The Man Who Lived Underground Study Guide

The Man Who Lived Underground by Richard Wright

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Introduction

"The Man Who Lived Underground," Richard Wright's story about a man who makes a home in city sewers after he is falsely accused of a murder, was first published in the journal *Accent* in 1942. It was originally written as a novel, but Wright could find no publisher for it and shortened the story to a length that would be suitable for a magazine. Two years later, the editor Edwin Seaver, a friend and admirer of Wright, included a longer version in an anthology, *Cross Section.* In 1960 the anthologized version of the story was included in Wright's collection *Eight Men.* Since that publication, the story has been consistently and widely anthologized and discussed. Wright did not live to see the ultimate success of his story, having died two months before *Eight Men* appeared.

The story concerns Fred Daniels, an African American falsely accused of killing a white woman. As he attempts to make a new life in the sewers, he examines his assumptions about guilt and innocence and comes to believe that people are inherently guilty and isolated from one another. These themes, as well as the exploration of life in a large city, are common in Wright's work.

Many readers have seen in "The Man Who Lived Underground" influences of Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1864 philosophical novella "Notes from Underground." Others compare the sewer scenes to those in Victor Hugo's classic French novel, *Les Miserables.* Wright, largely self educated but widely read in world fiction, used the themes and settings of these important European works to present a story that had not yet been told: the story of urban African Americans.

Author Biography

Richard Wright was born September 4, 1908, on a farm near Natchez, Mississippi. His father was a sharecropper and his mother was a teacher. Extreme poverty and family disintegration made it impossible for Wright to attend school regularly, so he was largely self-taught. He did well in school, especially in reading and writing, but he often had to leave school for weeks at a time to beg or work to supplement the family's income. In 1924, when he was only fifteen, he published his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre," in an African-American newspaper. He continued writing and read whatever major magazines of the day he could find-as well as any books he could manage to check out of the whites-only library on a borrowed card

In 1927 he left the South for Chicago, where he took a Job as a postal clerk. When the Great Depression cost him that Job, he found work with the Federal Negro Theater and the Illinois Writers' Project, both government-subsidized organizations. He continued writing. Although his themes were controversial, Wright's talent as a writer was instantly recognized His first published book was *Uncle Tom's Children* in 1938, a collection of four novellas. This was followed by *Native Son* in 1940, which became one of the twentieth century's most well-known novels by an African American and established Wright's reputation as a major writer. It was made into a film m 1951, with Wright himself playing the leading role; another version of the film was produced in 1986.

Wright had joined the Communist Party m 1932, believing the Party could help bring about a social revolution in the United States. The Communist Party involved him in an intellectual community that transcended race and gave him opportunities to write and edit for Party publications. In his most famous work, the novel *Native Son,* the protagonist Bigger Thomas is defended m court by a Communist lawyer, who speaks eloquently about racial inequality. Wright remained a member of the Party until 1944.

Through his adult life, Wright wrestled with his roles as a black man, an artist, and an American. For most of the 1940s he lived in Mexico, where he wrote the first volume of his autobiography, *Black Boy,* in which he explored the artist's role in society, and the ways in which African Americans contribute to their own oppression. Shortly after *Black Boy* was published, Wright moved to Pans, where he lived for the rest of his life.

In 1953 he published another violent novel dealing with an urban African-American victim of poverty and oppression, *The Outsider.* This was followed by other novels, another volume of autobiography, and political nonfiction. He lived m Paris in 1960, after several years of illness.

Plot Summary

As the story begins, a unnamed man is hiding from the police He is tired of running and has decided that he must either find a hiding place or surrender. At that moment he sees a manhole cover in the street. He lifts the cover; the water below is deep and fast. H1S fear of the police is stronger than his fear of the water and the darkness, so he enters and is nearly swept away and killed by the water before he finds his footing. As he explores the runnels, he knows that he is in danger, but an "irrational impulse" prevents h1m from leaving. Instead he moves forward, looking for a dry hiding place or a safe way out.

Following a faint sound he cannot identify, he comes to a section of the tunnel that is taller and has fresher air He gropes along, using a pole to test the depth of the water in front of him and occasionally lights a match for a brief bit of light. He finds a dirt cave off to one side, and then comes to a brick wall, through which he can plainly hear a group of people singing Christian hymns. Pulling himself up on some old pipes near the ceiling, he can see through a crevice that black people m white robes are holding a church service. It seems to him that what they are doing is wrong, that asking for forgiveness is obscene.

The man moves on, feeling his way through the water. By the faint light from another manhole cover, he sees a dead baby floating m the water; it has gotten snagged on some debris. With his eyes closed he uses his foot to push the body free, but in his mind he sees it swept away by the current. The nightmarish quality of this episode, and his sense that the men and women in the church are as insignificant as this baby, makes him think again about his own guilt.

Returning to the cave, he sleeps. When he wakes, cold and hungry, he knows he should leave the sewers, but knowing that the police have a signed confession from him convinces him to stay. To pass the time, he idly pokes a brick wall with a jagged pipe, eventually loosening enough bricks so he can squeeze through into a dark basement room. The building he has entered turns out to be an undertaker's office, and through a keyhole he can see into a lit room where a dead man is being embalmed. He takes some tools from the coffin maker's supply and uses a crowbar to open passages to other connected basements.

In a furnace room, he finds a sink with drinkable water and a workman's lunch box. He digs another hole in the bricks, and enters the furnace room of a jeweler's shop. Through a tiny crack he can see a white hand in the next room opening a combination safe full of money and gems. He determines to watch carefully next time so he can decipher the combination.

He miscalculates his place on the wall, and digs into the basement of a meat and fruit market instead.

After the store closes, he enters and finds a meat cleaver that holds a strange attraction for him, more fresh water, and an array of fruit which he eats until full. While he is in the store, a white couple come into the store to buy grapes and mistake him for the shop assistant. They do not notice anything unusual about the man, although he must be wet and disheveled after his time in the sewer. When they leave, the man follows them outside. There he finds a newspaper, and the headline is about him. Fear sends him back underground.

He finds a way into the room with the safe. While the watchman sleeps, the man takes money and gems from the safe. then walks over to a typewriter. He tries to type his name, "freddaniels"; this is the only time his name is mentioned in the' story. He adds the typewriter to his sack of booty, and returns to the cave. There, he rigs up an electric light and radio he has collected from the basements, and on a whim wallpapers his cave with money and sprinkles the floor with diamonds. He tells himself that what he has done is not equivalent to stealing, because the things he has taken mean nothing to him.

Daniels makes another round of the basements. and once again is drawn toward the sound of hymn singing. He watches a boy get beaten for stealing the radio that is in the man's cave. He watches the police interrogate. threaten, and beat the jewelry store watchman. These policemen are the same ones who forced Daniels to confess to a crime he did not commit. The watchman, however, does not confess but instead hangs himself, confirming the policemen's suspicions of his guilt.

Finally, Daniels accepts that all people share an inherent guilt, and he returns above ground to tell what he has learned. He finds the policemen who beat him, and begs them to come with him to his cave. They have found the real killer and have no further use for him. They bum his false confession, and as he descends back into the manhole, they shoot him. Like the dead baby before him, he is swept away down the sewer.

Summary

A man crouches in a vestibule and as he listens to the siren of a passing police car, and he tells himself that he must find a place to hide. As he contemplates this, a sudden movement in the street catches his attention. Investigating further, he finds that the cover has come off of a nearby manhole. The man waits until the siren is no longer audible before stepping out into the street and toward the manhole. Even though the police car is nowhere near, he feels a sense of urgency as he struggles to remove the cover. When he has finally wrestled it from the hole, he lowers himself into the dark cavern. As he nears the bottom, he finds that the rungs he had used to lower himself into the hole have ended and so he finds he must let go and drop into the water below. He struggles to maintain his balance in the rushing current and as he does, he becomes aware that a police car has stopped on the street above him. The man is fearful that he is going to be caught; however, the policeman simply replaces the manhole cover before leaving.

Alone in the hole beneath the street, the man listens to the sounds of the cars passing overhead. After finding a package of dry matches in his shirt pocket, he lights a cigarette. Using another match for light, he takes a look at his surroundings. The man immediately realizes how close he had come to drowning. He discovers another tunnel nearby and since it is dry, he decides to investigate it further. After a few minutes, he finds himself at the mouth of what appears to be a cave, but after lighting another match he discovers that it is the remnants of an old sewer.

The man lowers himself into the hole and is immediately overcome with the sense that another person is nearby. Even though it is obvious that there is no one else in the hole, the feeling persists and so he walks around the perimeter. As he does, he becomes aware of voices, which he eventually determines to be singing and that is coming from an adjacent church. As he looks around, he sees a small amount of light coming from the direction of the church and so using the pipes overhead, he inches his way toward the light in an effort to see more. Peering into the church, he can see some members of its choir and although he feels as though he is somehow intruding, he continues to watch until he grows tired of holding onto the pipe.

After he drops to the ground, the man realizes that the cave is very quiet. Somewhat unsettled by this, he makes his way back to the opening so that he can once again hear the water rushing by. He contemplates whether or not to return to the street and find another place to hide, and eventually decides that he does not want to have to continually be on the run and elude the police. Even so, he's not sure what to do to pass the time while he remains underground.

The man spends the next few minutes wandering through the sewer. As he walks along, he is startled to see the lifeless body of an infant floating in the water. Unsettled by this, he closes his eyes and kicks the body away from him and waits until he is certain that it has floated away before opening his eyes again. He walks along awhile longer before finally returning to his cave and falling asleep. When he awakens, the man realizes that

while he cannot remain underground forever, he doesn't want to return to the street. He thinks about the events that led to his exile: he was accused of a crime he didn't commit, and then beaten by police officers before being forced to sign a confession statement.

The man then realizes that he is hungry. He decides to attempt digging through the brick wall that surrounds his cave to see what is on the other side. He eventually removes enough bricks and cement to expose a set of wooden steps. He quietly climbs the steps and peers through the keyhole of the door that stands at the top. It takes a few minutes, but he eventually realizes that he is looking into the workroom of a funeral home. On his way back down the steps, he finds a light switch that he turns on to reveal a room full of tools, lumber and coffins. He decides to take some of the tools to help him tunnel his way through the walls of the sewer.

As the man begins to make his way back to his cave, he discovers another door. He pries the door open and walks through it. As he does this, the man becomes aware of a faint roar that sounds as if it is coming from far away. Even though he knows doing so may very well place him in danger, he feels compelled to investigate. He eventually comes upon a stairway, which he climbs. When he reaches the top of the steps, he realizes that he is in a movie theater. As he watches the people enjoy the movie, he realizes that the movie is merely an animated version of their lives. He feels compelled to confront them about this, but resists the temptation.

The man decides to leave the theater and on his way down the steps, is startled to encounter another man, who assumes he is looking for the men's room. He points the way and continues on. The man returns to the basement and finding a sink, washes his hands and then takes a long drink of water. As he finishes, he hears footsteps and so he crawls into a nearby coal bin. A man enters and after tending to the furnace, leaves. As the man crawls out of the coal bin, he spots a lunch pail, which to his delight is full. He also finds some cigarettes and matches. Taking his newly acquired possessions he returns to the basement below the funeral home to retrieve the tools he had found.

After the man gets the tools, the man decides to attempt to dig a hole in the wall of the funeral home basement. Before long, he realizes he is hungry and so he stops and eats the sandwiches he found in the lunch pail. His stomach full, he lies down and drifts off to sleep. As he sleeps, he dreams that he is walking on water and comes upon a woman who is holding a baby. The woman is sinking into the water and she is holding her baby above her head in an effort to keep it from drowning along with her. The man takes the baby from the woman and lays it on the water's surface so that he can rescue the woman. However, by the time he turns his attention back to the woman, she has vanished. He then looks for the baby, but the baby is gone as well. As the man desperately looks around, he finds that he too is sinking into the water. The horror of this dream awakens him and he leaps up and goes back to work.

As the man works, he wonders how long he had been sleeping. His thoughts are interrupted by a steady tapping noise that he eventually identifies as coming from a typewriter. Through a window above him, he is able to see into the room beyond the

wall, but the only thing he can see there is a stainless steel disc with some sort of fine markings. A hand appears to rotate the disc, which makes the man realize that the disc belongs to a safe. As the safe opens, the man is startled to see wads of money, rolls of coins and other objects. After staring at the safe for a few minutes, he decides to wait to see if the hand returns so that he can attempt to get the combination. While having this plan makes the man feel better about staying underground, he begins to get frustrated when the hand doesn't return to the safe.

After some time passes, he decides to leave his perch so that he can further explore the basement. He comes across another door and pushing it open, finds a radio repair shop on the other side. He decides to take a radio to put in his cave. After he returns to the cave with the radio, he decides to check on the safe and is disappointed to see the door being shut. He chastises himself for not being patient enough to wait for the hand to reappear and then decides to focus on how he can get into the room where the safe is without being detected. He eventually determines that by digging a hole in the wall, he should reach the basement of the building where the safe is. With his plan in place, he begins to dig. Before long, he breaks through the wall and after widening the hole, is able to pull himself to the other side. He remains still for a few minutes to see if he can hear the familiar sound of the typewriter, but it is quiet.

Summoning his courage, the man opens the door to find that he has entered a butcher shop. As he surveys his surroundings, the butcher enters, takes a piece of meat from a hook and whacks it with a meat cleaver. When he finishes, he hangs the cleaver on the wall and taking the freshly cut meat, he returns to the shop. Alone in the storeroom, the man takes the meat cleaver from the wall and looks through the glass window into the shop. When he sees the shop owner lock up and leave for the day, he steps from the storeroom into the shop and picks several pieces of fruit to eat. When he has had his fill, he goes to the sink and takes a long drink of water. When he finishes, he sits down to smoke a cigarette and think about his wife, his employer, and the three policemen who picked him up. He then walks to the shop door and as he watches the activity that is taking place outside, he longs to go out to join in. Impetuously, he opens the shop door and is somewhat startled to find a man and woman walking toward the shop. They mistake the man for a shop employee and ask him for a pound of grapes. Rather than raise their suspicion, the man gets their grapes and the couple go on their way.

After the couple leaves the store, the man goes out into the street for a few minutes. He walks to a newsstand and sees the headline on the local newspaper: "Hunt Negro for Murder." Feeling more anxious than ever, the man retreats back into the store, retrieves the meat cleaver and heads back to the basement. He thinks about the events that led to his running away and realizes that although he is innocent, he feels guilty.

The man decides to return to his cave, but then remembers the safe. He finds a place in the wall across from the last tunnel he dug and begins to dig a new one. He is quite tired, so the work is hard and it takes him a great deal of time to complete the task. He finally makes his way through the door and finds the steps leading upward. He climbs the steps and opens the door at the top. To his surprise, there is a young woman in the room who is just as startled to see him. She screams, and the man quickly retreats back

into the basement. When her coworkers come to investigate, she tells them that there had been a strange man in the room. Seeing no evidence of an intruder, her co-workers dismiss her claim simply a matter of hysteria and leave.

Meanwhile, the man goes back to the matter of obtaining the combination of the safe. As he waits, he realizes that it isn't the money that he is after but rather, the thrill associated with getting the money. He is just about to give up when the hand appears. The man carefully watches the hand's movements as it opens the safe. Within a few minutes, a second hand appears. The man realizes that these hands are different from the one he saw earlier and further, that the person to whom they belong is stealing. Even though the money doesn't belong to him, the man finds himself becoming indignant.

When it becomes clear to him that the establishment has closed for the night, he makes his way to the basement of the building. He is quite aware that a night watchman may be on duty and so he takes a good look around the room before getting to the task at hand. As he faces the safe, he recalls the numbers he has committed to memory and within minutes, the safe's door swings open revealing piles of money, rolls of coins, and jars containing some type of pellets. As he piles the wads of money into his sack, he realizes that he hasn't paid attention to the denominations and that up to this point, he has been taking all one dollar bills. He empties his sack and refills it with hundred-dollar bills.

With his sack filled, the man walks across the room to a typewriter that is sitting on a desk. Intrigued by the machine, he inserts a piece of paper and tentatively types his name. When he finishes, he decides to take the machine as well. Then, using his last match, he looks around the adjacent workroom and discovers that the establishment he is in is a jewelry repair shop. As he digests this information, he suddenly realizes that the pellets he had seen in the jars were diamonds and so he returns to the safe and takes all four jars.

With this task finished, the man returns to the workroom where he had seen another door. Curious as to what might lie behind it, he enters and immediately is overcome with the sense that there is someone in the room. He finally decides to turn on the light and is surprised, and shocked, to see another person, the night watchman, who is sound asleep. Before turning off the light, the man decides to take the gun and cartridge belt that is on the floor beside the sleeping guard. He returns to the room with the safe and spends a few minutes strutting around the room with the gun, pretending that he is faced with an imaginary foe. He then gathers all the things he has accumulated and proceeds to make his way back to his cave, being careful to make sure to replace the bricks that he had removed from the wall.

When the man gets back to the cave, he rigs up a light bulb and socket he had found in the toolbox beneath the funeral home. Next, he takes some of the money out of his bag and studies it closely. When he loses interest in the paper currency, he removes the rolls of coins from his bag and frees them from their paper wrappers. After sifting through the coins for a few minutes, he remembers the typewriter. He intends to type his

name, but suddenly finds that he cannot remember what it is and so he types the phrase "it was a long hot day." He pretends for a few moments that he works in an office but soon tires of this as well. As he looks around the room, he spots a can of glue and immediately decides to paper the walls of his cave with the money.

The man is amused by this and spends a great deal of time wondering what those outside of his cave would think of his decorations. When he tires of this, he opens the boxes containing watches and rings and hangs them one by one on the wall. As he sits down to admire his work, he becomes aware that the gun he had taken from the sleeping night watchman is at his side. Because he has never shot a gun before, he decides to give it a try. The loud noise startles him and he drops the gun on the floor.

The man then opens the jars of diamonds and pours them into a heap on the floor. For a few moments he imagines he is a rich man strolling through the park on a sunny afternoon. As he paces across the cave, he kicks the pile of diamonds, causing them to scatter in all directions. Rather than attempt to collect the gems, he decides to grind them into the dirt with his feet.

Tired of the games, the man becomes restless. He realizes that he cannot remain underground forever, yet he also knows that if he leaves, he will almost certainly be caught. He spends the next several hours catnapping and wondering what he should do. As he lies in the dark cave, he can hear the singing from the church again and so he climbs up on the pipes so that he can get a glimpse inside. As he listens to the choir members sing, he thinks that their faith is based on their belief that they have done something wrong. This causes him to think of his own situation and he finds himself becoming tense.

The man decides to move away from the church and return to the cave, but he is stopped by the sound of voices coming from the radio store. The man stops to listen and soon learns that a young employee of the store has been accused of stealing the radio that he had taken. Despite his protests that he is innocent, the young man is being beaten. The man momentarily considers bringing the radio back to the basement but decides against it, reasoning that the beating the boy is receiving will enable him to learn the secret of his existence.

As he moves away from this section of the underground, the man finds himself beneath the jewelry repair shop. He is able to look through a narrow portion of an open window to see the night watchman in the process of being beaten by police officers. The man recognizes the officers as the same three that had beaten him and coerced him into signing the confession. After beating and torturing the guard for quite some time, it appears as though he has passed out and so the three police officers decide to go outside for a cigarette. The man is momentarily tempted to call out to the watchman and invite him to live in the cave with him, but he resists. Before long, the watchman gets up from the floor, walks across the room and removes a gun from a drawer. The man watches in horror as the night watchman kills himself. He then leaves his perch and makes his way back to the cave.

Back in the cave, the man remains frozen in fear for what seems to be an eternity. When he finally does move, it is with definite purpose. He climbs out of his cave and begins sloshing through the water. He is moving against the current, so he has a difficult time, but he continues on. He finally locates a manhole cover and climbs to the top. As he moves the cover from the hole, the light streaming in momentarily startles him. He becomes deeply conflicted about whether to remain underground or go out into the sunshine. He eventually summons his courage and pushes the cover completely off of the manhole. As he emerges from the hole, traffic momentarily stops and irate drivers berate him for putting himself and others in danger. He makes his way to the sidewalk and when he passes a mirror, he is amused to see that he is covered in mud.

The man walks aimlessly for the next thirty minutes. He eventually finds himself near the church he had discovered while underground. When he reaches the church he feels compelled to go inside but isn't sure what he would say. He nonetheless walks into the church and begins to speak. Some of the congregation tries to silence him while others, assuming he is drunk, attempt to remove him from the church. As they toss him back outside, they warn him that if he attempts to come back inside, they will call the police.

Back outside, the man suddenly is overwhelmed with the desire to go to the police station and attempt to clear his name. He is confident that he can convincingly state his case and convince the police officers that he is not guilty of the crime for which he has been accused. As he enters the building, he is stopped by a police officer who asks if he needs help. The man wants to tell the officer that he is looking for the officers that forced him into signing the confession, but he is unable to find the right words. The police officer, assuming the man is crazy, asks if he knows where he is. He next asks the man for his name and address, but he is unable to respond. Finally, he tells the officer that he has been accused of killing a woman and that he has been living underground. The officer assures him that he will be sent back to the psych ward and that everything will be fine. Finally the man tells gives the officer the name of the woman who was killed and so he brings him to the officer who had handled the case.

The man is brought into a room where he finds the three men who had beaten him sitting around a table. Only one of the officers recognizes him and he asks the man why he came to see them. The man tells the officer that he is tired off hiding. He goes on to tell them about the money he took from the safe and pasted onto the wall. He is interrupted by one of the other officers, a man named Murphy, who tells him that they have already found the man responsible for the murder and that he has been cleared of any wrongdoing. The first officer, Lawson, admonishes Murphy for telling the man that the real killer has been caught. The man, seemingly oblivious to what is going on, begins to tell the officers about the time he spent underground and itemizes the items he took. He remains adamant that he didn't steal the items, and that he has every intention of giving them back. It becomes immediately clear that the police officers are not comprehending what the man is telling them and that they assume he is crazy.

The third officer, Johnson, takes the signed confession from his pocket and burns it. The man doesn't understand what this means and becomes frightened. The officers try to assure him that he has nothing to worry about, but the man is not convinced. The

officers are afraid that the man is going to get them into trouble and so they ask him why he is there. In an effort to get the officers to believe him, he tells them that he saw the night watchman kill himself and that he knows he did it because he was wrongly accused of stealing the items from the safe. The officers become frightened and decide to take the man out of the police station. The man suggests that they go to the underground so that he can show them where he has been living.

As the officers take the man outside, they try to come up with a plausible story to explain what has happened. The man clearly does not understand what is going on and continues to suggest that he show them the underground. They drive around for a time before the officer pulls the car over and once again asks the man where he had been hiding. When the man again insists that he has been living underground, the officers become increasingly frustrated. The car moves again and before long, they come to a stop in front of an apartment building. Lawson tells the other officers that they will wait in his apartment until it becomes dark outside.

As the men drink, the man becomes increasingly agitated at his inability to clearly express himself. He again suggests that he take the officers to show them the underground but his suggestion is met with a sharp blow to the head. The man passes out. When he awakens, it is dark and one of the officers suggests that they go visit the underground. The man is overjoyed at being given the chance to redeem himself. They get in the car and the man directs them to the right street. As they travel the deserted streets, the man again tells them about the way in which he decorated the walls as well as the fact that he fired a pistol. Playing along with him, the officers ask the man what he ate and they are amused by his descriptive answer. The finally reach the spot where the man went underground and the car stops. Two of the officers express their doubt that the man actually lived in the sewer, however, Lawson assures them he knows what he is doing.

The police officers let me man out of the car and ask him to show them where he lived. They walk to the manhole and Lawson suggests that the man show them how he went down. The man happily obliges and suggests that they can follow him. The man is happy that he can finally show the officers where he lived and what he did while he was down there. The man descends the ladder and hits the water. The current threatens to take him away, but the man manages to keep his balance.

The man cautions the other men to be careful but they do not follow. Instead, Lawson draws his gun. The man looks up in time to see the gun pointed at him. In the next instant, a shot rings out and the man falls backward into the water. As he fades from consciousness, he hears one of the officers ask Lawson why he shot. Lawson replies that he was afraid that the man would ruin their lives. One of the last sounds the man hears is the cover being placed on the manhole. He closes his eyes and lets the current carry him away.

Analysis

Richard Wright's short story *The Man Who Lived Underground* provides a fairly accurate description of the position in which most black men found themselves during the years immediately following the Great Depression.

Clearly, one of the central themes in this story is racism. The police accuse the man of a crime he did not commit and because he is black; they are confident they will not be disciplined for their brutal interrogation techniques. When the man returns to try to explain himself, the officers do not feel obligated to listen to him. The case is not unlike countless others: a white woman is murdered and a black servant immediately becomes the prime suspect. He is beaten and bullied and forced to sign a confession statement for a crime they know he didn't commit.

Later, when the real killer is found, the officers conveniently "forget" they treated him in this manner. We see from this episode that the police officer's bigotry is not confined to black people; the man eventually arrested for the crime is referred to as an "eyetalian." Fearful that their behavior will be made public, they kill the man so that he no longer poses a threat to them or their jobs. In this story and in so many other stories like this, it is clear that the police feel that they have unlimited power over others and that they can use that power as they see fit.

It is interesting, however, that this is the only instance of racism that the man encounters. Recall that when he is approached by the couple who wants to buy grapes, when he is outside the movie theater, and even after he exits the sewer, no one seems to give him a second look, despite the fact that he is covered with debris and most likely foul-smelling.

One of the most significant attributes of this story is that with the exception of one brief reference, the central character remains nameless. In the beginning, this seems somewhat strange, but as we get further into the story, we begin to understand that this is done purposely. The fact that the main character is known simply as "the man" enables him to represent nearly every black man of that period. The fact that the author chooses "Fred Daniels" as this character's name, a name that is strikingly similar to that of the famous abolitionist, Frederick Douglas, provides an indication that he represents the hope of absolute freedom for all black men. Clearly, while his decision to leave the rest of society behind and seek safety in an underground sewer is one that is made in desperation, especially in light of the fact that he is not guilty of the crime for which he has been accused, it is also representative of the futility many black men felt during that period in our country's history.

Similarly, the man's inability to clearly articulate his feelings represents the position of black men in America during that time. While he obviously has so much to say, the words remain locked inside of him. In many respects, the man may feel as though any attempts to explain himself will be futile, that is, he will be judged solely on the basis of his race. Further, his silence is symbolic of his inherent inability to do anything to improve his position in the world outside of the sewer. When he is underground, he has

no trouble expressing himself, even if there is no one there to talk to. He clearly expresses his fear, amusement, and frustration. Clearly, he feels in control and comfortable there. He is even able to convince the couple that walks into the market that he is a legitimate employee. Likewise, when he is wandering in the basement beneath the movie theater, the attendant assumes he is merely looking for the men's room. Given the anxiety the man feels when he encounters these people, it is clear to us that he has an inherent sense of guilt and assumes that the rest of the world likewise views him as being guilty of something.

The story's title is somewhat misleading in that while the man did spend a period of time underground, to characterize him as having lived there would not be entirely accurate. While we are not certain as to the precise length of time he spent in the sewer, it could not have been more than a day or two. During the brief period of time that the man does spend in the sewer, however, we see him enjoy the simple things he discovers: the look and texture of the money, the typewriter, and even the gun are all playthings to this man. He even admits that he takes them only for the thrill of getting them.

While we do not know much about the type of life the man led before going into hiding, we do learn that he works as a servant for a white family. This, in conjunction with the fact that he has been accused of a crime that he claims he did not commit, we can assume that the man's life has been difficult and one in which he has found himself victimized by others. Alone in the sewer, the man is freer than he has been at any other point in his life. By digging into the walls, he is able to gain access to various businesses and help himself to whatever he wants. He also is able to freely observe the people within these establishments without being discovered. Indeed, as he watches the choir sing and the people watch a movie, he becomes quite judgmental and even self-righteous in his assessments. This newly found confidence is a direct result of this unfamiliar taste of freedom he has obtained.

The confidence the man feels is further represented by the dream that the man has, in which he finds that he is able to walk on water. Normally a phenomenon reserved for the biblical character Peter, the man's ability to walk on water represents the newly found power and control he has discovered in his new surroundings. Similarly to his life outside of the sewer, the man unfortunately realizes that his ability cannot help him save the drowning woman or baby in his dream. Clearly, while he is in the darkness of the underground, he is in complete control, however the moment he gets anywhere near the light, indicating that he is closer to the outside, he becomes physically and emotionally uncomfortable.

The brightness of the light blinds him and causes him to turn back toward the darkness. This is actually the opposite of the traditional meanings of light and dark; in most cases, light is associated with hope while darkness symbolizes despair. In this story, the man finds comfort in the dark and is fearful of the world that exists in the light. Further irony exists in the fact that while the story's title implies that the man truly began to live during the time he lived underground, the sewer is also the place in which he died and where his body will remain.

When viewed in the context of racism, it becomes clear that it was no mistake that the author chose a sewer for the man's hiding place. Indeed, when one thinks of a sewer, images of the worst type of filth are among the first that come to mind. By placing this wrongly accused man in a sewer, the author is illustrating the horrible effects of racism and bigotry. Similarly, the darkness of the sewer represents the lack of hope for the future.

Another recurring theme in this story is seen in the man's struggle with understanding guilt. While it is clear that he feels guilty for running away, we also understand that he did it as a matter of self-preservation. His admission of guilt for the murder is one that was coerced and it seems that the man knows he was accused simply because he is black. As a result, we wonder if he really does know the difference between guilt and innocence. Recall how easily he is able to justify his actions when he takes the tools, the radio, or the money and diamonds. He does not feel the least bit remorseful when the boy in the radio shop is beaten or when the night watchman kills himself, in fact, he seems to derive satisfaction from the fact that at least now, the boy in the radio shop will "understand the secret of his life, the guilt that he could never get rid of."

Based on this, it is clear that the man in this story believes in the concept of original sin. While we don't know for sure, it is possible that the man was never baptized and so he still carries the stain of this sin with him. This would also account for his apparent contempt for the people singing in the choir as well as his belief that their songs of praise are in vain.

The death of the man at the story's conclusion is hardly surprising. While there are no specific indications given that this will happen, the reader begins to get a sense that the police officers have a plan for "dealing" with the man when they leave the station and go to Lawson's apartment to wait for nightfall. Unfortunately, the man is so consumed with finally having the opportunity to admit to his guilt that he fails to recognize the impending danger. We are given a further hint when, during the time they spend traveling to the manhole, the man finds himself singing the hymn that he had earlier ridiculed the choir for singing. The man's change of heart in this matter seems to indicate that he knows that once he confesses his guilt, he will be spiritually free.

Analysis

Richard Wright's short story *The Man Who Lived Underground* provides a fairly accurate description of the position in which most black men found themselves during the years immediately following the Great Depression.

Clearly, one of the central themes in this story is racism. The police accuse the man of a crime he did not commit and because he is black; they are confident they will not be disciplined for their brutal interrogation techniques. When the man returns to try to explain himself, the officers do not feel obligated to listen to him. The case is not unlike countless others: a white woman is murdered and a black servant immediately becomes the prime suspect. He is beaten and bullied and forced to sign a confession statement for a crime they know he didn't commit.

Later, when the real killer is found, the officers conveniently "forget" they treated him in this manner. We see from this episode that the police officer's bigotry is not confined to black people; the man eventually arrested for the crime is referred to as an "eyetalian." Fearful that their behavior will be made public, they kill the man so that he no longer poses a threat to them or their jobs. In this story and in so many other stories like this, it is clear that the police feel that they have unlimited power over others and that they can use that power as they see fit.

It is interesting, however, that this is the only instance of racism that the man encounters. Recall that when he is approached by the couple who wants to buy grapes, when he is outside the movie theater, and even after he exits the sewer, no one seems to give him a second look, despite the fact that he is covered with debris and most likely foul-smelling.

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Characters

Fred Daniels

Fred Daniels is the African-American protagonist of the story, the man who lived underground. He is an Everyman, whose name is not revealed until he attempts to type it out on the typewriter in the jewelry shop. A few hours later, when he tries to type his name again, even he cannot remember it. He is hiding in the sewer to escape the police, who have forced him to confess to murdering a white woman (He had been employed at the home of a Mrs. Wooten, a neighbor of the murdered woman.) As the story unfolds and he travels through the sewer tunnels and through a series of connecting basements, little more is leamed about him. He recognizes but rejects Christian hymns (in fact, he knows "most of the churches in the area"), and he is able to use carpentry tools and run wiring. For the purposes of the story, his fonner life above ground is insignificant. It is what he leams underground, and his return as a new man to the world above, that matter. Ultimately, people with his newfound knowledge cannot be absorbed into society. Daniels is murdered, and there is no mention of anyone who will notice his disappearance.

Johnson

Johnson is one of the three police officers who beat a confession out of Fred Daniels and attempt to do the same to the night watchman, Thompson. Of the three, he is the most tentative, allowing Lawson to do his thinking for him.

Lawson

Lawson is the leader among the three police officers. His name is Ironic, because he is not a "son of the law," but a man who has corrupted the law for his own purposes. Under his direction, Johnson and Murphy have beaten two innocent men, leading to one false confession and one suicide. When he orders them to say nothing about Daniels's emergence and about burning the false confession, they agree with no questions. They do not even question why they are following Daniels to the sewer and seem genuinely surprised when Lawson shoots Daniels in cold blood. One of them asks Lawson why he shot Daniels. He replies, "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things."

Murphy

Murphy is another of the three police officers and the one who has the most sympathy for the protagonist. When Daniels appears at the police station after his time underground, Murphy tries to tell him that his name has been cleared, but he is

silenced by Lawson. He believes Daniels is harmless but insane.

Thompson

Thompson is the night watchman in the Jewelry shop. He is sound asleep, with a picture of his wife and children at his head and his gun on the floor beside him, when Daniels empties the safe and also takes the gun. The next day, he is accused of the robbery by the same policemen who accused Daniels, and they beat the watchman as they earlier beat the protagonist, trying to get him to confess. When he is left alone for a few minutes, he kills himself.

Themes

Guilt and Innocence

One of the most Important themes in "The Man Who Lived Underground," the idea that Fred Daniels keeps exploring as he moves through the story, is the Idea of guilt and innocence. In nearly every episode, Daniels wrestles with guilt. When he hears the churchgoers singing hymns, he wants to laugh, but immediately he is "crushed with a sense of guilt." Contemplating the scene, he comes to believe that they are wrong to be asking forgiveness of God. The contrast is significant: he is "crushed" with guilt over the simple act of almost laughing, yet he feels that others should "stand unrepentant" for their own sins.

As he moves through the tunnels underground, his exploration of the meaning of guilt appears even more confused. He gradually comes to understand that everyone is equally guilty, or equally not guilty. Guilt does not prevent him from taking tools, food, a radio, money, or the other items he collects. He is unconcerned over the punishment the boy and the watchman receive because of his own actions, or over the watchman's suicide. He has to hold back another laugh while the boy is beaten for taking the radio, and hopes the beating will make the boy understand "the secret of his life, the guilt that he could never get rid of."

Daniels first enters the sewer soon after making a false confession, that is, after asserting his guilt when he is in fact innocent. At the end of the story, he tries to tell the policemen that he is guilty after all, but now they insist that he is innocent. He knows that the policemen do not understand what he is trying to tell them, but he knows what he has seen: "All the people I saw was guilty."

Alienation and Loneliness

Fred Daniels's alienation, his separateness from the rest of humanity, plays an important role in the story. His is not just a case of mistaken identity. By the middle of the story he has no identity at all, and cannot even remember his own name. Throughout the story he is repeatedly mistaken for someone else. The police think he is the murderer, the movie theater usher thinks he is a patron, the woman at the market thinks he is a shop assistant. For whatever reason the police made their mistake, the usher and the shopper simply must not be looking carefully, not considering Daniels as a human being; neither seems to notice that he is wet and smelling of the sewer, because they do not really notice him at all. Because he is invisible, thus anonymous, he is able to move freely both underground and above.

As he remembers his life above ground, Daniels makes no mention of family or friends, and he does not include family or friends in his playacting with the typewriter, the money, or the gun. Below ground, he is one man standing alone watching groups of

people in church, in a theater, at work. He lives out the most common metaphor for separation: instead of figurative walls between himself and others, he and the people he watches are literally separated by brick walls

Race and Racism

Although it is not the major theme of the story, race and racism are important to understanding what happens to Fred Daniels. An African-American male, he is accused of murdering a white woman, and history tells him that his chances of obtaining justice from white police officers and a white judicial system are slim. Indeed, the police officers have already beaten him, though they know he is innocent of the crime. The newspaper headline, "Hunt Negro for Murder," demonstrates that Daniels's race is more significant to his accusers than his individual identity Racism, therefore, is a part of what causes Daniels's fear and drives him underground in the first place.

Not everyone treats him terribly, however. The theater usher calls Daniels "sir," and the woman buying grapes is civil enough. But when Daniels returns to the police station, he is called "boy" and laughed at. When the three arresting officers cannot make sense of Daniels's strange and incoherent talk, one of them, Lawson, speculates, "Maybe it's because he lives in a white man's world." Wright, who chose to live most of his adult life outside the United States, believed that racist institutions can cause more harm than can be counteracted by well-meaning or morally neutral people. In Daniels's case, the very laws of the society-the police officer is named Law's Son-oppress those people they are supposed to protect. Daniels is an alienated everyman, whose race removes him even further from those around him.

Style

Images and Imagery

Through the many episodes of "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wright weaves imagery of light and darkness, repeating, reinforcing, and inverting the Imagery to heighten the sense that the world is chaotic and ultimately unknowable. For the most part, the underground is the world of darkness, and the world above ground is the world of light. The faint light that there is underground is strangely colored, from the "lances of hazy violet" coming through the holes in the manhole cover, to the light from the man's matches, "glowing greenishly, turning red, orange, then yellow," to the "red darkness" of the furnace room, and to the "yellow stems" from another manhole that reveal the floating baby. These odd colors heighten the nightmarish quality of life underground, but also highlight the fact that in thiS place the man is learning a new way to see.

After just a short time underground, the man loses his ability to live in normal white light. From his dark refuge he can see clearly those people who are still above ground: the people singing in the church, the dead man on the embalming table, the workers in the jewelry shop. In many senses, he can see them more clearly than they can see themselves, and they-although they are standing in the light cannot see him at all. But when he turns on an electric light in the mortician's basement a "blinding glare" renders him "sightless, defenseless." By the end of the story, when he comes back out of the manhole, light and darkness have been inverted. He cannot see well (one harasser calls him "blind"), and the lights of approaching cars cast him into" a deeper darkness than he had ever known in the underground." As he realizes that the police officers will not listen to his revelation, the light of his new knowledge is extinguished: "the sun of the underground was fleeting, and the terrible darkness of the day stood before him."

Setting

The setting of the story, the sewer where Fred Daniels hides from the police, is also an overarching symbol of the darkness and slime in the depths of the human heart. Just as the stinking, filthy sewer lies just beneath the surface of the vibrant city streets, so do evil and rot lie just beneath the surface of society, and of individual people. Unless humankind can transform Itself and climb out of the sewer, it will be doomed to everlasting fear, isolation, and blindness. Although he is not himself "cleansed,"

Fred Daniels nearly succeeds in escaping the sewer, but the world is not yet ready for him or his message of universal guilt.

Naturalism

Wright's earliest autobiographical writings show that he was fascinated with the great novels of naturalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially the work of Theodore Dreiser.

The foundation of naturalism is the belief that people are a part of the natural world, just as animals are. They are acted upon by forces in their environment which they cannot understand or control. Actions that appear to be acts of will are really reactions to external forces.

Fred Daniels is, as the saying goes, a victim of circumstance. He is accused of murder because of situations entirely out of his control: he is a man of the wrong color in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like many naturalistic protagonists, he is like an animal, living underground and compared by the narrator to a rat or a dog. Daniels is repeatedly driven to act by forces he cannot understand or control. Resting in his cave, he feels an "irrational compulsion to act." As he climbs out of the manhole at the end of the story, the narrator observes, "His mind said no; his body said yes; and his mind could not understand his feelings." Against his own will, he finds the policemen, who have more control over him than he does himself. They, too, are forced by circumstance; they have "got to shoot his kind." When Daniels meets the cruel death that is the fate of most naturalistic protagonists, he is not even a man any longer, but "a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth."

Historical Context

The Great Migration

When the Industrial Revolution changed the economy of the United States from predominantly agricultural to predominantly industrial at the end of the nineteenth century, new opportunities opened up for African Americans who were former slaves or the descendants of slaves. Over the first several decades of the twentieth century, African Americans by the hundreds of thousands moved from rural areas in the South to the big industrial cities in the North in what came to be called the Great Migration. These migrants hoped to leave behind increasingly oppressive Jim Crow laws and mob violence directed against African Americans, as well as a poor agricultural economy worsened by a boll weevil infestation. World War I created a greater need for factory workers, because many workers were fighting and because it takes material goods to conduct a war, and many factories that had previously banned black workers now welcomed them.

The new black workers did not find utopia, however. Most were offered only non-skilled or semi-skilled jobs, and they were paid less than white employees doing the same work. Poverty was still widespread, and most African Americans lived in ghettos in the inner cities. White violence against the newly arrived blacks led to riots that left many dead in the 1920s. A race riot in Chicago had to be suppressed by federal troops. Still, the migration continued. Between the end of World War I and the 1960s, more than six million African Americans left the South for what they hoped would be a better life in the North.

Wright was a part of this migration. He had been born on a plantation in Mississippi and lived in Tennessee, Arkansas, and again in Mississippi before arriving in a black ghetto in the South Side of Chicago in 1927 at the age of nineteen. There, he found a variety of menial jobs, but also had the opportunity to read widely and develop his writing. He saw that racism was as active in the North as in the South. When the Great Depression forced staff reductions at factories, for example, black workers were the first to be let go, regardless of length of service. Wright observed carefully, gathering what would become details and anecdotes for his writing. Ten years after moving to Chicago he moved to Harlem in New York City, where he was living when he wrote "The Man Who Lived Underground." As he continued to write, he became the first major author to document the experiences of urban black men in the United States, and among the first to present African-American stories to a white audience.

The Communist Party

In 1932, Wright joined a group called the Chicago John Reed Club, a group of radical writers and artists organized by the Communist Party. He soon came to feel that this group of intellectuals, white and black, were interested in him as an individual,

regardless of his race. He joined the Communist Party and became its local secretary. He wrote poems and essays about the proletariat, the lowest social class of workers who have no control over the factories in which they labor. As he worked with the Party In Chicago and Harlem, he came to consider that African Americans were not the only oppressed people In the United States, and that class was sometimes as big a factor as race in determining who thrived and who failed.

By the time he wrote "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wright had become disillusioned with the Communist Party. He felt that they had manipulated him, turning his art into propaganda, and he no longer believed that the Party's agenda for African Americans was in their best interest. Edward Margulies, in his *The Art of Richard Wright,* finds that "Fred Daniels' adventures suggest something of Wright's own emotions after ten years in the Communist underground." The tone of the story, he believes, is one of "compassion and despair-compassion for a man trapped in his underground nature and despair that he will ever be able to set himself free. "

Critical Overview

When "The Man Who Lived Underground" was published in the anthology *Cross Section* in 1944, there was not yet a large reading public accustomed to reading works by African-American authors. It was assumed that a black Writer could Write only about race, from only one point of view, and for a primarily black audience. In Wright's case, his early reviewers had read *Native Son,* and most approached "The Man Who Lived Underground" with the assumption that they already knew what it was about. In a 1944 review in the *Chicago Sun,* Sterling North wrote, "As an enthusiastic Wright fan of several years standing I may perhaps be permitted to point out that Wright is still doing variations on the same theme." Most reviewers read the story as one of a black man suffering under white oppression, and went about supporting that view. A rare exception was Harry Hansen of the *New York World Telegram,* who read Fred Daniels's flight as a "symbolic mission" transcending merely racial or political intent.

Over the next fifteen years, *Cross Currents* went out of print, and Wright published several more books and stories. "The Man Who Lived Underground" faded from public consideration unti11t was published again in Wright's posthumous collection *Eight Men.* All of the significant criticism of the story follows its publication in *Eight Men.* While the volume as a whole was not as well received as much of Wright's earlier work, "The Man Who Lived Underground" was immediately and nearly consistently hailed as a masterpiece. Of all of Wright's short fiction, this story has been the most studied and the most admired.

For critics in the second half of the twentieth century, the factor of Fred Daniels's race is less important than his humanity. For these readers, Daniels's struggle transcends race and the social climate for African Americans in the United States. Comparing the story to Wright's novel *Native Son,* Shirley Meyer writes in *Negro American Literature Forum* that "While Bigger Thomas gains his identi ty . . . by defying white society, Fred Daniels gains his identity on a universal level by identifying With all men." Earle V. Bryant agrees that the story "is essentially concerned with personality and its transfiguration" in an essay in *CLA Journal,* but he reminds readers that it is racism that drives Daniels underground.

Critics during the 1960s and 1970s struggled with the question of whether "The Man Who Lived Underground" was a naturalistic or existentialist work. As the drive to categorize literature so strictly waned in the 1980s and 1990s, criticism of the story acknowledged that part of the story's strength comes from Wright's deft handling of material of both traditions. Patricia D. Watkins, writing in *Black American Literature Forum,* explains the paradox of "the story's simultaneous existence as a naturalistic (thus deterministic) fable and an existential (thus anti-deterministic) fable." Yoshinobu Hakutani finds, in effect, that all of the critics who admire the story for different reasons are correct. He finds both a story of one man's struggle with racism and a universal story of identity, both naturalism and existentialism, in a "subtle fusing of various intentions" that "has an affinity with Zen-inspired writing." In short, he finds that Wright

knew what he was doing, and that "he succeeds in making his racial and universal themes intensify each other."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bily has written for a wide variety of educational publishers, and directs an interdisciplinary college program for talented high school students. In the following essay, she discusses the strategies Wright uses to present Fred Daniels both as a representative African-American man in a racist society and as an Everyman whose Crisis transcends race.

When a writer produces a story that becomes an overnight sensation, it is usually because she or he has written something that touches a nerve in the audience, often one that the readers did not even know was raw and exposed. This is what happened with Richard Wright's *Native Son,* which became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and sold 200,000 copies in three weeks. Many found in Wright's novel their first exposure to what life was like for African Americans in the Northern cities. Certainly, most of the book's white readers had no intimate acquaintance with African Americans, and only the slightest general knowledge of their circumstances. They read the novel as much for information as for art. Richard Gilman, writing in *Commonweal* twenty years later, remembers that the book "jolted [him], as it did so many others, [but] it is also true that the jolt was more of the sociological order, not the esthetic."

On the other hand, when a story appears that does not cause a sensation but is quietly and steadily read and talked about for decades, it is often because it contains themes and ideas that are universal, not specific to a particular place and time. This is the case with "The Man Who Lived Underground." Although It has much in common with *Native Son* in terms of situation, plot, character, and theme, Wright took deliberate pains in "The Man Who Lived Underground to present a story which both addresses and transcends issues of race.

Certainly, race is an Important factor in the story. Fred Daniels is a black man accused of murdering a white woman. Because he is black and they are white, the three police officers feel free to beat him until he confesses to the crime, and the reader is made to understand that they are indifferent to whether or not he is actually guilty. When Darnels returns to the surface to tell the world what he has realized, he is called "boy" and "nigger" by the people he encounters, and Lawson guesses that Daniels's confusion might be "because he lives in a white man's world." It is racism that sends him down into the sewer, and racism that prevents the police officers from listening to his story.

But this is not only a story of how white racism oppresses African Americans. After nearly a decade with the Communist Party, and years of reading fiction, psychology, and sociology from around the world, Wright came to believe that racism was just one symptom of an oppressive and corrupt human nature. Although he is an African-American author writing about an African-American protagonist-the is following the old dictum to "write what you know" -It would be a mistake to read the story as a message from one racial group to another. *Native Son* was a deliberate attempt to change white readers' minds about African Americans and bring about social change-a piece of propaganda. This short story is more than that. It is because Wright broadened his

vision when he wrote "The Man Who Lived Underground" that the story retains much of its power more than fifty years after it was written.

If Wright wanted the reader to be constantly aware of Daniels's skin color, he could have easily and naturally made more reference to it. In fact, there are very few references to Daniels's appearance. When he has gone down into the manhole and thinks the police have discovered him, he sees "a white face" hovering above the opening before the lid is replaced. Is this the first hint that the man is not white himself, or is it meant only as a contrast to the opening that turns to black in the next sentence? When he watches "black men and women, dressed in white robes" singing in the church, he does not think that he has been one of them or make any reference to his own skin color. The scene in which he washes his hands in the furnace room sink would have been a natural place to describe the man's skin as he washed it-the man notices the color of everything else in this scene, including his urine. But even though the scenes underground are told in great detail, with nearly every important object described, the man himself is never described. The reader does not know whether he is tall or short, old or young, bearded or clean-shaven. And as long as the man remains underground, there is almost no evidence to settle the question of his color.

During the days he lives underground, the people he encounters do not pay much attention to his color, either. The usher in the theater is polite, and twice calls Daniels "Sir." The couple buying grapes are cold, but civil. The woman whom Daniels frightens in the jewelry shop office is frightened because she saw "a man" in the window, but she never mentions his race, as she easily might have If Wright's point were to highlight racism. Again, if Wright's point were to call attention only to racism, he would have made these scenes more racially charged. Since strangers on the street go out of their way to shout insults at Daniels when he resurfaces at the end of the story, why should these white people be an exception? As long as he is living underground, Daniels has no particular identity-no name, no past, and no race. However, as soon as he returns to the surface to live, nearly everyone he meets notices his skin color and treats him badly because of It.

While Daniels is underground, most of the people he meets are "colorless" as well The dead baby floating in the sewer, the dead man on the embalming table, the night watchman, the usher, the man who stokes the furnace, all are described without reference to their appearance. This is not consistently true: the hand that opens the safe is white, as are the couple in the market and the woman at the file cabinet, and the churchgoers are black. But for the most part, skin color is ascribed only to people above ground, while for those below color is not important For Wright, color and color-based oppression are a surface problem-a symptom. Below the surface, in the human heart, is where corruption dwells. Some people are racist, but all people are guilty.

In fact, even the racist police officers are more than just racist. Their corruption goes beyond their treatment of Daniels, so that they are seen to mistreat everyone over whom they have power. When Daniels comes to confess to his guilt, Murphy tells him, 'We caught the guy who did the Peabody job. He wasn't colored at all. He was an Eyetalian." It is all the same to him. The race of the night watchman is never revealed,

but he is beaten and pushed to suicide by the police officers. Their evil, Wright says, is not Just racism. They have the power to harm others because they are white, but their whiteness is not the source of evil-It Just provides them with the opportunities for it to flourish.

Daniels is more like the other people in the story than he is unlike them. For most of the story he has no name, as most of the characters have no names. When his name is finally revealed, typed in lowercase letters with no space between the words, it is as featureless a name as "Johnson," "Murphy," "Lawson," or "Alice." They may as well all be named John or Jane Doe.

On the surface there are (or there seem to be) distinctions to be made among people. Below the surface, distinctions fade. Wright makes this clear with a series of images of the sewer current carrying away flotsam. First the man finds and kills a rat: "the grizzly body splashed into the dun-colored water and was snatched out of sight, spinning in the scuttling stream." Soon after, he finds the nude body of a dead baby and kicks It loose. "He kept his eyes closed, seeing the little body twisting in the current as it floated from sight." Both scenes involve twisting, and disappearing. At the end of the story, after all he has been through, the man is no different from a dead rat, or a dead baby: "He sighed and closed his eyes, a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth."

In modern literature, a rat is a symbol of evil; a baby stands for innocence. Daniels, the Everyman, is both--or neither. Underground, in the human heart that Wright compares to a sewer, the distinctions do not apply. Light and dark, wakefulness and sleep, guilt and innocence are impossible to determine. The world is chaotic, unknowable, terrifying. It is not a happy story, or an optimistic one, but it is a universal story that still speaks to readers a half century after Wright created it.

Source: Cynthia Bily, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Gounard calls "The Man Who Lived Underground" an "existentialist parable" In which the protagonist is "the symbol of loneliness and anonymity surrounding man in a materialistic and unfeeling society. "

During the summer of 1941, Richard Wright read an article in the August issue of *True Detective* which assumed a special significance for him. This article, "The Crime Hollywood Couldn't Believe," was about a 33-year-old man, Herbert C. Wright. Unemployed and aimless, Richard Wright's namesake had lived for more than a year in the sewers of Los Angeles. His subterranean existence had enabled him to get whatever he wished by entering stores through their sewer systems and helping himself. A close watch by the police eventually led to his arrest.

Fascinated by this story, Richard Wright noted a parallel between Herbert C. Wright's dilemma and the problems faced by the Black man in American society. Herbert Wright, who was a white man, was looking for a place in a society that rejected his attempts to establish himself as a responsible citizen. During his underground stay, he tried to develop a role, albeit peripheral to the mainstream of society, in which he could function and be himself. This theme was rapidly exploited by Richard Wright who held that the Black American had always played the same hidden role in a society that rejected him.

During the fall of 1941, Richard Wright wrote a short novel based on the *True Detective* story. Of the three sections of the novel, only the third, entitled "The Man Who Lived Underground," was published. It was later included in a collection of short works entitled *Eight Men.*

"The Man Who Lived Underground" tells the story of a Black man forced to hide in the sewers of a city because he is accused of a murder he has not committed. The underground world in which he lives for a while makes him discover that man is guilty by nature. The discovery of human guilt gives him the strength to leave his subterranean refuge to turn himself in to the police. But he is told that the murderer has been apprehended and that he is free. Convinced of his guilt as a man, he insists that police detectives follow him into the sewers to visit his underground world. Thinking he is a raving maniac, one of the detectives shoots him in cold blood when he is halfway down into a manhole. His body is abandoned to the dark and dirty kingdom of the sewers.

The long underground pilgrimage that changes the personality of the main character is used by Wright to illustrate the ideas he had about the essential nature of man. The author wants to show that the position of his protagonist is never stable. If this Blackman escapes his racial condition by living in an underground world, he is guilty of abandoning his society. Even though his life enables him to become a man fully aware of his humanity, such a life led in the sewers, caves, and dark passages in which he wanders cannot be considered an ideal existence. It seems to be the existentialist metaphor of man's existence.

Through a series of experiences encountered during his forced isolation in the sewers, Wright's character develops a new perspective that transcends racial concerns and allows him to acquire a new understanding of human existence.

On one occasion, he observes a Black congregation singing in a church and people watching a film in a movie theater, and reaches the conclusion that man must feel guilty. His reasoning is that If man were satisfied with his fate, he would not be looking for an escape in religion or entertainment. On other occasions, he experiments with the liberty afforded by his new existence and begins to steal objects that have no value to him. From the cleaver taken in a grocery store to the diamonds found in the safe of a jewelry store, he sees only the tangible proof of his boundless power. He wants to show that he can do whatever he wants in this new and free world. He begins to feel that: "Maybe anything's right," that circumstances alone determine the rightness or wrongness of a man's actions. Certainly the material goods belonging to his former society are drastically altered in value in his new world. He plays like a child with the *worthless* items from the jewelry store. Dollar bills become wallpaper for his hideaway and rings and watches are hung as decorations. The diamonds are scattered on the ground and trampled.

It is interesting to note that Wright never refers to the main character by name in "The Man Who Lived Underground." It is only by chance that we learn his name when he finds a typewriter in the jewelry store and pecks out "freddaniels." As the story progresses, we again find Daniels seated before a typewriter, this time in the cave where he has made Ins underground home. Now, however, he tries in vain to recall his own name. Wright shows that the character's identity from his former existence has lost Its meaning in his new life. His present condition represents that which is human and universal, and thus devoid of the most significant identifying feature of an individual man.

The choice of a Black man as the protagonist in this story made it easier for Wright to convey his ideas, since the white characters are blinded by racial prejudice that prevents them from knowing Daniels as a man. The condition of tills Black man is not only symbolic of all Black Americans, but also of anyone who is oppressed. His life underground allows him to freely express the feelings of the human race that he represents.

Wright underlines that even when Daniels is outside his subterranean universe, he remains totally unknown to the people he meets. If this situation is caused by the color of his skin, it is also a result of human apathy. When he wanders in the halls of a movie theater, he is surprised to be told where the men's room is by an usher used to a tedious job. When he steps out of the grocery store to get some fresh air, a white couple mistakes him for a clerk and buys a pound of grapes from him. Neither the usher nor the white couple can imagine for a second that Daniels has created a fantastic world for himself underground. To them, he is only a person permitted to play certain given roles by society. Daniels' subterranean world is very different from the one above him. Everything is new, including the notion of time that is unimportant. He winds up the stolen watches without worrying about what time of the day or night it is.

A major attraction of "The Man Who Lived Underground" lies in the constant alternation between the mysterious and the commonplace. Apparently mysterious events abound when Daniels emerges from his underground world. The consequences, however, are most basic in terms of human experience. Daniels appears to exert an infinite power in his ability to reveal that man's behavior is founded on guilt and that a realization of this must be reached. A young worker in a radio shop is beaten by his boss and accused of stealing the radio taken by Daniels. Startled by Daniels' sudden appearance, the secretary of the jewelry store screams out in fright. After checking everywhere, her employers think she is mentally deranged because they have not found anything. The night watchman of the jewelry store commits suicide since everybody is convinced of his guilt after the safe has been emptied of its contents. Unable to understand why such a thing has happened to him, he puts an end to his life by shooting himself in the head. This suicide will serve as proof of his guilt to the police. Wright demonstrates that, dead or alive, the night watchman has no hope of proving his innocence to a blind and pitiless society.

If Daniels' invisibility causes brutalities and a suicide, it also enables him to observe and judge the world he has left. Conscious of the guilt of man, he knows that sometime during his life every man must face the mystery of his existence After seeing someone steal money in the safe of the Jewelry store, Daniels tells himself that the thief will pay for his act in the future.

Even though he is not responsible for the murder he was accused of committing, Daniels wants to turn himself in to the police because of a deep feeling of human guilt. He wants to insist on his guilt and also try to make its origin known to all. By doing this, he hopes men will acknowledge the existence of their original guilt and will therefore learn how to improve the lot of mankind. But his good intentions are squelched by suspicious police detectives who feel he would endanger the established order of things. The name of the one who shoots him, Lawson, is symbolic of his profession. He is supposed to protect society by enforcing the law.

"The Man Who Lived Underground" is an existentialist parable since the protagonist develops his identity through his relationships with other people. Before Sartre or Camus had entered the literary scene, Wright had already grappled with the philosophy they later expressed. The author had tried to define the position of the individual in relation to modern society. Daniels is the symbol of the loneliness and anonymity surrounding man in a materialistic and unfeeling society.

Source: J. F. Gounard, "Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground', A Literary Analysis," In *Journal of Black Studies,* Vol. 8, No.3, March, 1978, pp 381-86

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Meyer examines the events that lead to the protagonist's identity formation in "The Man Who Lived Underground." The story's lesson, Meyer indicates, is *that self-realization occurs only upon "acceptance of one's responsibility in an absurd world"*

In Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" the hero's quest for identity involves his struggle for meaning in an absurd world which, although covered with pretensions of order and meaning, is more fundamentally marked by chaos, disorder, and blind materialism. The hero achieves his identity, however, only when his experiences underground convince him both that It is futile to expect to find meaning in an irrational world and that he must accept social responsibility despite the absurdity of human existence. Fred Daniels finds his identity when he realizes that all men are guilty because they possess an inherently evil nature and when he accepts the responsibility for his own implication in this evil nature.

"The Man Who Lived Underground" differs from *Native Son,* which was written earlier; while the latter was a naturalistic novel exhibiting a deterministic philosophy and social protest against societal racism, the former (i.e., "The Man Who Lived Underground") is a work which is motivated by the existential vision *Native Son* carries the message that the black man cannot achieve true identity through peaceful methods because societal forces prevent self-realization "The Man who Lived Underground," on the other hand, goes beyond social protest and says that all men are faced with a meaningless world for which they are in some measure guilty. To be sure, the black man is able to recognize the irrational character of the world more rapidly than others, for he has been driven underground by racism. But, more importantly, "The Man Who Lived Underground" carries the universal message that only the acceptance of one's responsibility in an absurd world can result in self realization. The primary act which acceptance of one's responsibility entails is the act of communicating the existential vision to others. Whereas in *Native Son* Bigger Thomas' rebellious violence gains him his identity, it is not the answer for Fred Daniels. Rather than this, the black man (as representative of every man) must come to grips with an absurd world and must make the most of it by accepting his share of the guilt that characterizes human nature.

Fred Daniels' struggle begins when he is forced to flee from the police for a crime (murder) which he did not commit. He takes refuge by escaping through a manhole into the city sewer. It is here, beneath the superficial elements of the outer world, that he begins to discover the true nature of reality and of human nature. In the depths of the sewer Daniels gropes through the darkness until he finds that he has entrance to the basements of buildings adjacent to the sewer tunnels. In these buildings and in the sewer he sees people in grotesque and different roles, symbolic of the base human nature that underlays outer respectability. He first observes a Negro church service, next discovers a naked, dead baby caught in some debris in the sewer slime, and then goes on to view the people in a mortuary, a movie theatre, a jewelry firm, a radio repair shop, and a meat market. These incidents are significant because the people do not

realize they are being observed, and Daniels is seeing them from a unique vantage point, from the level of the unconscious evil and despair which motivate man.

When Daniels first approaches the Negro church service and hears the people imploringly singing

Jesus, take me to your home above
And fold me m the bosom of Thy love. . . .

his impulse is to laugh at their blindness. The author tells us,

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, churned m him. A vague conviction made rum feel that those people should stand unrepentant and yield no quarter in singing and praying. . .

Daniels sees another side of the human circus as he finds his way into a movie theater:

Sprawling below him was a stretch of human faces, tilted upward, chanting, whistling, screaming, laughing. Dangling before the faces, high upon a screen of silver, were jerking shadows.
These people were laughing at their lives, he thought with amazement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves. . Yes, these people were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying.

In this passage one cannot help seeing echoes of Macbeth's famous speech in which he asserts that

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(*Macbeth,* V. v)

The next symbolic episode occurs as Daniels finds a jewelry firm in which he sees a man opening a huge safe filled with more money than he has ever seen. He feels compelled to get the combination and steal the money. Finally he does get the combination, and with no one around except the sleeping night watchman, he steals nearly all the money, jewelry, and diamonds.

It was with the discovery of the safe and his desire to get the money that "he had a reason for staying here in the underground." It is around this incident that Fred Daniels becomes aware of the evil nature and absurdity of the real world and the guilt of all mankind. He does not desire the money and jewels for any material gain, but merely as a symbol of defiance because he realizes their worthlessness. The symbolic nature of his stealing is again emphasized as Daniels is waiting to get the safe combination.

However, when someone finally does open the safe, Daniels is angered to see that that person is also stealing the money.

He's stealing, he [Daniels] said to himself He grew indignant, as If the money belonged to him Though he had planned to steal the money, he despised and pitied the man. He felt that his stealing the money and the man's stealing were two entirely different things. He wanted to steal the money merely for the sensation involved in gelling it, and he had no intention whatever of spending a penny of it; but he knew that the man who was now stealing It was going to spend it, perhaps for pleasure.

All the articles which Daniels plunders become for him his mockery of materialism:

There was in him no sense of possessiveness; he was intrigued with the form and color of the money, with the manifold reactions which he knew that the men above-ground held toward it. . . .
He did not feel he was stealing, for the cleaver, the radio, the money, and the typewriter were all on the same level of value, all meant the same thing to him. They were the serious toys of the men who lived in the dead world of sunshine and rain he had left, the world that had condemned him, branded him guilty.

And back in his cave in the underground, Daniels reflects upon his experiences:

...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 dim meaning linked them together, that some magical relationship made them Ian He stared with vacant eyes, convinced that all of these images, With their tongueless reality, were striving to tell him something...

And indeed they are telling him something, for when Daniels retraces his journey to revisit the people whom he has seen, he finds that a boy is being accused of taking the radio which Daniels himself had taken from the radio shop and that the night watchman is being beaten for stealing the money and jewels. Although they are not guilty of these particular crimes, they are guilty, ,as all men are guilty, by virtue of their humanity.

Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was redesigned long before: It seemed that one was always trying to remember a gigantic shock that had left a haunting impression upon one's body which one could not forget or shake off, but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one's life a state of eternal anxiety.

Daniels feels that he must act-he must return to the aboveground and proclaim his discovery to the world. He feels that if he tells them they will surely understand and see as he has seen. He returns to the police station to confess his guilt only to learn that the real murderer has been caught. Daniels insists upon his guilt, however, and takes the police to the sewer to show them what he has seen. The story ends ironically, however, as Daniels steps down into the sewer and is shot to death by the police officer. When

asked by one of his fellow officers why he shot Daniels, the policeman replies, "You've got to shoot this kind. They'd wreck things."

Fred Daniels does achieve his identity through his act of leaving the sewer to tell the world the truth about a meaningless existence and an evil human nature, facts from which men in the outer world are hiding. He realizes that all men are responsible for their actions in a world of evil and absurdity, and that men must accept responsibility for their existence nevertheless. Fred Daniels becomes a symbol of true humanity in this story of paradoxes. For by running away he runs into the truth and discovers that the outside world of sunshine is really covered with the darkness of evil and that the dark world underground is really lightened with truth.

While Fred Daniels is a black man, and Wright does make a few subtle comments about the racist society which drove him beneath ground, Wright does not absolve Daniels of guilt because of his oppression by a hostile society. Whereas Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* is inexorably driven by society to commit murder, and hence is not held responsible for his crime (as Max's speech seems to indicate), Fred Daniels is guilty of murder, and not because he actually committed it but only because of the evil nature which all men possess and which bind them together in all crimes committed by man. While Bigger Thomas gains his identity (via his "creative act" of murder) by defying white society, Fred Daniels gains his Identity on a universal level by identifying with all men.

The story then is more than a mere social commentary, for it questions the nature of good and evil, and puts problem of identity to all mankind.

Source: Shirley Meyer, "The Identity of 'The Man Who Lived Underground'," in *Negro American Literature Forum,* Vol. 4, No.2, July, 1970, pp 52-5.

Adaptations

In 1993, the City Theatre on the South Side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, produced a stage version of "The Man Who Lived Underground."

Topics for Further Study

Read the sections of Wright's autobiographical *Black Boy* that deal with his strict religious upbringing. To what extent do you think his own religious background influenced the church scenes in "The Man Who Lived Underground"?

Find some other short stories about racial, ethnic, or gender-based oppression. Do you think Wright demonstrates more or less anger in thIS story than the writers of the other stories you found? Explain.

Investigate the laws and policies that govern police officers as they carry out their duties, and the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the 1966 *Miranda* v. *Arizona* case. How likely would a Fred Daniels of today be coerced to confess to a crime he had not committed?

"The Man Who Lived Underground" was written during the 1940s. Based on the evidence in the story and other things you can learn about that decade, do you think the United States has moved forward or backward in terms of providing equal opportunities for all its citizens since the 1940s? Have any "wrong turns" been made along the road to equal opportunity? If you believe so, explain.

In 1993 the City Theatre on the South Side in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, presented a stage play version of "The Man Who Lived Underground." How easy do you think It would be to capture the atmosphere of the story visually? What scenes would have to be changed or omitted in a stage version? How well do you think an adaptation for radio would work? What about a film version? Which elements of the story would be best captured by each medium?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Jim Crow laws make life difficult for African Americans They have a restricted legal right to vote, to ride public transportation, to eat in public restaurants and stay in hotels, to receive a fair wage for their work, to attend public colleges and universities, and no right to rent or buy homes where they wish.

1990s: With the passage of the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, along with subsequent civil rights legislation, the United States has attempted to remove all legal barriers preventing any citizen from achieving full benefits of American citizenship. However, extralegal economic and social barriers still remain, and the dream of equality for all is still unfulfilled.

1940s: "Negro" is a neutral term describing a person of a particular race and is a term the members of the race use to describe themselves. The use of the word is not an insult or an attack. Wright himself had written an essay titled "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in 1937, and had helped create an international Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in 1955.

1990s: The term "Negro" is rarely used, except in the names of older organizations lIke the United Negro College Fund. Successive generations have adopted different terminology, often rejecting earlier systems. The term now preferred by many is "African American," which reflects African heritage and American citizenship. "African American" is used as either a noun or an adjective, the word "black" is also sometimes used as an adjective.

1940s: When a white person calls a black man "boy," it is a pointed and deliberate insult, denying that the black man has the dignity and stature of an adult. A man insulted in this way feels the strong Impact of having been belittled.

1990s: The term is rarely heard, and does not carry the power it once did. As an insult, "boy" has passed from fashion and does not resonate with speakers or hearers with anything approaching its old force.

1940s: The Communist Party has some political influence in the United States and attracts many intellectuals who, like Wright, are disillusioned with inequalities in American society or simply want to align themselves with a cause they deem daringly fashionable. (A case in point here is the rise of Alger Hiss, a key State Department official during Franklin Roosevelt's administration.) To most Americans, however, "Fifth Columnists," or organized subversives, are cold-blooded centralizers and planners trying to overthrow the republic in favor of an omni competent state.

1990s: Since the end of the Cold War in 1990, the national obsession with eradicating communism has abated. Although the Communist Party still exists, the term "Fifth Columnist" has been largely forgotten.

What Do I Read Next?

Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (1945) by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, a classic sociological study of economic and social conditions on the South Side of Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century. This book has been revised and enlarged three times, most recently in 1993. The original introduction is by Richard Wright.

The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) by Sigmund Freud, the Austrian psychiatrist who founded psychoanalysis. Wright was fascinated by Freud's theories about the connections between dreams and the unconscious, and may have been influenced by Freud's interpretations when he included imagery of stairs, tunnels and walls in his writing.

Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison, an African-American novelist. Ellison's invisible man, who is never named, is a black man struggling to find his own Identity, first in his Southern hometown, and then in a Black National group in New York City. Like Fred Daniels, the Invisible Man is a black man in a racist world, but his struggle to find meaning and purpose transcends race.

Native Son (1940) by Wright. A young African American, Bigger Thomas, commits two murders, stands trial with the assistance of a Communist attorney, and is sentenced to death Although he has committed serious crimes, Thomas is clearly presented as a victim himself, because of the racial oppression which Wright clearly and convincingly reveals.

"Notes from Underground" (1864) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Russian novelist and short story writer. This long story is told in two parts: a monologue in which the underground man argues against the notion that material progress leads to social progress, and a series of anecdotes playing out the narrator's ideas. Most critics believe that Wright was influenced by this story in creating his own.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American novelist and folklorist of the rural South. The novel tells the story of Janie Crawford, who struggles to find her identity through a series of relationships with men The characters speak m dialects of the African-American South, a literary convention that caused Wright to reject the book as a "minstrel" novel.

The Trial (1925) by Franz Kafka, an Austrian existential novelist. A bank assessor, Joseph K., finds himself accused by an unnamed judicial authority for a crime he knows nothing about. He struggles in vain for Justice and is killed. Many 'critics have seen this story as an allegory of existential guilt.

Further Study

Aaron, Daniel. *Writers on the Left. Episodes in American Literary Communism,* Avon Books, 1961.

Examines the political and social twentieth-century American authors, especially those, including Wright, who joined the Communist Party. Wright was a member of the Party during the time he wrote "The Man Who Lived Underground."

Fabre, Michel. "Richard Wright. The Man Who Lived Underground" in *Studies in the Novel,* Vol 3, No.2, Summer 1971, pp. 165-89.

Describes the series of mysterious burglaries committed by a man living in the sewer that inspired Wright to Write Ins story, and shows how Wright manipulated the facts of the actual case to present his own themes.

Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright,* William Morrow, 1973.

The definitive biography, Written by a leading Wright scholar Fabre interviewed scores of people who knew Wright at various stages of Ins life, and presents a great deal of information that will never be superseded

Felgar, Robert. *Richard Wright,* Twayne, 1980.

A solid starting point for studying Wright's life and writings. Felgar insightfully comments on the story in the context of Wright's full body of work and in the context of social history.

Ridenour, Ronald "The Man Who Lived Underground. A critique," in *PHYLON. The Atlanta University of Race and Culture,* Vol. 31, No.1, spring, 1970, pp 54-7.

A general explication of "The Man Who Lived Underground," Written in a time in which race relations were hotly debated.

Wright, Richard *Black Boy. A Record of Childhood and Youth,* Harper, 1945

The first volume of Wright's autobiography. The book reveals what life was like for many African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century of special interest are the sections dealing with Wright's extensive reading of naturalistic novels and how tins reading shaped his own work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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