Chapter V

Lawd Today! A Lewd Shriek
Lawd Today!, centering not on the theme of Negro oppression but on the very quality of life in urban America, gives a vivid account of twenty-four hours in the life of a Negro postal worker in Chicago, Jake Jackson, a frustrated, hopeless no-good. It is an expression of Wright's vision of life in the Chicago he knew.¹ It depicts the brutalization of black life in the urban North. Some critics, like Nick Aaron Ford, labelled it as a dull and unimaginative novel, set during the depression era when Franklin Roosevelt was the President. William Burrison in his essay, “Lawd Today: Wright's Tricky Apprenticeship” quotes Ford:

Unlike Wright’s known work, Lawd Today! contains practically every offensive Negro stereotype known to American literature. Furthermore, it is the first book under Wright’s name that has not made the white man or the white man’s society the predominant villain.²

This was Wright’s first novel but was published posthumously in 1963. It is different from his popular, radical fiction with which flight, violence, and oppression are synonymous. The novel is uncharacteristic of Wright’s writings. Speaking of Wright, Baldwin observes, “Today’s racial
manifestoes are being written very differently." With Wright, the pain of being a Negro is basically economic—its site is mainly in the pocket. However, Jake’s fantasies reveal his longing for Negro nationalism and the united African power. Jake Jackson is a Negro anti-hero who refuses to reject the environment that incapacitates him:

Jake is not only disagreeable; his sense of oppression stems principally from what Farrell has called "spiritual poverty" rather than from overt racial and social causes. In other words Wright portrays a soul already corrupted rather than a Negro struggling manfully to maintain his integrity against a hostile, threatening environment. It is of course implicit in the whole of Lawd Today that Jake’s sickness is environmentally induced, that the environment is itself sick, immature, and devious, but there is scarcely ever any explicit reference to capitalist exploitation.

The novel, comprising three sections, "Common Place," "Squirrel Cage," and "Rats' Alley," and each section covering approximately eight hours in his day, encompasses the dreariness in the life of Jake Jackson. The first section of the
novel, in about 108 pages, opening with Jake's awakening with a quite disturbing dream in the morning, covers his activities from the moment he gets up to the time he goes to work in the afternoon. He sees in his dream somebody is calling him up and he is struggling hard to climb up the endless steps.

This dream reveals not only Jake's nature but also the futility of his determinations. It centers on the theme of the novel, "the meaninglessness, the emptiness, and the absurdity of Jake's life":

It was hard work, climbing steps like these. He panted and the calves of his legs ached. He stopped and looked to see if he could tell where the steps ended, but there were just steps and steps and steps. Shucks, they needn't be in such a helluva hurry, he thought as he stretched his legs and covered three and four steps at a time. Then, suddenly, the steps seemed funny, like a great big round barrel rolling or a long log spinning in water and he was on top treading for all he was worth and that voice was still calling. (5)
He curses his wife Lil for leaving the door open and also turning on the old radio very early that woke him up. It is February 12, the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. Jake's monotonous life attaches no significance to Lincoln's birthday. All that he feels ---"old Abe Lincoln sure was a smart man"---has an ironic implication. He finds the magazine, Unity, a magazine devoted to Christian Healing, in Lil's bed and hurls it across the room. He is angry with Lil, ambles to the bathroom, and feels that he should have a shave and haircut. He hears Lil talking to the milkman in the kitchen and listens to it with his ear to the bathroom door, growing more suspicious of an affair between them. This is the initiation for his starting all that again, beating up his wife mercilessly.

Sexual frustration is also considered the central theme of the novel. This is the result of Lil's incapacity for sexual relations with Jake. The exigency of sex influences Jake and he desires to gratify his masculinity by means of ogling at passing women, lasciviously gazing at pornographic photographs, sharing jokes with his friends on sex, and visiting brothels. Further, his dream can also be interpreted in terms of Freudian implication, "Steep inclinations, ladders, and stairs, and going up or down them, are symbolic representations of the sexual
It seems Jake's life is determined by biological as well as socioeconomic urges. However, Jake's frustration is personal rather than the result of racial and economic discrimination:

It must be conceded, however, that Wright is not successful in relating Jake's sexual frustration to the economic and social implications of his existence. The very difficult rapprochement of Freud and Marx is not achieved in *Lawd Today.*

Lil pleads her innocence but it is of no avail. Painfully, she tries to convince Jake that she said no more to that milkman than she does to Mrs. Thomas, their neighbour. A reply to the usual greeting and an order for cream for the next day form the core of conversation with the milkman but Jake accuses her of turning the radio on so that he can not hear the conversation. Jake, filled with unwarranted hatred and revenge, and Lil, with piety and helplessness, go on with their arguments and counterarguments. Jake is reminded of clearing dues to the quack doctor, who in collaboration with Jake persuaded Lil to undergo an abortion in the larger interest of her health. The deterioration of her physical health at the hands of a quack doctor is compounded by her psychological distress when she realizes the deception.
Jake resolutely refuses to clear the dues and Lil touches his sore spot, his government job. Her complaint against him that he has stopped extending support to her will throw him out of work. He knows that twice in the past she complained and one more time will put an end to him. This feeling precipitates into his hatred of their marriage. He considers her the source of his unhappiness and forces her to leave the house but she denies. He slaps her and kicks in her side. He slaps her so hard that his fingers feel cold. Lil as a mute victim falls to her knees and sobs.

Jake feels Lil is ruining him, taking every ounce of joy out of his life. She has piled up big doctor's bill and it seems the payment is beyond his means. Compounding his owes, she has developed a tumour. He owes many debts and does not know which should be cleared first. He is a slave to the bad economic system:

If Lil goes and haves that operation it'll put me almost a thousand dollars in debt to that doctor. And that ain't counting all the other bills I owe, neither. And if I don't pay 'em they'll kick me off my job. . . . A wave of self-pity swept through him. What to hell? What in the world can a man do? I'm just like a slave. . . . If he went to a loan bank and borrowed a thousand
dollars, how long would it take him to pay it back? . .  
. . Sixteen years! Good Gawd! (19-20)

Though Jake misbehaves with Lil, he is afraid of her in 
anticipation of the possible risk of losing the job on her 
complaint. He wants to go for a loan to Jones and borrow 
enough to tide over the situation. However, he does not want to 
pay the quack the same day as he has already promised his 
friends Al, Bob, and Slim that he will stand the treats that night. 
He prefers merrymaking in the company of his friends to clearing 
the dues of the doctor and making his wife happy as he thinks 
that she is guilty of throwing him into all this mess. At the 
thought of his wife and her Unity books, he feels enraged and his 
wounded vanity seeks solace in criticizing and mocking at her 
faith and her God:

And what to hell! She oughtn't be so damned worried, 
nohow. Ain't she always reading Unity books? Ain't 
she always talking about how she trusts Gawd? Yeah, 
she ought to ask Gawd to get rid of that tumor for 
her. His face softened. Out of the soil of his anger an 
idea bloomed. The very next time she tells me about 
that damned tumor I'll tell her to let Unity take care
of it. Let hem bastards send up a silent prayer! Give her a dose of her own sweet medicine! (20)

After the bath, he takes up the Herculean task of combing his recalcitrant hair. Wright's keen eye for minute details and the superb craftsmanship in using the technique of description are intense. The use of mock epic terms is noteworthy. Metaphorically, his hair is his foe and the strategies he adopts are construed as the part of waging a war against a potent enemy. His first bombardment is with water and he dampens his hair until rivulets stream down his neck:

Then, seizing his comb like a colt .45, he tried to force an opening through enemy lines. The battle waxed furious. The comb suffered heavy losses, and fell back slowly. One by one teeth snapped until they littered bathmat and washbowl. Mangled and broken things they lay there, brave soldiers fallen in action, many of them clutched in the death grip of enemy hairs. After three minutes of attack the strands abandoned their trenches and retreated disorderly. (24)
Jake's efforts to look less Negroid by removing the kinks from his hair seem to suggest that he denies his identity that he is a Negro. This has a bearing on his frustration that his inability to achieve the determined goals is compounded by the bare fact that he is a Negro. His self-denial leads to the denial of his experiences as a Negro as well. He looks forward to overcompensating the shame of blackness by other means.

Jake's lavish and comfortable lifestyle can be seen when he stands before the ten suits hanging in his closet and his decisiveness in the selection of the suit for that particular day is followed by his comments on the appropriateness of each suit. The ten new suits are his pride and activate his sense of achievement. Before choosing the green suit, he rejects six others, three at a time. He is in such a predicament that he can not afford to spend so much on his dress-care, a clear indication that he is very callous and victimized by the economic insensibility.

Later, he goes on to read the paper and reacts to each of the headlines. When he reads, "HITLER CALLS ON WORLD TO SMASH JEWS," he feels that the Americans should get up from their slumber and send all the foreigners back as the country is flooded with "too many Jews, Dagos, Hunkies, and
Mexicans' (32). Further, he feels that the coloured people will be much better if these rascals are kept out. This is Jake's sharing in a characteristic touch of American xenophobia. He reads, "EINSTEIN SAYS SPACE BENDS" and says that Einstein is a Jew and is trying to fool everybody, just saying things to get his name in the papers. Next headline that "COMMUNISTS RIOT IN STREETS OF NEW YORK" provokes his hatred for the Communists.

This is a prelude to Wright's disappointment with the Party and his ultimate perfidy. He says through Jake that the Communists do not know what they want. They are the craziest guys and they go around fooling the people. He regards America as the freest, happiest nation on earth and considers Reds people who are critical of his native land. If these Communists come to power, they will line up the people and shoot them down whosoever do not oblige them. In Roosia (Russia) where they are in power, people are dying of starvation and they want Americans to get them in the same fix.

This is contradicted by Lil that in America also folks are starving. He calls her a Red. This is the most casual mention of Communism or Communists in the novel, though the time of the story dates back to 1935 or 1936 in the Chicago Negro ghetto,
when a considerable Communist organizational activity supposedly took place in the South. Jake is a potent “anti-Red” and it seems that he has faith in the capitalist system. Granville Hicks observes:

What interests me is that, although Wright was a Communist sympathizer and very possibly a member of the Communist Party when he wrote the novel, he did not make it a piece of direct Communist propaganda. Jake is no Communist; on the contrary, he denounces and ridicules the only Communist who appears in the novel. Nor does Wright portray Jake simply as a victim of the capitalist system. He is a victim, to be sure; but of a great complex of forces. Whatever Wright’s political opinions may have been his vision as a creative artist went far beyond them. 7

Jake reads multi-coloured circulars and advertisement throwaways from the mailbox. He goes to the Black Gold Policy Wheel and loses money in number game that makes him think that everything has been going wrong since morning. He remembers Lil and her bad mouth. He thinks of Lil talking to the milkman and immediately rushes back home, instigated by the suspicion of a possible affair between them. He is the victim of
the suspicion of infidelity. He creeps softly to the glass panel of his kitchen door and peeps in only to find Lil sitting as he left her. A copy of Unity is spread at her elbow. He comes back onto the street feeling “a haunting and hungering sense of incompleteness” (51).

He sees many flamboyant posters while loitering before the movie house. He is captivated by Hollywood notion of sex, heroism, and adventure. Later, he goes to Doc Higgins’ Tonsorial Palace. He confides in Doc his predicament and beseeches him to help him wriggle out of the situation by fixing up for him. This bears testimony to the prevailing corrupt system. During his conversation, Jake says:

Niggers is just like a bunch of crawfish in a bucket. When one of ‘em gets smart and tries to climb out of the bucket, the others’ll grab hold of ‘im and pull ‘em back . . . (60-61)

You know, I always said that we colored folks ought to stick with the rich white folks . . .

That’s the only way we’ll ever get anywhere.

“Ain’t that what old Booker Washington said? Cooperate and get along? (64)
Similar approach is seen in *The Long Dream* with Tyree Tucker and also with Fishbelly. Later, Jake in the company of Al, Bob, and Slim, smokes, drinks, plays cards, and enjoys himself in cracking jokes:

Bob (Robert Madison), Al (Albert Johnson), and Slim (Nathan Williams) are, in effect, his only friends, although the quality of Jake's friendship, in particular, is questionable. He all but rams whiskey down Bob’s throat, despite Bob’s repeated protests as to the effect such fluid would have on his inflammatory condition. Despite Al's proneness to high blood pressure and heart disease, Jake envies him his zest, good cheer, and National Guard membership. And Slim’s tubercular coughing frightens and disgusts him far more than it fills him with sympathy. Clearly, these three cannot save such a friend as Jake from this unlucky day.\(^8\)

He watches a Negro parade go by and visualizes the possible emergence of black power in the form of an African empire:

> Sweet hearts, the script has changed . . .
And with it the stage directions which advise
Lowered voices, genteel asides,
And the white hand slowly turning the dark page.9

This mood is contrasted with the dreary and monotonous
night shift at the Chicago main Post Office that Jake and his
friends are going to have. The nature of his work seems to affect
the personality and stance of Jake. In this there seems to be an
autobiographical element. Albert Halper, a proletarian novelist
from Chicago, said that before the publication of Native Son
Wright had written an unpublished novel “about the Chicago
Post Office where he had been employed as a night-shift
tsorter.”10

Part Two of the novel, “Squirrel Cage,” has an epigraph
taken from Waldo Frank’s “Our America”:

. . . Now, when you study these long, rigid rows of
desiccated men and women, you feel that you are in
the presence of some form of life that has hardened
but not grown, and over which the world has passed .
. . (113)

It accounts for the detailed description of the disdained
work-culture in the Post Office. There is an obvious suggestion
in the book that Jake is indisputably influenced and patronized by the work culture of his place. Jake appears before the Board and tries his best to convince Mister Swanson that his wife has been acting queer for about three months. He denies the accusation that he has kicked her.

Swallowing his shame in the presence of Howard, Jake pleads desperately:

Mister Swanson, I'm a black man. You can see my skin. I loves my race. I'm proud to be black. I wouldn't do nothing on earth to drag my race down. I ain't the kind of a man what would beat his wife and stand here before you white gentlemens... (125)

When the Board is about to turn down Jake's plea, Swanson receives a phone call from his politically influential barber. Doc's role shows that corruption is an integral part of the white society and saves Jake and his job. This "fix" would cost Jake seventy-five dollars.

There is a reference to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) in this section of the novel when Jake is told that the guys in Washington are planning to send a commission down to investigate how the
coloured clerks work. It is a general belief that the black clerks are inferior to the whites in work. Jake feels the eyes of the white inspector on him from one end and the eyes of the white women on him from behind. A sense of outrage sweeps through him:

They’s looking at us like we was monkeys in a zoo! A phrase he had heard an old Negro preacher say down South in his youth welled up in his consciousness, ringing in his ears like a bell. Lawd, if I had my way I’d tear this building down! If only there was something he could do to pay the white folks back for all they had ever done! Even if he lost his own life in doing so! But what could he do? He felt the loneliness of his black skin. (143)

Jake goes out of the Mailing Division during lunch hour and gets the loan amount of a hundred dollars from Jones. Accompanied by his friends, he dashes to the canteen to have a huge quantity of hot food. At the end of the work, they begin to enjoy their discussions on women and sex. Jake tells his friends about the innocence of Lil and how he has exploited it without causing the slightest suspicion to Lil:
She was just a little dummy when I married her, just seventeen. She would've believed that water wasn't wet if I had told her so. I could have pissed up her back and made her think it was raining. Well, one morning she comes to me all sad and serious, and says she's going to have a baby. At first I tried to get her to go to a quack to get some medicine so she'd pass the damn thing, but she was scared stiff. She had heard of gals dying from them kind of operations and I couldn't get her to move a peg. Then I gets busy and hatches up a smart scheme. I goes to my quack and makes a deal with him; I told him to tell her she just couldn't have a baby, that her hips was too little, that she'd die, or just any thing as long as she wouldn't have it. Who in hell wants a lot of sticky babies? (153-154)

Jake and his friends find daydreams and conversations the means to encounter the dreary routine of the physically and emotionally enervating postal work. All of them share the jokes on women but feel hurt and resentful when a white clerk overhears and expects another hot story from them. Bob irately remarks that the whites do not have anything to do with them
except when they talk about women. Their philosophy of life and living is also quite disgusting; they want to have pleasure, eating, sleeping, women, everything, they do not want anything to bother them. Further, their discussion moves on to old Jack, the greatest defensive fighter, and the story that old Jack was driving down Michigan Boulevard in Chicago in his high-powered Packard and a cop arrested him for speeding. When they brought him before the judge, he was fined fifty dollars. Old Jack took out a hundred dollar bill and asked the judge to keep it all as he was going back at the same rate of speed.

They talk about the race riots that Chicago had and how brutally the whites killed up niggers and also many other true reflections of racial discrimination. Their indulgence in "nigger jokes" is a reflection of self-hatred and race-deprecation. We have traces of their resentment and bitter experience of the South from their folk humour:

There ain't nothing worse'n a Southern white man but two Southern white men. . . .

' . . . and the only thing worse'n two Southern white men is two Southern rattle snakes! (177)
Don't like a liver
Don't like hash
Rather be a nigger
Than white poor trash". (178)

Jim Crow graveyards, whites' fear that a black spirit may rape a white spirit, no white hens are allowed to lay black eggs, they kill a black cow if she gives white milk, and other such similar expressions may sound like jokes but they contain the truth that for a black man it is bad luck anywhere in the South. The state of affairs is quite dissimilar in the North:

"You know, the first time I ever set down beside a white man in a streetcar up North, I was expecting for 'im to get up and shoot me."

"Yeah, I remember the first time I set down beside a white woman in a streetcar up North. I was setting there trembling and she didn't even look around."

"You feel funny as hell when you come North from the South."

"I use' to walk around all day feeling like I done forgot something."
"Yeah, every time I'd see a white man I'd feel like getting off the sidewalk to let 'im pass, like we had to do in the South." (173)

The songs like "Lawd, I'd rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the President of Mississippi . . ." and "I am going to shake the dust of the South off my feet forever. . ."(178), reveal the characteristic demarcation between the South and the North. However, this doesn't eliminate the projection of the North in wholesome good:

The only difference between the North and the South is, them guys down there'll kill you, and these up here'll let you starve to death.

Well, I'd rather die slow than to die fast! . . .

They say they lynch us to keep their women pure. . . (180)

Jake and his friends indulge in the discussions covering various topics including Hitler, Lenin, and Mussolini. They feel the need for all the coloured folks to come under one command.

Part III of the book, "Rats Alley," entitled after a glum phrase from T.S.Eliot's "A Game of Chess" section of The Waste Land, finds its essence in "But at my back in a cold blast I hear,
the rattle of the bones, and chuckle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (The Waste Land: "The Fire Sermon," 185-186). At twelve thirty, Jake and his friends checkout feeling that suddenly they have come to life from the death-like state. They "received their hats, coats, and canes" and "galloped down the winding steel stairs three steps at a time" (191). Jake, thinking of the sum of one hundred dollars that he borrowed from the paymaster on usurious interest rates, on his hip sings happily, "Yellow taxis, yellow money, yellow women... (193)" As Edward Margolies points out,

Each time Jake tries to improve his situation, he discovers himself more and more deeply in debt. But if Jake is the hapless victim of a ruthless money system, he is even more a slave to the values of the civilization that exploits him. For Jake too strives for what Wright has called elsewhere the American "lust for trash." He implicitly accepts graft as a political way of life-and expresses no resentment that he must pay a bribe to keep his job. 11

They go to Rose's place seeking enjoyment of the "real life." The room is jammed with dancers. There are gamblers, pimps, petty thieves, dope peddlers, smallfry politicians, grafters,
racketeers of various shades, athletes, high school and college students—all in search of real “life,” and hordes of sexeager youngsters. Jake and his friends drink and eat in the company of their respective girls. The massive orgy of feasting, drinking, and dancing is sponsored by Jake to his friends. Jake starts dancing with the “yellow” whore Blanche and his friends too follow the suit with their respective choice. Then, a tall, black Negro bumps into Jake and Blanche clings to his neck, diverting his attention from the man. His money is gone and later Jake realizes that he is fooled and Blanche is instrumental in getting him robbed.

Indignant Jake wants to grab something and smash it. He grabs Blanche’s arm and forces her to tell where the man has gone. Blanches pleads ignorance. Blue Juice, who takes care of the security of the brothel house, warns him not to touch her. Ben Kitty and One Barrel are ready for Jake and they pitch him and throw him out into the subfreezing cold of the early February morning. His friends battle a lot to get him out of there alive. While coming home, he takes out his leftover money and counts it, piece by piece. He has exactly eighty-five cents. He exclaims, “One hundred dollars gone in one night! And I got to pay Doc. Gawddamn that whore!” He straightened, smiled, and
yelled to the top of his voice: “But when I was flying I was a flying fool!” (215)

After hours of confusion, Jake finally reaches his house and finds Lil sleeping on her knees, praying. Enraged by the humiliation that he experienced outside, he decides to teach her a lesson, squarely blaming her for the whole mess. He empties the bottle and throws it at the dresser mirror. Lil wakes up and is frightened. She tries her best to coax him to go to bed without making the folks hear him but her attempts fail. Lil says that he is out having a good time with his money and friends, and she is sick and hungry back at home.

Jake in an inebriated condition, ransacks the house and attempts to kill Lil. While she struggles for the door, he catches her wrist and swings her around. He attempts to drag her to the middle of the floor and she sinks to her knees. When he tries to lift her, she bites his hand. When he further tries to attack her, she brings the piece of glass that she clutches in her fist down across his head. She hits him again and again when he tries to grab her. She stands over Jake and watches his drunken sleep. Ironically, Jake meets his tragic end at the hands of the deeply religious Lil. Her soft sobs silently express her death-wish. Nick Aaron Ford interprets Jake Jackson’s blood-drenched “drunken
sleep” as literal death. We get a glimpse of Wright’s tragic vision in the concluding lines of the text:

Lil dropped the piece of glass; its edges were stained from cuts in her hand. She stood over Jake a moment and watched his drunken sleep. Then she pulled down the shade, wrapped herself in a coat and sank to the floor. She pressed a wad of her gown hard into the cuts in her palm to stem the flow of blood and rested her head on her knees.

“Lawd, I wish I was dead,” she sobbed softly.

Outside an icy wind swept around the corner of the building, whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit. (219)

Wright uses this vivid simile again in *Native Son*: “Outside in the cold night the wind moaned and died down, like an idiot in an icy black pit” (*Native Son*, 221).

The atmosphere of *Laud Today!* is just as miserable as that of *Native Son*, but it is not nearly so powerful a novel. The characterization, especially that of Jake, is cruel and brilliant, but the basic implication, as in Wright’s other novels, that
Negroes are the victims of their environment and there is nothing they themselves can do about the situation, simply does not obtain today. Granville Hicks feels that the novel would have been disturbing to most orthodox Communists in the thirties as well as to many Negroes. Jake is presented not as the representative of the race but as a contemptible person.

Although hatred of white discrimination is bred in his bones, he has no sense of racial solidarity—"Yeah, it takes a black sonofabitch to rub it into his own people"—and he regards as fools those Negroes who work for the betterment of their people. 13

James Baldwin, in his *Nobody Knows My Name*, writes about Wright's interest as follows:

It is strange to begin to suspect, now, that Richard Wright was never, really, the social and polemical writer he took himself to be. In my own relations with him, I was always exasperated by his notions of society, politics, and history, for they seemed to me utterly fanciful. I never believed that he had any real sense of how a society is put together. It had not occurred to me, and perhaps it had not occurred to

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him, that his major interests as well as his power lay elsewhere.\textsuperscript{14}

George Kent feels the peculiar pulse of the novel \textit{Lawd Today!} different from the other works in relation to the major Wrightian theme:

In concentrating upon simply presenting the lives and their surroundings, Wright displays gifts that are not the trademarks of his other novels. Sensational incidents do not threaten the principle of proportion, or make melodrama an end in itself. Of all things, Wright displays, in his opening portrait of Jake Jackson, a talent for biting satire! Humour, so limited in other works, is often wildly raucous . . . .\textsuperscript{15}

(G)reat talent for the recording of speech rhythms and color (is evidenced). In the character of Al’s narrative of a masochistic black woman, Wright even does credit to the tall story tradition. But his most astonishing performance is Section IV of Squirrel Cage,” in which, for thirty pages all speeches are anonymous . . . .\textsuperscript{15} (T)he speeches form a poem, a device which breaks the novel’s tight realism and gives its rendering power a new dimension.\textsuperscript{15}
However, one can trace out glimpses of Negro nationalism through Jake's fantasies:

He saw millions of black soldiers marching in black armies; he saw a black battleship flying a black flag; he himself was standing on the deck of that back battleship surrounded by black generals; he heard a voice commanding: "FIRE!" Boooooom! A black shell screamed through black smoke and he saw the white head of the Statue of Liberty topple, explode and tumble into the Atlantic Ocean. . . (143-144)

William Burrison points out that the idiomatic refrain of Lawd Today! is more an unanswered plea than a comical exclamation. Talking about the significance of the title, he says,

The novel by that title, however, reflects not only a serious young artist's effort to capture different levels of reality, whether the quirks of one male Ego, the rhythms and black folk life of one city, or the moral bankruptcy of a nation in crisis. Lawd Today is, as well, the testament of a brilliant narrative craftsman learning to amuse himself with the many tricks of his trade. 16
Michel Fabre reveals that the novel was “rejected earlier by scores of publishers who thought it too loosely structured and immature.” Nick Ford doubts the authenticity of the novel as the work of Richard Wright and contends that the mature Wright would never have agreed to its publication. Margolies is of the view that Wright’s delicate Communist affiliation prevented him, at least for some time, from trying to publish it.

The absurdity of the existential hero is found in Jake’s determination in the face of intimidating situation and the futility of reaching the top of the stairs as described in his dream. Kenneth Kinnamon says that more complex irony is used in the novel as is evident from Jake’s bored reaction to the broadcast and it not only relates to the triviality of Jake’s life but also the tragic failure of America to fulfil the promise of the idealism of Lincoln:

*Lawd Today* not only presents the frustrations and misery of an individual black man, but also turns to the larger forces that have shaped—or warped—his life and that he so thoroughly misunderstands. Wright uses three main devices to achieve this additional dimension. The first is the newspapers that Jake reads at breakfast and in the taxi on the way to the
brothel. Jake's conversations with his friends and in particular with Doc and finally the recurrent use of snatches from a radio broadcast celebrating Lincoln's birthday. 18

Granville Hicks points out, "It was Wright's misfortune that he became first a Communist and then a self-appointed spokesman for the Negro people of the world. What he was capable of as a writer is evident even in so imperfect a work as Lawd Today."19


10. Albert Halper, ed., *This is Chicago* (New York, 1952) 130.


14. Granville Hicks 67-68.


18. Keneth Kinnamon 77.

19. Granville Hicks 68.