CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the Introduction, while most of the earlier Afro-American novels depicted the Negro as a simple, satisfied, humble and grateful being—an Uncle Tom in first degree—more recent novels reject this image. The Negro protagonist is not only a victim but also a rebel. As Richard Wright himself says, "If you act at all, it is either to flee or to kill; you are either a victim or a rebel."^ Evelyn Gross Avery points out, "The writer most frequently credited with making the Negro 'visible' is Richard Wright ... Offering historical and sociological, as well as psychological insights into the American character, Wright examines the rebel, his behaviour and motivations, his background. Products of a lower-class black environment, Wright's rebels are well acquainted with hunger, disease, poverty."


2. Evelyn Gross Avery, Rebels and Victims, p.4.
Richard Wright's protagonists are lonely, alienated individuals. They seek affirmation in action. Passion, impulsiveness, and violence characterize many of Wright's protagonists. For instance, fire which symbolizes violence, plays a major role in Wright's novels. In *The Long Dream*, the fire accident that destroys the "Grove" decides Fish's destiny. In *Native Son*, the burning furnace has literal as well as symbolic significance. It not only helps Bigger burn up Mary's body but it also represents Bigger's inner rage. In *The Outsider*, when the train in which Cross is travelling is involved in an accident, Cross comes out of the train and away from the fire (caused by electric short-circuit) a new man. Another characteristic of Wright's novels is a detailed gory description of animal/human slaughter.

In *The Long Dream*, Fish, on his way home from the children's court, comes across a badly injured dog. He kills the dog, thinking that it is better for the dog to die than to bear the pain. *Native Son* begins with Bigger artistically destroying a rat. Cross Damon in *The Outsider* has to smash the head of a co-passenger in order to come out of the compartment in the train.
involved in an accident. It can be said that by destroying an animal or human being, Wright's characters can express their anger safely against the enemy. Another characteristic of Wright's protagonists is that they are driven by explosive emotion and seek escape in alcohol, sex and brutal encounters. Fish in *The Long Dream* feels happy when he is in the company of his mistress, Gladys. In the case of Bigger, it is alcohol, his girl friend, Bessie, and his encounter with his friends that make him forget his misery at least for a short period. And in the case of Cross alcohol and sex help him escape into his own world. The absence of freedom provokes Wright's protagonists to attack members of their own family and friends, sometimes in self-defense and sometimes in anger and hatred. In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas attacks his friend Gus in order to cover up his own fear of whites. In *The Outsider*, Cross shocks his wife by hitting her on the face. He also kills his friend Joe Thomas so that his identity is not revealed. Fish, in *The Long Dream*, shows similar tendencies when he visits the local farm fair along with his friends. They take part in a
"Hit the Nigger Head" contest. What they do is bombarding their own image. In another episode they assault a Negro boy, Aggie. It is the hatred of his own people and their submissive nature that forces him to escape to France. But Bigger and Cross choose the second alternative, violent rebellion, in order to replace self-contempt with self-respect. Referring to the two murders that Bigger commits, Evelyn G. Avery says, "Since white America has stunted his intellectual and emotional development, he responds in kind, destroying his victims' brains, the potential source of such growth." In most of Wright's novels, whites are cast as villains but there are a few white characters who are represented sympathetically. In *Native Son* Mr. Max and Jan Erlene try to save Bigger, and in *The Outsider* Cross becomes involved with Eva and Ely Houston, the District Attorney; but all interracial relationships fail.

In black fiction, we find that traditional family life is affected by racism. In most of Wright's novels only mother is present to provide a secure home.

for her children. Only in *The Long Dream* do we find the father of the protagonist taking interest in his son's future. But race weakens Tyrone's patriarchal position. He compromises his dignity in order to enhance his fortune and safeguard his son. Thus, he earns Fish's gratitude but loses his respect, because he exploits other blacks and allows whites to insult him. Fish does not have any place for his mother in his heart. Even when Fish comes to know that his father has extra-marital relationships, he does not seem to show any sympathy towards his mother. Maybe this lack of sympathy is the reason for Fish not taking seriously the fact that his mother marries Jim soon after Tyrone Tucker's death. But one factor that redeems him is his resolution to see that Cantley, who encouraged his father's illegal business, is punished because Cantley was responsible for his father's death. In *Native Son*, Bigger does not show any love for his mother and sister. Love, respect, and trust have no place in the bleak environment. We do not know anything about Bigger's father. It is his mother who manages the family. Though Wright sympathizes
with her, we can notice that he defends Biggar's rebellion against her as he resists her attempt to make him into an Uncle Tom. In *The Outsider*, Cress is brought up by his mother, an unhappy lonely woman who seeks refuge in religion after her husband deserted her and the church. Cress is unhappy with his mother because he thinks that his mother was responsible for the view of life that he developed:

He was too close to her and too far from her; much too warm toward her and much too cold. If only he understood her less! But he was cut off from that; he was anchored in a knowledge that offended him. And this image of his mother's incestuously tinged longings would linger with him for days and he could curse her for it, and finally he would curse himself for living in a crazy world that he could not set right. (p.21)

Of the protagonists of the three novels discussed, only Cress is married but he fails to be a good husband. Not only does he fail in his duties as a husband but he also allows himself to be exploited by his wife, Gladys, because he becomes a prey to the demands of his mistress, Dot.

Another important point to be observed is that the protagonists' hatred of the Christian religion is
probably because of the great interest their mothers showed in religious matters. Wright himself regards Christianity as "a negative force, fostering self-hatred and shame and depriving blacks of their cultural inheritance." In "Our strange Birth," Wright says,

Captivity under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families ..., and destroyed our very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings ... They extended our Christian salvation to us without granting the boon of freedom.

Wright thinks, as do his protagonists, that Negro religion is similar to white repression. Both foster unwarranted shame. Church emphasis on original sin reinforces guilt about skin color. Whites equate black with evil and the Church stresses man's innate nakedness. They convince Negroes of their inferiority, and most of Wright's protagonists reject the Church. They cannot reconcile Christ's saintly crucifixion with the K.K.K.'s fiery cross. Christianity, which their submissive mothers follow strictly, may prolong their

4. Evelyn G. Avery, Rebels and Victims, p.32.
5. Quoted in Evelyn G. Avery, Rebels and Victims, p.30
lives, but the protagonists rebel because they do not want to pay the price—emasculaton and the death of spirit. To quote Evelyn G. Avery, "Groveling before whites is reprehensible but may be necessary; groveling before God is contemptible .... they cannot believe in their mothers' insatiable God who demands complete obedience and sacrifice of all earthly pleasures. Such a God, Wright believed, and worsened the Negroes' plight, depriving them of dignity and initiative. Such a God turned some against mothers." They consider God an alien, repressive force. In The Long Drown, Fishbelly denies the God that her mother worships. His hatred of the Church increases when he listens to the dramatic funeral oration of Reverend Ragland. In Native Son, Bigger denies his mother's religion in order to feel manly. When she visits him in prison and begs him to pray for their heavenly reunion, Bigger feels nauseated. As he does not want to hurt his mother's feelings, he joins his family in praying, but "Bigger held his

face stiff, hating them and himself, feeling the white people along the wall watching. His mother mumbled a prayer, to which the preacher chanted" (p.279). Though he wears the cross given by Reverend Hammond, Bigger is shocked when he sees the K.K.K.'s flaming cross. When he reaches his cell, he snatches it from his throat and throws it away. In The Outsider, Cross hates his mother's God who he thinks is "an awful face shaped in the form of a huge and crushing NO" (p.10). Another religion, a secular religion, that promises blacks brotherhood is Communism. Though in The Long Dream there is only a passing reference to "Reds," in the other two novels—Native Son and The Outsider—we are given a detailed account of how the protagonists look at Communism. In Native Son, when Jan mentions Communism to Bigger, he (Jan) does not realise that "political pitty is more offensive to a Negro than color prejudice." 7 The protagonist's views on the Communist party are presented in detail in The Outsider. Cross hates the secular religion as much as he hates Christianity. He rejects Communism

because he thinks that though it offers him equality, it demands complete surrender.

Society as described in Wright's novels is divided into two major subgroups - one black and the other white. The white society has complete dominance over the black society. The moral, social, economic, and political laws which govern the individuals in these two worlds are codified by the white society and are transmitted to the black world more through physical or social interaction than through any set of written codes. The social, economic, and political practices of segregation foster demeaning, destructive psychological attitudes that characterize the personalities of both the black and the white characters in Wright's novels. As Frantz Fanon says, "(even) A normal Negre child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world." 8 We notice that both in The Long Dream and in Native Son, the protagonists' destinies are determined when once they come into contact with the whites.

8. Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, p.143.
As already mentioned, of all the taboos, the sexual taboo is the worst. While white men freely exploit Negro women, black men can be castrated for even looking at white women. White women often act as lynch-bait and lure Negroes to their deaths. In The Long Dream, Fish and his friends are terrified when a white woman tries to seduce them. Chris, a black youth, is caught with a white prostitute and is murdered. His body is a reminder that death awaits black men who violate the line the whites have drawn. Towards the end of the novel, the police frame Fish on charges of raping a white lady. Such an atmosphere makes men incapable of enjoying affectionate and stable relations with women. In Native Son, Bigger treats Bessie only as an object that he can manipulate for his pleasure and power.

... Love grows from stable relationships, shared experience, loyalty, devotion, trust. Neither Bigger nor Bessie had any of these... There was no common vision binding their hearts together; there was common hope steering their feet in a common path. Even though they were intimately together, they were confoundingly alone. (p.363)

In The Outsider, Cross Damon sees in Gladys and Dot only "woman as body of woman."
In conclusion, we may say that most of Wright's protagonists feel restless under the social and religious taboos. When they try to cross the line of demarcation, they face the wrath of the whites. But the happiness they get when they enter the ever tempting white world and challenge white superiority is greater than the happiness they are supposed to get out of a Jim Crow life.