Brigano

played a role, certainly, but it has been a mysterious one. So despite an artifically inserted flicker of better relations between the races through Marxist inspiration, the story is dominated by white brutality and Negro fear.

"Bright and Morning Star" powerfully conveys the pain of Negro suffering and the degradation of the Negro ego, and its intensity resulting from Wright's narrative thrust helps to compensate for a thematic split and an aesthetic flaw. A proletarian tale, it offers a favorable portrait of a white girl, Reva, who, in fact, loves the young Negro Communist Party leader, Johnny-Boy. But Reva is a thinly drawn character—just as are most of Wright's whites. However, Wright continues to picture vivid scenes of white indignities and violence performed at the expense of Negroes. The painful torture and killing of Johnny-Boy and his mother by a truculent white group is graphically described. In addition, any assuagement in Negro-white hostilities is suggested not through the white Reva or other white characters, but through Johnny-Boy's mother, who very late in the story accepts tentative hopes for social reforms through Communist Party policies and practices. Thus, despite the shadowy presence of a partisan white girl, the focus, unintentional as it may be, is upon salvation more through communism than through a reversal of white attitudes, even though an intended merging of the two forces is keynoted in a pronouncement by Johnny-Boy that is critical to the thematic direction: "Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black. . . . Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men."[25]

Wright's short fiction of the 1930s is essentially an imaginative re-creation of the atmosphere and milieu of his childhood experiences. The fears, frustrations, and pent-up angers of the Southern Negro are posed against the sadism of the white Southerner. Until, in two of the stories, Marxism enters the lives of some of his Negroes and whites,

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there are no influences outside of Southern culture to alter an environment generally hostile to the black man. Each story represents a Negro reaction to the white world during a moment of crisis and, usually, of violence. Furthermore, the stories collected in *Uncle Tom's Children* are so arranged that each marks a progressive increase in resistance to their lot on the part of Negro characters or groups. "Uncle Tom's children" look less and less like "Uncle Tom." In many respects, the stories could be classified as biased sociological studies, with Negroes created as the human beings and whites as the generalized evil figures. The tone of the stories reflects Wright's attitude of protest, prefiguring his outlook in his celebrated novel of protest set in a Northern metropolis, *Native Son.*

The stories, too, are filled with the kind of literary naturalism so often linked by commentators to *Native Son.* Deterministic and materialistic forces are shown as components in an environment of external forces obstructing human freedom. Also stressed are genetic and subconscious limitations on human rationality. In *Black Boy,* Wright claims that during his brief residence in Memphis his initial perusals of serious literature were of novels by Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Reflecting upon the events of his youth in the South, he notes that "all my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel."[26] In his terse, dialogue-filled novellas of protestation set in what is basically the rural South, Wright seems to have combined his knowledge of the fictional forms he had met in his reading and his personal impressions of a ghastly South that was antagonistic toward the Negro. In his later writings his adoption of literary naturalism is as consistent, and a posture of protest continues to inform the narratives. Thus, Wright's short fiction of the 1930s provides a valuable introduction to the themes and techniques of his later works.

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Wright left the South and went to Chicago in 1927. Ten years later he journeyed to New York, where he lived until 1945. Commenting generally about Negro life in Northern urban areas, he wrote in 1941:

> It seems as though we are now living inside of a machine; days and events move with a hard reasoning of their own. We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people . . . that words cannot bridge. No longer do our lives depend upon the soil, the sun, the rain or the wind. . . . In the South life was different; men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you. The world moved by signs we knew. But here in the North cold forces hit you and push you.[27]

A defining characteristic of the urban environment, according to Wright, was that "we go home to our Black Belts and live, within the orbit of the surviving remnants of the culture of the South, our naïve, casual, verbal, fluid folk life."[28]

In *Lawd Today*, Wright traces in minute detail a day in the life of a young married Negro male in the Black Belt of Chicago. In certain spots the novel is also a fictional rendering of Wright's personal experiences in, and reactions to, Northern city life revealed elsewhere in various autobiographical sketches about his early days in Chicago.[29] Wright does not generalize from the nightmarish incidents in the day of the novel's main figure, Jake Jackson. He does, however, set before the reader the commonplaces of existence in the Black Belt. For Wright, *Lawd Today* was really a stepping stone to his much larger artistic achievement in *Native Son*.

As a work of art, *Lawd Today* is beset by numerous shortcomings. The amount of sheer dialogue is overburdening; the meager, often-monosyllabic vocabulary is shallow and poorly descriptive; and the unrelenting stress upon the smallest of details, even to the extent of picturing the card

distributions in bridge games, is tedious. The fact that Wright did not offer the novel to the public—his wife had it published after his death—may be an indication of how Wright himself felt about the quality of the work. Nevertheless, *Lawd Today* is an interesting prelude to *Native Son*. Because of it, we can imagine Wright's groping to translate his Chicago experiences into an artistic genre. The novel has two significant features: one is Wright's placing of a single Negro character at the center, while at the same time examining all of the events and objects in his environment immediately touching upon his life; the other is an absence of specific white characters who could represent threats to the central figure's being. Wright's emphasis is upon Negro people and Negro life amid the cold forces of Northern urban surroundings.

Wright does not fancy his Negroes in *Lawd Today* to be lovable creatures maintaining a philosophical cheerfulness in a land of plenty turned barren because of the Great Depression. Their happy moments arrive as relief from both the hardships and the drabness of the Black Belt; however, all too often these moments come in the forms of liquor, narcotics, and illicit sexual indulgence. The picture is so sordid that one well-known Negro literary critic was sufficiently provoked to comment that *Lawd Today* contains an overabundance of offensive stereotypes of Negro characters and life.[30] Just as the actions of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* are socially repugnant and despicable, so are those of Jake Jackson and other Negroes in *Lawd Today*. Wright implies in both novels that framing the superstructure of society dominated by the white world is capitalism, which is a force that smothers and denudes the individual personality. *Lawd Today* is thus an attempt by Wright to draft in an artistic mode and a literary genre those messages which are all too clearly spelled out later in *Native Son*.

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Jake Jackson and his friends Al, Bob, and Slim are not admirable figures. Hardly worthy of a hero's role is a central character who has tricked his wife into an abortion and then resents and beats her because of the medical expenses incurred from a resultant internal infection. Neither is a married man who borrows money early in the day only to spend it at night on a prostitute from a Negro dance hall. Wright is not creating people to be emulated or pitied. They are to be seen and understood. *Lawd Today* is not a psychological novel. It does not penetrate sympathetically into the subconscious mind. Rather, it presents Jake Jackson and his companions living in their external world. Wright identifies with his characters only insofar as they too have been influenced and affected by larger external social forces, and he does not condemn or condone the choices made by Jake. Although his short stories reveal that there are some understandable, even personally valid, courses of action for Negroes, or for white men, as a matter of fact, in *Lawd Today* the range of options is limited not only because of skin color but also because of the capitalistic social structure, the ramifications of which are most evident in an urban setting.

That Wright portrays Negroes who are not admirable means neither that he is treating Negroes in general unfavorably nor that the Jake Jacksons are the sole and inevitable personality-types functioning in a Black Belt. It does suggest, however, that Wright is directing his attentions in naturalistic fashion to a common reality of everyday life in an urban ghetto produced by much more than white attitudes toward Negroes. In a later essay Wright indicates that he had formed a new consciousness about Negro life in America after having experienced a few years of urban Chicago life. The newer and larger vision extended beyond such external events as lynchings, "Jim Crowism," and brutality. It involved "crossed-up feelings"

and emotional tensions. He sensed that American Negro life was "a sprawling land of unconscious suffering, and there were but few Negroes who knew the meaning of their lives, who could tell their story."[31] Although *Lawd Today* obviously cannot tell the full meaning of Negro-ness in Chicago, it can and does depict a sufficient amount of emotional tension and unconscious suffering to accent its point about the stunted, inturned culture of the urban Negro.

The black world of *Lawd Today* is lurid and disreputable. On its periphery is the white man's land, entered by Jake and his friends only when they travel to their jobs in Chicago's central post office. After work they retreat into the noise, crime, and household tensions of the strip set aside for them by the whites. The slice of the white world that they do see combines the inherent impersonal tendencies of the city with the reality of the whites' rejection of the Negro. Thus, in the North also, Wright feels, a curtain divides the two races, a curtain that prevents all but necessary and unavoidable contacts. The barrier is not so hard and fast in the North, for black and white men work side by side in the same post-office jobs; but the Negro of the North, as Wright depicts him here, continues to be abused in one way or another. For example, one of Jake's friends asserts, "The only difference between the North and the South is, them guys down there'll kill you, and those up here'll let you starve to death."[32] Even in their government jobs the men feel they can advance only so far. As Jake watches the young white college boys working around him in the post office, he senses keenly the real barriers: "Them white boys always in a hurry to get somewhere. And soon's they get out of school they's going to be big shots. But a nigger just stays a nigger."[33] In a violent image, reminiscent of the tone and the attitude of abhorrence and outrage in Wright's short stories and in *Black Boy*, Jake ventures that

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"Uncle Sam's sister was raped by a nigger," because Jake "can't figger out no other reason why the white folks hate us so."[34]

The awareness of a color curtain is strong and is reflected in private conversations among the Negro men. Combined with the prospect of never being anything but mail sorters in their jobs, it leads to frustrations that turn inward to the Black Belt. We are told that when Jake looks at the post-office building before beginning his shift at work, "deep down in him was a dumb yearning for something else; somewhere or other was something or other for him. But where? How?"[35] The ground swell of a half-conscious and desperate emotion within him can find no outlets in the white world. Jake's heated outburst against the tactics of a white inspector who discovers that Jake has incorrectly sorted some of the mail is indicative of the explosion point near which the Negroes' tempers hover, but such a display of pent-up emotion on the part of Jake serves only to provide an excuse for the white man's deciding his future in the post office during the employment uncertainties of the Great Depression. The Negroes' feelings of frustration, the anxieties over their dead-end work, the knowledge that they are "niggers" in a white society that shuts them out—all produce in the men an outer pose encouraged, expected, and accepted by the whites. It is one perceptively comprehended by one of the Negroes: "We just as well take it easy and have some fun, 'cause the white folks got us hog-tied."[36]

In his short fiction of the 1930s, Wright rarely conducts the reader through a black society existing by itself. He prefers to concentrate on those moments when the black and white worlds interact with, or react to, each other. However, in *Lawd Today*, after accounting for those hours in Jake's day when he must function away from the Black Belt, Wright explores the conditions encountered and sustained in the Belt by Jake and his companions when they seek relief from their frustrations. The final section of *Lawd Today*, the "Rats' Alley" section, is a portrait of the sensuous, the risqué, and the cheap. With cigar in mouth and liquor in hand, the young men enter the smoke-filled, jazz-pierced, marijuana-offering Negro dance hall and eatery, where pimps, prostitutes, and underworld hoodlums abound. The scene is created by Wright within a surrealistic, alcohol-influenced view of Jake. The pervasive bedlam of the atmosphere is occasionally punctuated by the shrieks, whistles, and handclaps supporting the wild and exotic dances performed by Negroes "letting loose"—a spectacle that Wright perhaps has in mind when elsewhere he comments, "Our blues, jazz, swing and boogie-woogie are our 'spirituals' of the city pavements, our longing for freedom and opportunity, an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us."[37] In the end, the men find themselves robbed and left brutally beaten in an alley behind the hall. Jake, his week's pay and a loan spent or stolen, returns home to his wife to provoke an argument resulting in violence and physical injury. In one day Jake has traveled full circle from the tensions of his apartment, to the rejections and frustrations met in the white world, to the ephemeral thrills and emotional releases in a Black Belt sanctuary, to the now greater distresses of his marriage.

The single dominant image running through *Lawd Today* is in the form of a historic call to freedom, which ironically falls unheeded upon Negro ears deafened by the clichés of their own speeches and the spasmodic noises of their music. Because the action occurs on Lincoln's birthday, a February day symbolically blanketed with white snow, throughout the novel radios blare loudly not only excerpts from Lincoln's addresses but lectures and commentaries delivered by professors and broadcasters. While

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scenes of the Civil War are reenacted verbally across sixty years of time, the Chicago Negro, released and liberated to the Northern city by the events of history, is pictured by Wright as a modern slave. He has been banished to his Black Belt to search for his humanity amid the rubble of personalities shattered under the vilification and mistreatment by a white-controlled, capitalistic, urban society.

Although *Lawd Today* is not primarily a depiction of a black world in open conflict with a white world, through the mere presence of a Black Belt, of a Jake Jackson who is jealously conscious of a different circle of existence outside of the Belt, the novel does suggest an environment related to that of the black bands of Negro life spread across the Southern countryside or concentrated in tight pockets within Southern towns. To be sure, in the Northern city a threat of instantaneous death at the hands of unpredictable whites is not present, as it is in *Black Boy* and in Wright's short stories of the 1930s. Yet, the pronounced but subtle strangulation of the Negro personality within a jungle of city industries, sidewalks, and back alleys—the message behind the grim, heavy, naturalistic ploddings of Wright in *Lawd Today*—is obviously linked to the white man and the friction of race relations. The hurdle in time and space from the depressing and dangerous domain of his short stories and of *Black Boy* led Wright to experiences and visions of the Northern milieu that caused him to cry out in protest. Although the protest is muted in *Lawd Today* by his reportorial and journalistic technique, it is implanted within the author's selection of his subject matter.

Wright's second novel, *Native Son*, made him famous. Since it was issued as a monthly selection by a national book club, it received a wide circulation among the American public. It delivered powerfully to the consciousness and conscience of white America an unforgettable picture of one

hideous by-product of American culture—Bigger Thomas. Furthermore, perhaps because of its extensive and, therefore, financially successful circulation, it signalled a turning point in both the subject matter and the fortunes of many Negro fiction writers in the 1940s.[38] No longer did the Negro novelist have to feel that a white audience should be patronized with portrayals of Negroes underscoring only the sentimental aspects of Negro life or an allegedly inherent, good-natured Negro acceptance of his Negro-ness and his low station in American society. Although *Native Son* was certainly not the first example of Negro protest writing in the history of American letters, its popularity and the publicity it gained undoubtedly gave encouragement and impetus to those Negro writers who would soon join the "Wright School of Protest."[39] Of course, the times were historically ripe for a *Native Son* to be received with much ado on the American literary and social scenes. The Great Depression and so much that was generated because of it—in literature, for instance, the social novels of Dos Passos, Farrell, and Steinbeck—were compelling Americans toward less romantic and more pragmatic inquiries into man's social existence and into the realities of American life. A dominant theme in literary expression was that of protest. Far from reversing a trend, *Native Son* strengthened it and advanced its demarcations into the area of race relations.

Wright's active contact with Marxism and the Communist Party had provided him with a new framework for his ideas; and his own sensitivity to, and involuntary engagement in, the plight of the Negro had afforded him with enough raw material for his fiction. Artistically, the groundwork for *Native Son* had already been established in *Lawd Today*, Wright's short fiction, and his many Marxist-oriented poems of the 1930s. Personally, a posture of protest had been adopted long before his flight into the

North, as page after page of *Black Boy* attests. Whether or not the protest novel is presently outdated as a vehicle for Negro expression is a question that James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones, and their supporters can decide only through their own art and integrity. However, still valid is Baldwin's assertion that *Native Son* is "the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America. . . . Such a book . . . could never have been written before. . . . Nor could it be written today. It bears already the aspect of a landmark."[40]

The plot and superficial structure of *Native Son* are respectively chronological and uncomplex. The three parts, "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate," trace: (1) the social and psychic conditions building up to Bigger Thomas's involvement in the death of a white girl, Mary Dalton; (2) Bigger's flight from the police with a Negro girl, his murder of this Bessie Mears, and his capture by the police; and (3) his trial, which allows his Marxist lawyer, Boris Max, to bombard Bigger and society with political propaganda. Beyond the plot and the violence of the novel and the polemics of the final section, what *Native Son* is in a larger sense has been subject to a diversity of opinion. Some early reviewers went so far as to assert that the novel represented a malicious tract devoted to encouraging and increasing the black man's hatred of whites.[41] To clarify what he thought were incorrect interpretations of *Native Son* and of his own intentions, Wright responded publicly with articles and letters. He emphatically affirmed that he was not defending Bigger's actions. He instead was trying to explain them through depiction. The general nature of the novel, he claimed, is a tale of a Negro youth who hated and feared whites. Bigger's hatred is to be understood as an outgrowth of his fear.[42] Beyond the broader implications of *Native Son* then, underlying the novel is a fear-hate combination earlier posed by Wright in the Southern settings of his short

stories and insinuated in *Lawd Today*. Writing as late as the 1950s, James Baldwin, Wright's ofttimes detractor, validated as real for Negroes the emotion of hatred placed at the center of the novel:

> There is . . . no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, . . . simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled.[43]

Although a potential Marxist salvation is inserted too obtrusively into the final section of *Native Son*—to the detriment of the artistic worth of the novel—the basic reality of the fear-hate background of race relations in America never fades.

Reshaping an element of the "Rats' Alley" section concluding *Lawd Today*, Wright opens *Native Son* with the grotesque scene of Bigger's chasing and killing the rat prowling his family's one-room, slum apartment in Chicago's Black Belt. The action is ironically symbolic. Later Bigger will assume the role of a hunted animal, and the rat will be interchanged in the minds of the whites with Negroes in general. Quickly Wright sets Bigger apart from the sharing of any warm and strong associations with members of his own family and of his young gang companions. When Bigger dangles the rat in front of his sister, Vera, to scare her, he adds to a list of annoyances that have already alienated her; and his mother's outward relationship with him is epitomized by her declaration, "Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in my life."[44] His gang companions feel that he is different, that his hot temper raises a block between an open relationship between them and him. Throughout the novel, Wright

focuses his attention upon Bigger and how he encounters the white world and is met by it. Baldwin has offered an appropriate comment that Wright had cut away an important dimension of Negro life, "the relationship Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life."[45] Baldwin's statement, however, does not weaken the premises and purposes of the novel.

Although Bigger is estranged from both the religion and the folk culture of his race, and Wright clearly and quickly establishes this fact in the novel, Bigger can still represent the Negro in abstract in terms of Negro responses to their being placed outside of many aspects of the American Dream. In the essay *How "Bigger" Was Born,* Wright explains that Bigger is attempting "to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the more imposing sight and sound of daily American life."[46] As a Negro, Bigger is barred, Wright is plainly saying, from entering the dominant white civilization. An early scene in which the gang members look up wistfully at an airplane, wishing they too could have an opportunity to pilot it, is a symbolic rendering of the curtain between the two worlds. Though the boys realize, as Gus says, that "them white boys sure can fly," they also must hopelessly agree with Bigger's brooding comment, "Yeah. . . . They get a chance to do everything."[47] An impassioned outburst by Bigger illustrates clearly that the color curtain in *Black Boy* and the short stories has been extended by Wright to the Northern city: "Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail."[48] Such morbid observations, a result of the shared experiences of the Negroes, are soon stripped away in *Native Son,* however; for Wright sets Bigger outside of

these experiences by creating him as a primitive force operating between the black and white worlds, yet existing in the first because he is a Negro.

Wright lays bare what he feels is the truth of Negro life in terms of the larger society, not what it is in itself. Ironically, Negro life is what it is because it has been forceably delegated a special position by that larger society. Bigger, then, is the "nigger," the Negro symbol, as Baldwin phrases it, in "that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash."[49] If Bigger, as Wright has created him, is a metaphor, if he is a symbolic monster who as either a person or a fictional character cannot accept his own humanity, as Baldwin contends, then the success of *Native Son* must depend on these premises, not upon whether the protest novel is the correct medium for contemporary Negro writers or whether the protest novel lacks the reality of a believable and developing personality at its center. Furthermore, as we shall see in a later chapter, Bigger may be taken on his own terms, especially if one is willing to equate elements of modern existential philosophy with elements of Bigger's beliefs. Bigger, in fact, is a prefiguration of the existential hero Cross Damon in Wright's *The Outsider* (1953). Although Bigger is stationed outside of the Negro folk culture, he carries within him the fears, hatreds, and frustrations of his black culture. His position is not unlike that of Wright at the end of *Black Boy,* where he has rejected much of Negro life, including the quiet acceptance of Negro-ness on the part of members of his family. Like Wright, Bigger hovers in a no-man's-land between white and black, but he is imbued through experience and observation with the humilities and the suppressed reaction to them that appear to reside in every Negro breast.

At the beginning of *Native Son,* Bigger realizes that be-

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cause he is a Negro the span of his life can spell out only nonfulfillment. Behind this knowledge lurks an impulse to break violently through the barriers imposed upon a whole life: "He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else."[50] A corollary is his deep desire "to merge himself with others and be part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black."[51] Thus, despite his estrangement from the warmth that possibly could emanate from within his own black culture, he does embody the two strains that Wright apparently thought are common to Negro-ness—the sense of frustration caused by the restrictions maintained and guarded by the whites and the wish, albeit buried or bludgeoned into the subconscious, to participate unnoticed within the whole group.

Bigger is far more than a mere singular individual whose story is to be enacted in melodramatic fashion. Just as the novel moves around such primitive symbols as the sun, water, wind, and fire, the main character proceeds through his experiences as a primitive representative of what Wright felt underlies Negro existence in America.[52] When Bigger and his gang plot to rob a white-owned and -operated store, he is overcome by the fear of reprisal from an alien white world, and he foils the attempt. When later he is invited by the white Mary Dalton and her Marxist boyfriend, Jan Erlone, to communicate with them on a personal and private level, he chokes up with a fear and a shame that accompany his awareness that he is a Negro. It is when Bigger is set loose, when he acquires an inner power to destroy both white and black life, when he is presented the occasion to plot alone against the white world, that Wright combines Bigger's search for a meaningful identity with the specter of a violent rebellion of Negro America against

white America. The "act of creation" that Bigger sees in his quasi-accidental killing of Mary *is* creative. It raises him, and with him his Negro-ness, from the level of obscurity to the realm of recognition. He accomplishes alone something sensational. In so doing, he projects his now unavoidable presence into 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. "Normal" morality and law are suspended for Bigger, as Wright—through such means as the lawyer Max—forges the impression that a higher law justifies Bigger's deeds. Even the "immorality" of Bigger's subsequent murder of the Negro girl, Bessie, is complicated by the reader's feeling that Bigger has, for his own good, been set free from his former fear and guilt obsessions. He is now embued with a manliness and pride of a new self. The two murders are "the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. . . . Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight."[53]

With the release of the new Bigger, the "new nigger" really, Wright betokens for white America the horrendous vision of the potential black uprising that he thought awaits in every Negro heart to be sparked against the centuries of white injustices and maltreatments. The decision to stand up and fight made by Silas in the Southern setting of "Long Black Song" Wright extends into the snowy, white, winter, urban setting of *Native Son*, with its shadowy background of the Black Belt earlier portrayed in *Lawd Today*. He suggests what could happen if the young Jake Jacksons and Bigger Thomases should choose to push their fears, frustrations, and hatreds outward into the whole society rather than inward into the Black Belt. Thus Bigger's tale, metaphorically affecting as it does an entire

nation, is epic, its actions symbolizing decisions on the grand scale.[54]

Employing the omniscient narrative device within the naturalistic framework of *Native Son,* Wright transplants in one way or another most of the aspects of American race relations previously outlined in his short stories and *Lawd Today*. For example, the connections made by Southern whites between Negro manliness and the defense of white maidenhood are duplicated in the Northern urban environment. Newspaper headlines publicize the possible rape of Mary by Bigger; and, at the trial, as long-winded as it is because of the employment of the lawyer Max as a Marxist spokesman and interpreter of Bigger's life, the state's attorney, Buckley, proclaims that "the central crime here is *rape!* Every action points toward that!"[55] Bigger is able to conceal his part in Mary's disappearance from the Dalton household by hiding behind another fiction about Negro life maintained by the whites: that a Negro would not dare, in fact would not be smart enough, to kill a rich white girl. Wright himself later elaborates on the implications of such a distorted view:

> The entire long scene in the furnace room is but a depiction of how warped the whites have become through oppression of Negroes. If there had been *one* person in the Dalton household who viewed Bigger Thomas as a human being, the crime would have been solved in half an hour. Did not Bigger himself know that it was the denial of his personality that enabled him to escape detection so long?[56]

Furthermore, Bigger helps to preserve the white fiction by acting out as long as he can the white-assigned role of the harmless, stupid black boy. He feels that "who on earth would think that he, a black timid Negro boy, would murder and burn a rich white girl and would sit and wait for his breakfast like this?"[57] This guise is a variation of the similar

one that Wright in *Black Boy* found he had to assume to survive in the Southern culture.

Native Son differs, however, from the autobiography and from most of the earlier writings in an important respect: a conscious attempt is made by Wright to picture certain whites as human beings sympathetic to and communicating with Negroes. In the first part of the novel, encountered again is a Negro vision of whites similar to that in Wright's short fiction and *Black Boy*, that "to Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead."[58] Near the end of the novel we see that in Jan Erlone, Bigger has discovered that "for the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him."[59] Then we are also asked to believe that Boris Max has exuded such a genuine warmth and interest that he too is transformed in Bigger's mind from a symbol of the threatening natural force into a human being. Unfortunately, not only does Wright draw a paper-thin characterization of Jan throughout the novel, he so overdramatically utilizes Max as an orator of Marxist doctrine that he thoroughly undermines Max's effectiveness as a living character.

Max's courtroom plea for Bigger's life is not solely Marxist propaganda. Max often seems caught between a purely economic interpretation of Negro-white relations and an interpretation taking into account noneconomic, psychological, and irrational factors. Reiterating many points Wright has introduced elsewhere in the novel, Max mentions the social, educational, and economic restrictions placed upon Negroes by the whites. He also contends that Negroes "constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive *within* this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights."[60] Max thinks that most Negroes, like Bigger, want to attain self-realization

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and dignity; however, because of the whites' firm and cruel domination over them, they can feel only fear and hatred. In many respects, then, he is reasoning that Bigger's crimes have been predetermined. They are logical responses to the harsh barriers constructed by whites between Negroes and the rest of the society.

It is when Max deals with the history of American Negro-white relations that he resorts to Marxist explanations. However, he does recognize that the whites too are possessed by a fear of Negroes and by strong guilt feelings over the history of their rule over blacks. Although fear and guilt are rational motives for white actions, they have caused irrational deeds to be heaped upon the original misdeed of forcing the Negro to exist outside the whole society. Thus, Max is trying to cope with interpretations that seem to start from a Marxist historical view but are often sustained by noneconomic factors—much in the manner that Wright later treats his nonfictional folk history of the American Negro in *12 Million Black Voices* (as we shall discover in Chapter 2). However, Max reveals, the culprit behind all is capitalism. It has produced "men of wealth," who urge a show of white force and intimidation in order "to protect a little spot of private security against the resentful millions from whom they have filched it." Capitalism and the property class have conspired in a diversionary action to foster white involvement in the suppression of the Negro so that the whites themselves might feel that they are protecting the American Dream, the dream that Max thinks is actually part of a plot against all men without property, whites and blacks.[61] He suggests that the answer to problems even more fundamental than race relations lies in a Marxist revolution.

Despite an apparent alteration in Wright's outlook on the future of race relations, the world of *Native Son* is essentially like that of his earlier works, a world divided by a color curtain. A Bigger Thomas released from the social restraints imposed upon his color is the significant difference. If Wright complained that he had previously written with *Uncle Tom's Children* "a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about," then with *Native Son* he satisfied his oath to write a novel that "no one would weep over," that "would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."[62]

During the twenty years between *Native Son* and Wright's death, he spent more time and effort on nonfiction than on fiction. Only one of his three novels in this period, *The Long Dream*, extensively treats American race relations; and the best single piece among his few short stories and radio scripts, "The Man Who Lived Underground," tells us less about Negro-white relations than about Wright's metaphysics. *Eight Men*, a posthumously issued collection, contains all the stories and scripts of Wright's last two decades, plus a couple of his earlier stories. They cover a span of about twenty-five years and are set in both the American South and North and in such foreign locations as Africa, Paris, and Copenhagen. Addressed primarily to white Americans, they are best characterized by Wright's declaration in 1945 that unless white Americans change their ways, they will soon be facing overt Negro violence against them.[63]

The violence of the stories in *Eight Men* has been criticized by James Baldwin. Not only does he feel that it is gratuitous and compulsive, but he also condemns Wright's failure to explore the roots of that violence, which, Baldwin claims, are the inner rages of the author and of the fictional characters. He does congratulate Wright for uncovering the sexual myths proliferated around the American Negro, suggesting that when Wright pays great heed

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to the details of physical destruction, he is stressing the Negro's "terrible attempt to break out of the cage which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long."[64]

The details in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," a short story included in *Eight Men*, relate to the rural culture of the Southern Negro.[65] They are vaguely reminiscent of the flight elements in *Black Boy*. The seventeen-year-old David wants to be treated as an adult by other Negroes in the rural community; and by owning a gun against his parents' wishes, he possesses a symbol of maturity and of rebellion against parental authority. After he has accidentally shot a mule owned by his white employer and has been chastised by his parents, he must live with the haunting memories of a white crowd that has laughed at him because of his foolish actions. Finding the strain too pressing, he steals off into the night and boards a passing freight train, presumably northward bound. The tale suggests that the whites are the overlords who force the Negro personality inward toward its own separate culture group. Although the Negro parents who do not understand the needs of their son could, of course, be any parents, white or black, there is the slightest suggestion that these Negro parents feel the white burden above them and are thus unable to communicate openly with their own kin. The heckling and laughing white crowd is only a stage prop used by Wright to symbolize the amusement afforded the whites by confused Negroes. The result is not unification and communication among Southern blacks; rather, it is the flight from the South—from the environment that has produced their frightened and fragmented black culture—a re-echoing of the final pages of *Black Boy*.

"The Man Who Killed a Shadow" deals with the real and shadow lives of Saul Saunders, a Negro born in a small Southern town who subsequently becomes aware of "a

world . . . split in two, a white world and a black one, the white one being separated from the black by a million psychological miles."[66] Later, as a middle-aged janitor in Washington's National Cathedral, he is continually distracted by the sexually suggestive antics of a forty-year-old, virgin, white librarian. One day, after being called "black nigger" by her, he experiences a swift resurgence of the submerged responses to a lifetime of buried humilities. In a surrealistic scene, he brutally kills the librarian and mutilates her body. Although the blond, blue-eyed Miss Houseman, like the laughing white crowd in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," is an undeveloped, symbolic stage prop, the outburst of animalistic violence directed against her by Saul Saunders is a figurative representation of another possible Negro reaction to generations of white suppression and of white sexual myth perversion. Like Bigger Thomas and many of Wright's Negro characters, Saul has looked "timidly out from his black world" to see "the shadowy outlines of a white world that was unreal to him and not his own."[67] The single moment of uncontrollable rage bursts out into the white world in the form of hideous violence, as Saul, symbolically all Negroes, destroys the shadow that has covered him all his life. The story is a warning to whites, a timeworn tale told elsewhere and often by Wright in one shape or another. Its publication date, 1949, bares a consistent attitude toward American Negro-white relations on the part of the author.

Baldwin feels that "Man of All Work"—the last short fictional work written by Wright—is a masterpiece and a sign that Wright, "as he died, was acquiring a new tone, and a less uncertain esthetic distance, and a new depth."[68] Wright's portrayal of a Negro man who, unable to find a job and relying on the income from his wife's work, dresses in his wife's clothes and hires himself out as a cook, penetrates deeply into the demoralization of the Negro male

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and the fragmentation occurring within a family when the female plays the role of the breadwinner.[69] To a certain extent the interior of Negro culture is being examined in this radio-play script.[70] However, the plot stresses the events that materialize when the Negro Carl enters the home and the daily routine of the white Fairchild family. Mr. Fairchild's imagined stereotype of promiscuous Negro women and his belief that a Negro woman will want to submit to his advances because he is white and thus powerful lead to a humorous situation, recalling British Restoration drama: a man chasing another man who is disguised as a woman. In due time a jealous Mrs. Fairchild arrives on the scene and helps to disentangle the confused state of affairs by wounding Carl with a bullet. Medical assistance is rendered to the injured Negro, and he returns home, a wiser man for his troubles. Other than the two-hundred-dollar check he receives to save the Fairchild family from public scandal, Carl gains nothing more than a reinforcement of his knowledge that the white world is a perilous habitat for Negroes, and that white men would affront the dignity of black women by assuming that they all are promiscuous. Wright maintains the vision of a hostile and ignorant white world; however, the significant aspect of "Man of All Work" is not in the treatment of themes but in the added dimension of the humor of situation. In this radio script, which lacks authorial intrusions, we see hints of a change in Wright's artistic approach, which death never permitted him to develop. Baldwin's remarks are both pertinent and incisive in this respect.

Wright's novel *The Long Dream* lacks the narrative force of *Native Son.* Although it too was written in a vein of protest, it appeared during a decade in which other Negro novelists were beginning to deal with a wider scope of the American-Negro experience. Accordingly, *The Long Dream* suffered from criticisms that often overlooked some of the accomplishments of the novel. Reviewer Granville Hicks has pointed out the undue melodrama, the unpolished prose style, and the weak characterization of Fishbelly Tucker, the central figure, who seems to mature too quickly.[71] Saunders Redding feels, and justifiably so, that the novel has a major weakness of iteration, that Wright insists the reader be told repeatedly the implications of the plot.[72] Redding's severest attack on *The Long Dream* revolves around the idea that Wright in his Paris exile had lost touch with his American roots and thus could not accurately account for either subtle or dramatic changes in race relations in the States.[73] In *The Long Dream,* Wright does return to the Southern world of *Black Boy* and his early short fiction; and Fishbelly's flight to Paris at the end of the novel mirrors conclusions in other of Wright's works and also parallels his own self-exile.

Thematically, *The Long Dream* characterizes a relationship between the whites and the blacks of the South distinguished again by a curtain drawn by the ruling whites. Threats and dangers to Negro property, life, and personality are unrelentingly present. However, the novel differs from Wright's other fiction in two ways: it depicts a middle-class, entrepreneur Negro existence, and it portrays the psychological and emotional growth of a central figure over a period of time. Artistically noteworthy are the ironies in dialogue and action and the inclusion of mirrored episodes.

The action takes place in Clintonville, Mississippi, a town of twenty-five thousand inhabitants, ten thousand of whom are Negroes. Tyree Tucker, Fishbelly's father, is a prospering middle-class businessman whose facade enterprise is a funeral parlor. However, a substantial portion of his income is derived from dwellings rented to Negroes and from a Negro whorehouse. In addition, Tyree and another Negro professional man, Dr. Bruce, own a dance

hall, which is another haven of entertainment and prostitution for Clintonville's Negroes. For ten years a monthly check has been given by Tyree and Dr. Bruce to Gerald Cantley, the white chief of police, to permit the illicit operations in the shabby dance hall to continue unhindered. When a Fourth-of-July fire destroys the dance hall in the 1950s, forty-two Negroes perish, triggering a chain of events that includes the murder of Tyree and the emergence of Fishbelly as the manager of the Tucker businesses.

The first two sections, about three-quarters of *The Long Dream*, are occupied with Fishbelly's relationship with his father and his impressions of what a Negro must do in order to live safely in the South. The final section deals with Fishbelly's contacts with whites and the events turning his fear and suppressed hatred and jealousy of whites into flight. His escape from Mississippi mirrors Fishbelly's earlier discovery that Southern whites "lived with niggers, shared with them, worked with them, but owed them no human recognition."[74] It also reflects his dream of entering a social realm in which his safety is ensured and his ability to accumulate money and material goods is not stifled. Fishbelly is fatally in love with the white world, because the white world could offer him the chance to develop his personality and his wealth without fear of reprisal from a racial group. The fact that he flees directly to Paris, bypassing the American North, represents a commentary by Wright on the racial climate of Northern cities and conveys an insight supported later by actual racial violence in the North.

Tyree Tucker has been able to uplift his family through smart though occasionally unethical business dealings. Although he possesses a house, cars, and property holdings equal to those of many middle-class whites of the town, he does so only by exploiting members of his own race. In addition, he must depend upon an uneasy alliance with the white powers of the town to maintain his position. Operating within a Negro proverb that the "white folks are on top of us, and our own folks are on top of our folks, and God help the black man on the bottom," he knows that he can reach merely the lower perimeter of the white world. His security is possible only because he has money to bribe many whites from destroying him and his business ventures. Meanwhile, Fishbelly in his youth, like the young Wright in *Black Boy*, slowly perceives the truth of his father's belief but inwardly rebels against the adverse implications for the full development of his own personality.

A fascinating aspect of the novel is Fishbelly's movement from this rebellion to acceptance. A disgust that had overcome him when his father was forced to act humbly and subserviently in front of the chief of police and the mayor is transformed in time into Fishbelly's willingness to act out the role of vassal to the white world. The moment of conversion occurs when Fishbelly, brought to jail for trespassing on white property and then playfully threatened with castration by white policemen, is released only after Tyree has pleaded with his white connections to drop the charges. Fishbelly then comprehends that his father all along has been doing the only thing possible for a Negro who wishes a measure of independence in the South. Earlier he had felt that his father was a symbolically castrated man. Now that he himself has been compelled to face real castration, he believes that his safety is bound up in the acquisition of money and the acceptance of his father's pragmatic philosophy that "the only way to git along with white folks is to grin in their goddamn faces and make 'em feel good and then do what the hell you want to behind their goddamn backs!"[75]

To this point in the novel, Wright has pictured both the perpetuation of white hostility and domination and the continuation of the Negro's fatalistic response to them from

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one generation to the next. Fishbelly's hatred and disgust for his father's acceptance of servility is changed into an admiration for the cunning and intelligence that have made that position secure. However, the irony lies in the channeling of Negro energies and frustrations into efforts of cheating other Negroes in order to please whites, thus reinforcing the structure of the segregated society. Wright successfully uses two recurrent images—parasites and castration—to illustrate the nature of the whole society and the white threats that help to keep it as it is. If Wright's earlier depiction of the South of the 1920s and 1930s was characterized by fear and buried hatred on the part of poor Negroes, that of the 1950s is featured by more of the same, but now on the part of middle-class Negroes. Corruption and exploitation now become sins shared by both whites and blacks.

Following the dance-hall fire, in which Fishbelly has lost his light-colored Negro mistress, Tyree engages Chief of Police Cantley in a game of blackmail. The cancelled checks held by Tyree are pitted against Cantley's influence with the jury that will try Tyree for the criminal negligence responsible for the fire. After Cantley has arranged for and supervised Tyree's murder, Fishbelly has the option of using his large share of the inheritance or of fleeing the town. But Fishbelly is blinded by the glitter of the possible gold he could gain by continuing both his father's corrupt arrangement with Cantley and the operation of the whorehouse, and he elects to stay in Clintonville. One generation of Negroes replaces another, and the white-dominated system remains unthreatened by revolt or unweakened by escape. Chief Cantley's next move is to discover whether Fishbelly has the cancelled checks; and Fishbelly, imitating his father in a way that previously had repulsed him, falls down on his knees before Cantley, pleading and crying that he would not betray a white man. Again Wright

creates a mirror effect from one Tucker to the next, symbolizing the continuing fate of the Southern Negro.

At last Fishbelly is caught in a situation that recalls to him Tyree's shouted proclamation: *"You are nothing because you are black, and proof of your being nothing is that if you touch a white woman, you'll be killed!"*[76] Cantley prearranges to have Fishbelly found with a white woman. Fishbelly is caught and, through the working of white juries and laws, is sentenced to jail for two years. There, away from his money-making operations in Clintonville, he begins to see what exactly his Negro life in the South has been. Not even the power and authority of comparative wealth have been sufficient to secure a safe existence. Instead, he finds an earlier conviction of his youth confirmed—a conviction he had somewhere dismissed in his later selfish desires to accumulate the money he foolishly thought would buy him life and dignity. He now understands that the white world "had the power to say who could or could not live and on what terms; and the world in which he and his family lived was a kind of shadow world."[77] Like Wright at the end of *Black Boy*, Fishbelly flees the hostile South, "yearning to be at last somewhere at home," yearning to find a place that would allow his personality to develop within a whole society, not a fragmented and racially segregated one.[78]

The Long Dream is a protest novel. As such, it makes little distinction between the Negro-white relations Wright grew to comprehend during the days of his youth described in *Black Boy* and the relations he could only read about and sense during his final years in Paris. *The Long Dream* reiterates a consistent Wright theme that in America a curtain hangs between the black and white races. This curtain is not only an outgrowth of white prejudice, but also a barrier against the elimination of that prejudice through communication between the races. Furthermore,

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it creates an impediment to the full development and expression of all American Negroes. Seeing injustices heaped upon the Negro and recognizing the denial of humanity to the Negro, a tortured Wright must cry out in rage—a rage, as James Baldwin pronounces, that is almost literally the howl of a man being castrated.[79] Wright's bitterness at the history and the course of relations between the two races is as noticeable and intrusive in his final novel as it is in nearly everything he had published. Despite the naturalistic techniques and the use of the third-person, omniscient narrator, an aesthetic and philosophic distance between the author and his material is never achieved—in *The Long Dream* or nearly every other piece by Wright concerned with American race relations. Even when the dialectics of Marxism, to be transformed into social action, offered Wright a hope for parting the color curtain, he reverted to the attitudes he had acquired in his youth in the South and in his early adulthood among the Black Belt inhabitants of Chicago. In the absence of the tempering influence of Marxism, a feeling of outrage thoroughly permeates *The Long Dream.*

When we listen to Wright telling us about the worlds of black and white in America, we may hear echoes from a poem that he wrote in the 1930s, "Between the World and Me." In it the persona stumbles upon the remains of a tarred-and-feathered Negro. Soon the dry bones and the gray ashes begin to sink into the persona himself, and he imagines that he too is battered by white hands. Then, after being tied to a sapling, coated with hot tar, punctured by white feathers, and drenched in gasoline, he is set afire. The poem ends with begging and pain—the cry of a man agonized by the sight of man's inhumanity to man.[80] This pain and agony, whether real or imagined, characterizes Richard Wright's treatment of American race relations. It underlies the protest of a black man who would sacrifice,

perhaps unintentionally, the preciousness of his art for the birth of humane justice in his native land. However, as a cry of pain within protest writing, it seeks a justice that Wright felt was within the scope of human achievement. Other aspects of his work indicate as much.