

THE NATURALISM OF RICHARD WRIGHT:

An examination of the naturalistic imagery in Wright's short fiction

by

Jason Charles Williams

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate  
Faculty of Salisbury State University,  
Salisbury, Maryland, in partial  
fulfillment of the requirement for the  
degree of Masters of Arts

1998

This Thesis for the M.A. degree  
by Jason Charles Williams  
has been approved for the  
Graduate Faculty

by

Wavie Gibson Jr.

Dr. W. Gibson, Supervisor

Connie L. Richards

Dr. C. Richards, Reader

Thomas Z. Erskine

Dr. T. Erskine, Reader

Date 5/21/98

Abstract

Williams, Jason Charles (M.A., English)

The Naturalism of Richard Wright: An examination of the naturalistic imagery in Wright's Short Fiction

Thesis directed by Wavie Gibson, Jr.

Dr. Wavie Gibson, Jr.

This thesis investigates the naturalism, including animal and natural imagery and metaphor, dehumanization of characters, devolution of characters, etc., within Richard Wright's short fiction in order to determine whether Wright's early naturalistic philosophy continued throughout his career. Through a chronological examination of the naturalistic aspects in several stories in both Uncle Tom's Cabin and Eight Men, this investigation demonstrates that Wright maintained a consistent, naturalistic focus up to his last short story, despite his involvement with French existentialists in the 1940s. This abstract of about 81 words is approved.

Signed Wavie Gibson, Jr.

Dr. W. Gibson, Supervisor

Connie Richards

Dr. C. Richards, Reader

Thomas T. Erskine

Dr. T. Erskine, Reader

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Wright and the Canon.....                        | 1-3   |
| Wright and Naturalism.....                       | 3-4   |
| Wright and Existentialism.....                   | 5-6   |
| Wright's Naturalistic Consistency.....           | 6-7   |
| Early Stories 1936-9.....                        | 7-47  |
| Wright's Pseudo-existentialism of the 1940s..... | 47-67 |
| Wright's New Perspective.....                    | 67-72 |
| Conclusion.....                                  | 72-74 |
| Works Cited.....                                 | 74-75 |

## Wright and the Canon

In the three decades that spanned Richard Nathaniel Wright's career, he wrote and published five novels, fourteen short stories, two plays, a screenplay, four thousand haiku poems, five works of nonfiction, and a stunning autobiography. Wright is usually listed in anthologies of American literature as a naturalistic writer, a post-twenties exception that occurred after the boom of naturalistic fiction by Norris, Crane, and others. Too late for the Harlem Renaissance, he is often seen as a bridge between the African-American literature of the that time period and the modernism of writers like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Henry Louis Gates in the preface to Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present states, "one of Wright's most enduring legacies was to have bred--through reaction--the movement of African-American modernism exemplified by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (xiii). Gates contends that Wright is an intricate piece in the development of African-American fiction. However, little has been written about Wright's individual development as a writer.

Most of the critical attention given to Wright deals with Native Son, his most famous novel, a decidedly naturalistic text about Bigger Thomas, a young, black man who accidentally murders a rich, white man's daughter. The novel contains all of the elements of a protest novel, advocating Communism as the best method of fighting a racist environment. In Richard Wright: A Collection of Essays, Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer define the determinism of Bigger's environment: "The only way he can

find, less than consciously, to affirm this humanity is through a brutal act of violence against the society that confines him" (5). Bigger's world "systematically denies his humanity,"(5) explains Macksey and Moorer, so he has nothing left but the instinct to survive. Because of the great commercial success that Wright achieved with Native Son, his other works seem to be dwarfed in the shadow of its popularity.

Wright is usually defined as a naturalistic writer because of the naturalistic elements of Native Son. However, as a result of Wright's historical positioning in the post-naturalist decade of the thirties and his later works, like The Outsider, which appeared to be existential, a debate has arisen over Wright's literary philosophy. Some critics believe he was purely a naturalist, that his experiments in existentialism were unrealized. Others recognize a philosophical shift that occurred in Wright's work when he moved to Europe in the forties and became friends with Jean-Paul Sartre. This paper seeks to determine whether a transition occurred in Wright's literary philosophy, specifically whether his early naturalism changed to existentialism when he encountered its philosophy in the forties.

In order to discover whether the debated shift did occur in Wright's literary career, one must do a careful examination of his career, which spanned more than three decades. Given the constraints of space, time, and resources, a complete examination of such a lengthy career would be practically impossible for this study. Moreover, such examination would most likely be quite jumbled, given the variety of genres represented by Wright's

literary works. However, a careful analysis of his short stories and novellas should reveal any significant shift that might have occurred. The short stories and novellas represent a concentrated application of Wright's skills. Moreover, in short fiction, an author must rely more upon the elements of his craft in a limited space in order to convey the themes intended. Accordingly, the present discussion will examine the naturalistic elements in the two collections of Wright's short fiction: Uncle Tom's Children and Eight Men.

Four stories that appear in Eight Men and Uncle Tom's Children are not included in this study. In Uncle Tom's Children, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" is not included because it is an excerpt from Wright's autobiography, as is "The Man Who Went To Chicago" in Eight Men. Since both pieces are part of Wright's autobiography, they do not fit the criteria of the short story, the genre this study focuses on. In addition, "Man Of All Work" and "Man, God Ain't Like" are excluded because both stories are dialogue pieces (possibly radio programs) and therefore, lack the imagery necessary for this analysis.

### Wright and Naturalism

Some of the most respected Wright scholars and biographers, such as Michel Fabre, Bernard Bell, and Margaret Walker Alexander, believe that Wright wrote within naturalistic boundaries. Naturalism is defined by M.H. Abrams in his glossary of literary terms as a "post-Darwinian" placement of man as animal (175). More specifically, naturalistic novels contain a protagonist who "inherits compulsive instincts--especially hunger, the

accumulative drive, and sexuality--and is then subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which that person is born" (175). The crux of naturalism is environmental determinism, the belief that one's social atmosphere determines one's perspective of the world. Philosophical naturalism views man as a part of a natural process that can be scientifically studied. John J. Conder in his book Naturalism in American Fiction discusses the "pessimistic determinism" that critics observed in writers like Norris and Dreiser (1). Although he questions the pessimism of these writers, he asserts the necessary component of determinism when defining naturalism: "The scientific mentality that emphasizes causality easily leads in the direction of determinism" (9). In short, humans operate within an inescapable, natural order of cause and effect.

This definition, according to many critics, reads like a blueprint for Wright's fiction. According to critic Bernard Bell in his comprehensive study, The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, Wright's "mission was to overwhelm the sensibilities of the white world with the truth of his naturalistic vision" (154). It is not uncommon for Wright to be labeled a naturalistic writer and listed among earlier writers, like Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. He himself confesses in his autobiography Black Boy his connection to naturalism: "All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them"(295). Margaret Walker Alexander, writer and friend of Wright, also describes Wright's literary philosophy in naturalistic terms: "Human nature and human society are

determinants and, being what he is, man is merely a pawn. . .He is alone against the odds of Nature, Chance, Fate and the vicissitudes of life" (53).

### Wright and Existentialism

Despite the critical support asserting Wright's naturalism, there is proof that Wright was exposed to existential theory. In fact when he moved to France in the late 1940s, he became good friends with the main proponent of atheistic existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Sartre's Being and Nothingness, Sartre proposes that reality is constructed from observation, not from being (Honderich 793). Therefore, Sartre's theory differs from the social determinism of naturalism because it believes that determinism and an "independent reality of ethical values" are illusions (793). Abrams defines existentialism as a human "cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning" (1). A human's existence is therefore "absurd" because it moves from nothingness into nothingness (1).

Many Wright scholars contend that his fiction became existential after his involvement with the French existentialists. In his examination of Wright's novella "The Man Who Lived Underground," Edward Margolies argues for Wright's existentialism: "Like Wright's heroes, the characters of existentialist authors move about in a world devoid of principles, God, and purpose--and suffer horror at their awesome godlike powers as they create their own personalities and values out of the chaos of existence" (80). Katherine Fishburn in Richard Wright's

Hero: The Faces of the Rebel-Victim acknowledges the acceptance of Wright's existentialism in his later fiction, citing other proponents of his existentialism--critics Stanley Edgar Hyman, Ronald Ridenour and Shirley Meyer--and calling "The Man Who Lived Underground" one of the "best examples of Wright's existential thinking" (155).

#### Wright's Naturalistic Consistency

In order to determine whether or not Wright shifted to existentialism as these critics contend, an examination of the naturalism in his earlier stories is imperative. The discussion below examines Wright's earlier stories and confirms a career consistency through his use of similar naturalistic themes, such as man's conflict with a deterministic environment, man's animal instincts, and man's tendency toward violence. Specifically, the natural and animal imagery of the short stories of the 1930s demonstrates Wright's naturalistic predisposition. Furthermore, despite those who argue for Wright's existentialism in his later stories, the stories of the forties and fifties show a remarkable consistency with his earlier naturalistic imagery. Elements of existentialism do exist, but they seem to be no more than conventions of existential literature, not based on an existential philosophy.

A compelling argument for Wright's consistent adherence to naturalism was his appreciation of his place in America and the ability of naturalism to explain that place in a larger context. Why did that philosophy seem to provide him with, as he states in *Black*

Boy, "a sense of life itself?" The answer seems to be provided by Wright himself in his autobiography:

I now knew what being a Negro meant. I could endure the hunger. I had to learn to live with the hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me. (296)

The naturalistic world view he found in Dreiser and others provided him with an explanation of the psychology of the African-American, as well as a means to protest the oppression of the African-American. For Wright, the oppressive natural world created in stories like the "Open Boat" is mirrored in the everyday oppressions of African-Americans in this country. His realization of the position of African-Americans is what led him to say that "the Negro is America's metaphor" (qtd. in Bell 150). The African-American's oppression was simply a microcosm of the deterministic nature of the universe.

In a letter to his friend Margaret Walker Alexander, Wright explains his writing perspective: "In short, a writer may exhibit a greater knowledge of the world than he has actually seen" (35-6). Wright may have been unaware of the consistent naturalism he employed, but despite the experiments in other conventions of gothic romance, existentialism, and true crime, he remained a naturalist who believed that the environment determined one's life, and African-American's struggled, as did all of humanity, to survive the oppressive nature of the universe.

## Early Stories 1936-39

Examining Wright's short fiction of the thirties reveals his preoccupation with naturalistic themes of social determinism and dehumanization. Here he deals with the African-American's development in an oppressive environment that denied his humanity, that prevented him from assuming manhood, and often left him psychologically scarred. His examinations of the African-American psyche often contained elements of Freudian psychoanalysis that explained the character's neurosis in terms of his/her environmental conditions. Wright's early stories of the 1930s focus upon the dehumanization of an individual by a racist, deterministic environment that provokes only violent, animalistic responses. Most characters in these early stories meet a tragic, violent end because of their attempt to escape the inescapable determinism of their environment.

In stories such as "Fire and Cloud" (1937) and "Bright and Morning Star," (1938) Wright merges his Communist affiliations with his naturalistic perspective, providing protest fiction that provided Communist doctrine as solutions to the oppressive environment. In the stories of the 1930s, Wright offers Communism as the new religion to replace the submission of Christianity, which emphasized endurance rather than political organization. In short, the early short fiction of Wright set the naturalist tone of his later work.

## "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936)

In the novella "Big Boy Leaves Home," a young boy, aptly named Big Boy, while swimming naked with three friends on the

property of a white man, startles a white woman who happens upon them as they are drying off in the sun. The woman's husband, a soldier and the son of the racist property owner, hears his wife's screams, shoots and kills two of the boys and is attempting to kill Big Boy and Bobo when Big Boy gets the man's gun and kills him in apparent self-defense. His family and the community, fearing a white reprisal, send him to hide in a kiln, a large hole in the ground on the outskirts of town, to wait for a truck that would be able to take him north. Bobo, attempting to join Big Boy in the kiln, is caught and burned alive while Big Boy looks on helplessly. The novella concludes with Big Boy hopping the truck north.

On the surface, the novella is about stunted maturation. The short story illustrates Big Boy's doomed attempt to mature to adulthood in a society that hinders the process. Kenneth Kinnamon, in The Emergence of Richard Wright, comments that the story has a familiar theme, "the initiation of a youth into violence and his escape from it . . . . a kind of postpubescent black Huck Finn. . ." (85) The images of animals and nature within the story serve to mirror and highlight Big Boy's dehumanization by his racist environment. In other words, it is the racist determinism of his environment that prevents him from achieving maturation. Instead, his environment causes him to revert to violent, animalistic instincts to survive.

Margoiles identifies the opening scene as "an American dream setting--an idyllic country atmosphere--carrying echoes of Mark Twain. . ." (61). The rite of passage motif is introduced as the

group of adolescent boys come walking out of the woods, singing and laughing, into the pasture, "beating tangled vines and bushes with long sticks" (17). As is suggested by these sticks, it is also a sexual rite of passage, a realization of the danger of their own sexuality. As they enter the clearing, Big Boy, the obvious leader and dominant male of the group, identifies and labels the female sexuality. "N she hung em out in the hall,/ N then she put em back on her QUALL!" (18). Big Boy invents the word "QUALL," identifying her sex and therefore, moving closer to sexual maturation than the other boys. Furthermore, the name Big Boy suggests that he is closer to maturation than the more childlike name Bobo, the bestial name of Buck and the *less* of Lester.

Part of this rite of passage for their group is understanding their place in the world. The four boys have only begun to realize their position in society, and their explanations of their position are expressed through the animalistic metaphors that dominate their descriptions of one another. They compare each other to hens, horses, dogs, snakes, hippopotamus, and rabbits. Although the name calling is done in the context of making fun of one another, the comparisons reflect their self-perception as less than human, a perception nurtured by white society's rejection of their humanity:

'NO TRESPASSIN," read Lester.

"Know whut tha mean?"

"Mean ain no dogs n niggers erllowed," said Buck. (25)

Buck's comments suggest that he understands the way in which white society views him and his friends, and their use of animal insults of one another suggest a partial acceptance of their status.

The whole narrative reflects the naturalistic determinism of growing up in a world that treats one as subhuman and therefore forces animalistic responses.

The animalistic portrayal of the boys is evident in their challenge of Big Boy's dominance of the group, which reads like a group of wild animals challenging the dominant male of the pack:

Big Boy bared his teeth.

"C mon! Try it now!"

The three circled around him. (21)

Grunting, kicking, and hissing, Big Boy finally succeeds in maintaining his position, and his victory foreshadows his ultimate survival. As Margoiles argues, "there is a skillful interplay of the boy-man aspects of Big Boy's character" (62). He is both the leader and most mature member of their group, but he is still a boy.

Big Boy's world is the animal kingdom of Darwin, where "only the strong survive." The dehumanization of these boys into animals fighting for survival demonstrates Wright's naturalistic vision of African-American life: denied their humanity by white society, African-American children grow up in an environment that prevents maturation. Big Boy's attempt at maturation causes the conflict in the story.

Big Boy's superior progression of sexual maturity is displayed again when he confronts the white woman who comes upon them after they have been swimming naked. Her name, Bertha, suggests Big Boy's birth of sexual understanding: "Big Boy stopped puzzled. He looked at the woman. He looked at the bundle of clothes . . . . Black and naked, Big Boy stopped three feet

from her" (30). He is the only one to confront and speak to the woman, and her reaction of horror to his blackness and nakedness puzzles him.

Wright is demonstrating the dangers of sexuality for African-Americans because of white, racist fear. Given the stereotypes about the animal nature of African-Americans, the white woman reacts out of ridiculous fear of being raped. The white man's reaction to his wife's screams is to begin shooting. After the man has killed his two friends, Big Boy grabs the barrel of the gun, attempting to assume a symbolic sexual maturation. The narrative becomes less about "slice of life" realism and more about maintaining the naturalistic rite of passage for Big Boy. The struggle with the gun is a symbolic struggle for the right of sexual maturity, the right to become a complete man. The phallic gun is first used by the dominant white male, and it isn't till Big Boy's challenge to his power that the killing stops.

The man responds by calling Big Boy a "black sonofabitch" and a "black bastard" (31), suggesting a lack of heritage and the rape, both literal and figurative, of the black culture. He is the son of a woman who was treated as less than human, a "bitch" for white culture. Calling him a "bastard" also suggests the rape that occurred during slavery by white masters which produced "bastard" children whom the white world refused to acknowledge. Here, Wright allows the white man's racial hatred to indict white society for their debasement and dehumanization of black culture.

Big Boy manages to shoot the man and flees with Bobo, who serves as a foil to Big Boy. The name Bobo suggests his

immaturity, perhaps suggesting a childish version of Big Boy. Big Boy forces Bobo to return to his own house alone while he runs to his home. His mother and father, frightened of the repercussions of the white community, call the African-American community leaders together to help figure out a way to smuggle Big Boy out of the state. It is imperative that Big Boy leave because he is no longer a boy but has matured beyond that level. His challenge and defeat of the white soldier make it impossible for him to remain in their community. As Brother Peters comments, "ef they ketch im there itll ruin us all" (43). The community sends him to the edge of town to hide in the kilns, and Big Boy runs "straight toward the sunset," the sun suggesting the end is near for his rite of passage.

The naturalistic narrative structure is revealed not only in the characters but also in the setting, where nature suggests the fate of living in a white world: "A black winged butterfly" and the "sparrows" within the scene foreshadow the death to come in gothic descriptions (28). The image of a "black winged butterfly" is particularly apt because it suggests the rebirth of Big Boy. Just like the butterfly, Big Boy is maturing and the uniqueness of his blackness is beautiful but also slightly foreboding. Critic Tracy Webb's essay on "The Role of Water Imagery in Uncle Tom's Cabin," correctly explicates the symbolic significance of the water in "Big Boy Leaves Home." Like the other aspects of the setting, the water is "something they can want . . . but not ever really have" (8). The dominant association of the water is death, the shooting of Buck and Lester at the pond and the rain unable to put out the flames that engulf Bobo.

Biographer Keneth Kinnamon believes "The idyllic setting and the exuberant animal spirits of the boys combine to invest the scene with a charming natural innocence," making the tragedy more profound (83). However, while the children are naive to the danger, the children seem to recognize their debased position in the world already: " 'Yuh know ol man Harvey don erllow no niggers t swim in this hole' " (25). Wright is creating a purely naturalistic setting that reduces men to animals because that is the natural response to the environmental oppression.

Wright's naturalistic world is a world full of symbolism and archetypes. For example, Big Boy's encounter with both the snake and the dog when he is hiding in the hillside pit strip Big Boy of his humanity, leaving only his bestial instincts of survival: "He fought viciously, his eyes red, his teeth bared in a snarl. He beat till the snake lay still; then he stomped it with his heel, grinding its head into dirt" (47). The biblical allusion of the snake in the garden of Eden is, of course, significant because the snake represents the evil of the Big Boy's racist environment. Inside the hell-like kiln, hiding from an angry, white mob, Big Boy's killing of the snake reflects his dream of violent reaction toward his racist environment. As Margoiles explains, "the snake and the methodical, impassioned manner in which Big Boy destroys it suggest at one and the same time his terror and burning hatred of the whites" (62). Given the obvious implications of the biblical allusion of the snake, the snake is also simply an animal, and therefore, Big Boy must sink to its level to destroy it. He becomes

an animal, experiencing a kind of de-evolution that characterizes naturalist literature.

The hunting dog that discovers him in the kiln also manages to dehumanize him into an instinctual struggle for survival:

"Instinctively, he fumbled for the throat as he felt the dog twisting between his knees. The dog snarled, long and low, as though gathering strength. Big Boy's hands traveled swiftly over the dog's back, groping for the throat" (58). Big Boy, once again, is relegated to a beast of instinct.

As introduced earlier, in both naturalistic fights, Wright is also presenting symbolic sexual confrontations, another naturalistic theme, depicted in very violent terms to reinforce the idea of the violence associated with the fear of black sexuality. The phallic connotations of the snake are obvious, but the "groping" and "stiffening" and the "dognails digging into his loin" as he was "pushing his whole weight" on the dog also suggest a symbolic sexual confrontation. The violence of the act reflects the violence associated with African-American sexuality in a world that seeks to deny that maturation, a recurrent Wright theme in his short fiction.

Wright's skillful depiction of the dehumanization of the black man and the denial of his sexuality in symbolic and naturalistic detail is further supported in the horribly riveting scene of Bobo's brutal execution. Drenched in tar, he is covered with feathers and burned alive. Resembling a bird, he is finally murdered in a dehumanized form. Perhaps there may be a suggestion of hope in Big Boy's successful escape--a Phoenix from the ashes, given Big

Boy and Bobo's coupling--but the true animalistic nature of man has been revealed.

The harshness of the violence in this story and others reflects Wright's predisposition as a protest writer, and naturalism seems to be the best tool for his purpose. "Big Boy Leaves Home" with its rendering of a naturalistic rite of passage is the perfect blueprint for the naturalistic flavor of the following narratives because it introduces recurrent themes in Wright's work. The dehumanization of man, the fear of African-American sexuality, and violence associated with maturation are all themes that will appear in later stories.

#### "Long Black Song" (1936)

Published the same year as "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Long Black Song" explores the dynamics of black male/female relationships in an oppressive society. Sarah, the protagonist, waiting for her husband Silas, ponders her past relationship with Tom, a soldier who left to fight in World War I, when a white salesman comes to her house. The salesman, whom Sarah describes as a "little boy selling clocks," (134) forces himself on Sarah, who acquiesces, succumbing to her stifled desires--her "white bright days and dark black nights" (137). He leaves the clock, promising to return the next day to collect a down payment from her husband.

Her husband returns to find the salesman's hat, pencil, and handkerchief in their room and correctly assumes that his wife has slept with the salesman. Smashing the clock, Silas runs Sarah from the house with a horse whip. After running back to the

house for her baby, Sarah camps out under an oak tree, awaiting the salesman's return for the money. Upon the salesman's return with a friend, Silas attempts to horsewhip them and then shoots one of them as the other speeds away. The man who escapes brings back white reinforcements, and a gunfight ensues, ending in the burning down of the house with Silas inside. The final scene is Sarah running from the horrible scene, clutching her baby.

This story was the first of two stories with a female protagonist, and Sarah's perspective becomes the lens from which the reader interprets the events. Margolies states, "The narrative unfolds from [Sarah's] point of view--and she becomes , at the end, a kind of deep mother earth character, registering her primal instincts and reactions to the violence and senselessness she sees about her" (66). Margolies is correct in his identification of her as a "deep mother earth character." Her description of the natural beauty of the farm contrasts with the truth of the violence and hatred under the surface, represented by Silas' reaction.

Sarah's sublime natural perspective is evident in the vibrant color imagery, used to describe her setting:

She saw green fields wrapped in the thickening gloam. It was as if they had left the earth, those fields, and were floating skyward. The afterglow lingered, red, dying, somehow tenderly sad. And far way, in front of her, earth and sky met in a soft swoon of shadow. A cricket chirped, sharp and lonely; and it seemed she could hear it chirping long after it had stopped. (127)

The natural scene seems sentimentalized and idyllic, despite the "thickening gloam." Sarah and this natural world are connected, and the setting reflects her emotions in the colors of the sky and the "lonely" chirping of the crickets.

Sarah's "hope of white bright days and deep desire of dark black nights" (129) are her daydreams of love, now that Tom, her true love, has left. Sarah romanticizes her life: "[Tom's] leaving had left an empty black hole in her heart, a black hole that Silas had come in and filled. But not quite" (129). Sarah is seduced by the young salesman largely because she seems to exist in this world of idyllic nature. Kinnamon identifies the irony of Sarah's sexuality: "In this way sex, central to the feeling of natural harmony of this earth-mother figure, becomes the trigger for the extreme disharmony of racial conflict" (96). The conflict arises when the salesman arrives.

The salesman lives in a completely different world and enters her world in a "black car" (129), bringing death into her romantic world. This young, college student studying science brings a bit of "reality" into Sarah's romantic, agrarian life. The entrance of the real nature of man is best illustrated by the clock. Before the salesman arrives, the baby is given a clock to play with, and Sarah's musings about Tom are accompanied by the "Bang! Bang! Bang!" of the clock. When the salesman arrives, he brings with him an attitude alien to Sarah's natural world:

"But how do you keep time?"

"We git erlong widout time."

"But how do you know when to get up in the morning?"

"We just git up, thas all."

"But how do you know what time it is when you get up?"

"We git up wid the sun."

"And at night, how do you tell when its night?"

"It gits dark when the sun goes down." (131)

The dialogue between the salesman and Sarah demonstrates the different perspectives of each. The salesman cannot understand the lack of technology, of precision in their daily routine. In Sarah's natural world, however, the sun dictates their work and rest, and time doesn't exist for her--until the salesman brings her the graphophone clock.

The "Bang! Bang! Bang!" of the baby's clock, associated most with thoughts of Tom, and the new clock that "reminded her of the light she saw sometimes in the baby's eyes" seem to signal her sexual desire. The description of her sexual encounter with the white salesman is accompanied by the "bangbangbang" (137) of the baby's clock:

A liquid metal covered her and she rode on the curve of white bright days and dark black nights and the surge of gladness of the summer and the ebb of the deep dream of sleep in the winter till a high red wave of hotness drowned her in a deluge of silver and blue that boiled her blood and blistered her flesh bangbangbang. . . (137)

The description lacks the beauty of her natural world and reflects a more modern, industrialized world, devoid of the "green fields and red suns," replaced by "liquid metal" and a "red wave." Kinnamon argues that "[Sarah's] Edenic vision is in ironic contrast also to the

realities of racial violence that the story presents" (99). The reality is made clear to Sarah when Silas returns and discovers her adultery.

The ultra-violent end of the story emphasizes the dominance of the new industrialized, world over Sarah's idyllic, natural world. Unlike Sarah, Silas has all along recognized the true naturalistic world: "From sunup t sundown Ah works mah guts out t pay them white trash bastards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house . . . . Ah slaves lika dog t git mah farm free" (143). The truth is far from Sarah's vision of harmony with nature. While Sarah might dream of an harmonious existence, her romantic notions of the natural world have been replaced with the harsh determinism of an oppressive, racist society.

The story ends with the destruction of Sarah's world, the burning of the house, and Silas' death. Sarah finally recognizes the true, naturalistic vision, and it is harsh and cold, unlike the harmony of "bright white days and dark black nights" (147) Her picture is of the death and destruction men inflict on each other:

Dimly she saw in her mind a picture of men killing and being killed. White men killed the black and black men killed the white. White men killed black men because they could, and the black men killed the white men to keep from being killed. And killing was blood. Lawd, Ah wish Tom wuz here. (147)

Her realization of the animalistic nature of man and the Darwinian struggle for survival of the black man suggests that she is finally seeing the true naturalistic vision of the world, and she laments for Tom, whom she associates with the romanticized natural world.

The killing would go on, Sarah realizes, "in spite of the hope of white bright days and the desire of dark black nights and the long gladness of green cornfields in the summer and the deep dream of sleeping grey skies in the winter" (133). The final scene is Sarah running across the field, denying the true vision she has seen, calling on its creator "Naw Gawd!" (156).

Wright's use of the setting to reflect the psychology of his characters indicates his naturalistic philosophy, but this "Long Black Song" also contains suggestions of his political leanings as well. The story seems to be steeped in Communist theory, attacking the agrarian ideal as false, especially for the African-American sharecropper. His use of a female protagonist reflects a belief that African-American women, at least farmer's wives, were more unaware of the reality of oppression, the reality of the naturalistic struggle of man. Although Sarah's innocent belief in the harmony of the natural world seems naive, Wright may have been suggesting that her vision, although false, was still the ideal. Unfortunately, the tragedy of the ending suggests that the determinism of the environment is too much to overcome.

#### "Fire and Cloud" (1937)

The novella "Fire and Cloud" that appeared in Uncle Tom's Children in 1938 was published the year before in Story Magazine, winning \$500 in the magazine's story contest. The story was Wright's first use of Communist characters in his short fiction and is much more overtly political than "Long Black Song." The story challenges the traditional religious solution given for the problem

of racial oppression, providing a new solution that reflects Wright's naturalistic perspective.

Here, the protagonist, Reverend Dan Taylor, seeking to get relief for the famine of his town, gets involved with two Communist organizers, Hadley and Green. His involvement in the preparations for a march on the rich, white section of town and city hall, despite his refusal to directly align himself with the Communist leaflets, brings the wrath of a group of racist "white trash" who whip him unconscious. Ousted by a jealous competitor, Deacon Smith, he returns from being beaten to find his church has voted him out of the leadership position.

Rejecting his traditional methods of subservience and patience, Taylor replaces them with resolve to unite the community to march on City Hall. In the most poignant moment of the story, Taylor explains his new, religious philosophy to his son Jimmy: "Yeah, but its different now, son. Its the people! Theys the ones whut mus be real t us! Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us!" (210). In essence, Taylor is expressing the idea that strength comes from the community, not from an isolated relationship to God but from a relationship with other people. The novella ends with Taylor's march on town with the people of his congregation and the poor white people organized by the Communists, and the mayor's acquiescence to their demands, promising them immediate relief.

While the political undercurrent is much stronger in this story and Wright's own political agenda is more readily apparent, the story still contains elements of naturalist fiction, not in spite of

the Communist propaganda, but because of it. The theories of naturalism are, of course, related to Marxist philosophy. Both naturalism and Marxism contend that environmental factors influence the nature of man, and both attempt to explain human relationships in terms of methodology. In her analysis of Wright's naturalism, Joyce Ann Joyce details the link between naturalism and protest fiction: "Both the literature of protest and naturalistic fiction--particular mode of protest--focus on society's mistreatment of an individual and of a particular group of individuals" (10).

Fabre describes Wright as "a humanist who retains the Marxist perspective as an ideological tool" (58). Wright used Marxism to explain the dynamic of social determinism in his short story "Fire and Cloud." For example, as the story opens, Reverend Taylor, returning from the white section of town where relief has been denied, contemplates the world around him: "He thought, Thas the way its awways been!. . .Seems like the white folks just erbout owns this whole worl!. . .We black folks is jus los in one big white fog. . . ." (157). The oppression of their lives is couched in natural terms to show how their environment, dominated by the white majority causes their confusion.

Similar to the deterministic universe of "Big Boy Leaves Home," Dan's world dehumanizes and oppresses him and the people of his town: "Those huts were as familiar to his eyes as a nest is to the eyes of a bird, for he had lived among them all his life" (158). Taylor's comparison of the huts of his community and a nest reveals the survival instincts at play within the community. Taylor and his community are only fighting for the right to survive,

prevented by laws from planting and given no relief from the drought. Their struggle is a Darwinian struggle of strength, and Dan's realization of the origin of strength--the community--is what finally assures their survival: "Yes, he had been like Moses, leading his people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land" (159). Margoiles contends that it is Dan's realization of the strength of "Christian brotherhood" (69) that delivers his people, but it is less about God than it is about the community. In short, their delivery is less a result of Christianity than a result of political organizing of the oppressed workers, an important Communist principle.

Taylor initially finds an answer for his painful existence in God. The dehumanization he endures is powerful as the white oppressors take him into a field and viciously whip him. Ironically, the men force him to say the Lord's Prayer, which reads "give us this day our daily bread," bread being what Taylor was fighting to get for the community. Following the dehumanizing whipping at the hands of the white world, Taylor goes through a transition and begins to rely on the community as he had God for strength.

Taylor, of course, becomes a typical Christ figure, persecuted and oppressed, leading his people, despite opposition, but he is a modern Christ figure and seems to be leading them not to God but to each other. In short, the biblical allusions and symbolism, complete with the "black Judas" (161), Deacon Smith, serve a political purpose rather than a religious one. It is finally the organizing of the oppressed against the bourgeoisie, a Communist

principle, that delivers his people, not the Christian principle of patient endurance which had failed up till then.

In a typical naturalist convention of comparing man to beast, Taylor's journey to revelation is depicted in the image of a bird, following the beating:

A small bird wheeled past his eyes and fluttered dizzily in the starlight. He watched it veer and dip, then crash softly into a tree limb. It fell to the ground, flapping tiny wings blindly. Then the bird twittered in fright and sailed straight upward into the starlight, vanishing. He walked northward. . . because the bird had darted in that direction. (203)

Like the bird's uncertain flight, Taylor had maintained an uncertain relationship with the white community, ascribing to a Booker T. Washington philosophy of elevation through hard work, while wearing a mask of compliance. "He does not give up God entirely, of course," explains Kinnamon "for a southern black preacher does not become a full-fledged Marxist revolutionary overnight" (106). The challenge to his notion is first raised by the white Communist Hadley: "If they knew youd really fight, theyd dislike you; yes? But you can *make* them give you something to *all* of your people, not just to *you*." (175). It isn't until he falls to the ground, tied to a tree and whipped like an animal that he achieves ascendancy. Wright is using a common naturalistic technique of mirroring the human experience in the natural world.

Taylor's connection to the natural world is clearly laid out in Jeffersonian terms. "The earth was his and he was the earth's; they were one. . ."(160). His connection to "God's ground,"

although steeped in Christian theology, also reflects a naturalistic world view. Continuing the connection to the natural world, he is placed parallel to his mule, "following old Bess" (161) against the deterministic world. Despite the obvious political agenda, Wright's naturalism is once again apparent in his descriptions of the setting and characters.

Finally, the "fire" and the "cloud" of the title refer to the burning resentment and passion for survival burning within the oppressed proletariat, and the "cloud" is the massing, the organizing of the displaced and oppressed. As they sing a hymnal, the marriage of politics and spirituality is made complete:

"So the sign of fire by night

N the sign of the cloud by day." (218)

Reverend Taylor experiences "[a] baptism of clean joy" (220) realizing that the strength to fight against oppression comes not from God, but from the community, a common theme in Wright's work: "Wright's concept of this community--extending beyond the Negro world--clasping hands with its white oppressed brothers, informs the very essence of a developing social vision. . . ." (Margoiles 63). Although Margoiles' statement is correct in assessing the stories of Uncle Tom's Children, later stories, such as "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," suggest that the community may not be the solution for the oppressed. This switch may reflect his movement away from the principles of Communism.

This novella, however, is truly protest fiction and Communist propaganda, but the naturalistic world that informs Marxism is apparent in the naturalism of the story. That is, the deterministic

world, the instincts of survival, and attempting to define humanity in an animalistic world are all included. The next story deals with similar Communist propaganda.

"Bright and Morning Star" (1938)

Another novella published in the late thirties was "Bright and Morning Star," the story of Aunt Sue, a mother of a black, Communist organizer in a small, southern town. Aunt Sue's son, Johnny-boy, faced with a "Judas" within the group who has revealed the location and time of their secret meeting, leaves to warn the other members. Aunt Sue, left alone, is beaten by the sheriff who is searching for Johnny-boy, and in the haze following her beating the white, newcomer to the Communist group, Booker, comes to her house telling her that Johnny-boy has been captured by the sheriff. Disoriented and concerned for the other members, Aunt Sue tells him the names of each Communist.

Booker assures her that he is going to warn them, but shortly after he leaves, Reva, a white girl who is in love with Johnny-boy, reveals that Booker is the informant. Aunt Sue distraught over her mistake, travels through the hard rain to where the sheriff has Johnny-boy, where she shoots and kills the informant Booker before he can reveal the names. Shortly afterwards, the angry mob kill both Johnny-boy and Aunt Sue.

Like Reverend Taylor in "Fire and Cloud," Aunt Sue replaces Christianity, the traditional source of her strength, with Communism, the new source of strength for the community, which unites humanity not on racial boundaries but economic boundaries. As Johnny-boy explains, "Ma, Ah done tol yuh a

hundred times. Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black,' he said. 'Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men' "(234). The parallel of Christianity and Communism is a brilliant tool of propaganda, suggesting that the old faith in Jesus and life after death can be replaced with the struggle to uplift the oppressed. "In effect the transition was not hard for her to make," Margoiles points out, "since the principles underlying her old faith are the same as those of Communism" (70), best illustrated in the following passage from the story:

And day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision . . . . The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection. . . (225)

Wright's own religious origins, which consisted of a strict Seventh-Day Adventist grandmother, probably assisted in his replacement of Christianity with Communism. Early in his career, he saw Communism as the new faith that would help African-Americans attain equality. He seems to side with Karl Marx's view of religion's inadequacy to legitimately help, feeling that it maintains the status quo only. Thus, the "star" of the title, an allusion to the star of the Christ child, becomes the beacon for Communism, the new deliverer of the people.

Despite the story's political agenda, Wright's naturalistic literary style endures in the image he chooses to illustrate the fight. Aunt Sue describes the white society as "a cold white mountain" who "had swum into her vision and shattered her songs

and their spells of peace" (224). The "songs" are the Christian hymns of patient endurance that gave her hope in deliverance in the afterlife. White society had "driven her back from the earth,"(229) preventing her from achieving harmony by degrading and dehumanizing her.

The mountain becomes an extended metaphor within the story, appearing again when Booker appears, following Aunt Sue's beating: "She felt Booker's fingers pressing on her arm and it was as though the white mountain was pushing her to the edge of a sheer height" (245). The image of an immovable mountain suggests the deterministic universe in which Aunt Sue struggles. The racial oppression she endures seems like an undefeatable foe, something that will possibly exist forever in her environment.

The deterministic nature of the universe is apparent even in the opening images of the story. The airplane beacon is described as "a gleaming sword above her head" (221) and the rains that can either bring growth or "'bog things down lika watah-soaked coffin'" (221). While one image is man-made and the other natural, both are symbolic pieces of her oppressive environment. The "sword above her head" and the rain symbolize the oppression of living as an African-American. In addition, she is forced to cross a river to get to where they are holding Johnny-boy so she can stop Booker from revealing the names she gave him. As Webb explains, the water becomes a metaphor for her life: "But her crossing is also a figurative crossing over from her old sources of strength. . ." (14-5). As with the previous stories discussed, Wright is utilizing

naturalistic metaphors to depict the struggle of humanity in an oppressive, deterministic environment.

It isn't until her release from this racist determinism that she no longer has to fear it: "And she was suddenly at peace; they were not a white mountain now; they were not pushing her any longer to the edge of life" (261). It is Sue's acceptance of her destiny to sacrifice for the party that prevents her from being afraid of the "white mountain."

The obvious Communist propaganda of the story doesn't outweigh the skillful crafting of the narrative. However, the image of the "white mountain" is central to understanding the dynamic between oppressor and oppressed, and reflects the naturalistic sentiment of a Communist world view. Wright would again use the natural world to depict the struggle of African-Americans in his next story.

#### "Down by Riverside" (1937)

Wright's novella "Down by the Riverside" was originally published as "Silt" in 1937, but the name was changed the following year when it was included in Uncle Tom's Children. The story contains a similar naturalistic thematic structure to "The Man Who Saw the Flood," which will be covered later. The protagonist, Brother Mann, failing to heed the warning signs of an approaching flood, must rely on a boat stolen by his brother-in-law to take his pregnant wife, who is unable to give birth, to the hospital. Rowing his wife, Lulu, his mother-in-law, and his son, Peewee, in the stolen boat, he encounters the owner Henry Heartfield, who shoots at him after identifying the boat. Mann fires

two shots at Heartfield, killing him in front of his wife and children. Mann rows away from the scene to the hospital where he is told that his wife has already died.

Conscripted under marshal law to help rescue efforts, Mann ends up returning to the Heartfield's house, and despite a momentary desire to murder the wife and children to save himself, he rescues them and takes them to the hills. Heartfield's family immediately reports him to the soldiers in charge, and the soldiers take him into custody. As he is being led by the soldiers out of the camp and to his execution site, he decides to run and be shot rather than be lynched. The narrative ends with an image of Mann's dead body at the river's edge.

Wright begins the narrative with Mann staring out the window at the "yellow water swirling" (62) and the destruction the flood has caused. Mann ponders the statement of Sister Jeff, Bob's wife, about the migration instinct of their cow, Sally: "The morning before he had seen his only cow, Sally, lowing, wagging her head, rolling her eyes, and pushing through three feet of water for the hills. It was then that Sister Jeff had said that a man who would not follow a cow was a fool" (63). Sister Jeff's statement suggests the superiority of instinct to reason when faced with awesome power of nature, a theme prevalent in naturalist fiction.

The element of racism separates this narrative from simply being another conflict of man versus nature. In her essay "The Role of Water Imagery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*", Webb marks the power of nature in the narrative: "In contrast to the water in 'Big Boy Leaves Home,' the water here is much more overt, more

threatening, more powerful" (8). The flood waters become a symbol for the environmental pressures and influences of white-dominated society. As Webb observes, "Yes, it seemed that the water had always been there and this was just the first time he had noticed it" (64).

The water becomes a metaphor for the deterministic, racist society that has denied his humanity: "'Them white folks is makin trouble n that currents strong,'" says Elder Murray, whose name implies a greater understanding of the environment. Elder Murray, by coupling the strong "current" and the racist "trouble" suggests a symbolic relationship between the natural world and the racial dynamic. Mann is also given a precedent for the behavior of the white community during floods by Grannie, his mother-in-law: "'Sistah James boy got killed in a flood just like this. . .'" (68). It is obvious for the older generation that the "water had always been there." That is, the race hatred has always existed.

Mann, ignoring the survival instincts of his cow, also rejects the offer of religion that Elder Murray and Grannie present. He sees the absurdity and unrealistic tenement of their belief in God. God, represented by nature, seems wholly indifferent to the struggles of Mann. His lack of faith manifested in his impatience for Murray's long-winded prayer is a result of the disillusionment he has with an absentee God: "He wished in his heart that Elder Murray would hurry up and get through with the prayer, for he wanted to be in that boat" (72). He realizes that his family's survival is his responsibility. Wright is constructing a story that

illustrates man's struggle with his environment by placing Mann in a direct conflict with the flood.

Wright's naturalism is obvious in his construction of Mann's struggle with the flood. As he rows his family toward the hospital in the stolen boat, the narrative begins to resemble Crane's "Open Boat," as he ponders the indifference of the infinite blackness around him:

To all sides of Mann the flood rustled, gurgled, droned, glistened blackly like an ocean of bubbling oil. . . walls of solid darkness. . . he could feel the force of the current. . . fear flowed through everything. (74)

Later in the narrative, he describes the river as alive: "In front of him he could feel the river as though it were a live, cold hand touching his face" (97). The personification of the river is an obvious foreshadowing of his death. As with Big Boy's struggle with animals in the pit in "Big Boy Leaves Home," Wright is using nature to reflect the struggle of humanity. Rowing through the darkness, Mann's journey becomes a naturalistic metaphor for his life, an allegory that represents man's struggles against the constraints of his environment.

His fight through the darkness is finally helped by the lights of the Heartfields' house, which give him something to focus on. The struggle of Mann with the flood is a metaphor for his struggle in the world. Attempting to stay in the middle of the flood, he is looking hopefully forward, only to be denied hope when he reaches his goal. The river becomes a metaphor for life as he is attempting to keep from the conflict of the racist world, looking toward a goal

that proves to be an illusion. He is forced into a decision of survival through violence or death, and his instincts for survival, along with the pressure of the situation, lead him to shoot Heartfield, to choose life over death.

Using Mann's dilemma, Wright is asserting that the denial of survival to the black man was a result of the denial of his humanity by the white world. Since the African-American boy was not allowed to become a man in the racist environment of America, his survival was also not assured or valued by a racist society. Mann constantly has to assert this humanity within the white world as they constantly ask him his name. His name, Mann, of course, becomes literally man, a declaration of his humanity in the face of forces who do not recognize it. His humanity is symbolically denied by Heartfield as he calls to him:

"Who's there?"

"Mann!"

"Who?" (78)

Heartfield is symbolically refusing to acknowledge Mann's humanity. Instead, recognizing his boat, he attempts to kill him and demonstrates his rejection of Mann. Mann's retaliatory shots kill Heartfield, who falls dead into the water. "He had a choking impulse to stop: he felt he was lost because he had shot a white man: he felt there was no use in rowing any longer: but the current fought the boat and he fought back with the oars" (81). The instinct of survival clings to him despite his realization that his act, although in self-defense, meant death for him because he had acted against the determinism of his world.

Mann's death, the final scene of the story, is the inevitable culmination of the Wright's naturalistic framework, the literal and symbolic end of Mann's journey. "Ahll die fo they kill me! All die," Mann decides (123). His death occurs when he runs from the soldiers "over waves of green grass" (123). His decision to run is his final act of freedom, his final attempt at asserting his manhood. His struggle in the "brown water" of life among the "shouting white boats" of society, ends with him struggling to the river "on all fours," once again relegated to a beast of instinct trying to survive.

Ultimately, "Down By the Riverside" is about the struggle to achieve manhood in a society that denies your humanity. The constrictive society is best represented by the naturalistic determinism of the flood, which forces Mann into the decisions he makes to survive.

#### "The Man Who Saw the Flood" (1938)

Two of Wright's short stories published in 1938 appear in the posthumous publication of Eight Men. They are "The Man Who Saw A Flood" and "The Man Who Was Almost A Man." "The Man Who Saw the Flood" resembles "Down by the Riverside" in its utilization of the flood setting to indicate the deterministic universe that dominates Wright's early fiction.

An extremely short piece, it describes the post-flood hardships of a sharecropper's family. Tom and his family return to their flood-ravaged home and begin the slow process of cleaning up and assessing the damage. While they are cleaning, Tom and his wife, May, discuss his inevitable return to work for a white man, Burgess, whom he owes money and for whom he must rely on for

flood-relief supplies. Having been close to escaping the wage slavery of the sharecropping system, Tom is forced once more under Burgess' yoke. Burgess' quick arrival during their clean up signifies his eagerness to have him back to working off his debt, while already accruing further debt because of the flood damage.

The emphasis of the story is upon the scene of natural damage and its effects on the already oppressive sharecropping system. Fabre contends that Wright's preoccupation with the natural world was a result of his fear of "the forces that reason cannot control, forces that lie within the darkest recesses of a man's soul" (58). The determinism of the environment is obvious given the fate of Tom and his family. The story relies on a series of powerful natural images to comment on the sharecropping system. As the flood recedes and the family returns, "A black father, a black mother, and a black child tramped through muddy fields, leading a tired cow by a thin bit of rope" (102). This image is a kind of tableau for the hardships of the sharecropping system. The image emphasizes their blackness because most of the poorest sharecroppers were black, and the "tired cow" led by a "thin bit of rope" suggests the poverty and exhaustion of the sharecropping system, a system that dehumanizes men and women in much the same way as slavery. Through his use of post-flood, natural images, Wright asserts that the sharecropping system is wage slavery.

Wright once again remains consistent to his naturalistic conventions by using the naturalistic metaphors to explain human existence. For example, the family cow becomes a symbol for this

system's dehumanization. The cow's importance to survival is evident because it is the only animal that is saved, while the chickens and pigs have drowned. In addition, the cow is named Pat and is referred to by name like one of the family. The cow also reflects the family's attitude in her movements: "Outside Pat lowed longingly into the thickening gloam and tinkled her cowbell" (107). The cow's hunger for food correlates to the family's hunger; both the cow and the family are dealing with an instinct to survive. The "tinkling" of the bell is Tom's reminder of the inferior position he must assume to survive. Tom, like his cow, exists as a beast-of-burden to Burgess, and Wright is using the animalistic imagery of the cow to mirror that oppressive relationship.

The destruction caused by the flood has ironically spared their house. It is ironic because it is what keeps them bound to the land and therefore bound to Burgess and their cycle of debt. The description of the house also reflects Tom's miserable situation. "The cabin had two colors; near the bottom was a solid yellow; at the top it was the familiar gray. It looked weird, as though its ghost were standing beside it" (104). The two colors, "yellow" and "familiar gray" suggest the decay and destruction the system breeds and the ghostly image adds to the ever-present suggestion of impending death.

Other images foreshadowing death occur throughout the house: "Like a mute warning, a wavering flood mark went high around the walls of the room" (104). The "flood mark" is a warning of the possible hopelessness of their situation, and the inevitable death the system will cause. The descriptions of the inside of the

house also suggests the family's fate: "[a] dresser. . . bulging like a bloated corpse" and "[t]he bed. . . was like a giant casket forged of mud. . ." (104). These images of death foreshadow their fate under the determinism of the sharecropping system. The family resembles the "[t]wo smashed chairs. . . huddled together for protection," (104) because the devastation of the flood has left them with nothing but each other.

Tom comments upon his situation, saying, "Ef we keeps on like this tha white man'll own us body n soul" (106). He recognizes that the sharecropping environment has forced him to choose between wage-slavery and death. Typical of a naturalistic story, his environment has determined his course of action, and he is only acting out of the instinct to survive. Wright's naturalism endures into the last short story of the decade, "The Man Who Was Almost A Man."

#### "The Man Who Was Almost A Man" (1939)

Richard Wright's rarely discussed short story "The Man That Was Almost a Man," first published in 1939, is usually reduced by biographers and critics to a simple story about a black boy's failed initiation into manhood. Originally titled "Almos' a Man," it tells the story of young Dave Saunders and his struggle to be recognized as a man by both whites and blacks in his southern, rural community, a struggle that climaxes in the "accidental" shooting of his white employer's mule. Following his humiliation in front of the town, Dave leaves in search of a place where he can be a man.

Critic John E. Loftis suggests in his article "Domestic Prey: Richard Wright's Parody of the Hunt Tradition in 'The Man Who

Was Almost a Man" that David Saunders represents a parody of the "great white hunter" of American literature, "the young hero who achieves manhood by hunting and slaying a wild beast" (437). According to Loftis, the "disparity between black and white possibilities of growth and development" creates a parody that attacks the white-dominated power structure that prevents the protagonist's coming-of-age (437).

While Loftis' application of the hunting tradition is not without support, the implications of Dave Saunder's doomed initiation reaches deeper than a simple parody of a western literary tradition. The story attacks the black-white power dynamic of the south for producing an environment that creates an Oedipal-like reaction in adolescent blacks who are doubly oppressed by both family and society. For Dave, manhood has been defined as the ability to destroy others, embodied by the gun he so desperately wants. The gun becomes a phallic weapon of domination and oppression where manhood means violence and cruelty: "Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white. . .they would have to respect him" (1202). Dave is being taught that the fear evoked through violence is the only way to earn respect. His attempt to attain this respect reflects Freud's description of an adolescent's maturation, the desiring of the mother and the resentment of the father, a process Freud labeled the Oedipal complex, which if successfully negotiated leads to the son's eventual mirroring of the paternal role (Booker 27).

However, Dave's initiation isn't just a typical Oedipal complex, but an attempt to establish himself as the new oppressor,

replacing both his father and the symbolic white father of society. His initiation into manhood fails in both respects because white society will never recognize him as a man. Once again, Wright is presenting a deterministic environment that stunts or suppresses the development of an African-American. Given the violent definition of a man in an oppressive southern culture, his escape onto the train North seems to suggest an escape from the social constraints that emasculate him to a place where he can finally be a man, but Wright's later stories of the northern city ("The Man Who Lived Underground," Native Son, Lawd Today!) suggest that this place doesn't exist in America .

The story appropriately begins with Dave striking out, "looking homeward through paling light" (1198). The initiation motif is clearly established and its violence is suggested by the diction: "Dave struck out. . ." (1198). Clearly, Dave's initiation into manhood will be a violent rite of passage and the "paling light" suggests that it may be doomed. Early on, Dave professes the link between violence and maturity: "One of these days he was going to get a gun and practice shooting, then they couldn't talk to him as though he were a little boy" (1198). Dave couples the ability to handle a gun with being a man because it is a tool to exert one's will over another. He believes, perhaps justly, that he is entitled to the gun because he already works like a man: "Shucks, a man oughta have little gun aftah he done worked hard all day" (1198). In short, the gun becomes a physical manifestation of manhood, a powerful phallic symbol. Dave's early daydreams of the gun suggest masturbation: "He could almost feel the slickness of the

weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust" (1200). The gun symbolizes both psychological and sexual empowerment for Dave.

Dave's first assertion of his manhood and, therefore, his right to own a gun, is met with the white shopkeeper's laughter. Joe's laughter is the first denial of Dave's manhood and suggests that white society will never allow him to become a real man: "You ain't nothing but a boy. You don't need a gun" (1199). The gun he later offers the boy is an old "left-handed Wheeler," a pistol. The poor quality and awkward left-handed molding indicates that Dave will never be able to possess any real power to endanger white control. Eventually, Dave's lack of power is what drives him off to seek another place, free from these constraints. However, the double oppression arises in his family's denial of his manhood because his inability to be recognized as a man in the white community is paralleled in his own family structure.

His mother's denial of his manhood indicates his subjugation in the family's hierarchy. Dave's Oedipal journey toward maturation begins with her confidential acquiescence. Before asking his mother for the gun, Dave predicts his eventual success: "He did not want to mention money before his father. He would do much better by cornering his mother when she was alone" (1200). The use of "cornering" suggests the kind of hunter-prey relationship he is attempting to achieve over his mother. Initially, Dave's mother reasserts his place in the family, despite her "promise" to get him a gun: "Yuh ain nothing but a boy yit" (1201). Dave first appeals to her as a child who will never ask "fer nothing

no mo" (1201). Then, Dave changes tactics, arguing that the gun would really be for his father. Loftis correctly states that the father who is without a gun "cannot serve as Dave's model of manhood" (440). The lack of a gun suggests the father's emasculation and subjugation by white society, indicated by his only concern that Dave and his white employer, Mr. Hawkins, are "gitten erlong" (1200). It isn't until Dave embraces his mother and tells her he loves her that she surrenders to his wishes.

The scene, although not overtly sexual, still suggests a confidential relationship that excludes the father as she instructs Dave to bring the gun back to her. Furthermore, their secret alliance is illustrated in her late night meeting, where she demands the gun. If she were simply getting the gun for the father, there would be no need for her nighttime visit, but they are attempting to keep the existence of the gun a secret. Dave's mother's explanation that the gun is for Dave's father attests to her awareness that they are disempowered. The mother knows the father needs a gun, but she isn't sure if even he can handle the mantle of manhood.

Dave's father has been denied his own manhood by the white establishment, and therefore, Dave rejects him as a viable role model. According to Sigmund Freud, who was influential in the formation of naturalistic literary theory, it is a child's initial perception of the father as a rival for the mother's affection that finally allows him to assume the paternal role by imitating the power and authority of the father (Booker 28). Wright, who was very interested in Freudian psychoanalysis, constructs a two-fold

Oedipal complex. Dave's father's impotence before men like Mr. Hawkins leads Dave to equate violence with manhood. Critic Edward Margolies contends, "For him, as for most adolescents, manhood is the highest order of achievement--but his paucity of social and emotional experience makes him view that goal in the image of a gun" (76). The experience prevents him from negotiating the Oedipal complex and associating his father with manhood. His father has also been reduced to a "mule" who works for white society. It is the symbolic white father, not his real father, whom he is attempting to model himself after when he buys the gun.

The higher order of power and authority than his father in Dave's world is Mr. Hawkins, his employer, who represents the dominant white establishment, and Dave plays out another Oedipal sequence with this symbolic, paternal figure. The trial of manhood really begins after Dave has slept with the gun and awakens to the "gray light of dawn" (1202). The light suggests both the dawning of his maturation, as well as its inevitable failure suggested by its "gray" hue. With the phallic weapon appropriately strapped to his thigh, he goes to Jim Hawkins' farm and is ordered to begin plowing using the mule, Jenny. Typical of Wright's naturalist fiction, the subjugation of the animal mirrors his own subjugation as he imitates the authority of his white employer: "Know whut this is, Jenny? Naw, yuh wouldn know! Yuhs jusa ol mule"(1202).

Dave's assertion of power over the mule also plays out like an Oedipal scenario. The mule, Jenny, represents white society's

property. While it isn't, of course, his mother, it is a female owned by a white man. The mule as the white man's--and therefore white society's-- possession reflects Dave's own impotence to affect his own oppression. His impotence is the reason he wants desperately to master the gun, which he sees as a means to becoming an oppressor rather than a victim: "And if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him. . ." (1202). In his attempt to master the weapon, to master the power to destroy others, he accidentally shoots the mule.

By shooting the mule, Dave isn't killing his "domination" as Loftis suggests. Jenny is a tool used by the white oppressors not a symbol of the oppressors. She is more closely aligned with Dave who at one point refers to himself as a "mule" (1206). Therefore, Dave is attempting to assume the paternal role of the oppressor. Even more indicative of an Oedipal-like initiation is the sexual terms in which the shooting is described. For example, the flow of blood "down her leg" seems to suggest vaginal bleeding. Dave's immediate reaction is to plug the hole, which he does repeatedly until his fingers are "hot and sticky" (1203). He weakly calls her name and trembles as she finally dies. Jenny's death suggests a sexual climax: "For a long time she held her neck erect; then her head sank, slowly. Her ribs swelled with a mighty heave and she went over" (1203). Immediately after this we are told that "Dave's stomach felt empty, very empty" (1203). The diction clearly indicates a sexual release, given the previous descriptions, and the violent sexual imagery of Jenny's death also reflects the violence of Dave's world.

The end of Dave's initiation is signaled by the sunset that occurs while they are burying Jenny. However, his initiation isn't successful because like his father he is incapable of achieving manhood in the eyes of the dominant white society: "Dave cried, seeing blurred white and black faces" (1204). Dave is doubly oppressed by both white and black, but it is the crowd's recognition of his limitations as a black boy and the unlikelyhood of his ever becoming a man that cause them to laugh. It is finally impossible for Dave to achieve the Oedipal-like transition and assume the mantle of paternalism in this environment because he is continually subjugated by the symbolic, white father. Dave is humiliated by the crowd, who laughs at his pathetic accident. Later in bed, he thinks about the beating his father promised, and he remembers "other beatings." These other beatings refer to not just his father's violent oppression, but Mr. Hawkins and white society's domination as well, and he decides to flee the oppression.

By the light of the "bright" moon, Dave experiences an inward illumination as he finally masters the gun. Standing at the top of the ridge, which signals the elevation of his thought, he realizes the true authority and power that keeps him "almost a man": "Lawd, ef Ah had just one mo bullet Ah'd taka shot at tha house. Ah'd like t scare ol man Hawkins jusa little. . . Jusa enough t let im know Dave Saunders is a man" (1206). But he is impotent before the white man, both literally out of bullets and figuratively unable to shed the yoke of racial oppression. Dave's final decision is to escape the world where manhood is defined in violent terms and where he would never truly be recognized as a

man. Margaret Walker in her book of biographical and critical information, Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius, contends that the escape motif reflects Wright's own flight from the south (331).

Dave hops the train to escape to "somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man. . ." (1206). His decision to hop the Illinois Central is an attempt to reach a place in the North where he can achieve maturation free from the constraints of southern, racist society.

According to Fabre, "The Man Who Was Almost A Man" began as part of a never-published novel called Tarbaby's Dawn. The protagonist's name was Dan, not Dave, but the killing of the mule is similarly described. In the novel, Dan endures a strict religious upbringing as the son of a day laborer who works for Tom Hawkins. Dan, suffering the peer pressure of his friend Bill, who is more sexually experienced, impregnates the daughter of a nearby family. Fabre contends that Dan is trapped by his environment: "The rigid principles of the rural community, his poverty and now these new responsibilities all contrive to imprison the inexperienced adolescent in his milieu" (153). Following his entrapment, he "accidentally" kills Mr. Hawkin's mule.

The short story that appears in Eight Men as "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" (1940) was a reworking of this earlier scene. While Dan/Dave's circumstances prior to the mule scene have dramatically changed, the issue of psychological and sexual maturation remained constant. In addition, the character of Bill is not described in the short story, but he is still mentioned in the final paragraph: "Ah betcha Bill wouldn't do it!" (1206). His mention of his friend suggests that he is making a sexually mature

decision that even his friend would be unable to do. Even in the original context of the story, Wright seems to support the theme of Dave's decision to escape the oppression as a mature one, but it is a mature decision within a stunted development that equates manhood with violence. For Wright, African-Americans toiled under the naturalistic determinism that forced them to react to their instincts of survival, which usually meant violence. Denied their manhood, the tendency was to act out the animalistic impulses that were expected from the racist world.

The majority of Wright's work deals with the theme of existing inside an oppressive society and the alienation it produces. In "The Man Who Was Almost A Man," Wright seems to be interested in the psychological effects the environment has on an adolescent's maturation process and the stunted growth that the oppressed class experiences under the heel of their oppressors. Dave undergoes an Oedipal-like initiation where he discovers that he will never wrest away the power of the dominant white father. Rather than suffer like his real father, Dave flees his subjugation under the eternal paternalism of white-dominated society. Ultimately, Wright is illustrating the double oppression of family and society that black children must endure. However, as is suggested by other works by Richard Wright, such as Native Son and Lawd Today!, his escape north will not result in any more freedom for growth than his rural town offered. At the end of the 1930s, Wright was still consistently a naturalist, believing in the ultimate influence of one's environment.

## Wright's Pseudo-existentialism of the 1940s

Joyce in Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy attempts to explain the differences between naturalism and existentialism: "Whereas naturalism views human beings as total victims of their environment, existentialism argues that human existence is unexplainable" (14). Given these difference, Joyce still views them as "two sides of the same coin," (12) and their similarity is probably the reason many critics contend that Wright's later work was existential. The previous analysis of Wright's fiction in the 1930s shows that he remained consistently a naturalist throughout the decade.

Although the forties are often seen as Wright's turning point, an analysis of Wright's fiction of the forties reveals a consistency in his naturalistic themes. Despite his dabblings into underground worlds, dreamscapes, and objective perspective, Wright still maintains the social determinism inherent in naturalist fiction, and the characters can still be considered "total victims of their environment" (Joyce 14). The change in locale from country to city hasn't really effected a change in the oppressiveness of the character's environment.

Wright's vision, however, does broaden in these later stories to include all humanity, not just African-Americans, and although he still looks to the community for strength, the community becomes a place for sharing the despair of common conditions, not a place for victory. He seems to acknowledge that the shared fate of humankind is the inescapable nature of man and man's

environment, a theme prevalent in the often analyzed story "The Man Who Lived Underground."

"The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942)

"The Man Who Lived Underground" was the only major fiction published by Wright until 1949. Written at the end of 1941, the novella tells the story of Fred Daniels, a black man who has been beaten by three dirty cops into confessing a murder he didn't commit. The story focuses on his escape into the sewer and the underground world he finds there, a world free from the determinism of the world above. Daniels returns to the surface, and attempting to explain to the world what he has seen, brings the same cops that beat him to his underground world. The cops, who have since found the true murderer of Daniels' neighbor, are afraid he will tell someone that they beat an innocent man, so they kill him, leaving him in the sewer.

When critics argue for Wright's philosophic switch toward French existentialism, it is often this novella, along with the novels The Outsider and The Long Dream, that is used to argue the point. In Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim," Katherine Fishburn confirms that "most critics do agree . . . . on the existential content of the story" (155). There is no doubt that the elements of French existentialism exist in the story, influencing the narrative structure and the alien universe of the Fred Daniels underground. However, a close examination of the structure of Wright's microcosm reveals that it is more a pseudo-existential, naturalistic story. The overriding proof for Wright's naturalism is

the ultimate determinism of the world above that is ultimately inescapable for Daniels.

By examining the naturalistic imagery of the underground world, the consistency of Wright's message is evident: man lives in an inescapable, deterministic universe in which African-Americans have a more difficult struggle because of their double oppression by nature and by the dominant white majority. It is a theme that dominates Wright's life, as is illustrated in the stories of the thirties. The only difference is that all humans exist in the deterministic universe. As Margolies notes, "In reality what Wright is doing is transferring what he once regarded as a special Negro experience, a special Negro truth in white America, to all men, white and Negro, everywhere" (79). In this sense, Margolies is correct in labeling the novella a "modern allegory" (79) because Fred Daniels is representing humanity.

Although the physical environment changes in this novella to a cityscape, the naturalistic imagery is still maintained and still supports the idea of a deterministic universe. Fred Daniels achieves a kind of freedom underground, but it is a pseudo-freedom because he is trapped in a world of death and danger underground, essentially a microcosm of the above-ground world. The only thing missing in this microcosm is the white oppression, but the environmental determinism still exists. It is this fact that Daniels wants to relate to his fellow man, the common state that all of humankind endures. In essence, the story becomes an urban retelling of Crane's "Open Boat" hypothesis, that community

is the only recourse for man living in a powerful and indifferent natural world.

Wright obviously was experimenting in the French existentialist vein when he constructed his underground world for Fred Daniels. According to one biography, "Wright had originally been passionately interested in the French existentialist. . .Wright, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir often met to discuss political and philosophical matters. . ." (Fabre 322). Despite his interest, however, this story stays remarkably consistent with his past stories. Fred Daniels' descent into the underground world of the sewers is a Dante'-like journey into hell, not an existential journey into nothingness. The underground world is an inversion of the morality of the above-ground world. He becomes a black Christ who returns from this hell to "save" humankind, but he is doomed to fail because people refuse to believe the truth of their existence.

The novella begins with Daniels being lured by the "columns of water" that "snaked" (22) from the manhole cover. The snake imagery appears three more times in the narrative beginning with the "hiss" of the sewer and then Daniels "slither[ing]" (33) head first and "uncoiling" (65). The transferal of the snake-like characteristics from the sewer to Daniels is symbolic of his revelation of humankind's true instincts toward evil and also suggest the connection of Daniels to his environment.

As stated above, Fred Daniels' descent into the sewer reads like Dante's journey to hell: "He dropped instinctively. . . .the siren seemed to howl at the very rim of the manhole. . . .he wondered if this were death" (20). Following the hellish imagery of his descent,

the inversion of the world below is signaled by the closing of the manhole "until the hole looked like a quarter moon turned black" (21). The sewer is a place of "darkness" that "seemed strange and unreal" to Daniels. The sewer stinks of "rot" (21), his match glows "weirdly" colorful in the "wet gloom (21), and at any minute he could be "swept to death" (21). It is a place of "silence" that seemed "a million miles away from the world"(23). Despite the darkness and silence, however, it is not an existential nothingness that Daniels has fallen into.

Daniels' underground world also contains a resemblance to hell with images of fire and blood: "he jerked the door wide and saw on the far side of the basement a furnace glowing red" (29). This red glow of the furnace becomes the red glow of an "E-X-I-T" (30). In addition to the fiery red of the furnace, blood is all around the underground: "[He] stood in the red darkness, watching the glowing embers of the furnace. he went to the sink. . .the water flowed. . . .like a spout of blood" (31). His urine also becomes a "red stream" (31) in this underground world of death. Despite his escape from the determinism of above, he is now within a microcosm of that world where evil nature is readily apparent in the surroundings.

The bloody images continue when Daniels happens upon a meat locker: "He narrowed his eyes; the red-white rows of meat were drenched in a yellow glare. A man wearing a crimson-spotted jacket came in and took down a bloody meat cleaver. . . .Each time he lifted the cleaver and brought it down upon the meat, he let out a short, deep-chested grunt" (38). Wright's portrayal of the butcher

is almost savage and grotesque; it is a naturalistic picture of mankind, an inversion of "civilization."

To accompany the blood-and-guts savagery, Daniels is faced with image upon image of death and his own mortality. The first image of death that he encounters is a dead baby floating among the debris of the sewer. "Lit by the yellow stems from another manhole cover was a tiny nude body of a baby . . . he moved impulsively to save it, but his roused feelings told him that it was dead, cold, nothing. . ." (26). The baby is a suggestion of the ultimate fate of the future of mankind, and it is not just coincidental that the baby is not given a race. Wright's vision of the world is bleak which once again reveals his naturalistic philosophy that, as Joyce says, "naturalism is inherently pessimistic" (12).

The baby is not the only corpse that Daniels encounters. Shortly after seeing the baby, he digs into the basement of an undertaker: "He placed his eye to a keyhole and saw the nude waxen figure of a man stretched out upon a white table . . . A fine spun lace of ice covered his body" (28). The coffins and embalming tools of the undertaker's workroom make the body a ghastly image, and as in the description of the baby, race is unimportant because it represents humankind's shared fate. In short, Daniels is progressing through a life journey, attempting to find meaning in a meaningless world, an existential concept. However, he finally does find meaning, which is impossible in existential philosophy: this meaning is a reflection of humanity's shared, naturalistic position.

For example, the naturalistic concept of "man as animal" is reinforced with the animal imagery in the story. As in his other stories, the animals come to represent the protagonist, but unlike his practice in his past narratives, Wright is asserting the commonality of humankind's position. The first animal encountered is a disease-carrying rat, which Daniels kills instinctually because of fear: "He held the match close and saw a huge rat, wet with slime, blinking beady eyes and baring tiny fangs . . . . He grabbed the pole and let it fly against the rat's soft body" (22). The rat, dropping into the water's current, foreshadows Daniels' death, in much the same way as the dead baby foreshadows his eventual absorption into the environment. As with the snake imagery, Daniels seems to take on the characteristics of the rat, climbing through holes he digs and "rac[ing] to his hole"(42) when discovered. The naturalistic conventions of using animals to reflect human personality and behavior that occurred in his short stories of the thirties surface again in this story. The characters are dehumanized by the comparisons in order to present their instinctual reactions and responses.

Daniels is also compared to a dog, a common metaphor in Wright's stories, and one can see the instinct to survive in the protagonist's hunger: "Then, like a dog, he ground the meat bones with his teeth, enjoying the salty, tangy marrow" (33-4). In addition to the dog metaphor, as he emerges from the underground filled with fear, Wright describes hanging to the rim of the manhole "like a frantic cat clutching a rag" (65). The instinct of self-

preservation is apparent in the metaphor. Given the usual coupling of the snake symbol with evil, the snake imagery, discussed earlier, and the images of the snake-like worms and eels reemphasize the evil of the underground world. Moreover, the worms suggest the decomposition of the dead. Also the images suggest his animalistic instincts within the underground: "he had learned a way of seeing in his dark world, like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch" (32). Additionally, he moves "[e]el like" through the holes he had dug. Here Wright is emphasizing the naturalistic motif of reliance on instinct over reason.

Another aspect of Wright's novella commonly used as proof of its existential nature is the dream that Daniels has of the mother and child. While the dreamscape is a common device used in existential fiction, it also reflects Wright's study of psychology. Daniels dreams that he is walking upon water when he comes upon a woman slowly sinking into the water holding a baby over her head. Taking the baby from her hands, Daniels then places it upon the water and dives in after the woman, but he is unable to find her. When he returns to the surface, the baby is gone. He begins to doubt his own powers to stand upon the water and sinks into the water, choking and struggling (34). It is obvious, given his ability to walk on water in the dream, that Daniels is being compared to Christ. The dream is a metaphor for his attempt to "save" humankind in spite of the indifference of nature. The fact that he fails to save the woman and later loses the child suggests the hopelessness of his plight because humankind is already lost.

His realization of humanity's unsalvageable state of immorality manifests itself as he begins "to doubt that he could walk upon the water" (34) and begins to drown.

His development as a Christ figure continues with the entrance of religion through the underground church he discovers. The church also reflects the inversion of the underground world: "He edged to the crevice and saw a segment of black men and women, dressed in white robes, singing, holding tattered songbooks in their black palms. His first impulse was to laugh. . ." (24). The people become a tableau for the failure of religion to ease the suffering of the oppressed, and it is here that Daniels reveals his attitude toward religion: "He felt that he was gazing at something abysmally obscene" (24). His disgust increases and the elements of Wright's training as a protest novelist become apparent in Daniels' tirade against religion that seems somewhat incongruous with the character: "Pain throbbed in his legs and a deeper pain, induced by the sight of those black people groveling and begging for something they could never get. . . . people should stand unrepentant and yield no quarter in singing and praying" (25).

Wright's disdain for religion, originating from his grandmother's strict Seventh-Day Adventism and his own Communist leanings, reveals itself in a propagandistic attack on the submission to oppression that religion teaches. Keeping with the inversion of traditional morality, Daniels becomes the Christ figure who will deliver them from their ignorant belief in white society's God. The difference, then, between Daniels and

existential heroes is, according to Margoiles, that he arrived "accidentally at their insights" (80). His accidental "fate" allows him to discover his own position in the world, a position dictated by his environment. Daniels must travel into the underground world in order to make an objective decision about his place in the above world.

Later in the novella, Daniels expresses the guilt that religion breeds and asserts that the congregation's praises of Jesus are "wrong" (60). Daniels' sense of religion is that it is based on "anxiety" and "guilt" (60), a "search for happiness they could never find" (60). Religion is not the answer in Daniels' world for the social injustice that is occurring. The message that Daniels wishes to bring to the surface, the lesson he learns in his inverted underground, is the importance of the community, the importance of realizing the shared position of humankind, not just of black people, but of all races. Wright seems to be addressing the position of helplessness in a deterministic existence. It is a message that once again echoes Crane's "Open Boat" hypothesis, suggesting humanity's smallness before the infinite universe and our shared state of impotence.

The people of the movie house, like those of the church, attempt to escape their shared positions. Daniels sees behind the red letters "E-X-I-T," where people are trying to escape. Behind the "black curtain," the "human faces, tilted upward, chanting, whistling, screaming, laughing" (30), attempt to ignore the perversity of humanity. Like the church, the movie becomes a way for people to laugh at "animated shadows of themselves" (30).

Once again, Daniels' instinct as a conscious observer is to "awaken them" to their shared existence: "His compassion fired his imagination and he stepped out of the box, walked out into the thin air. . . .Yes, these people were his children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying" (30). His task to rouse humanity to the commonalty of their existence is an impossible one, given the perverse state of the above-ground world. It is a position that Wright seems to be writing from, although by writing he suggests that despite the pessimism of his naturalistic vision there is a separation between the people in text who are doomed and reader who may not be. This reconciliation of pessimism and optimism is a trait in some naturalistic texts that Charles Child Walcott notes in his discussion of naturalism, "an optimistic intention propelling the creation of a pessimistic, deterministic novel" (qtd. in Conder 2).

Wright suggests that the dominating characteristics of the above-ground world seem to be greed, which is not surprising, given Wright's Marxist leanings. At one point in the narrative, Daniels observes from his underground peep hole a jeweler opening a safe, and he memorizes the combination with the intent to come back and take the money and diamonds when he observes an employee taking money:

He's stealing, he said to himself. He grew indignant . . . .

Though he had planned to steal the money, he despised and pitied the man. . . . He wanted to steal the money merely for the sensation involved in getting it. . . .the man who was now stealing it was going to spend it, perhaps for pleasure. (45)

The greed of the above ground is inverted in Daniels' underground lair, as he wallpapers the inside of his hideout with money and hangs the watches on the wall: "He had triumphed over the world aboveground! He was free! If only people could see this!" The freedom Daniels feels is the freedom from materialistic greed of the aboveground, "which kills its children and turns death into an industry" (Fabre 215). His hideout filled with riches, now only decorations, becomes a "mocking symbol" of the greed above. This freedom is seen by many critics as a reflection of his existential realization; however, the brutality of the world still exists, symbolized in the bloody cleaver that hangs next to the watches and money. He has escaped the greed only by removing himself from the world. It is a short-lived, pseudo-freedom because while he has shed the upper world's greed, he is trapped in the hell below.

The greedy brutality of the above ground is more easily observed from Daniels' removed perspective. The radio reveals the brutality of humanity in the news, and Daniels ponders this brutality, assuming a god-like persona:

he looked down upon land and the sea as men fought, as cities were razed, as planes scattered death upon open towns, as long lines of trenches wavered and broke . . . . men groaned as steel ripped into their bodies and they went down to die. (57)

The death and destruction are a result of man's inherent brutality and are therefore inescapable. Thinking about the aboveground,

he is "trapped" (57). It is a purely naturalistic explanation of existence, blaming the nature of man for the brutality of life.

Later, when Daniels observes a boy being beaten for taking the radio that he stole, he changes his attitude toward the brutality of humanity: "Perhaps it was good thing that they were beating the boy; perhaps the beating would bring to the boy's attention, for the first time in his life, the secret of his existence, the guilt that he could never get rid of" (61). The "guilt" that Daniels is referring to is the guilt of being human, a brutal and oppressed animal. This "guilt" rises again when Daniels observes the night watchman, who has been accused of the robbery he committed. "The watchman was guilty. . .not guilty of the crime of which he had been accused, he was guilty, had always been guilty" (62). He watches the watchmen commit suicide despite his anonymous scream "don't" (64), unable to reveal his existence to the world above. The guilt of humanity is an idea that Wright would take on more extensively in his novel The Outsider. If God is dead, that is if religion is no longer viable, then humans must be their own god, and life must be based on manipulation of others and/or being manipulated by others. Therefore, humans are guilty simply because their nature is manipulation and oppression.

Daniels returns to the surface in hopes of uniting humanity by the truth of his vision, that humankind all struggle under a brutally, deterministic universe. The people of the church reject his message, of course, content to stay ignorantly trapped in materialistic illusions like the people in the movie theater. The

congregation kicks him out because he is "filthy," he "stinks" and they believe he is "drunk" and "crazy"(67-8).

He finds no company in his oppressors either, seeking the cops that beat him into a confession, Johnson, Murphy, and Lawson. Struggling to be the prophet he sees himself as, to reveal to the world its truth, he goes to the police, wanting to take them to the underground, so they can achieve the same revelation. He no longer recognizes them as the oppressors because he recognizes the commonality of humanity, that is eventual death and non-existence. The police officers, of course, cannot look into themselves because they are trapped in the subjectivity of their socially determined perspectives. Lawson upholds the "law" in the end, his only alternative, by shooting Daniels in the chest: "You've got to shoot this kind. They'd wreck everything" (84). The "law" protects the illusion of the goodness of humanity and the goodness of the universe. Daniels represents a threat to that illusion because he sought to overturn with his underground vision, a vision that professed the greed and malevolence of humanity:

He stood in the dark, wet with sweat, brooding about the diamonds, the rings, the watches, the money; he remembered the singing in the church, the people yelling in the movie, the dead baby, the nude man stretched out upon the white table . . . he saw these items hovering before his eyes and felt that some meaning linked them together, that some magical relationship made them kin. (51)

The images are "striving to tell" the ultimate frailty of human life before the awesome brutality of human nature. Wright's message

stays consistently naturalistic, but he now acknowledges the kinship of all humanity, feeling that humankind are all operating under natural constraints. Wright's other short story of the 1940s attempted to probe further in the psyche of man.

"The Man Who Killed A Shadow" (1949)

In 1949, Wright published "The Man Who Killed A Shadow." The story of Saul Saunders, a black man living among the "white world of shadows"(85), reflects Wright's immersion into the psyche of the black American by presenting the psychology of a young, black man who views the world with a "plaguing sense of unreality" (187). The detached perspective of the narrator reflects Wright's physical distance and naturalistic objectivity. Wright had moved to France in 1947 and published a French version of this story shortly after in the same year. The perspective of the story reflects the attempt at constructing an indifferent narrator who would observe and record the protagonist's actions, a characteristic of many naturalistic stories.

The protagonist, Saul, gets a job in the "white shadow-world" as a janitor in the national Cathedral and is confronted with a depraved, white woman who stares at him and reveals her crotch when he is cleaning under her desk. Responding to the racial slurs the woman spews after being rejected, he slaps her and she screams. Reacting to the screams out of a brutal instinct of survival, coupled with a scarred psyche, Saul kills the woman to stop her from alerting the outside world. He makes a poor attempt to cover up the crime, more out of an obsessive sense of cleanliness than out of guilt, and is later arrested. In the final

scene of the narrative, somewhat similar to the court room scene of Native Son, the grand jury indicts Saul for her murder and ironically feels it necessary to mention that the victim was never raped, which seems to be a more important fact than her murder.

"The Man Who Killed A Shadow" is remarkably consistent with earlier narratives. The story presents the psychological damnation of racism upon a young black man growing up under deterministic boundaries that either dehumanize or deny his existence. The third-person, limited narrator relates to the reader Saul's scarred psyche without judgment. In short, the narrator refrains from making moral judgments upon the actions of the character.

The story opens with an explanation by the narrator of Saul's perspective toward the world: "It all began long ago when he was a tiny boy who was already used, in a fearful way, to living with shadows. . . . And this boy had such shadows and he lived to kill one of them (185). Saul's world of shadows was a world split along racial lines--white and black, separated "by a million psychological miles" (185). The narrator makes Saul's psychological scarring lucid: "So people became for Saul symbols of uneasiness, of a deprivation that evoked in him a sense of the transitory quality of life, which always made him feel that some invisible, unexplainable event was about to descend upon him" (186). Much like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Wright's story describes Saul's perspective toward relationships as unreal and transitory.

Saul's sense of the world is built upon an unstable foundation of dehumanization and oppression. He sees life as

transitory because he has been taught by society and by the death of his parents not to value human relationships as stable: "It so happened that even Saul's mother was but a vague, shadowy thing to him, for she died long before his memory could form an image of her. And the same thing happened to Saul's father. . ." (186).

The narrator introduces us to Saul's scarred psyche of his early youth to provide the reader with a reason for his actions later in the story. "In 'The Man Who Killed A Shadow,' [Wright] scrupulously adhered" claims Fabre, "to sequence and detail for the clinical, nearly scientific progress of his demonstration" (109). The description of Saul's maturation from childhood to early adulthood provides one with the psychological background that prevents one from dismissing the murder as a product of violence. While the violence is real, his actions reveal a deeper pathology than a violent temperament; they suggest a denial of healthy maturation as a result of his environment.

Saul's environment feeds his psychosis: "Saul got used to hearing the siren of the police car screaming in the Black Belt, got used to seeing white cops dragging Negroes off to jail" (188). The daily oppression and racism that Saul endures become routine: "when he heard that if you were alone with a white woman and she screamed, it was as good as hearing your death sentence" (188). This fact of life, ironically, is prophetic, foreshadowing Saul's eventual tragic fall. He didn't fight against his environment because "always the black man lost" (188). His naturalistic environment teaches him that survival was more important than

freedom, and his only escape was alcohol and staying within the black, shadowy community.

Wright, once again, uses animal imagery to illuminate his black protagonist's psychology:

Saul was next hired as an exterminator by a big chemical company and he found that there was something in his nature that made him like going house to house and putting down poison for rats and mice and roaches. He liked seeing concrete evidence of his work and the dead bodies of rats were no shadows. . . . He never felt better in his life than when he was killing with the sanction of society. (189-90)

His job as an exterminator allows Saul to act out his aggressions, to become the oppressor rather than the victim. The "dead bodies" were invigorating because they gave him a sense of power over another living thing, just like the power that he felt was controlling and killing him. He resents the hereditary and environmental circumstances that have rendered him symbolically impotent and is instinctively driven towards violence to rectify his condition.

He reveals these violent tendencies, of course, when he murders the white, female librarian. It is difficult to assess the motivations of the "tiny, blonde" woman because of the limited narration, but her actions seem to suggest a sexual psychosis that manifests itself in her confused attraction to Saul, a representative of raw, sexual energy to her. At first, Saul ignores her strange staring, refusing to tell his boss because "why talk to one shadow about another queer shadow?" (191). However, the story reaches an impasse when the woman, assuming a dominant role, orders

him to clean under her desk, while she sits, spreading her legs, her dress "drawn halfway up her" (191). Her actions are described "as though she was being impelled into an act which she did not want to perform but was being driven to perform" (192-3). Wright seems to be suggesting a psychosis in both characters, a shared psychological trauma produced by living in this world.

Saul's fearful reactions to her rather brazen invitations suggest his learned attitude towards the dangers of white, female sexuality to a black man. She reacts to his rejection of her with humiliation, attempting to assert her dominance over him. To remind him of his place, she calls him "black nigger" (193), an insult that Saul "had heard" (193) was the "supreme humiliation" (193) used by white people. The "wild danger" (193) of this situation causes him to act without thinking, slapping her face, which makes her scream. The scream, foreshadowed earlier as a "death sentence," is the catalyst for the violence that ensues.

The violence can be seen as a product of his unstable life of shadows. Because he doesn't recognize human life as tangible--in part because he, himself, is not recognized--he commits murder: "When at last the conviction of what he had done was real in him, it came only in terms of flat memory, devoid of all emotion, as though he were looking when very tired and sleepy at a scene being flashed upon a screen of a movie house" (197). His failure to recognize the immorality of his actions is a reflection of his environment. The narrator's rendering of his story sounds like a psychological case analysis, an objective and detached statement

of the facts, exactly the style of most naturalists who are attempting to stay scientifically objective.

"The Man Who Killed A Shadow" reflects the influence of psychology upon his fiction, and Wright's tendency to explain the psyche in terms of an oppressive environment. Fabre explains Wright's preoccupation with psychology in The World of Richard Wright stating that, "Throughout his career, Richard Wright appears to have been fascinated by psychology as well as the cultural determinants of violent criminal behavior" (108). Based on the facts of a 1945 murder case, this story is further evidence of Wright's quest to utilize real life tragedy to illustrate social determinism. Despite the lapse of time, Wright has maintained a consistent focus, informed by the philosophy of naturalism.

#### Wright's New Perspective

Wright's last published short story was "Big Black Good Man." (1957) It is this final story that saw the most changes in his literary focus, but all the changes are superficial experiments in setting, character, and perspective. The impetus of the story remains the same: a naturalistic depiction of humanity.

Despite the story's white narrator and European setting, Wright continues to explain humanity in terms of the natural world. His use of naturalistic imagery is consistent, and his naturalistic explanations of characters' actions remain the same. Wright continues to argue that social determinism dictates the actions of humanity, and that determinism was inescapable. The most notable shift is in his treatment of race. Wright's focus is upon the psychological reaction of the white world to black

strength. Wright asserts a black nationalism that is not crushed immediately, that is not snuffed out in a violent, tragic scene. Instead, the narrative ends somewhat pleasantly with the African-American character virtually unaffected by the white world. In this story, Wright attempted to tackle the psyche of the white man.

"Big Black Good Man" (1957)

Critic Edward Margolies believes that "Big Black Good Man," Wright's last piece of fiction, "deviates from the usual Wright short story" (87). He is correct, in that many aspects of the story--such as the non-American setting, the white protagonist and the plotless, nonviolent narrative--are not typical of Wright's work. Wright has only one other story with a white protagonist, his novel Savage Holiday, a violent tale of death begetting death. So, this story would appear to be a departure for Wright in many respects. However, while the superficial characteristics of Wright's short stories are absent, "Big Black Good Man" contains a fairly consistent theme, and does not deviate from the naturalistic messages in the previous stories.

The story is told from the perspective of Olaf Jenson, an old, white, manager of an inn in Copenhagen, Denmark. The change in milieu is the most drastic switch. While "Big Black Good Man" was not Wright's first use of a white protagonist (Savage Holiday), the story takes place in Denmark, the first non-American locale in any of his fiction. However, the European setting doesn't seem to be particularly foreign in flavor.

While Olaf is working at the desk, admitting tenants, or, as he calls them, his "children" (198), a "six and a half feet" (199)

dark, black man enters, "the biggest, strangest, and blackest man he'd ever seen in all his life" (199). The man, named Jim, is an American sailor and asks no more of Olaf than any other sailor would: "what they wanted was almost always women and whiskey" (199). However, Olaf is afraid of his new customer because of his size and his blackness and helps him only because he is too paralyzed by fear to resist.

Calling Lena, a prostitute that he felt was "big and strong" (201) enough for a man like Jim, Olaf broods upon his feeling of insignificance and impotence before the "living, breathing blackness" (280), feeling a "primitive hate" (202) for Jim. Lena, on the other hand, sees Jim as "just a man," (201) undaunted by Olaf's description. After staying six nights, Jim confronts Olaf before leaving to get his money from the safe and to pay his bill. Before he leaves, however, he places his "tremendous hands" (200) around Olaf's neck. Olaf wets himself, thinking that the "black giant" (204) is going to kill him, but Jim leaves only to return a year later with six, nylon shirts for Olaf: "'One shirt for each time Lena came. . . See, Daddy-O?'" (206). Olaf laughs uncontrollably at his blunder, explaining his mistake and says "'You're a big black good man'" (207). Perhaps sensing the primitive hate that was behind the misunderstanding, noted by Olaf's addition of "big" and "black" to the compliment, Jim smiles and says "'Daddy-O, drop dead'" (207) before leaving.

Most critics interpret this story as an exploration of the "enemy's" (Margolies 88) psyche, as purely a psychological rendering of Olaf's "primitive hatred." However, the hugeness and

blackness of Jim suggest a larger context for the story. If one considers Olaf's description of Jim, his identification of him as an American and Jim's use of "Daddy-O," it is probable that Wright was using Jim as a symbolic representation of the new, civil right's movement that was gaining strength in the late fifties. However, despite Wright's seemingly new focus toward a hopeful future, the narrative still contains the same naturalistic elements as his previous stories.

The description of Jim given to us from the perspective of Olaf's third person narrator reminds one of Norris' McTeague, an abnormally large and powerful man, but in addition, Jim is the "blackest man" Olaf had ever seen. The narrator describes him as a "brooding black vision" with skin "so black that it had a bluish tint" (199). In addition to his blackness, Jim's "bulk" is described in naturalistic images, such as the "rocklike," "threatening stone," of the "mountain ridges" of his shoulders. His movements seem to reflect his enormous size: "The big black cloud of a man now lumbered into the office, bending to get its buffalolike head under the door frame, then advancing slowly upon Olaf, like a stormy sky descending" (199). The narrator's explanation of Olaf's perception of Jim dehumanizes Jim into more an object of nature than a man or into a fairy tale "giant." He describes him as a "black, beast," "gorillalike," "snake-like," and a "rat" when he fantasizes his death at sea. (203,205-6). But he mostly describes him in terms of his power, a "black mass of power," a "living wall of flesh," and "living, breathing blackness looming" (201, 203). The descriptions of the

power of this "black mass of man" suggest that he is representative of a larger movement.

If Jim is viewed as a symbol of the burgeoning civil rights movement and Olaf as a representative of the white, European world, then the story becomes a wake-up call--as it is literally for Olaf at the beginning of the story--for the white world to recognize a new powerful, movement that expects only equality, removing the need for violence. The story becomes an analysis then of the "primitive hate" of white Europeans, which causes misunderstanding that results in violence. Consider the narrator's description of Olaf's attitude toward Jim:

He was being a fool; there was no doubt about it. But try as he might, he could not shake off a primitive hate for the black mountain of energy, of muscle, of bone; he envied the easy manner in which it moved with such a creeping and powerful motion; he winced at the booming and commanding voice that came to him when the tiny little eyes were not even looking at him; he shivered at the sight of the those vast and clawlike hands that seemed always to hint of death. . . (202)

Olaf's reaction to Jim is parallel to the white majority's reaction to the unified movement of African-Americans demanding equality. Wright is suggesting that the size of the movement, together with African-American blackness, touches upon a "primitive hatred" that whites have for blacks, breeding the resentment that is manifested in Olaf.

Jim is, after all, identified by Olaf as an American, which suggests his roots in the slave system that bred the strongest blacks like cattle. Then too, the common name of Jim suggests an "everyman," even evoking Twain's beloved character Jim in Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. So while the narrative takes place in Denmark, it is more about the American black man refusing to take submissive position before the Anglo world. Instead, he steps to Olaf's counter expecting only those things given other men. Olaf muses: "But what was he angry about? He'd had requests like this every night from all sorts of men. . . ." (201). Olaf's "primitive hate" represents how ingrained racism is in society, and although Olaf "fought with all kinds of men," (199) he is frightened by the "intense blackness and ungainly bigness" of Jim. If the "intensity of blackness and ungainly bigness" could suggest the new, civil right's movement, then Olaf's reaction is the reflex at encountering the power of a people refusing their position, demanding to be treated as equals.

The conclusion of "Big Black Good Man" is a departure for Wright, as it ends in relatively good spirits. However, despite the "happy ending," the unsettling message is left. As the title "Big Black Good Man" suggests, the Anglo world will always see things in terms of power and color before recognizing human goodness. Consistent with his naturalistic beginnings, Wright believes that the hatred that whites have for blacks is a "primitive hate," a natural hate that one cannot escape.

### Conclusion

Of course, it is likely that Wright was influenced by existential arguments and themes; however, the naturalism that initially attracted him to writing remained the basis of his short stories. Wright's life seemed to be a constant struggle against the racism and oppression of his environment; the determinism of his environment ingrained the naturalistic philosophy into his psyche. In The World of Richard Wright, Michel Fabre acknowledges Wright's naturalistic experience: "Whatever may be characteristically naturalistic in his fiction is more likely to have resulted from his personal experience as a poor black American or from his early readings and stands as an embattled writer" (59). Despite experiments in other forms and theories, such as gothic, tragedy and existentialism, Wright remains consistent to the naturalist vision that resulted from his identification with the oppressed minority.

However one views Wright's literary philosophy it is hard to deny the impact he had upon American literature. Ralph Ellison's review of Wright's fiction suggests the impact Wright had upon the African-American literary world: "Native Son and Uncle Tom's Children express an artistic sensibility overcoming the social and cultural isolation of Negro life and moving into a world of unlimited intellectual and imaginative possibilities" (12) As Gates notes "[Wright] was the first African-American writer to sustain himself professionally from his writings alone" (xi). His commercial success produced widespread influence on other writers. It is hard to argue with Gates' assertion that Wright is the "single most

influential shaping force in modern Black literary history" (xi). But Wright's writings challenged the white world also, forcing the public to acknowledge the harsh images of a racist America. Wright's criticism of Uncle Tom's Children in the 1940 essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born" reveals the focus of his literary career:

When the reviews of [Uncle Tom's Children] began to appear, I realized that I had made an awful mistake. I found I had written a book which even banker's daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. (531)

Wright's naturalistic mission was to deny the catharsis that allowed distancing from the reality of the brutality and oppression that accompanied growing up African-American, and his fiction is the enduring legacy of the success of that mission.

#### Works Cited

- Alexander, Margaret Walker. "Richard Wright." Macksey and Moorer 21-36.
- Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Orlando: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1993. 1,175.
- Bell, Bernard W. The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition. Amherst: UMass. Press, 1989. 150-71.
- Booker, M. Keith. A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism. White Plains: Longman Publishers, 1996. 27-40.

- Conder, John J. Naturalism in American Fiction. Lexington: U. Press of Kentucky, 1984. 1-21.
- Ellison, Ralph. "Review of Native Son." Gates and Appiah 11-18.
- Fabre, Michel. "Richard Wright: The Man Who Lived Underground." Macksey and Moorer 207-20.
- . The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright. New York: Morrow and Co., Inc., 1973.
- . The World of Richard Wright. Jackson: U. Press of Miss., 1985. 56-75, 93-121, 158-9.
- Fishburn, Katherine. Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977. 155-67
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis and K.A. Appiah, ed. Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993. 3-5, 62-65.
- Joyce, Joyce Ann. Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 1986. 1-28.
- Kinnamon, Keneth. The Emergence of Richard Wright. Chicago: U. of Ill. Press, 1972. 75-117.
- Loftis, John E. "Domestic Prey: Richard Wright's Parody of the Hunt Tradition in 'The Man Who Was Almost A Man.'" Studies in Short Fiction 23.4 (1986): 437-442.
- Macksey, Richard and Frank E. Moorer., ed. Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1984. 1-7.
- Margolies, Edward . The Art of Richard Wright. New York: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969. 57-89.

- Walker, Margaret. Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1988. 328-338,
- Wright, Richard. Black Boy. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1991. 295.
- . Eight Men. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996.
- . Uncle Tom's Children. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1991.
- , "Big Black Good Man." Literature. Ed. Kirszner and Mandell. Orlando: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, Inc., 1997. 197-207.
- , "How 'Bigger' Was Born." in Native Son. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 1991. 505-40.
- , "The Man Who Was Almost A Man" Fictions. Ed. Trimmer and Jennings. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998. 1197-1206.