt a marked impression on me; maybe it was because I longed secretly to be like him and was afraid. I don’t know” (ix). The Biggers that Wright remembers standout in his mind because they stubbornly challenged the system that sought to keep them in their place. In their own desperate and often pitiful ways they sought the status quo. This Wright admired. The most impressive Bigger No. 5, was a knife-wielding, prideful figure who always rode the Jim crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased. For this group of precursors of his own protagonist in Native Son, Wright gave a moving valediction:
The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were hounded, until they were either dead or their spirits broken. (n.p.)

*Native son* is not a thin essay about life, it is instead a powerful work of art that sets ideas in motions, thus re-creating the full weight and density of lived experience. Three particular aspects of modern American history are crucial to an understanding of *Native Son*: the Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North in the second half of the twentieth century, the Great Depression, which produced a major crisis in American culture between 1929 and 1940, and the interest in radical leftist politics that developed in response to this crisis. A glance at the chronology of Richard Wright’s life and his works immediately makes clear, that Wright personally experienced each of these three important aspects of modern American history and was thus able to write about them with special force and authority.

Richard Wright, who became seriously interested in Marxist ideas in the early thirties and who formally joined the Communist party in 1933, saw his fiction as a channel to be used in the struggle for transforming American society. *Native Son* was begun just three years after Wright became a Communist and was intended to be a radical indictment of the American system that Wright felt had been brought to the verge of collapse by the Depression. *Native Son* was written while Wright was an active worker for the Communist. The Party simplifies human experience to promote Marxist ideas. Wright’s novel enriches his personal outlook with a political vision which gives it unity, depth, and resonance. But at no point does political abstraction distort or compromise the integrity of Wright as an individual black man.
Native son is widely considered Wright’s most monumental achievement in fiction. Native Son placed Wright in the first ranks of American literature, it combined the determinism of naturalism with the grittiness of socialist realism that Wright drew from the works of such writers as James T. Farrell and Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser’s An American Tragedy, to which Native Son is frequently compared, had a special impact on Wright’s literary development and philosophical outlook. Both realism and naturalism remained vital forces in his work. It defined and influenced almost the entire sweep of African American fiction of the Post World War II era.

Native Son, composed during the depth of this crucial decade, indeed provides its reader with a similar kind of awareness in the reader. Written by a man who directly experienced in his own personal life some of the decisive events and movements of modern American history, the novel is a remarkable mirror of its time. It speaks with a new voice that provides an intimate and shockingly realistic account of the plight of the poor blacks in a massive ghetto.

In his essay on Bigger’s birth, Wright said that “life had made the plot over and over again, to the extent that I knew it by heart” (xxviii). Repeatedly he had seen black boys picked off the streets to be charged with an unsolved case of “rape” (xxviii). “This thing happens so often that to my mind it had become a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America” (xxviii). During the first week in June, 1938, Wright wrote to Margaret Walker Alexander in great excitement. He said “I have just learned of a case in Chicago that has broken there and is exactly like the story I am starting to write” (58-61). The case was that of a young black boy named Robert Nixon who had been accused of rape, and when the police captured him they forced a confession of five major crimes, of which rape was only one. He was apprehended and the story was
highlighted in the front page of the Tribune. The actual case is a part of history as the novel is part of literary history of the thing itself.

Richard Wright as a black American artist portrayed Bigger as a rebel. He shows that Jan, a white party worker, is convinced that “we can’t have a revolution without ’em” (76) and thus the blacks will be organized. Wright has depicted Bigger as a man who forcefully revolts against his hostile environment. Bigger is a representative man, because he enacts on a symbolic level the condition of the modern man alienated from a mechanistic environment. But he is also a richly imagined individual whose consciousness fashions the individual that he is.

Wright always makes the reader aware that there were two Bigger’s. One an outward person conditioned by a brutally deterministic environment and another, inward person who struggles against and eventually gains some degree of autonomy over his environment. Like Bigger himself, who is in the early part of Book Three feels that “the actual killing of Mary and Bessie was not what concerned him most” (286) and who tries desperately “to know what had driven him to it” (286). Wright is more interested in probing the humane interior life of his central character that sensationalistically details the gothic horrors of his outward actions. Wright always depicts Bigger as “divided and pulled against himself” (27), a person struggling against the deterministic forces that are at odds with his basic human drives.

Bigger’s quest for Marxism is made more believable after his basic position in the society is studied. It is important to examine the conditions that lead to his quest. From the beginning to the end, Wright emphasizes Bigger’s position in his society and his search for an ideology that will explain his oppressed state. Wright makes Bigger into a revolutionary, because Bigger fulfils the basic conditions of such a person: Bigger is
“black, unequal, despised” (256). These oppressive conditions, as Max explains in his long speech, are a result of the peculiar society (capitalist and racist) in which Bigger lives. It goes without saying that Bigger’s world would exist in any society, racial prejudice is an ally of capitalism, for both racial prejudice and capitalism create separate classes. One is based on race, the other is based on wealth and ownership. This capitalism and racism serve one another, here the victim, the black man is also a poor man.

Narrow outlook on race, class, and nationalism are alien to any human existence whether he is white or black. Bigger cannot be called an articulate, he can be envisioned as the ideal revolutionary: poor, alienated, discriminated against, and ready to act violently against that which dehumanizes him in anyway. Bigger comes to feel that what he is pitied against is not only the white man as a racial entity, he does not come to understand both Jan and Max, but the white man’s economic; political and social structure. He also sees that race determines one’s social status. If he can overcome a system in which race is a separate class, then he will cease to be an oppressed being merely by virtue of his race. Because it is impossible to destroy any structure in the abstract, his violence is directed against those who uphold this structure. And if his own race were to uphold such a structure, he would be pitted against it too. Like the author in the *Black Boy*, he is against his family, black community and the whole of America.

Bigger’s rejection of ideas and ideologies formally takes place in the prison. In the prison Bigger discards one alternative after another. He rejects his family, the race leaders and religion. But Bigger acknowledges the validity of Boris Max, his lawyer who has helped to reintegrate himself as a dignified human being when he tells Max: “. . . If all folks was like you, then maybe I wouldn’t be here. . .” (332).

Bigger feels alienated from the black bourgeoisie too. When Max asks him why he did not turn to black leaders for help and sympathy, Bigger replies: “Aw, hell,
Mr. Max. They wouldn’t listen to me. They rich, even though the white folks treat them almost like they do me. They almost like white people….” (330). In his reply, Bigger is hinting at the class basis of his feeling of alienation. His need for money reflects his awareness of the division of classes “They own the world” (25).

Bigger’s awareness of his state in society which leads him on to his quest for a system of beliefs that will help him to articulate what he has been feeling and going through. Bigger seeks a confirmation of what he has discovered in himself already; he seeks a system of thought that upholds what Bigger has found through instinct.

Of late he had liked to hear tell of men who could rule others, . . . He felt that some day there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act and end fear and shame. He never thought of this in precise mental images; he felt it; he would feel it for a while and then forget. But hope was always waiting somewhere deep down in him. (109-110)

Bigger’s quest is based not on the racial level but significantly, on the social and universal level. He wishes to end this dual, search with a racism of blacks and whites that would help not only the poor blacks but the poor of all colours. It is Jan and Max who help him to probe within himself and the larger scenario of the outside world for an answer.

These are Bigger’s instinctive stirrings which do not bear any Marxist overtones in the beginning which only towards the end of the novel does he arrive at a Marxist understanding of his stand in society through Max. The movement of the novel then is from a dim, but real, yearning in Bigger to a larger perspective of manhood. Together with Wright, Bigger also goes through a hunger for equality.
Passively he hungered for another orbit between two poles that would let him live again; for a new mode of life that would catch him up with the tension of hate and love. . . could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dread of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that would be a victory. (256)

The murder of Mary also helps to arouse class-consciousness in Bigger; talking to Max later, he says: “Well, I acted toward her only as I know how. She was rich. She and her kin own the earth. She and her kind say black folks are dogs. They don’t let you do nothing but what they want. . . .” (324). As Bigger keeps talking, he faces the stark reality in the sense that the Negro has limited economic opportunity with even more clarity he declares:

“Mr. Max, a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and can’t do. You get a little job here and a little job there. . . Pretty soon u get so you can’t hope for nothing. You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain’t a man no more. You just work day in and day out so the world can roll on and other people can live. . . .” (326)

This exclusion creates in Bigger a psychological and economic alienation. Bigger touches on this point when he says: “Well, they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. They like God…” He swallowed, closed his eyes and sighed. “They don’t even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die” (327). Thus Bigger is economically and emotionally dehumanized by the collaboration of his environmental forces.

Thus the latter part of the novel deals with Bigger’s ideological awakening. He had always felt these thoughts within him, but it took Jan and Max to draw his feelings
and thoughts out. “And Jan? And Max? They were telling him to believe in himself” (288). “He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge; but in Max’s asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before” (333).

Now, Bigger sees hope in the world because of the universal kinship felt by all who share his outlook. “He stood up in the middle of the cell floor and tried to see himself in relation to other men, a thing he had always feared to try to do, so deeply stained was his own mind with the hate of others for him” (334). This acknowledgement within himself of his universality and kinship, gives him “this new sense of the value of himself gained from Max’s talk” (334). Thus the reader sees Bigger as moving from an inarticulate and instinctual stage to a position where he becomes conscious of Marxist ideologies. These Marxist ideologies help him to shift himself from an entirely racial view to a view that includes race and class.

The vanishing of racial difference is clear enough:

Another impulse rose in him, born of desperate need, and his mind clothed it in an image of a strong blinding sun sending hot rays down and he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men, and black men, and all men, and the sun’s rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun… (335)

The newly acquired experience becomes now his identity and comes to a conclusion regarding his attitude towards the whites: “But he was not interested in hating them now… It was more important to him to find out what this new tingling, this new elation, this new excitement meant” (336).
Max through Marxist ideology gives universal meaning to Bigger’s violent and meaningless life. When Max convinces Bigger that the reasons for whites hating blacks are strongly economical, then Bigger has made the ideological leap forward, and consequently, even sees his crime in Marxist terms. Thus, before his death, his life achieves meaning. When Bigger asks, “‘B-b-but what they hate me for’” (390), Max replies; “They want to keep what they own, even if it makes others suffer” (390). Max does not mean to completely negate Bigger’s racial status, but he puts the emphasis on economics:

. . . And the rich people don’t want to change things; they’ll lose too much. But deep down in them they feel like you feel, Bigger, and in order to keep what they’ve got, they make themselves believe that men who work are not quite human. They do like you did, Bigger, when you refused to feel sorry for Mary. But on both sides men want to live; men are fighting for life. Who will win? Well, the side that feels life most, the side with the most humanity and the most men. That’s why . . . y-you’ve got to believe in yourself, Bigger. . . (391)

Consequently, having understood this, Bigger can now view his crime in a favourable light: “What I killed for must’ve been good!” (392). The act of killing, then, frees Bigger in that he sees it as an extension of his new found Marxist ideology; ideologies which requires action and Bigger has acted.

The ideology does not negate the criminality of his action, but it justifies it under the terms of its beliefs. In this way Bigger is free. In so far as Bigger’s crime is a natural reaction to a hostile environment, it must’ve been good. Bigger’s crime serves two major functions: it frees Bigger in that it is an act which boldly challenges the environment. And it points to the nature of the environment which, from Wright’s Marxist perspective, is
dehumanizing. Bigger’s actions point to the system under which he lives: as George Kent says; “Bigger Thomas and Richard Wright were after the system – not merely its pieces”.
(Richard Wright: Blackness and the Adventures of Western Culture 340)

The cultural commission of the Communist party had formulated a program in Proletarian Realism, according to this, the black writers were urged to portray the southern planters and Wall Street bankers as villains, and were asked to conclude their plots on a note on triumph and victory of the black proletariat over its white oppressors.

In Native Son Mr. Dalton, in a subtle way appears as capitalist villain. Richard Wright ironically presents Mr. Dalton as a philanthropist, who is sympathetic to the Negro cause. But in reality he is a capitalist exploiting the poor. It is his assumption that the blacks if they live together in the South side, they will be happy. A closer look at the Daltons, reveal that Bigger ought to be very careful in his dealings with them. The Daltons are ‘tragically blind’ to their own motives. Considering themselves to be philanthropists who unselfishly improve the lives of poverty stricken blacks, they are unaware that they are instead driven by guilt stemming from the fact that their wealth is created by renting over priced, substandard housing to blacks, they do not contribute in changing the system. They are therefore among foremost of Bigger’s oppressors.

Mr. Dalton is blind to the nature of the economic and social system in which he participates.

The Daltons patronized their previous chauffeur by sending him to night school but then refused to hire him in their business after he had graduated. Although Mr. Dalton consciously believes that hard work and good character enable a person to be a success in American life, he has caused much to the suffering of the blacks, he says he wants to alleviate. When questioned by Max, Mr. Henry Dalton replies, “Now, Mr. Dalton, it has been said that you donate millions of dollars to educate Negroes. Why is it that you exact
an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep?” (302)

Wright also emphasizes that blacks and minorities must overturn American capitalism, pushing for radical changes that will ensure they become the legitimate citizen who will fully share in the democratic possibilities of American life. As Max tells Dalton, “something of a more fundamental nature” must be done (274) to make America a just and open society.

Wright emphasizes the wretchedness of the lives of poor blacks through the hysterical outpouring of the prisoner who comes to share Bigger’s cell. He shouts and yells how blacks are overcharged for the discarded food stuff dumped into the Black Belt and how their over-crowded school breed perverts. Due to colour discrimination, blacks are not even provided with proper hospital facilities. It becomes quite obvious to the reader that there is a method in his madness. Here Wright seems to imply that a sensitive black, who has fully grasped the meaning of his life in a white society, is likely to lose his mental balance. The insane prisoner of the Native Son seems to be a predecessor of the Crazy Vet in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man.

Bigger has lured Bessie sexually with the money stolen from the murdered body of Mary Dalton:

The same deep realization he had had that morning at home at the breakfast table, while watching Vera and Buddy [his brother] and his mother came back to him; only it was Bessie he was looking at now and seeing how blind she was. He felt the narrow orbit of her life: from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved. (131)
Bessie, however, is scarcely blind. She knows Bigger and the situation of both his and her life intimately. The dialogue of a scene between Bigger and her that takes place a short time later in the novel reads:

“If you killed her [Mary] you’ll kill me,” she said. “I ain’t in this.”

“Don’t be a fool. I love you.”

“You told me you never was going to kill.”

“All right. They white folks. They done killed plenty of us.”

“That don’t make it right.” (168)

She is, of course, correct on all counts. Bessie is accessible, domestic, and unprotected. She possesses the most lucid vision in Native Son. She is the only character in the novel who realizes that Bigger’s murderous course is a mistaken redaction of Western tactics of terror. Bigger, for example, reflects with calm and cunning self satisfaction that his relationship to Bessie has been one of commercial trade: “So he would give her . . . the liquor and she would give him herself. . . He knew why she liked him; he gave her money for drinks.” (132) It is not love that secures the relationship between Bigger and Bessie. He is a murderer and petty thief who uses Bessie as a means of passage.

The entire megalomaniacal scheme of ransom that Bigger concocts relies on Bessie’s forced complicity. To gain her compliance, he browbeats, bribes, bullies, and beats her. And his early actions are determined as by the phrase he rehearses: “He couldn’t take her couldn’t leave her.”(222) Bigger did not dare to leave Bessie alive because his life depended on hers.
He was not in love with Bessie Mears it was just a passing relationship based on liquor and sex. His relationship to her is his relationship to the black community, he will use and enjoy her when he can and strike out when she gets in his way. She was merely evidence and under it all he knew that the white people did not really care about her being murdered.

Bigger is prompted by his family to kill the rat, here he acts alone. Whereas his treatment of Gus and Mary stemmed from frenzied passion for his action, in this scene of killing Bessie he eventually acts from lucid, carefully deliberated motives. While Bigger's earlier violence was instinctive, this brutal killing is ultimately a conscious act, his successful attempt “to impose his will over his body” (222). And whereas his earlier acts of violence stemmed from situations in which Bigger “closed his eyes and struck out blindly” (225), this terrible act is clearly envisioned and, highly calculated. Unlike his other acts of violence in the novel, his murder of Bessie involves genuine consciousness and free will. Although environmental pressures certainly play a significant role in this scene, they do not wholly drive the action.

His murder of Mary Dalton is an act of creation. It could be considered as a quasi accidental killing that is creative. It raises him, and with him his Negroness, from the level of obscurity to the realm of recognition. He accomplishes alone something sensational. In so doing, he projects his now unavoidable presence to the white world. His satisfaction is, of course, perverse; but, Wright implies, it is legitimate the logical outcome of an acknowledged release from a consciously subservient group. It is a way of escaping all the negatives in his life. The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score. Bigger realizes that he had committed rape every time he looked into a white face and now he has done it in a
way that the white face would have to cry out in pain. He created by making whole, by severing the perpetual discontinuity between his two worlds, his aspiration and his abilities to attain their satisfaction; he had never felt a sense of wholeness until he introduced Mary Dalton to the furnace.

Bigger’s murder of Bessie, on the surface, seems to be only a grim re-enactment of his earlier killings of the rat, and Mary Dalton. Once more he attacks by going for the head, this time using a brick to crush Bessie’s skull. Here again Bigger is motivated by fears brought on by environmental conditioning. Because he was afraid to act alone in extorting money from Mr. Dalton, he involved Bessie in his plans. And now that he is afraid Bessie will disclose information to the police that will result in his capture, he feels “he would have to kill her. It was his life against hers” (222).

As Bigger escapes from the police after killing Bessie, his consciousness deepens and he is able to assert his freewill in several ways, even in the face of an environment growing even more hostile. Although he is not able to overcome this environment by either escaping from or transforming it, he can acquire a lucid view of the world around him for the first time in his life. Thus he begins to gain psychological distance from and emotional control over the world. He takes crucial steps toward selfhood, planting seeds that eventually flower in the Book three. In one way it traces his action as a kind of growth in his personality by his environmental conditioning. They also provide important evidence that he is gaining the ability to break the circle of necessity that has dominated him for so long. He is able to make the first step toward the new life.

Book two entitled “Flight” is apparently structured in the same way as Book two, for it too is organized by three major scenes of entrapment laced with patterns of deterministic imagery. Throughout Book two, Wright suggests that there is a way out of the naturalistic trap for Bigger if he can overcome his blindness and see his environment
truly and then devise alternatives to it. Although the three major scenes Bigger’s murder of Bessie, his escape from the authorities, and his capture by the police portray Bigger as repeating patterns of behaviour brought on by his environment.

While trying to find his way through the labyrinthine streets of Chicago’s South Side, he obtains new perspective on his life as a black American when he climbs to the top a tenement building and observes a black family living in a one room apartment similar to the one he and his family had taken for rent. When he sees three black children in with their parents, Bigger thinks, “Five of ’em sleeping in one room and here’s a great big empty building with just me in it” (231). Descending from the roof to secure food and warmth, he walks through the streets, again thinking of the social system restricting blacks to impoverished ghettos; “they keep us bottled up here like wild animals”(233). In contrast to the first scene, in Bigger’s frenzied emotions cancelled out his conscious thoughts, reducing him to the level of an animal, Bigger here retains a human identity by continuing to think clearly.

He carefully looks for a Negro bakery to buy bread, knowing full well that a white proprietor might recognize and report him. Failing to find a black owned bakery because the only black business in the ghetto is funeral parlours, he thinks again about how the social system oppresses blacks: “they trick us every breath we draw….They gouge our eyes out” (234).

Shortly, afterward he has another moment of awareness when he goes to an abandoned building and observes from a window a religious service in black church. Although the church is “dim-lit” (237) Bigger’s mind is illuminated by another significant insight: “Conventional religion is a way in which black people are blinded by the system. As he listens to the congregation singing he consciously rejects this kind of
“surrender, rejection” (237), even though he is attracted by the music because it provides him with a systematic vision of life that satisfies “his deep yearning for a sense of wholeness” (238). He honestly faces the fact that such a vision is an illusion that encourages blacks to endure passively the injustices of the real world by offering them happiness in a vaguely imagined after life.

Bigger is no longer driven by fear but has attained that sort of lucid consciousness that enables him to think and act freely. He resolves to defy his pursuers in a final shutdown and in the process begins to overcome the fears that have trapped him most of his life. As he is physically apprehended by the policemen who are emissaries from an “ocean of boiling hate” (249), he psychologically frees himself from the terror that environment has always imposed upon him and that, ironically, is currently driving the police. Now it is the social world outside Bigger that behaves like animals driven by “thirsty screams” and “hunger shouts” (250,251).

Bigger on the other hand, is detached from such a world of instinctive violence. Because some part of his mind is beginning to stand aside from the world of fear and hate encircling him, he can direct his thoughts freely. He can be defiant and unafraid in a public way for the first time in his life, not feeling the need either to subvert secretly or to cover from the white world he no longer fears. Indeed, Bigger “laughs” (252) as the police capture him, savouring the awareness that “they are afraid” (252) trapped as they are in society induced world of ignorance and hatred.

This crucial moment of awareness Bigger achieves at the end of book two becomes the basis for his dramatic human growth in Book three. The final section of the novel, like the previous two Books, pivots on these crucial scenes, each of which takes the form of a conversation. The conversations Bigger has with a variety of people as they visit his cell early in Book three, the dialogue he has with his white lawyer Max in the
visiting room, and his final talk with Max at the end of the novel all have the same effect, that of enriching Bigger’s inward life so that he can achieve human selfhood despite a deterministic environment. These three scenes, then, allow Bigger ultimately to break the circle of necessity of his prior life and to achieve a new life grounded in existential freedom.

Bigger is not a pathological monster but a richly imagined person. And so Wright would tell at the beginning of his story that Bigger’s relationship to his family was that he lived with them, but behind a wall, and a curtain. When he relates to black people he takes his violence out on them. His hatred bottles up and has to get out; since it cannot reach its stimulus, the white man, it is expelled on blacks. He corners his pal, Gus, and holds a knife blade at his mouth, saying, “Lick it” (40). What he wants to do, of course, is hold it at the white man’s lips, draw blood from the white man’s tongue. But he couldn’t get him. Bigger had heard that white people felt it was good when one Negro killed another because it meant that they had one Negro less. When a Negro says he is afraid to go to Mississippi because he would be killed he does not refer merely to the white race. Bigger cannot feel “guilt” (357) about his murders. His is a mind in which “guilt” (357) plays as negligible a part. If Bigger’s text is skyward, Bessie Mears’s story in *Native Son* has clearly to do with deaths on city pavements. Bessie’s story is one with its anxious revisions that merely repeats without a difference.

Bigger therefore has a human self that can use consciousness to mitigate the effects of his severely restrictive environment. He is stressed in an early scene in which he is able for a few brief moments to relax and operate independently from the intense pressures of his environment. This part of Bigger possesses all the human drives of a twenty year old American responding to what he perceives are the opportunities of American life. Leaning against a “brick wall” (13) an obvious reminder of an
environment intent on depriving him of these opportunities he nevertheless can feel an understandable urge to transcend his narrow existence and become part of a fluid world of movements and possibilities “kinda warm today” (13). Despite the fact that Bigger will later kill two women after his normal drives toward love have been twisted by environment, here he takes an altogether normal pleasure in watching the gentle sway of a woman’s body as she enters a building. And whereas the novel’s key scenes of violence are acted out at night during powerful snowstorms that reflect his turbulent, uncontrolled emotions, here Bigger relaxes and enjoys the sun burning dazzling yellow and the white clouds floating in a clear, bright sky.

Rigidly trapped in confining rooms throughout the novel, Bigger at this point is given a rare opportunity to become a part of the natural, fluid world that evokes his casual curiosity that touches Bigger at the core of his being, revealing a person who has all the usual American instincts for a life of change and possibilities.

Bigger looks at an election poster of a white man, running for district attorney, he is reminded that “IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU CAN’T WIN!” (16). When he looks up again and is inspired by the sight of a plane flying overhead, he is informed by Gus that only the whites are given opportunity to fly such planes literally or otherwise become upwardly mobile in American life. Indeed, Bigger again feels like the rat depicted in the novel’s first scene. Just as the rat is safe only when it stays behind its baseboard hole but will starve if it remains there all the time. Bigger feels “like I’m on the outside of the world peeping through a knot-hole in the fence” (23). When he tries to break through that hole in order to feed himself on the opportunities which do not exist for blacks, as he tells Gus “They don’t let us do anything” (22). He knows that black people, like the rat are cornered, for they are forced to live in a teeming ghetto that denies them social, economic, and political possibilities, and Bigger thus sees this ghetto
metaphorically as “one corner of the city” (23). Physically trapped by a racist society that
treats black as animals, Bigger perceives his life “like living in jail” (23) because his
experiences both at home and in the larger world deny him basic forms of human action.
Either ways he turns, the setting reminds him of his hopeless situation. If he
accommodates himself to the expectations of the dominant society, he will be condemned
to live in a rat infested apartment, and if he rebels, he will, as Buckley’s campaign poster
warns him, end up in jail or in a worse situation. The urban setting, in both its
microcosmic and its macrocosmic forms, imprisons Bigger, bottling up his deepest
human impulses and forcing him to live like an animal.

Hanging out on the city streets with Gus, Bigger demonstrates that he is not really
the tough guy most people see but has a soft human side of his character, a side that
aspires to a better life and a more fully realized self. Although one part of Bigger resents
Gus and later almost kills him in the poolroom fight, another part of Bigger responds to
Gus in a personal, even affectionate way. Indeed Bigger shares with his friend his most
deeply felt longing, a desire not only to be a pilot but also to “fly” (14) beyond the harsh
restrictions ruling his life. When Gus reminds him of the ways in which the white society
will frustrate these hopes, Bigger does not lash out with reflexive hatred but instead jokes
about the situation, transforming his pain and resentment into a complexly ironic
awareness that the two of them enjoy.

Bigger on his own part has resented Jan’s friendly overtures earlier in the novel.
But gradually Bigger’s attitude undergoes a tremendous change and he looks at Jan, a
white man, as a human being. Besides this, through the famous defence by Max, the
white lawyer from the International Labor Defense, Wright has further demonstrated an
aspect of black and white relation in the proletarian sense of the word. Max meets Bigger
in his prison cell. And he sympathetically asks questions pertaining to Bigger’s life
inspiring in him sufficient confidence to answer all those questions. At that point Bigger experiences a kind of catharsis of emotions of hatred and fear, and feels that his life has received a recognition which it had never received before: “For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of” (334).

In writing *Native Son* Wright began his examination of Bigger Thomas from the outside, exploring Bigger’s family, his friends, and surroundings. But as he got deeper into the character, he must have found social and psychological explanations were inadequate. There was more to Bigger than the naturalists, communists or psychologists could explain. For Bigger, as Wright must have discovered, was not satisfied to be labelled and forgotten. He was rebellious enough to want to forge an identity out of his black experiences, in spite of or to spite society. Most likely Wright did not know it at that time, that he had created an existential hero, a metaphysical rebel.

Later when asked to identify the source of Bigger’s alienation, Wright replied with a political explanation that has overtones of Miller’s absurd in it. In this 1940 essay Wright said that as far as he was concerned Bigger is a product of a dislocated society, where he is considered as a dispossessed and disinherited man.

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is an enormously stirring novel of crime and punishment. It is considered as one of the most powerful and intense novel. This Negro “American Tragedy” deals seriously and powerfully with the problem of social maladjustment, with environment and individual behaviour, and subsequently with crime and punishment. It is a tragedy Wright’s black boy is killed in the electric chair not for being a criminal, since the crime is unpremeditated, but for being a social misfit.
The startling truth in Wright’s *Native Son* is that the injustice is that Bigger under
gives racial, not merely a social one. Bigger Thomas is far beyond and outside of helpful
social agencies. He represents an impasse rather than a complex one and his tragedy is to
be born into a black and immutable minority race. The novel spares no sentiments in
depicting the harsh realities of racism, poverty, brutality, and the futility bred by the
urban ghetto. Wright’s *Native Son* set the stage for the civil rights movement of the
1960’s and created an entrance for new generations of black writers in the United States.

Wright’s *Native Son* not only revitalized modern, American, and Afro-American
traditions by creating a new kind of hero and providing a fresh look at black urban life
but also deepened its own meanings by connecting the hero’s experience to these multiple
levels of literary traditions. It therefore achieved the originality, depth, and resonance
expected of a genuine masterwork.

The idea that Bigger is primarily a victim of his environment strips him of the
beauty and physical mysteries that characterize the human personality. Yet the
accompanying critical attitude is that through sheer will Bigger manages, to some degree,
to isolate himself from the plight of those around him and hence transcends
environmental forces by his growth into self knowledge. Wright like Bigger, transcended
overwhelming obstacles in achieving his success as a writer, and more importantly that
Wright again like Bigger, was torn between the same contradictory tensions of despair
and rebellion. From this perspective *Native Son* becomes primarily an extension of
Wright’s personality.

The thematic progression in both *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* is the
same from a spontaneous, fear motivated reaction by a black character against the white
mountain of racial hatred to a realization of the necessity for concentrated Marxist
organization of the poor. Also developed in both works are the ideas that sexual taboos between the races confuse and confound the black man’s struggle for justice and that nature herself often seems to join with the white man to oppress the Negro. Similarly, such images as the white mountain or the white fog which refer to the crushing weight of white society on the individual black man appear in both *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son*. It is contended here that *Uncle Tom’s Children* not only possesses unity and makes an unsentimental artistic statement about the position of the black man in the South, but that it employs several of the central images and themes of *Native Son* in an aesthetically more sophisticated manner than does the later and more famous work.

Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* is a bitter protest against racial injustice. The title comes from the expression of the Negroes indicating that they are no longer Uncle Toms. It focuses on the dark and violent aspects of black life in rural South during the thirties. *Uncle Tom’s Children* originally contained four lengthy stories: “Big Boy Leaves Home”, “Down by the Riverside”, “Long Black Song”, and “Fire and Cloud”. Wright published an expanded edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* in 1940, which included a nonfiction introductory essay, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and concluded with the story of “Bright and Morning Star”. The book is unified by the stories of shared social context, common themes, and consistent narrative technique.

The common theme of the stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children* is the struggle to find personal dignity in an oppressive society, but the individual stories in the collection describe different levels of self awareness and portray various reactions to oppression. Throughout the book, a tension between Wright's faithful presentation of the Communist Party line and his intuitive belief in Black Nationalism is evident. It is made coherent by
an arrangement of these ideas that leads one towards increasingly sophisticated examples of self realization.

“The Ethics of Living Jim Cow” is the result of blacks living in constant fear and tension. The blacks themselves enforce obedience to the code of behaviour drawn up by the whites. Therefore, as a measure of self defence, the blacks teach their children these principles. “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” describes Wright's own experiences of growing up. The essay starts with his first encounter with racism, when his attempt to play a war game with white children turns ugly, and follows his experiences with the problems of being black in the South through his adolescence and adulthood. It describes his experience of prejudices at his first job. While working at an optical factory, his white fellow employees Pease and Morrie bully and eventually beat him for wanting to learn job skills that could allow him to advance.

Wright also discusses the suffering attacks of the whites on the blacks and explores the hypocrisies of white prejudices against blacks. These include black men being allowed to work around naked white prostitutes while having to pretend they do not exist. Whites have exploitative sex with black maids, and yet any sexual relations between a black man and a white woman, or even a prostitute, are cause for castration or death. Wright also delves into the more subtle humiliations inherent in the Jim Crow system, such as being unable to say thank you to a white man, lest he takes it as a statement of equality.

The essay, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” is a much abbreviated version of the racial outrages described in Wright’s autobiography, Black Boy. . . . The essay ends with Wright quoting a Memphis elevator operator he had known: “Lawd, man! If it wuzn’t fer them polices ‘n’them o’lynch-mobs, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but uproar down
here!” (237). It is an aesthetically valid introduction to the stories which follow, both because of its concentrated description of the brutality endured by Wright himself and similar instances of degradation in the South and because of the warning contained in this closing quotation. As it will be seen later, the addition of “Bright and Morning Star” brings this answer much more sharply into focus than it was initially.

Set in the American Deep South, each of the powerful novellas collected here concerns an aspect of the lives of black people in the post slavery era, exploring their resistance to white racism and oppression. One must note here that four of the five stories depict a brutal death suffered by a black man at the hands of white sadists and the other describes a flogging. The first “Big Boy Leaves Home” is a lynching story but it avoids the usual stereotypes. The second “Down by the Riverside” is a flood story which is almost too poignant, too terrible to bear. The first two stories show how the black protagonists react to white intimidation in a definitely non militant way. The third “Long Black Song” is the story of how a white man takes advantage of a Negro’s wife and of the revenge that follows. The fourth “Fire and Cloud” concerns a Negro community’s efforts to protest against being allowed to starve to death for want of relief. In fifth story Aunt Sue in “Bright and Morning Star” has been convinced by her Marxist sons that the Communist vision of heaven on earth is the reasonable equivalent of Christian salvation. Wright speaks for his own people in a voice which demands to be listened to.

The black characters portrayed in these stories are weakened by poverty, threatened with racist violence, and tested by death; yet, they reveal an inherent strength and a potential for heroic rebellion. But Wright’s concern is not merely racial, for the stories describe the perennial hard times of the rural South, exacerbated by the Great Depression. Against this background of class animosity and social upheaval, Wright
projects the ideal of interracial collective action. In all these stories the black men when provoked, stand their ground. The Negroes who are the central figures of these stories are tragic characters trapped and tormented in the white man's world by their own sensitiveness, their own sense of individual being, their self consciousness which is ruthlessly invaded at will by men made lords of creation through lack of certain pigmentation in the skin.

The didactic presentation of Marxist theory is most obvious in “Fire and Cloud”, which concludes with a triumphant, though improbable, interracial protest march, and in “Bright and Morning Star”, which idealizes the personal sacrifices made to protect the secrecy of an interracial Communist organization. However, parallel messages are communicated less directly in the other stories, for all of these stories demonstrate the deterministic influence of social and economic conditions and the futility of an individual's effort to rebel unless that effort is part of a collective action. The stories also display Wright's intuitive belief in Black Nationalism. His black characters, often through a revelatory experience of racist violence, are made aware of their status as outsiders. There is no emotional shading, and the reader must empathize with the oppressed blacks and despise the cruelty of the whites. Wright introduces sympathetic white Communists in two stories, “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star”.

“Big Boy Leaves Home” describes Big Boy's initiation to the harsh social reality of the rural South. The story moves from the playful innocence of a day at the swimming hole to the brutal execution of one of Big Boy's companions by a white mob. Similarly, Big Boy is forced to change from an overgrown child into an emotionally hardened young man who calmly kills a rattlesnake and a dog before escaping the South and his childhood in a truck bound for Chicago.
In “Down by the Riverside”, the symbolically named Brother Mann is a sacrificial character caught in a devastating flood and then destroyed by a racist system of justice that values property more than human life. Mann steals and murders to save others, but he cannot kill merely to protect himself from incrimination. Mann’s heroic effort to preserve life is, in the end, as futile as any single man’s effort to hold back the flood.

Reverend Taylor, the central figure in “Fire and Cloud”, is the leader of a black community, a man who has won influence through accommodations with the white establishment. A revelatory beating administered at night by the white thugs finally convinces Taylor that the whites will never willingly give up their oppressive ways. Taylor is the only protagonist in Uncle Tom's Children who triumphs, for he realizes that he must abandon his individualism and join in collective action.

Aunt Sue’s heroic murder in “Bright and Morning Star” of an informer who is about to reveal the names of other Communist sympathizers is a selfless act undertaken for the collective good. Thus, Wright’s characters portray three phases of development: the full awareness of oppression, individual efforts to strike back, and collective actions to change the system.

Big Boy Leaves Home stands in the very front rank of Wright’s work; the story first appeared in the New Caravan (November 2, 1936), and he would never in the next two decades of published writing achieve a greater success in the story form. This harrowing story tells of a black adolescent who is forced to shoot a white man in self defence after he watches his friend being lynched, burned alive, and mutilated. It is the first of Wright’s works to receive wide critical attention.
Wright would object, later, that what bothered him about *Uncle Tom's Children* is that it made too many bankers' daughters cry. And on the surface “Big Boy Leaves Home” should be the one story in the book that would appear most guilty of that charge; Big Boy does not even have the saving grace of a Silas, a dignity in death, or the revolutionary conversion of a Dan Taylor. Big Boy just runs. He is a poor young victim of unbearable brutality. The real object of “Big Boy Leaves Home” is terror, and it presents that terror as inseparable from a deep and pervasive myth, fraught with sexual pathology. The writing is clear, cleansed of any phoniness or sloganeering, perfectly in control.

“Big Boy Leaves Home” describes the tragic events which occur after four young black boys decide to go swimming in a pond on the property of a notorious local white racist, Harvey.

“Elder, wes in deep trouble,” began the old man. “Big Boy n some mo boys. . .”

“. . . Lester n Buck n Bobo . . .”

“. . . wuz over on ol man Harveys place swimmin. . .”

“N he don like us niggers *none,*” said Peters emphatically. (260)

The white woman appears. The boys run for their clothes; the woman screams; her companion Jim, Harvey’s son, the Southern white man with his rifle and army officer’s uniform, one of the captains and colonels that inhabit Dixie memories comes to the rescue of white womanhood. He shoots down two of the boys, Lester and Buck, but Bobo and Big Boy overpower him and kill him. Then they run. Bobo keeps saying, as he runs, “Ahm scared” (253); four times he cries it out and he fears “Theys gonna lynch
us”(252). No such luck. A rope around the neck would be a blessing; beaten by Big Boy at the beginning, in the wrestling match, Bobo will be captured, mutilated, and burnt alive.

Big Boy and Bobo rush home, where the parents realize what terror is waiting for them. Ma and Pa know what it’s all about, for they have lived through it. It is the dread sin, the great curse the black native naked in the presence of the white woman: And they’ve killed not just a white but a patriot, a “soldier.” (256) The cry goes out for the gathering of the black clan; the room is soon filled with “Brothers” (258) and “Elders” (259). The family keeps asking the boy why he wasn’t at school, keeps putting the pointless question to him. The adult mind mumbles insanely dull patterns, over and over, as if by simply insisting on what should have been then what has been will ebb and pass away. The happy black boys could not get back to their clothes, cannot be civilized, and cannot hide their black members. Decency was unobtainable and led to murder; after murder there is now no protection, no refuge, and the indecency grows with killing force. And the black community sees ruin, destruction. The murder by mistake now runs through both communities, white and black, energizing them and calling up the full consequence of the curse.

Wright is particularly good at depicting terror and Big Boy changing reaction to his situation not only by means of interior monologue but by describing Big Boy’s movement as well. When, Big Boy arrives at the kiln, he discovers that he must first kill a snake that has ensconced itself in the depths of the pit. Somehow the startling confrontation with the snake and the methodical, impassioned manner in which Big Boy destroys it suggests at one and the same time his terror and burning hatred of the whites. Later, now safely in the hole himself, he fantasies killing whites in just the same way as he killed the snake—whipping them, stamping on them, and kicking their heads against the
sand. His dreams of glory an ironic comment on the usual order of boys’ fantasies are headlines in which he imagines himself described as the killer of twenty white lynchers.

Yeah, ef pa had only let im have tha shotgun! He could stan off a whole mob wid a shotgun. Then another came. He got the same medicine. Then the whole mob swirled around him, and he blazed away, getting as many as he could. They closed in; but, by Gawd, he had done his part, hadn't he? N the news-papersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED! Er mabble theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little. Tha wouldn't be so bad, would it? (266)

After a brief respite at home during which time his mother gives him some corn bread. Big Boy is on his way. He has had no water since noon but he will get it. As if anticipating that the destruction is to be by fire, Big Boy goes out to hide in the kilns, where no other boys would have played at their dreams of mobility, Casey Jones tooling down the tracks. The kilns are close to a highway, and a plan is laid for Big Boy and Bobo to wait in them overnight before catching a ride in a truck which a friend will drive to Chicago the next morning.

From afar white voices come with fire; Big Boy’s family has been thrown out of their house and the house has been burned. On the opening pages gentle songs of glory and happy abandoned tunes; are heard and picked up by marauding bands of whites, with their own, peculiar song of glory: “We’ll hang ever nigger t a sour apple tree…” (269). Big Boy does spend the night hiding in a kiln during which he sees his remaining friend, Bobo, caught and burned alive by a white mob just a few feet away from him.
They get Bobo and have a picnic. A feast: tar and feather and burn and dismember.

Big Boy saw the mob fall back, leaving a small knot of men about the fire. Then, for the first time, he had a full glimpse of Bobo. A black body flashed in the light. Bobo was struggling, twisting; they were binding his arms and legs. When he saw them tilt the barrel he stiffened. A scream quivered. He knew the tar was on Bobo. The mob fell back. He saw a tar-drenched body glistening and turning. (271)

It is a community entertainment, the ladies and the gents gathered around the camp fire. Big Boy, watching from his hole, sees Bobo’s body go up in flame, blazing against the sky. Rain begins, and he has to kill an inquisitive dog that threatens to give him way. From sunshine and honeysuckle and a “summer swimming hole” Big Boy has dropped out of the world into a hole filling up with cold rain, a dog’s body in his lap. The core of this story is the conflict between the Negro’s instinct for self preservation and an impersonal, unpredictable lynch machine. It is this central psychological core of Negro life in the deep South, communicated in clear, unemotional prose, which gives Wright’s stories their intensity, and a kind of impersonal eloquence in voicing the tragedy of his people.

In the morning the truck arrives on time and Big Boy makes his escape truck-fittingly, the “Magnolia Express Comny” on its way to Chicago:

The truck swerved. He blinked his eyes. The blacks of daylight had turned brightly golden. The sun had risen.
The truck sped over the asphalt miles, sped northward, jolting him, shaking out of his bosom the crumbs of corn bread symbolic of the rejected South, making them dance with the splinters and sawdust in the golden blades of sunshine.

He turned on his side and slept. (275)

Wright’s dialogues among whites and the little glimpses the reader gets of the whites are often capable of at least two diametrically opposed meanings. One white asks another, what he is carrying in his arm. The response is, “Er pillar.” (270) The pillow is there for feathers, tar and all. The line is comic horror; when the word gets out that a nigger is going to be lynched, the white man runs straight to his inner room, comes up with a pillow and trots across the field with it under his arm. He’s got his equipment in bed. The same grizzly comedy of sexual disgust comes across in:

“Jack! Jack! Don leave me! Ah wanna see im!”

“They’re bringin im over the hill, sweetheart!” (270)

“HURRY UP N BURN THE NIGGER FO IT RAINS!” (271) And after the consummation, the field is filled with stray voices of the nameless participants in the rite. They sound with unbearable frenzy, zeroing in on our bones. The use of dialect is rarely easy and never folksy, as it sometimes is in Wright; it conveys a special speech, essential to the effect of such lines as “Ah’ll take some of yuh ladies back in mah car.”(271) It accomplishes what most great stories do: its small action involves a culture, makes some penetration into it. “Big Boy Leaves Home” is the most perfect and largest story written by Richard Wright. It is a savage act of the mind which reflects the reality.
In “Big Boy Leaves Home” the symbol of the North stands for equal rights, and a resort for those who escape from the oppression of the South. Big Boy in this story speaks longingly of the North where blacks enjoy equal rights and towards the end he escapes lynching by running away to the North. Big Boy’s escape was affected through the will of oppressed Negro community despite obvious risks. Wright’s concept of this community extending beyond the Negro world clasping hands with its white oppressed brothers, informs the very essence of a developing social vision in the other stories of *Uncle Tom’s children*. Flight represented by “Big Boy Leaves Home” is one aspect of the Negro struggle for survival in the South.

Wright’s technique is simple, straightforward narrative and beautifully direct dialogue. But there is no lack of artistry. He is always reaching beyond the simple event to catch all the complexity of emotion that surrounds it. The horseplay of the first part of “Big Boy Leaves Home” adroitly leads up to and contrasts with the frenzied tragedy of the shooting and the lynching.

“Down by the Riverside” takes place during a major flood. Mann’s house was twelve feet above the yellow, swirling and droning water. For four long days and nights it had been flowing past. It appeared as if the water had always been there. “Mabbe somebody jus dropped them houses n trees down inter tha watah . . .” (279). He felt giddy and a nervous shudder went through him. The leaves were over flowing in the North every Negro was forced to pileup sand and cement bags on the levee by the railway. Two more bridges were washed. Trains couldn’t run anymore. There was typhoid in the air. Things were pretty bad. Its main character, a farmer named Mann, must get his family to safety in “the hills”(282), but he does not have a boat. In addition, his wife, Lulu, has
been in labour for several days but cannot deliver the baby. Mann must get her to a hospital, the Red Cross hospital.

Mann has sent his cousin Bob to sell a donkey and use the money to buy a boat, but Bob returns with only fifteen dollars from the donkey and a white boat stolen from the post office, Mr. Heartfield who hates Negroes. Mann must take the boat through town to the hospital, even though Bob advises against this, since the boat is very recognizable. Rowing his family, including Lulu, Peewee, his son and Grannie, Lulu’s mother, in this white boat, Mann calls for help at the first house he reaches. This house is the home of the boat’s white owner, Heartfield, who immediately begins shooting. Mann, who has brought his gun, returns fire and kills the man, while the white man's family witnesses the act from the windows of the house.

Mann rows on to the Red Cross hospital but is too late; Lulu and the undelivered baby have died. Soldiers take away Grannie and Peewee to safety in the hills, and Mann is conscripted to work on the failing levee. However, the levee breaks, and Mann must return to the hospital, where he smashes a hole in the ceiling at the direction of a colonel, who then directs Mann to find him once everything’s over saying he’ll help Mann if he can, allowing the hospital to be evacuated. Mann and a young black boy, Brinkley, are told to rescue a family at the edge of town, who turn out to be the Heartfields. Inside the house, Heartfield’s son recognizes Mann as his father's killer and Mann raises his axe thinking to kill the children and their mother but is stopped when the house shifts in the rising flood waters. Despite his terror that he might be fingered as Heartfield’s murderer and accordingly facing the possibility of a brutal and torturous death, Mann takes Ralph, his sister and Mrs. Heartfield to the hills. There, Mann tries to blend with his people, hoping he might find his family,
Lawd, Ah wondah whuts become of Peewee? N Grannie? He thought of Lulu and his eyes blurred. He elboweto a crowd of black men gathered around a kitchen tent. He signed and a weight seemed to go from him. He looked into black faces, looked for hope. (320)

Meanwhile the white boy Ralph identifies Mann as the killer of his father. Armed soldiers take him away for a tribunal with the general and then the colonel he’d helped at the Red Cross. Mann knows that he is doomed to death. When he runs, the soldiers shoot him dead by the river’s edge.

The subject and theme of the story may be summed up in one word as: Group Consciousness. Group consciousness, as against individual consciousness, the relationship between individuals or awareness of group is the main concern of “Down by the Riverside”. Mann tries to forget his own efforts for the sake of helping others: “Now and then he remembered Lulu and Heartfield and he felt dizzy; but he would urge himself and it would pass” (311). The irony occurs, of course, when Mann is called to rescue the Heartfield’s family. Consequently, Mann is very reluctant to go but again his concern for the group rather than his own life overtakes him and saves the Heartfield’s family. After Mann rescues the Heartfields, the ending becomes a foregone conclusion: Mann is to be shot for his crime.

At this point, he becomes a martyr, he gave up his own life for the sake of others. Mann, however, is no religious Uncle Tom who would lie down in submission and die; he is one new breed of Uncle Tom’s Children. He is a rebel who prefers to die by choice; he would die before he would let them kill him: “Ahll die fo they kill me! Ahll die. . . He ran straight to the right, through the trees, in the direction of the water.”(326). He runs for it and is shot to death. Death is the price Mann has had to pay for his new sense of values
and awareness of the group; but it is a price he pays by his own choice. Mann represents a force for the brotherhood of man; as such, this force denies artificial barriers of race and colour, and denies too, the existence of the individual as separate from group.

From a Marxist view point, the story “Long Black Song” portrays the inadequacy of bourgeois values in providing self fulfilment in a society where one class or race manipulates another. Through Silas, Wright shows the development of a man who moves from full acceptance of bourgeois values (specifically, the accumulation of private property), to his awareness of the inability and impossibility of such values to bring self-fulfilment. Thus, Silas comes to realize that for him these values are impossible, primarily because he cannot enjoy the freedom of the whites. That is how the whites dictate terms to the black.

The two central characters in “Long Black Song” portray opposing reactions to oppression. Silas, embittered by the infidelity of his wife, Sarah, and the frustrations of chasing the bourgeois dream of ownership in a social system that does not treat him equitably, the third and climactic story “Long Black Song,” there is a marked shift in the manner in which the black victims meet the white brutality. It is as if the viewpoint most dramatically stated in Claude McKay’s famous 1919 poem, “If We Must Die” becomes the central theme of the last half of the book. In “Long Black Song,” the character Silas’s death dramatically enacts a message of courage and defiance.

The plot of “Long Black Song” is relatively simple. A white travelling smooth talking salesman seduces a young Negro farm mother (Sarah) whose husband (Silas) has gone to the town to buy provisions. The white salesman plays the role of a petty bourgeois, who can afford to reduce the graphophone’s price by ten dollars for Sarah. Silas is embittered by the infidelity of his wife and the frustrations of chasing the
bourgeois dream of ownership in a social system that does not treat him equitably. When Silas returns home, he discovers her betrayal and attempts to whip her. She flees but steals quietly back to recover her infant. The following day the salesman returns with a white friend. Silas horse whips one and kills the other. Later, Sarah, watching from a distance observes a posse of white lynchers burn down their house in which Silas has entrenched himself, but not before he has succeeded in killing one or two white men. The story concludes with a gunfight between Silas and several white men, and although Silas is murdered, he briefly experiences a sense of manhood and freedom when he succeeds in killing two white men. His wife Sarah, from whose perspective the story is told, embodies the enduring strength of southern blacks, their ability to suffer and survive.

Then on all sides white men with pistols and rifles swarmed over the fields. . . A shot rang out. A white man fell, rolling over, face downward. . . She saw two white men on all fours creeping past the well. One carried a gun and the other a red tin can. When they reached the back steps the one with the tin can crept under the house and crept out again. Then both rose and ran. Shots. One fell. A yell went up. A yellow tongue of fire licked out from under the back steps. (353)

The success of the story, perhaps Wright’s best, lies in the successful integration of plot, imagery and character which echoes the tragic theme of Silas’s doomed awareness of him and the inadequacy of the bourgeois values by which he has been attempting to live. Silas’s recognition is his death knell, but he achieves a dignity in death that he had never known in life.

In the beginning Silas wants to imitate the ways of the white capitalists. He has devoted ten years in trying to achieve what he thinks will eventually lead to economic
freedom: “Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t git mah farm free…” (350). On account of his values, he holds personal property (his farm and his wife, Sarah) to be goals worth striving for, hoping that these will fulfil his every need. He has bought ten more acres of land from old man Burgess and

“... Paid im a hundred n fifty dollahs down. Ahll pay the res next year ef things go erlong awright. Ahma have t git a man t hep me nex spring...”

“Yuh mean hire somebody?”

“Sho, hire somebody! Whut yuh think? Ain tha the way the white folks do? Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs gotta do just like they do.” (341)

Just when he is about to have some sense of achievement, his world crumbles. His bourgeois dream of owning the farm and his wife is unrealizable because of the caste system he is subjected to. Wright uses the racial differences in order to disclose the differences of caste inherent in a capitalist society, and in this manner he shows that there are complex combinations of economics and race operating in such situations as Silas finds him in.

Silas’s class and racial identity cannot meaningfully change in a capitalist and racist society. He is aware of his lack of choice: “Now, its all gone. Gone... Ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothin. Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah ain got nothin. It don make no difference which way Ah go. Gawd! Gawd, Ah wish alla them white folks wuz dead! Dead, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em all! ” (350-351)

Silas realizes that the unfaithfulness of his wife, Sarah, may be attributed to a specific aspect of bourgeois codes, that the conquest of a woman is a promiscuous act paralleling the accumulation of wealth and power through unethical, but acceptable
business devices. When the white salesman approaches Sarah, she is thinking of the boyfriend of her youth, Tom, who was killed in World War I, “Nothing good could come from men going miles across the seas to fight” (331). What intrigues Sarah is a material and superficial object of the new industrial and bourgeois age, a graphophone.

He pulled out a square brown graphophone. She bent forward, looking. Lawd, but its pretty! She saw the face of a clock under the horn of the graphophone. The gilt on the corners sparkled. The color in the wood glowed softly. It reminded her of the light she saw sometimes in the baby’s eyes. Slowly she slid a finger over a bevelled edge; she wanted to take the box into her arms and kiss it. (334)

The music emanating from the white man’s device creates a dream mood between Sarah’s consciousness and subconsciousness that leads to her submission to the white salesman’s sexual advances. Finally, the story is framed by two scenes of violence, one merely suggested and the other actually dramatized.

Given the predicament Silas finds himself when life before him presents a lack of meaningful choice, it is entirely believable to see him fighting to the end. It shows the hopelessness of Silas’s goal in an exploitative environment.

“The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothin in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!” . . . He stopped and tried to get his breath. “But, Lawd, Ah don wanna be this way! It don mean nothin! Yuh die ef yuh fight! Yuh die ef yuh don fight! Either way yuh die n it don mean nothin . . .” (351)
Silas’s final struggle is not to save his property, but to assert his new sense of values. The central element of the story lies in its combination of economic and racial levels and in its portrayal of the failure of middle class values to provide self fulfilment of Silas. The combination of race and class is readily observed. He eventually comprehends that the steps to financial success in America do not coincide with the steps a Negro must climb in order to reach self respect and dignity in the eyes of the white community. In fact, Silas’s rejection of the American dream is really a rejection of the bourgeois values. At the end Silas’s shooting affair with the white posse and his self immolation by fire in the farmhouse carry back to America, the native land, the concept of disharmony among men.

She stared before her at the dry, dusty grass. Somehow, men, black men and white men, land and houses, green cornfields and grey skies, gladness and dreams, were all a part of that which made life good. Yes, somehow, they were linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel. She felt they were. She knew they were. . . She touched her face to the baby’s face and cried again. (352)

In both scenes Sarah protectively clutches her daughter, Ruth, perhaps symbolically nursing a new breed to set the world straight.

“Fire and Cloud” may be based, as so many of Wright’s works are, on an actual incident. Angelo Herndon, a Negro, a Birmingham coal miner, was the centre of a famous case in the thirties, when he was sentenced to twenty years on the chain gang for inciting to insurrection. In an autobiographical pamphlet he described an uprising that very well could have been the model for Wright’s story.
In the middle of June, 1932, the state closed down all the relief stations. A drive was organized to send all the jobless to the farms. There is a reason beyond the Daily Worker article to think Wright got his idea from Herndon. Wright must have been somewhat troubled by the claim that whites would march shoulder to shoulder with blacks (he offers no explanation in his story and never reports in other writing having seen white and black in the South join like this). In Herndon’s account there are 1,000-600 white, 400 black, a ratio of 3:2. In Wright’s story, the agitators Hadley and Greene promise 5,000, saying they have 3,000 whites and 2,000 blacks. Again, exactly 3:2, white to black, as in Herndon’s account. Since Wright was unable to offer evidence of how the racial unity was achieved, it is understandable that he should have wanted to stick closely and in what little detail he had to an actual account.

In the final two stories of collection, “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star”, Wright weaves Marxism and the Communist Party into the very fabric of his tales. The story line itself, divided into the thirteen separate sections, traces Taylor’s spiritual growth from passive Christian resignation to active social participation. It resembles the plot structure of proletarian fiction of the 1930’s of the downtrodden, humbled down trodden perceiving through the course of their experiences a vision of a new and better world. Taylor’s socialist vision is couched in Biblical allusions, but remains, nonetheless, true to form. “Gawd ain no lie! He ain no lie! His eyes grew wet with tears blurring his vision; the sky tremble; the buildings wavered as if about to topple; and the earth shook . . .” (406), Taylor cries out exultingly, “Freedom belongs to the strong!” (406)

Taylor’s self assumed Biblical role allows him to see perhaps than any of Wright’s previous heroes that Negro freedom depends upon Christian brotherhood. Moreover as a leader of the Negro community, he perceives that success requires him to
organize a mass social action. He cautions his son who, like Silas of “Long Black Song”, wants to resort to the same kind of isolated violence that whites use against Negroes.

Wright uses the Great Depression as commentary enough upon the failure of Capitalism. When food and relief are cut off from the Negro community by the white authorities, Wright speaks as much about the faults of an economic system as he does about the racial cruelty and injustice. Rev. Taylor has at one time received the word from God to guide and shepherd his flock, but that world of green pastures and sunny skies he recalls from his past is crumbling around him. The economic realities of the times are shattering his flock’s trust in his ability to lead them anywhere. Meanwhile, the Mayor, Mr. Lowe the head of the Industrial squad, the chief of police Bruden, the Capitalist stooge in the guise and garb of justice, know well that the party could strike the spark for a blaze of revolt on the part of the Negroes. They also fear an alliance between the blacks and the poor whites.

In the most ironic terms, the chief of police Bruden warns Rev. Taylor against encouraging a protest march through the town, suggesting that it would be part of a sinister Communist plot; “I want you to get this straight! Red ain’t folks! Theyre Goddam … rats trying to wreck our country, see?” (375) He also fears an alliance between the blacks and the poor whites.

As the story progresses, all hopes of Rev. Taylor’s life were writ in water. It just won’t go. “Ah done lived all mah life on mah knees, a-beggin n a-pleadin wid the white folks. N all they gimme wuz crumbs! All they did wuz kick me!” (397) Only after suffering a terrible beating at the hands of the white vigilantes is Rev. Taylor able to convert his religious zeal into social action. However the rise of a leader from oppressive capitalistic circumstances seems in keeping both with Marxism and ideology of the popular Front adopted by the party in the second half of the 1930s. After they make him
pray aloud to the tune of the whip, Rev. Taylor walks home through the white
neighbourhood "like a pillar of fire" (393) to lead his flock down freedom road. His son,
Jimmy, has been pushing Taylor to militance all through the story "... Aw, hell, Pa! Is
we gonna be dogs all the time?" (396). Taylor explains to his boy the faith of the future:

"Membah whut Ah tol yuh prayer wuz, son?"

There was silence, then Jimmy answered slowly:

"Yuh mean letting Gawd be so real in yo life tha everthing yuh do is cause of Im?"

"Yeah, but its different now, son. It's the people! Theys the on es whut mus
be real t us!" (398)

And Taylor finally climbs on the bandwagon that has been waiting for him; he
goes out and joins the swelling tide, the great band of marchers singing of the fire by
night and the cloud by day; under the waves of their song and "moving with a sea of
placards and banners" (405). The lessons of Southern history and the lessons of Richard
Wright's own previous work negate the lesson of "Fire and Cloud." "More joined along
the way. When they reached the park that separated the white district from the black, the
poor whites were waiting. Taylor trembled when he saw them join, swelling the mass that
moved toward the town. He looked ahead and saw black and white marching. And still
they sang..." (405); the mayor buckled and promised food if the folks go home. The
story ends in "a baptism of clean joy" (406) and the triumph of the new masses.

The community in "Fire and Cloud" is a lesson in difference. It could be argued
that the situation in "Fire and Cloud" is overpoweringly desperate: Brother Bonds brings
reports of mass beatings, women and children, the killing of one black man "Whut tried t
fight back,” (401) and the white vigilantes “ridin up n down in cars.”(401) Yet this parade of horror is a direct result of the threat to the march planned by Rev. Taylor and not a cause of it. The determination of the community to get to the City Hall occasions the first battles of race war, not the other way around. Taylor’s discovery is that the cordial relationships that exist between the whites and Negro communities are based ultimately on an underlying reality of terror and brute power, which is the key theme of *The Long Dream*. Unfortunately in *The Long Dream* the only alternative to submitting to this humiliation is flight, whereas in “Fire and Cloud” Taylor’s Negroes demonstrate, protest, and succeed.

Thus the march is headed by Taylor: poor whites joining the ranks with the Negroes, and the first step toward salvation through the social mass action is undertaken even though the inspiration for Negroes must be derived from the God father Taylor, rather than from the party workers. However, the rise of a leader from oppressive capitalistic circumstances seems in keeping both with Marxism and ideology of the popular Front adopted by the party in the second half of 1930’s. Wright here, as in certain of his poems, is portraying how the consciousness of the masses may be aroused to action against a system that has created a lower class, the parallel to a working class.

In the entire book of *Uncle Tom’s Children* there is only a single portrait of an unpredisposed white Hadley, the Northern Communist. In “Fire and Cloud” thousands of whites the poorest, traditionally the greatest haters of the Negro decide to join with their economically stricken brothers for bread. In *Uncle Tom’s Children* the central passion of every Southern white man is black hatred. Faced with the choice of uniting with Negro or dying by famine, the rednecks of *Uncle Tom’s Children* would rather join the mass protest than die of hunger. Wright passes, and concludes in a swab of rhetoric where
every practical question is solved by figures of speech. All the prose on the last two pages is bloated, throbbing with triumph at the expense of accuracy.

In “Fire and Cloud” Wright’s Marxist tendencies are reflected in his presenting images and symbols that stand for capitalism and other evils. In this story the American capitalist system with its glamorous exterior but cold and indifferent attitude to its starving population has been depicted through the image of a girl sitting behind the desk at the relief office. When Dan Taylor after being refused relief for his people is walking home in a depressed state he can still see that image in his mind’s eye;

Her arms had been round, slender, snow-white like cold marble, her hair had been the color of flowing gold and had glinted in the sunlight; her eyes had been wide and grey behind icily white spectacles. It seemed he could hear her saying in her dry, metallic voice: I’m sorry, Taylor. You’ll just have to do the best you can. Explain it to them, make them understand that we can’t do anything. Everybody’s hungry, and after all, it’s no harder on your people than it is on ours. Tell them they’ll just have to wait. . . (356).

In “Fire and Cloud” is another symbol for the capitalist exploiters, who thrive at the cost of their victims. Dan Taylor after getting beaten up and whipped wonders over the lot of his people: “How come they make us suffer us so?... Yit they bleed us! They fatten on us like leeches!”(393), Dan Taylor’s wounded and oppressed state comes out forcefully through the image of a small wounded bird that . . . wheeled past his eyes and fluttered dizzily in the starlight. He watched it veer and dip, and crash softly into a tree limb. It fell to the ground, flapping tiny wings blindly. Then the bird twittered in fright and sailed straight upward into starlight vanishing. He walked northward, not going
anywhere in particular, but walked northward because the bird had darted in that direction. (392)

The concept of militant and faithful sacrifice by urban workers is depicted better by Wright in “Bright and Morning” Star than any of his other stories. The theme of social conflict is intended to be subsidiary to that of class conflict. So strongly Wright himself feels that the story is more about Marxism than about Negro white relations. Wright progresses from the idea of organized Negro white protest to the specific idea of a society based on Marxist principles. Although the two chief characters Aunt Sue and her son Johnny-Boy of “Bright and Morning Star” are cruelly maimed and murdered, they die secure in the belief that the cause for which they had given up their lives will someday be realized.

The story is related in the third person from the point of view of an elderly Negro tenant farmer’s widow Aunt Sue whose two sons Sug and Johnny-Boy who are Communist Party organizers. As the story opens, Sue reminisces about the hardships she has undergone in her life and how her two sons have managed to convert her simple Christian beliefs of a heaven in the next world to a version of a Communist utopia on earth. In effect, the transition was not hard for her to make, since the principles underlying her old faith are the same as those of Communism. She discovers herself humming an old hymn, “Bright and Morning Star”, the star signalling the new era approaching with the Resurrection. Reva, Johnny-Boy’s white girl friend, calls on her and tells her that the sheriff and other white officials have learned of a secret Party meeting that is to be held the following evening. When Johnny-Boy returns that evening, Aunt Sue delivers Reva’s message and Johnny-Boy goes out in the rain to warn the other Party members. Shortly after Johnny-Boy’s departure, the sheriff and his men break into Aunt
Sue’s house and demand to know the whereabouts of her son. When she refuses to tell them, they beat her and leave.

She gave him up because she wanted them to know that they could not get what they wanted by bluffing and killing.

“There is gonna be a meetin,” said the sheriff.

“Is it?”

“Tha nigger son of yos is erroun here somewhere n we aim t find im,” said the sheriff. “Ef yuh tell us where he is n ef he talks, mabbe he’ll git off easy. But ef we hafta find im, we’ll kill im! . . .”

“He wont be the only nigger yuh ever killed,” she said again. (422)

Aunt Sue had trustingly supplied a list of local Party members to a white man, Booker, a new entrant into the Party ranks. Later from Reva she has discovered that Booker is not to be trusted, and Sue must expiate this error through real action as a symbolic gesture. Aunt Sue’s lack of sufficient motivation for her earlier maternal instincts to protect her son from the danger of the white sheriff and white vigilantes are later transformed into a desire to assist the cause of the organization in which her sons so fearlessly believe. Somehow her actions at the end of the story, when she shoots Booker at the scene of her son Johnny-boy’s torture, are bound up in her immediate reactions to the extortion attempt by the sheriff and his men.

The story is remarkable for the intense religious fervour that informs Sue’s character. Like the Reverend Taylor of “Fire and Cloud” she conceives her mission in Biblical apocalyptic terms, but here the imagery is of a higher order, the metaphors sustained in a mounting tension until an ultimate sublimity is reached that transports her suffering into a mystical unity. As she lies dying, “Focused and pointed she was, buried
in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength; and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies” (441).

It reinforces the idea that only a politically aware black people can combat the whites, yet it emphasizes the image of a single individual sacrificing her life for the good of black people and the Communist party. Wright himself wrote in a letter prefaced to a reprint edition by International Publishers that, it was not his story, it belongs to the workers. He would never have written it unless he had felt that he had a workers audience to read it. Inspite of this caveat, the scenes of whites torturing Aunt Sue and her son Johnny-Boy are devastating, almost as shocking as the lynching of Bobo in “Big Boy Leaves Home”.

In any event, although in “Bright and Morning Star” scenes of sadistic white cruelties against Negroes are drawn in vivid and harsh details and the conclusion pictures, the violence of race against race, the emphasis is upon the path to dignity and Marxist salvation taken by Aunt Sue. She must take all motherly precautions to save Johnny Boy from the similar fate of her elder son, Sug. She fears that Johnny-Boy’s association with, and, activities for, the Party will lead him also to jail or even to death. Thus she is initially created by Wright as a symbol of those who would interfere with the work of the Party out of selfish emotional motivations. Rather it emerges from both a motherly protective instinct and her reactions to the white deputies who rough handedly try to extort information from her concerning the whereabouts of her son Johnny-Boy.

Although Sue’s conversation to support the Party is influenced by many elements, and certainly does not stem from a knowledge of and belief in the Marxist dialectic, it is a process related to the world’s pride and freedom; it becomes a form of self respect and
dignity that Wright attempts to extend far beyond the patterns of a mother and son relationship. Thus when Sue sees Johnny Boy undergoing severe physical tortures and yet, out of his militant loyalty to the Party, not revealing any of its plans and secrets, she does not interfere with the brutal proceedings. She instead awaits Booker’s appearance. He enters and she shoots him. Of course, Sue has committed a wilful act of suicide, but she has also performed the dramatic, symbolic gesture that both expiates an error and creates a unity between her maternal identification with Johnny-Boy and her present enlistment in the services of the Party.

Like the other pieces in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Bright and Morning Star” celebrates southern Negro folk whose faith, courage, and endurance Wright regarded as easily translatable, in terms of constructive social action, with the new dispensation of Communism. Yet Wright’s Negroes achieve their sense of recognition through the course of their Negro experiences, and not through any inculcation of communist ideals.

As has been already shown, Taylor and Sue arrive at their decisions as a result of their peculiar Negro folk mysticism or, perhaps, as Wright would have it, a native Negro revolutionism. Even Aunt Sue is a Negro first, before she is a communist. Although she presumably possesses maternal feelings toward the white girl Reva who loves her son, she has an instinctive distrust of whites. She tells her son that the Judas among them must be a white man, and although he chides her for being a black chauvinist, her Negro instincts prove truer than his communist training. Her suspicions of Booker, a new entrant into the Party ranks proved correct by Reva’s confirmation that Booker is not to be trusted. Hence, Wright’s militant Negroes, despite their protestations to the contrary, often sound more like Black Nationalism than communists internationalists.
Uncle Tom's Children convey an emotional power that has not been diminished by the passage of time or the alteration of the social conditions they address. It shows the influence of literary realism and naturalism. Wright's prose is direct and graphic. His effective use of dialect and black folk culture increase the realism of his stories. The characters in Uncle Tom's Children, struggle against an environment of racial animosity that pushes them toward savagery. Through their efforts to resist this process, Wright’s black protagonists attain varying degrees of self-awareness at the cost of physical and mental suffering. There is a small variety of mood in these stories. In every case the end is despair and bitterness. But there is no thought of submission. These Negroes do not know their place. They are bewildered but not broken in their spirits. They can be murdered but, but they cannot be made to acquiesce.

Ironically, some achieve a momentary vision of freedom and a better understanding of themselves only at the point of death. Their determination despite overwhelming opposition and terrible suffering makes them tragically doomed heroes. The arrangement of the stories presents the reader with a rough progression of increasing sophistication, as characters achieve more advanced levels of knowledge of themselves and move toward collective solutions to their social problems.

Thus Richard Wright, presents the plot of “Fire and Cloud” in Uncle Tom’s Children, and portrays Mr. Dalton in Native Son, earnestly following the tradition of Proletarian Realism. In Fire and Cloud, Dan Taylor, the preacher puts all his faith in the masses and joins the successful demonstration compromising the black and white hungry people.

Themes of oppression and victimization appear in Down by the Riverside and Native Son. For example, Mann has heard that the white folks are threatening to conscript
all Negros they can lay their hands on, to pile sand and cement bags on the levee. In times like these, they will shoot down a black like a dog and will think nothing of it. How Negroes are oppressed and victimized for no faults of theirs has been revealed in *Native Son*, when Bigger Thomas is in flight, a newspaper reports that several hundred Negro employees had been dismissed from jobs because of Bigger’s case.

Unfortunately, the people who surround Bigger fail to see him adequately on either level. Bigger’s mother, the Daltons and the outside world are altogether blind to the personal and private life that forms the basis for Bigger’s individuality, and these people also distort their view on him with stereotypes rooted in their own emotional needs. Thus, Mr. Dalton, Mr. Britten the private investigator perceives him as a “boy” (143) he can help so as to relieve his own guilt over being a slumlord. Max sees Bigger as a part of a social predicament. He can understand only Bigger within the limits of the political ideology he needs to believe in. Mary Dalton envisions Bigger as a black boy, who need to rebel against a social system that has given her the privileges but left her with gnawing sense of guilt and boredom.

Many characters make Bigger into a symbol but not the meaningful and prophetic symbol as Wright described in “How Bigger was Born”. Instead of envisioning Bigger as a modern everyman who is victimized by the depersonalized social environment that threatens the humanity of all people, they see him as a dark embodiment of otherness that provokes their fear and hostility. Thus Buckley the police man characterizes Bigger as a “black mad dog” (374) and an “infernal monster” (376) who threaten to destroy civilization. The newspapers label Bigger an “ape” (260), and the white mob congregated outside Bigger’s jail cell perceive him as “a figment of the black world which they feared” (257). Bigger’s sometimes brutal behaviour is triggered by a pathological social
environment that pushes him beyond his powers of control and understanding. Even while engaged in outward behaviour that may be described as monstrous, Bigger is always portrayed in complex human terms by Wright. He goes to great lengths never to let one forget Bigger's very human inward life.

Murder is a recapitulation of suffering. Bigger hides in empty houses the way Big Boy hid in empty kilns. Bigger wants to know the right way to behave when he is captured, “the right way being the way that would enable him to die without shame” as in *Uncle Tom’s Children* Brother Mann and especially Silas in “Long Black Song” and the Negro mother in “Bright and Morning Star” wanted to die. In this sense *Native Son* becomes a way of retrieving the pain of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, hurting that pain into the white community.

The concept of equality of human beings is an important aspect of Communism. In the context of American communists it is the poor blacks and poor whites who are working side by side and it also means that they are getting united to fight for their rights. Besides this, it also means friendly relations among blacks and whites. Richard Wright focuses on these aspects of equality in *Fire and Cloud*, *Bright and Morning Star* and *Native Son*. In *Native Son*, one of the angriest black novels of the time depicting its protagonist at his most defiant self, it is a white communist, Jan Erlone whose friendly gesture brings about a change in Bigger’s attitude. Jan Erlone has rightly been credited with successfully passing the test of the Communists inter racial unity when he forgives Bigger even for murdering his sweet heart Mary Dalton.

“Big Boy Leaves Home” sets the pitch for *Uncle Tom’s Children* as a whole. It strikes the major chord, establishes the energies and symbols and directions that will be elaborated in all the subsequent stories. The great pond at the beginning and the torrential
rains will appear again in the flood in “Down by the Riverside”. The sexual encounter between white and black recurs in “Long Black Song.” And the burning of the black boy, Bobo, is an explosion of flame that will burst up again both on Silas’s shack and on the “ring of fire” (387) that Dan Taylor feels walking home. Big Boy’s dream of the newspaper headlines, “NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED” (266) and “TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED,” (266) prefigure Silas’s last stand.

Despite the symbolic overtones of rebirth in this passage, the rest of the book and certainly all of Native Son assert that fleeing to Chicago is not the answer to the Southern black man’s oppression. It is merely a form of sleeping. Big Boy is, in fact, a younger Bigger Thomas in several ways like Bigger, he is the leader of a gang, which he dominates physically, and he stumbles inadvertently into violence because of a white woman and then seeks refuge in “Flight”. Also, Big Boy’s reflexes are every bit as controlled by “Fear” as is Bigger’s. The conclusion, then, that Chicago will prove to be no more of an answer for Big Boy than it is for Bigger Thomas seems inevitable.

Sarah’s downfall is not a rape but a complicated emotional experience that she cannot understand, and Silas’s response is no conventional indignation at a sexual affront but hopeless resentment of the ultimate invasion of his personal life. Taylor becomes the focal point of innumerable forces in his community; white fear, white hatred, white tyranny, black desperation, black timidity, black courage. There is a thematic progression in these stories, each of which deals with the Negro’s struggle for survival and freedom. The pathos of the story lies in the precariousness of the lives of the Negro community.

Only Wright’s southern tales contain heroic blacks: Reverend Taylor in “Fire and Cloud,” Aunt Sue in “Bright and Morning Star,” Brother Mann in “Down by the
Riverside” who sacrifice for their family and community. The passionate, blood stained land inspires some of Wright’s characters in a way the North cannot. Thus, in “Fire and Cloud,” the Reverend Taylor, depressed by the sufferings of his starving congregation, is comforted by memories of a better time when he “had walked behind his plow, between the broad green earth and a blue sweep of sunlit sky the earth was his and he was the earth’s” (132). On such land “he had first taken . . . a wife . . . his first born son growing . . . to a strong, upright manhood” (130). The soil had nourished Taylor, enabling him to preach, and later to challenge the town’s white authorities. A close relationship with nature had strengthened his ties with his fellow men.

While Wright’s northern rebels are self centred and devious, some of his southern characters courageously defend their loved ones. In “Bright and Morning Star” Aunt Sue is willing to sacrifice her life to protect her Communist comrades and to avenge her son. A monumental earth mother, she envelopes her sons in “the charm and magic of her vision” (184), and inspires admiration in the white girl Reva who loves her son. Nobly rendered, Sue’s death contrasts with that of Bigger and Cross who die alone and frightened. Aunt Sue, however, is killed with her son on southern soil and dies secure in the knowledge that she has saved others. “Buried in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength, she does not feel her flesh growing cold” (215) as Cross does. Instead her body blends with the “rich black earth” (181) which fortified her; she becomes like the North Star, a guiding light for others.

In “Down by the Riverside” nature and white men conspire to destroy Brother Mann, who struggles valiantly to survive and to save his family. Love for his farm keeps him from leaving during a flood; love for his family makes him battle the raging waters and the white authorities. Although he loses, Mann exhibits the same bravery as Aunt Sue,
and like her defies the whites and dies on the land, “his face buried in the wet, blurred green” (102), his body returned to the earth.

Wright submitted “Big Boy Leaves Home” and three other stories he had written in Chicago. The stories were united by their common subject, the violence of racist terror, and by the thematic development of collective response to that terror manifested in the progression from Big Boy’s flight in the first story to the Reverend Taylor’s triumph and Aunt Sue’s sacrifice.

Wright has written *Uncle Tom’s Children* within black experience telling truths, about the South. The use of dialect in the stories was masterful, the narrative style, found that the pace and descriptions dovetailed perfectly, the reader could explicitly identify a political purpose in this volume, *Uncle Tom’s Children* is a cry for immediate anti-lynching legislation as well as an encouragement of unity among black and white workers.

*Native Son* is an extension of what Wright began in *Uncle Tom's Children*, and it is not difficult to imagine Bigger Thomas as a direct descendent of Big Boy from “Big Boy Leaves Home”. The Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* can be read as a continuation of the character Big Boy, a connection that is implied by their names. In this sense, *Native Son* extends the process of cruel discovery that begins in “Big Boy Leaves Home”, and it also provides sociological documentation for a character like Bigger.

In *Native Son* Wright shifted his focus to the problems of urban blacks in the North, but his picture of a two-tiered society based on racial discrimination and the protection of property rights remained the same. Although the racist thugs of *Uncle Tom’s Children* are replaced by avaricious landlords, irresponsible journalists, and brutal police in *Native Son*, the slums of South Side Chicago, like the rural South portrayed in *Uncle
*Tom's Children*, is a place in which the dreams of success are available to all but the means to achieve them are restricted to a few.

The central theme of *Native Son* is the central theme of most black American writing, the doubleness of black existence in the United States. In particular the novel explores the stifling limitations imposed on blacks. Bigger expresses this sense of exclusion as he and his buddies stand idly on a street corner watching a plane fly overhead: “They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can’t. It's just like living in jail” (22). As in *Uncle Tom's Children*, the central movement of *Native Son* is toward the development of self-awareness, Bigger's development is perverted by environmental pressures that make him feel that violence is his only way to self-realization.

As an outsider forced to create his own values, Bigger simply continues the pattern of his life since he has never really been a part of this world. He has been isolated from whites because of his colour and alienated from blacks because of his rebellious nature. His violence is regarded as dangerous by the black community who are eager to continue accommodating the whites. It is therefore possible to read the book both as an indictment of racism and as exploration into the nature of man. It poses an answer to the question asked in one of Langston Hughes’ poems, “What happens to a dream deferred?” (142) According to Wright, it explodes. Furthermore, since Wright saw the black man as the metaphor for modern man, he equates Bigger’s quest for identity with that of all men. To quote Wright: “The voice of the American Negro is rapidly becoming the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world today” (143). But clearly it was of considerable significance to Wright that his hero be seen first as a black and then as a man.