Uncle Tom's Children Study Guide

Uncle Tom's Children by Richard Wright

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* is a work made up of six distinct parts that include a nonfiction introductory essay followed by five fictional stories.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow" describes Wright's own experiences growing up. The essay starts with his first encounter with racism, when his attempt to play a war game with white children turns ugly, and follows his experiences with the problems of being black in the South through his adolescence and adulthood. It describes his experience of prejudice at his first job. While working at an optical factory, his white fellow employees bully and eventually beat him for wanting to learn job skills that could allow him to advance. Wright also discusses suffering attacks by white youths and explores the many hypocrisies of white prejudice against blacks. These include black men being allowed to work around naked white prostitutes while having to pretend they do not exist. Whites have exploitative sex with black maids, and yet any sexual relations between a black man and a white woman, even a prostitute, is cause for castration or death. Wright also delves into the more subtle humiliations inherent in the Jim Crow system, such as being unable to say "thank you," to a white man, lest he take it as a statement of equality.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" tells the story of a black teenager and his friends who have an unfortunate encounter with some whites. Big Boy and his friends Lester, Buck and Bobo are swimming on white property when a white woman surprises them. She begins to call for help, and her fiancy, an army officer, begins shooting with his rifle, killing Lester and Buck. Big Boy grabs the rifle and shoots the man, and then he and Bobo run. Big Boy and his family plan for him to escape. He will hide out all night in a kiln on a hillside and catch a ride with a black truck driver to Chicago in the morning. However, while hiding in the kiln, Big Boy witnesses a mob tarring, feathering and burning alive his friend Bobo, who was coming to join him. Big Boy must kill a dog that sniffs him out and passes the rest of the night crouched in shock and fear. He then meets with the truck driver in the morning and escapes, the sole survivor of the four friends.

"Down by the Riverside" takes place during a major flood. Its main character, a farmer named Mann, must get his family to safety in the hills, but he does not have a boat. In addition, his wife, Lulu, has been in labor for several days but cannot deliver the baby. Mann must get her to a hospital. He has sent his cousin Bob to sell a donkey and use the money to buy a boat, but Bob returns with only fifteen dollars from the donkey and a stolen boat. Mann must take the boat through town to the hospital, even though Bob advises against this, since the boat is very recognizable. Rowing his family, including Lulu, Peewee, his son and Grannie, Lulu's mother, in this white boat, Mann calls for help at the first house he reaches. This house is the home of the boat's white owner, Heartfield, who immediately begins shooting. Mann, who has brought his gun, returns fire and kills the man, while the man's family witnesses the act from the windows of the house.

Mann rows on to the hospital but is too late; Lulu and the undelivered baby have died. Soldiers take away Grannie and Peewee to safety in the hills, and Mann is conscripted to work on the failing levee. However, the levee breaks, and Mann must return to the hospital, where he heroically smashes a hole in the ceiling, allowing the hospital to be evacuated. Mann and another black man, Brinkley, are told to rescue a family at the edge of town, who turn out to be the Heartfields. Inside the house, the boy recognizes Mann, who raises an ax to kill the child, but he is stopped when the house shifts in the rising floodwaters. Mann takes the boy, the boy's sister and his mother to dry land. There, Mann cannot find his family, and the white boy identifies Mann as the killer of his father. Soldiers lead Mann towards their camp. Thinking himself doomed, Mann runs, and the soldiers shoot him dead by the river's edge.

"Long Black Song" takes place on a solitary farm, where a young black woman, Sarah, waits for her husband, Silas, to return from selling his crop. She also has to take care of her baby, Ruth. Sarah has fantasies about another man, Tom, and is unsure if she loves Silas. A white salesman shows up as the sun goes down and tries to sell her a record player. They make conversation, and as she gets him some water, he attempts to seduce her. Initially protesting, she leads him to the bedroom, and they have sex. He leaves the record player with her and says he will try to return in the morning and convince her husband to buy it.

Silas returns, sees the record player and suspects Sarah has been unfaithful. He drives her from the house in a rage, whipping her as she goes. Silas hates white people and has worked ten years to own his farm free and clear. He is livid that Sarah has slept with a white man, and when the white salesman returns in the morning, he first whips and then shoots him. As Silas protests that he does not want to die, but must because he can never be free in a white man's world, Sarah takes Ruth and runs into the hills, where she watches Silas have a gunfight with the white mob that comes to get him. He dies when they burn the house down around him, but he does not make a sound as it collapses on him.

"Fire and Cloud" follows a preacher, Taylor, as he tries to save his people from a wave of starvation. Denied food aid by the white authorities, Taylor must return empty-handed to his church. There he finds a tricky problem. He has been talking about marching in a demonstration with communists, and they have come to visit him in one room. In another room, the mayor and the police chief have arrived to talk to him. Taylor has a history with the mayor, who has done him favors in exchange for his securing peace and order among the black community. However, if the mayor finds out about the communists, Taylor will be in trouble. First Taylor talks to the communists, who try to convince him to further commit to marching. Taylor gives them only vague answers. He then talks to the mayor and the sheriff, who try to convince him not to march. Again, Taylor is vague on what he will do. He successfully gets both groups out of the church without their paths crossing. Then he talks to his deacons. One among them, Deacon Smith, has been plotting to depose Taylor and take over the church.

A car pulls up, and Taylor leaves the deacons to see who is in the car. Whites beat him and throw him in the back, taking him out to the woods. There, they whip him and make

him recite the Lord's Prayer, in a move designed to keep him from marching. Taylor must walk back through a white neighborhood, where a policeman stops him but does not arrest him. Once home, Taylor realizes that this beating directly connects him to the suffering of his people, and he tells his son that the march must go on. Seeing that many in his congregation have also been beaten over the night, Taylor leads them in the march through town. He realizes that together, the pain of his being whipped and the strength of the assembled marchers, black and white people in one crowd, are a sign from God. The whipping is fire, and the crowd is the cloud of the fire and the cloud God used to lead the Hebrews to the Promised Land.

"Bright and Morning Star" concerns an old woman, Sue, whose sons are communist party organizers. One son, Sug, has already been imprisoned for this and does not appear in the story. Sue waits for the other son, Johnny-Boy, to arrive home when the story begins. Though she is no longer a Christian, believing instead in a communist vision of the human struggle, Sue finds herself singing an old hymn as she waits. A white fellow communist, Reva, the daughter of a major organizer, Lem, stops by to tell Sue that the sheriff has discovered plans for a meeting at Lem's and that the comrades must be told or they will be caught. Someone in the group has become an informer. Reva departs, and Johnny-Boy comes home. Sue feeds him dinner, and they discuss her mistrust of white fellow-communists. Then, she sends him out to tell the comrades not to go to Lem's for the meeting.

The sheriff shows up at Sue's looking for Johnny-Boy. The sheriff threatens Johnny-Boy, saying that if she does not get him to talk, she had best bring a sheet to get his body. Sue speaks defiantly to the sheriff, who slaps her around but starts to leave. Then Sue shouts after him from the door, and he returns, this time beating her badly. In her weakened state, she reveals the comrades' names to Booker, a white communist who is actually the sheriff's informer. Sue realizes that she is the only one left who can save the comrades, and she dedicates herself completely to this task. Remembering the sheriff's words, she takes a white sheet and wraps a gun in it. She goes through the woods until she finds the sheriff, who has caught Johnny-Boy. The sheriff tortures Johnny-Boy before her eyes, but she does not relent or try to get Johnny-Boy to give up. Then Booker shows up, and she shoots him through the sheet. The sheriff's men shoot first Johnny-Boy and then Sue dead. As she lies on the ground, she realizes she has fulfilled her purpose in life.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Part 1

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Part 1 Summary

Wright begins with his childhood house, literally on the wrong side of the tracks. Next to the railroad, his yard lacked greenery, being filled instead with cinders that he and his friends threw at each other in play-wars. When they try to play war with a gang of white children, the whites throw broken milk bottles. One cuts Wright on the neck, and when he complains to his mother, she beats him until he has a fever of 102 so he will never again mess around with white people. This lesson teaches Wright to detest his cinder yard, which before he had not thought of as mean or poor. He also learns to think of well-kept, green yards as symbolic of the white people he now fears.

Moving to Mississippi, Wright finds some relief living in an all-black community, but this ends when he must go to work. At first, Wright thinks he might have a good opportunity at the optical factory. The white boss seems interested when Wright mentions he has studied two years of algebra. Yet when Wright tries to learn more about the optical trade from his white coworkers, they accuse him of thinking beyond his station. Relations on the job get frosty, until finally Wright's coworkers contrive a way of ruining his position. One accuses him of saying his name without first saying "Mister." The other claims he witnessed this lapse. Wright can either admit what he did not do or else call the other man a liar. With this impossible choice Wright gets an inevitable beating and leaves the job. His fellow blacks accuse him of not staying "in his place."

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Part 1 Analysis

Wright begins life with no idea of race and innocently tries to play with the white children. The violent tactics they employ are alien to Wright and his friends, who are rapidly outmatched by this force. That his mother would beat him just for having contact with the white children, and beat him hysterically, telegraphs her own fear of whites to him. Because the incident occurs on the pretext of a battle for control of territory (Wright and his friends first attempt to do battle beyond the tracks), Wright forever associates his loss of innocence with the immaculately kept yards of the whites.

Crucially, Wright sees that life can be lived with dignity within the black community, with black businesses and black autonomy. However, economic necessity demands that Wright return to the white world. Working in their factory, Wright sees that he will always be at their mercy. Even if his ultimate boss seems encouraging, Wright himself will be at the mercy of lesser, meaner men, who directly manage him. If the factory boss preserves a sheen of nicety, these men, in every way Wright's inferiors, nonetheless have the ability to bully and inflict violence on him. This predicament seems to be the law of the land.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Parts 2-4

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Parts 2-4 Summary

Wright details more instances of Jim Crow violence. He works as a porter in a clothing store and sees his boss and his boss' grown son drag a black woman they accuse of not paying bills from the street into a back room, from which screams then emerge. A policeman witnesses the event and does nothing except arrest the woman when Wright's boss throws her out. In the back room, the boss casually offers Wright a cigarette. Wright smokes it and looks at the blood on the floor. Wright's black coworkers later tell him the woman is lucky not to have been raped.

Wright discusses another encounter that occurs as he rides his bike by the road. He gets a flat, and some young white men offer him a ride on the running board of their car. Mockingly offering him some whiskey, the whites throw a bottle at his face and knock him to the ground from the fast-moving car. They claim he didn't say "sir" when speaking to them. They threaten to beat him and tell him he is lucky they do not kill him when he refuses to ride with them again.

In another encounter, Wright delivers groceries in a white neighborhood near dark. He quickly pedals his bike back to the store. A police car pulls him over, demanding he lie on the ground. The officers search him at gunpoint and then instruct him to tell his boss not to send him into white neighborhoods after dark.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Parts 2-4 Analysis

Wright deepens his understand of Jim Crow violence and injustice in these encounters. The brutality the clothing-store boss displays against the woman is disturbing. However, that everyone, white and black, treats the event as normal is just as disturbing, maybe more. Wright's sharing a cigarette with the boss after the beating, with blood on the floor in front of him, enters him in a conspiracy of silence. By accepting it, he signifies that he will be a good employee and a good black man and not talk about what happened with the woman. As his black coworker's comment indicates, such silent complicity with white violence is pervasive among the blacks living with this violence.

Wright continually finds himself at the mercy of whites. He must offer gratuitous signs of respect even to drunken teenagers, even while traveling at high speed on the outside running board of a car. This episode offers a blistering portrayal of power abused for its own sake and of the distorted logic that allows the whites to claim they are merciful after nearly killing Wright.

When the police in the white neighborhood automatically assume Wright's guilt, it shows the law's complicity in the unfair exercise of power. The key feature in this encounter is the double standard at work, as Wright finds himself treated like a murderer on the run just for delivering groceries. Whether the police actually believe they are protecting the

neighborhood against a horde of criminals or just want to bully the powerless, their presumption of guilt and readiness to use deadly force creates a continuing state of fear among blacks. The police are just a different version of the other Jim Crow bullies Wright encounters.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Parts 5-9

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Parts 5-9 Summary

Wright works as a bellboy in a hotel used by white prostitutes plying their trade. Part of his job involves bringing the prostitutes and their customers liquor and cigarettes. He must ignore their nakedness and keep his eyes down if a man is in the room. One man catches him looking for a second and threatens him, telling him not to look if he wants to "stay healthy." Another white man sleeps with one of the black maids in the hotel and then forces a black bellboy to marry her and claim her child. The whites joke about it when the child is born with light skin. A black bellboy has sex with a white prostitute and gets caught. He is castrated and then referred to as a "lucky bastard" for being allowed to live. In another instance, Wright walks with a female companion, one of the maids at the hotel. The white night watchman slaps her on the rear as she passes. Wright naturally turns, and the man challenges him with a gun, making him say he likes the sexual harassment. The maid forgives Wright; he had no choice, she said.

After moving to Memphis, Wright works for another branch of the earlier optical company. Here he learns more subtle indignities of Jim Crow racism, such as having to lie and scheme just to check out books from the library. The white man who allows Wright to check out books in his name is a Catholic and experiences some bias himself. Perhaps this makes him more sympathetic, thinks Wright, who forges notes from the man detailing books to check out. In Memphis, the white employees talk more to Wright and behave less violently. Still, certain subjects cannot be discussed, including anything to do with white women, the Civil War, the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments to the Constitution or other social equality or political topics.

Wright concludes with the smallest instance of having to defer to whites. He always has to take his hat off in an elevator, even with both arms full of packages. Loaded down this way in an elevator, a white man takes Wright's hat off for him, an act of kindness. Wright cannot say thank you because the man might take it as an equalizing and therefore insulting statement. So Wright pretends to nearly drop the packages to avoid this. Wright's friend, commenting on the entire system, predicts "nothin' but uproar" in the South if it were not for lynch mobs and police.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow," Parts 5-9 Analysis

Wright explores the sexual status of black males in the above sections of his essay. To work in a whorehouse around naked white women requires him, as a black male, to behave as a eunuch, not showing any interest at all, not even awareness. For those who stray from this act, the results are dire, such as castration. The white men certainly do not follow this standard with the black maids, taking advantage of them and then foisting off the blame on blacks. Also, as the episode with the white night watchman

shows, they enforce this unfairness with the gun, taking masculinity from black males in the bargain.

Wright ends his essay not with more cases involving outright violence, but instead with several descriptions of more minute ways Jim Crow humiliates him and distorts his human relationships. His lies to the librarian, and when he must pretend certain historical, social and political facts do not exist, he must intellectually neuter himself when around whites, just as he must sexually neuter himself. The episode in the elevator offers an absurdity similar to the earlier encounter with Pease. The white man does Wright a favor, but Wright cannot acknowledge it. This time Wright manages to escape insulting the white man. However, he cannot escape the larger facts of life under Jim Crow, that it is oppressive, violent, scary, duplicitous and, with this final instance in the elevator, downright surreal.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 1

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 1 Summary

Big Boy and his friends Lester, Buck and Bobo walk through the grass, carefree. They joke to each other and sing songs. One song is a "yo' mama" freeform, and they look for rhymes that will finish it. Finally, they use a made-up word, "quall," singing it with a bawdy inflection. The next song is religious, about a glory train to salvation. They fix on a literal meaning, and discuss actual trains they like. Lester, Buck and Bobo plan to jump Big Boy and pin him down. They try, but Big Boy gets Bobo by the neck and chokes him, causing the other two to back off. Big Boy gloats over his victory and taunts his friends with how smart he is.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 1 Analysis

This scene sets the stage of the action. While the boys are typical, foul-mouthed teenagers, they are concerned mainly with innocent pursuits. The make fun of each other, make fart jokes and profess their love of trains and of food. They wrestle. Besides setting up the characters, Big Boy as leader and the other three as his none-too-respectful followers, this section features the free play of language in all its joy. The dialogue has a quality like jazz, the quartet of boys improving from a stream of consciousness on a theme and then changing the theme. With the made-up word "quall," for example, the boys create meaning just by saying it, by how they say it and where they say it in the context of the song and the larger stream of dialogue.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 2

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 2 Summary

Big Boy and company come upon the swimming hole. They debate whether to go swimming. Lester, Buck and Bobo shy away, since the swimming hole belongs to old man Harvey, a white man known to shoot at trespassers. Big Boy wants to go, arguing that they are already trespassing, so what is the difference if they trespass in the swimming hole? They take off their clothes and jump in, hooting and hollering at the water's coldness, making fun of old man Harvey and trying not to be too loud. They climb out and start to dry off in the sun when a white woman comes upon them, startled. They are naked and paralyzed with fear. Big Boy starts to approach the woman, asking for his clothes. Misinterpreting his advance as hostile and predatory, the woman screams for help. Her fiancy, Jim, an army officer, starts shooting with a rifle. He kills Lester and Buck. Bobo pleads to the man not to shoot him. Big Boy grabs at the man's rifle. They struggle, and Big Boy gets the gun. The man starts toward Big Boy, but Big Boy shoots him dead. As the woman screams, Big Boy and Bobo get their clothes and run away.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 2 Analysis

In one fateful moment, Big Boy's childhood ends. The deadly encounter happens when misunderstanding mixes with a willingness to use violence. In this story, and in the rest of the book, race relations are always set on a hair trigger. This is literally true with the officer, who does not fire a warning shot at the boys but immediately shoots to kill, as if he has been waiting all along to start killing black people and just needs an excuse. The woman, Bertha, is little better. She seems either unable to hear or unable to process Big Boy's request for his clothes and its significance. She is that most desired of objects in the Jim Crow mythology, a white woman, and as such her mind has likely been conditioned to believe all black men want only to rape her. When she comes upon the naked boys, she creates the scenario from her conditioning, not from the facts.

Wright brings up an important social dynamic in this scene, revealing how whites operate with the guiding myth of vulnerable southern white womanhood under attack by savage black lust, requiring defensive action by gallant white gentlemen. As Wright shows, reality defies this scenario, and black men and boys are the victims of this paranoid fantasy. Outside of fiction, twenty-five years after this story was published, America would come to see this white southern myth played out in all its glory with the murder and mutilation of the child Emmet Till.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 3

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 3 Summary

Big Boy and Bobo run home, realizing what has happened and trying to avoid any white people along the way, lest they be seen and reported once word travels. They agree to split up and each go to their families. Big Boy gets back to his house in a disheveled state, climbing over the fence to the chicken yard and falling in with the chickens. When his mom asks him what is wrong, he begins to cry.

On learning what has happened, Big Boy's mother sends for his father. Big Boy relates the story of the killing and explains how he and his friends play hooky. Big Boy's father gets the shotgun and sends for Brother Sanders and Elder Peters. After a brief discussion, they decide Big Boy and Bobo have to leave town by hiding out for the night and then catching a ride with Elder Paters' cousin Will, who drives a delivery truck to Chicago. Big Boy runs to hide in a kiln, a kind of covered hole for a fire he scooped out of a hillside earlier.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 3 Analysis

The black characters who stand on their own in *Uncle Tom's Children*, like Mann or Silas, are usually lost. Those who manage to connect with their communities have a fighting chance. Having a social system in which whites automatically condemn blacks also means that blacks automatically recognize each others' plight, leading to a tight-knit community. The functioning of this community, as they gather, share knowledge on what Big Boy can do, share resources such as Will the truck driver and get their story straight, is the most significant feature of this part of the story.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 4

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 4 Summary

Big Boy runs for his kiln, choosing his route carefully, worried that bloodhounds might track him to his hiding place. Along the way, he thinks of his father's gun and fantasizes about killing the entire lynch mob. When he gets to the kiln, a large, venomous snake slithers out. Big Boy fights and kills the snake. He enters the hole worried about other snakes lurking inside. Waiting in the hole, he reminisces about playing in the kilns, how he, Lester, Buck and Bobo would light fires, causing jugs to blow their tops, and how each pretended to be driving a train. He has more fantasies about killing the mob, imagining potential newspaper headlines resulting from his killing them.

Then Big Boy hears the lynch mob searching nearby, and he hunkers down, worried for Bobo. A dog finds the snake outside the kiln but goes away before finding Big Boy. Big Boy hears more dogs, and then a cry goes up. The mob has caught Bobo. Big Boy, helpless, watches as the mob builds a fire to heat a barrel of tar. Big Boy can discern Bobo as a small moving shape and then hears the mob close in and gather "souvenirs," tearing off a finger and an ear. Women join in this savagery. The mob paints Bobo with tar, feathers him, and finally hangs him by a rope over the fire and pours on gasoline. Bobo dies. The mob disperses as rain starts to fall.

A dog sniffs out Big Boy and comes into his kiln. Big Boy catches and kills the dog, choking it before it can bark. Big Boy spends the night in the rain, afraid to move, in a state of shock, and morning finds him in the same position he left. Early in the morning, the truck comes, and Will comes for him. Big Boy tells Will what happened to Bobo. Will hides Big Boy in the back of the truck, and the story ends as Big Boy goes to sleep.

"Big Boy Leaves Home," Part 4 Analysis

One can read the snake by the kiln as a symbol of Big Boy's corrupted childhood. The snake, after all, now inhabits the play-structure Big Boy had created for himself and his friends only a week before. Big Boy's battle against the snake is only the first battle he will have to fight in a newly cruel world that wants him dead. Over the course of the night, his childhood fortress acquires a new and terrible association for him, much like Wright's yard did in "The Ethics of Jim Crow." Where before it symbolized his dream of freedom driving a train, now it is a cold, wet hole where he must hide. It gives him a view of the lynching, by far the single most horrific scene in *Uncle Tom's Children*, and the kiln traps him as the dog approaches. In childhood, dogs are usually around to play or be pets. This dog means death for Big Boy, and Big Boy must kill it to live and then spend the night by its body.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 1

"Down by the Riverside," Part 1 Summary

Mann has stayed in his house for three days so far, watching the floodwaters rise. He wants to remain in his home as long as he can, thinking the waters will subside, but now he realizes he cannot stay any longer. His wife, Lulu, has been in labor for almost four days, her hips too slim to deliver the child. Mann has sent his cousin Bob to sell Mann's donkey and buy a boat with the money. Mann's head hurts, and he thinks he may have the flu.

Mann has heard about the army being brought in and about blacks being made to shore up the levee at gunpoint. He hears gunshots and believes a soldier is probably shooting a black man. Bob returns with fifteen dollars, all he could get for the donkey, and a stolen boat. Mann and Bob discuss the boat, which belongs to Heartfield, who is notorious for hating blacks. Mann decides he must get Lulu to the hospital, which means he must take the boat, recognizable as Heartfield's, back through town. Bob describes a daunting situation in town, with white men heavily armed all over the place and black men being killed trying to flee from the levee. Mann decides to take his gun with him to town.

Elder Murray shows up in a rowboat. Mann and Bob describe the situation to him. Mann goes and gathers up Lulu, wrapping her in a blanket and picking her up himself. She is weak and still conscious but not very responsive. Elder Murray says a long prayer, during which Mann tunes out and wonders if he can get the boat back to Heartfield. He plans to try to return it. They sing a hymn, and then Elder Murray takes Sister Jeff and Bob in his boat and heads for the hills. Mann starts rowing for town.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 1 Analysis

Mann wonders why one man "should be hit so hard and on so many sides at once." He made a bad decision earlier, when a government boat came by offering to take him and his family to higher ground. Mann refused the offer, wanting to stay at home. This refusal reveals something stubborn in his character, something one could also call dogged. This stubborn/dogged aspect of Mann causes him to decide to risk rowing through town in a stolen boat, rowing all the way there against the current as well. As his boredom and drifting mind show during Elder Murray's voluminous prayer, he is a practical man as well, concerned with doing what he must to solve a problem. Fate and his own earlier refusal to leave home have dealt Mann a bad hand, so to speak. Understanding this, he nonetheless rows toward town, where he will play the cards he was dealt.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 2

"Down by the Riverside," Part 2 Summary

Mann rows through the flood as the last light leaves the sky. He must try and navigate trees, houses and other barely visible obstacles, worrying continually that the levee will break. Mann uses smokestacks of a cotton-seed mill to orient himself and plots a route toward town. Rowing against the current is very hard on his back, and his fingers sting. The boat hits a house in the darkness. Figuring out that the building is old man Tom's store, Mann realizes where he is and sets off along Pike's road. They see two yellow-lit windows, and Mann rows toward them, thinking they mean people who can help him.

Mann reaches the window and yells up to it, asking for a phone to call the hospital. The man inside, a white man, Mann notes with dismay, shines a flashlight down on him. The man in the Heartfield, and he recognizes his stolen boat. Heartfield's family, his wife and son, appear at the window as Heartfield demands his boat back. Mann clutches the oars in fear, and then two pistol shots come from the window. Heartfield comes out onto a porch and down some stairs toward the water with a gun and a flashlight, but he shoots at the wrong area of the water. Heartfield wades towards them and is very close when Mann shoots him twice, killing him. Mann hears Heartfield's wife screaming, and Heartfield's son shouting out condemnations.

Mann replays the scene as he redoubles his efforts to get to town, worrying what will happen to him and his family now that he has killed a white man. He gets to town and is met by soldiers who stop him, amazed he has rowed so far against the current. The soldiers search Mann, but he has left the gun in the bottom of the boat, and the soldiers do not find it. Mann tries to tell the soldier he needs to get Lulu to the hospital, but the soldier just wants to talk about Mann's feat of rowing. Eventually a motorboat comes and pulls them to the hospital. Mann takes his gun with him.

In the colored ward, they lay out Lulu, now unconscious. The doctor looks at her and then matter-of-factly tells Mann that she is dead, as Grannie and Peewee look on. Lulu's left hand splays out, open.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 2 Analysis

The storytelling in this section is bare and elemental. The white boat offers a symbol of hope against the dark, deepening floodwaters. The family has nothing to rely on except for the few planks of wood making up the rowboat and Mann's Herculean strength and endurance. No one can see a thing. In fact, with the rain, the night and the water covering everything, the five senses are highly impaired in gathering information about the world. Instead, Mann must rely on pure memory and longs for something to match his "inner vision."

The fight with Heartfield takes place in a similarly elemental setting, with few recognizable features. The lights of Heartfield's house stand out against the darkness. His flashlight reaches like a beacon in the night for the white boat and allows Mann to mark his target. Moving around in the dim flood zone requires fumbling over the walls and edges of buildings for Mann and slowly sloshing through three feet of water for Heartfield. Challenged by the watery environment, the two men do battle in what seems like slow motion.

Lulu's death also takes place in a stark setting, though under the bright hospital lights rather than the pitch dark of the flood. When the doctor says, "Well, boy, shes dead," his tone is sharp, as if the fact represents the punch line of a joke. Lulu's death hits the family as another elemental event, set against a flood that has already stripped them down to the barest desire for survival.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 3

"Down by the Riverside," Part 3 Summary

The doctor tells Mann that the baby has died as well as Lulu and that Mann should think of getting his family to the hills. Mann is still trying to comprehend that Lulu has died. The nurses roll Lulu out. Grannie tries to follow the body, and Mann pulls her back. After a tense silence, a chair falls over and some of the white hospital staff laugh nervously. A soldier informs Mann that they have commandeered his boat but that a motorboat will take them all to the hills. The captain gives him a form and promises to pay him back for Heartfield's boat, thinking it belongs to Mann. Citing the state of martial law, the captain demands that Mann come and work on the levee. Mann tries to protest, but he is separated from his family. Mann says goodbye to them as a motorboat takes them to the hills. The soldiers give Mann a raincoat, boots and a sandwich, though they have no water for his parched throat. Waiting for the boat, Mann unpacks more raincoats and boots. A boat comes and takes Mann to a cement plant, where other blacks load cement bags onto boats that ferry them to the levee. Mann feels better once among blacks, "with his people." Mann sees a line of men carrying bags along the levee and dropping them. He is going to join them when an alarm sounds and the levee breaks. The men jump into boats as the levee gives way. The soldiers with Mann turn the boat around and together they flee.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 3 Analysis

The necessities of the flood, the need to shore up the levee, the need to have a boat and the need to survive, strip away any pretensions or niceties that might exist in the society around Mann. The doctor and the nurses therefore behave with minimal pity or feeling when Lulu dies. The doctor even tells Mann to feel lucky he is still alive, though his dead wife and baby lie before him. The thin line separating Jim Crow inequality from out-and-out slavery is also erased in the flood. The soldiers press Mann and the other blacks into service, and the scene Mann sees as he approaches the levee is like a view of the past, with black men toiling away in an endless line under white overseers. It is also a scene that strips away the pretenses of the Jim Crow South and shows the true nature of its race relations that usually lies buried just below the surface.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 4

"Down by the Riverside," Part 4 Summary

The waters rise quickly after the levee fails. The soldiers need men who can drive boats, regardless of race, and allow one of the black men with Mann, named Brinkley, to start ferrying people away from the hospital. Mann goes along as a partner. Mann wonders if he can trust Brinkley and tell him what happened with Heartfield. Mann does not have a chance to tell his story before they get to the hospital, which now has water covering its first floor. Inside the hospital, the colonel takes Mann aside, giving him and ax and telling him to stand on a table and knock a hole in the ceiling. Mann does, temporarily losing his memories of the bad things that have happened this night. He has to work fast, as the waters are rising quickly. He pulls out ceiling planks with his hands, getting splinters. The siren stops, scaring Mann with the silence. He finishes the hole and starts pulling people onto the roof. Mann can see the waters rising. Together, Mann and the soldiers carry people, including white women, to waiting boats. They lower first the civilians and then the soldiers to the boats. The colonel praises Mann, promising to do him a favor in the future. Brinkley shows up in his boat. The colonel asks them to go to a house and save a woman and her children, giving them a slip of paper with the address on it. Looking at the slip, Mann sees the house belongs to the Heartfields.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 4 Analysis

Here, the utter hypocrisy of the Jim Crow system gets fully exposed. Though the whites usually treat blacks as incapable of anything but the most menial labor, when their own survival is at stake they will ignore this false standard. Once the levee breaks and everyone must escape, the soldiers allow blacks to drive the boats. When Mann gets to the hospital, he is entrusted with breaking through the roof in order that everyone in the hospital can be saved. These developments show how the whites actually do not even believe their own prejudices and will forget or suspend them when outside forces such as natural disasters upset the everyday social order.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 5

"Down by the Riverside," Part 5 Summary

As Mann and Brinkley head toward the Heartfield house, they have to avoid much debris, even a house that has started to float. As they get closer, Mann starts to worry what will happen when the Heartfields see him. Mann wants to tell Brinkley, hoping that Brinkley will help a fellow black man, but he is afraid that they have come too far and cannot turn back. Mann has recurring memories of Mrs. Heartfield.

Mann and Brinkley find the house. Brinkley calls out to the Heartfields, and they answer. Mrs. Heartfield's head pokes from the window. Suddenly their house breaks free and starts drifting down the street. Brinkley and Mann follow it, pulling up alongside when it comes to rest. Mann climbs in a window with an axe and a flashlight. He finds the family. The boy lights a match and recognizes Mann, starting to yell. Mann considers killing them all, the Heartfields and Brinkley, with his gun and his ax, but he is torn by indecision. He starts to lift the ax to kill the boy when the house shifts again, and he stumbles. Brinkley calls out, and Mann realizes that he cannot kill the family if Brinkley might see. Numbed, Mann tells the boy to get in the boat and helps load the mother and the little girl. Looking back at the house, Mann sees that it almost fell over into the flood and that he just escaped. As they head toward the green hills, and as the sun rises, Mann prays to God to save him.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 5 Analysis

In the topsy-turvy world of the flood, Mann kills Heartfield at one point and then finds himself returning to the scene of the crime and saving Heartfield's family. That the white colonel entrusts Mann and Brinkley with saving the family shows that he either puts his faith in them or else has little faith the family will survive before they get there. For his part, Mann does not quite save the family. He seems poised to kill all three in order to save himself, but he pauses with the ax held high. He is so torn with indecision that he is beyond words, and Wright does not describe his inner thoughts at all. Whether or not Mann chooses to kill the family remains ambiguous, as it is a decision he never gets to make.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 6

"Down by the Riverside," Part 6 Summary

The soldiers in the hills meet the boat carrying Mann, Brinkley and the Heartfields. Mann tenses up, sure the boy will start yelling and give him away, but it does not happen immediately. Mann walks away, nervous when a soldier approaches him. The soldier just wants Mann's borrowed raingear. Mann looks for his family, trying to keep the many first-aid and kitchen tents between himself and the soldiers. He finds a kitchen tent with black men and gets some coffee. He asks about his family, though no one has heard of them. He is starting to relax and form a plan when a woman screams.

White soldiers throw Mann on the ground, and the Heartfield boy identifies him. The soldiers lead him at gunpoint, past the faces of the helpless and silent black crowd, to the hard and unsympathetic faces of the whites. The soldiers lead him to Mrs. Heartfield, who also positively identifies him as the killer. The crowd of whites wants to lynch Mann, but the soldiers refuse, struggling with them and even threatening to shoot. In the melee, Mann catches a brow on the mouth. They take him before a general, who hears the witnesses and looks at the paper Mann signed for Heartfield's boat. They search him and take away his gun. They order Mann taken away. Mann tries to protest, but they don't listen. Walking away, Mann can see the white boats by the water. He thinks he is being taken to a firing squad and tries to run. The soldiers protest but shoot him, and Mann dies by the riverbank, his left hand splayed just as Lulu's was at her death.

"Down by the Riverside," Part 6 Analysis

Mann does not immediately flee once he reaches land, perhaps because he does not want to draw suspicion by ducking out of the tent area, perhaps because he wants to make contact with his family or perhaps he is just tired and disoriented and needs to get his bearings. When the soldiers catch him, he is standing around drinking coffee and trying to decide what to do next.

Throughout this story, one wonders about the soldiers. They are racist, but they also seem more willing to act in a practical manner, maybe because they care mainly about getting the job done. Of course, in a world full of oppression, as Mann's is, the soldiers are simply the less oppressive option. After all, the colonel, who earlier seemed to recognize Mann's heroism, does not speak up for him at his makeshift trial. The soldiers who protect Mann from the lynch mob probably just care about preserving discipline and staying in control of the situation. Finally, Mann cannot get his word in, as his pleas and attempt to tell his story fall on deaf ears. The story is ambiguous as to whether the soldiers plan to execute Mann immediately or give him a more formal trial later. The story is unambiguous about the fact that Mann knows he is doomed.

"Long Black Song," Part 1

"Long Black Song," Part 1 Summary

Sarah's baby, Ruth, cries, and she cannot placate the child until she gives her an old, broken clock to play with. Ruth beats on the clock with her hands, and the banging sound continues throughout the first part of the story.

Sarah is waiting at home for her husband, Silas, to return from selling his crop. It is sunset, almost a week since Silas left. Sarah also wonders about a man she knew before Silas, Tom, who has gone to fight in World War I. She imagines life with Tom instead of Silas and remembers kissing Tom in the cornfields. She feels lonely, thinking that Tom had left a hole in her heart and that Silas has not quite filled it.

Sarah hears a car. At first thinking it is Silas, Sarah sees a white man get out. He is a salesman, but before he begins his pitch he wonders about the banging noise. Sarah tells him what it is, and he becomes amused that the clock does not work and that she does not "need time." He starts his pitch, selling combination clock-record players, "graphophones." Sarah admires the graphophone sample and feels weak when he plays a hymn record on it. She has no money, but he thinks her husband will buy one. They make small talk. He says wants to earn money for college and tries to explain what science is to her. She offers him some water and goes to the well. As she bends over the well, he touches her, first seemingly accidentally and then on purpose. He grabs her breasts. Sarah protests and struggles, but then she leads him to her bedroom, where they have sex.

"Long Black Song," Part 1 Analysis

Sarah associates beauty with the land. For example, when she hears the hymn on the record player, the music affects her deeply, and she senses herself traveling out over the fields, hovering above the land. She does not think in images, presumably working at a more sensual, poetic level, which Wright evokes by using phrases like "feeling the rise and fall of days and nights" to describe her. Reading this section, one imagines Sarah's farm deep in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a landscape without other humans. Dwelling in this dreamlike reality, she seems to go about her day-to-day chores absentmindedly. The salesman picks up on her artistic nature, sees how he can exploit it and swoops in for the kill.

"Long Black Song," Part 2

"Long Black Song," Part 2 Summary

As he leaves Sarah lying awake in her bed, the salesman tries to close the deal on the graphophone. He offers various discounts and payment options, which the stunned and shocked Sarah cannot accept or decline. He leaves the graphophone and says he will come back the next morning. Sarah drifts between sleep and waking, until she hears the jingle of Silas' wagon. Silas enters the room happy. He has gotten a good price, 250 dollars, for his cotton and bought ten more acres of land. He also mentions offhand that Tom was in town. Silas looks at the graphophone and asks Sarah about it. She quotes the discounted price the salesman offered, forty dollars, different from the one written on it, fifty dollars, and Silas gets suspicious and angry. He throws the machine out the door, where it shatters, accusing her of lying to him, just as she lied about Tom, he says. He finds the salesman's pencil on the quilt and threatens to whip her. He goes on a diatribe about white people and how hard he works. Then he finds the salesman's handkerchief. He starts to whip her, and she puts on her dress and runs out. He calls out for her, looking in the fields. Sarah speeds back to the house, grabs Ruth and then runs back to the hill. Sarah resolves to sit on the hillside until morning.

"Long Black Song," Part 2 Analysis

Silas goes from jubilance to red-hot anger in a short amount of time. When he first accuses Sarah of infidelity, he has scant evidence, only that she quotes the graphophone's price at forty dollars when the price tag says fifty. Clearly, he is full of suspicion about his wife to begin with, and he seems to have some knowledge about her association with Tom, probably sensing that she still has feelings for him. His inadequacy fills him with anxiety. He feels he should be loved for working hard and is angered that Sarah does not love him completely. He is a man of ambition, having worked hard to own his land, and now is expanding his operation. Still, his wife does not give him his due. In working to own his land, he works against the whites so that he can finally look down on them as they do him. To have Sarah then go to bed with a white man hits him on two levels: his hatred of white people and his insecurity about his wife.

"Long Black Song," Parts 3-4

"Long Black Song," Parts 3-4 Summary

Sarah, sitting on the hillside, plans to intercept the salesman when he comes in the morning so that he will not be killed. She considers her circumstances, that she is lucky to have a house and a hardworking husband. She falls asleep and has a vague, bad dream of being dragged over the land and into a hole by some unseen force. She wakes up, remembering what has happened and knowing she has to head the white man off, but she cannot be seen by Silas. She hears the salesman's car and sees Silas waiting with a whip. Sarah can only watch as Silas whips the salesman. They struggle, and Silas gets his gun and shoots down one of the white men. The car speeds off; Silas' shot misses it. Then Silas drags the white man's body into the middle of the road. Sarah runs at him and falls at his feet.

Silas tells Sarah to get up and then throws furniture from the house. He tells her to take her things and go. She tries to convince him to run with her. Silas refuses, saying that if he runs, he will lose his land that he has earned over ten years and that he wishes God will kill all white people. Silas starts to cry and goes to the white man's body and talks to it, complaining of how he was betrayed, how everything has gone wrong and how he intends to go down fighting. They hear the faraway sound of cars, and Silas tells Sarah to run. She runs up the hill again. From there, she watches the gunfight. Silas kills one white man, and others run up to light the house on fire with gasoline. Silas kills one more, and the house burns down. The house collapses on itself, and Silas dies without a sound.

"Long Black Song," Parts 3-4 Analysis

Sarah dreams of an unseen, unstoppable force dragging her to a bottomless hole, into which she falls and falls. She also meditates on the cycle of killing that goes on between white men and black men as an eternal feature of life. Silas also feels the victim of an unstoppable force, the whites who never gave him or any other black man a chance. He recognizes that the system is inherently unfair, and he protests first to the white man's dead body. Then, he seems to speak directly to God, protesting this unfairness. Sarah, with her vision of Silas following a long red river of blood, and Silas, with his belief that he will be killed one way or the other, no matter what he does, may not be an ideal match as husband and wife. Yet both have developed different versions of a fatalistic worldview. Sarah's view plays out in lyrical flights and mystical thoughts, while Silas' plays out in grim, determined, bloody action.

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 1-3

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 1-3 Summary

Pastor Dan Taylor walks back to his church, singing a song and surveying the towns in the distance, thinking of how the whites have always owned the entire world. He wonders if he can do anything and specifically if marching with the communists will help change the situation. His congregation is starving. Taylor has just come from a meeting with white officials who could provide food aid but will not. Taylor wonders what he will tell his people. He thinks of the two communist activists he has been talking to, Hadley and Green, and wonders if they might be right.

As Taylor walks back to his church, he remembers how he worked the land, had a son, Jimmy, then heard the call to preach and established his church. His course had seemed clear; now it is confused for him. He had wanted to lead his people to the Promised Land; now he must tell them he cannot get them any food. He thinks of the ten-man committee he sent to the mayor and of the mayor, who he has dealt with in the past. He also thinks of Deacon Smith, a rebellious assistant who wants to take over the church. He walks among his people's houses, greeting them.

Taylor sees his son, Jimmy, who tells him that the mayor is waiting in the church parlor with the chief of police. Whites are warning blacks to stay off the streets, trying to prevent a demonstration. Also, Deacon Smith has been spreading the word that Taylor may demonstrate. The two communists, Hadley and Green, wait in the Bible Room. Taylor realizes he must deal with both problems at once, without the mayor seeing the communists, or he may be killed. Taylor goes into his church, meets his people, hears that nothing has come of the committee visit to the mayor and prays with the congregation, leaving the problem with God. Taylor gives out all the change he has for food.

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 1-3 Analysis

Characters in earlier stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* are helpless, caught in circumstances that are like slowly tightening traps. Pastor Taylor, on the other hand, is the first character in the book with options. He has a following, and while he still risks death, he commands some respect among whites for his role as a leader. He has dealt with the mayor in the past and knows him as a political adversary. He can consider how to leverage his power against the mayor, even if he must do so very carefully.

Taylor is more than just a political schemer. He is a man of deep religious conviction who has heard a call from God. Though his path currently appears blurry, he does not lose his faith. His prayer to God asks for a sign to guide him, citing the Lord's good works listed in the Bible and putting his own congregation's troubles in the context of those works.

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 4-6

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 4-6 Summary

Taylor tells his wife, May, to go and tell the mayor that he is sick, has to get out of bed and dress and will be a few minutes. Then she must go to Deacon Smith and tell him that Taylor is with the mayor and to wait in the basement with the other deacons. Then she must go to Hadley and Green and conduct them into Taylor's room, where he will talk to them. May argues that Jimmy must live and grow up among the white people and should not be put in jeopardy. Taylor convinces her to do as he asks.

May carries out Taylor's requests. Hadley and Green come to his room and try to convince him to march. They are worried that if he does not bring his congregants to the march, they will not have enough numbers to have an impact. Taylor, for his part, has the same concern. What if his people march and no one else shows up? They will be left to the mercy of the police in that case. Taylor has not let his name be used on the handbills advertising the march. Otherwise, Hadley and Green protest, they could have raised a much bigger crowd. Taylor still refuses to let them use his name, citing his status as a preacher. He also refuses to threaten the mayor with a demonstration. When he lets out Hadley and Green, he feels ashamed and prays for guidance.

Taylor and the mayor exchange pleasantries in the parlor. The mayor is chummy, speaking of them both as "old war-horses." Taylor is reserved and slightly retiring. Police Chief Bruden, who has brought the head of his Industrial Squad (in other words, an anti-union, anticommunist unit), greets Taylor as "boy" and glowers at him. The mayor offers Taylor a cigar, which Taylor declines. The mayor cites their twenty-five years of working together, singling out an instance where he stopped a lynch mob from killing one of Taylor's people, in arguing for Taylor not to march. Chief Bruden, not appreciating the mayor's soft touch, shakes his finger in Taylor's face, accusing the communists of stirring up race hate. Lowe chimes in with a disrespectful comment. Taylor argues that he has no control over what his people do and that they will likely march whether he tells them to or not. The mayor tries to convince Taylor that his role is to keep order among the blacks and again brings up past favors. Chief Bruden promises three hundred officers on the streets and accuses Taylor of trying to start a riot. Taylor asks for hunger relief for his people. The mayor says everybody is hungry. Bruden and Lower threaten Taylor, and the three men leave.

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 4-6 Analysis

Taylor must deal with all his problems at once. He chooses to appease them all, with a scheme to keep one group in one room and another in a different room that slightly resembles a parlor comedy. This setup, with Taylor juggling communists, the white authorities and his own church governing board all within his church, provides a

representation of the indecision in Taylor's mind. He gives noncommittal answers to all who come to him in this scene.

However, as the back-story provided indicates, Taylor has actually come to a new step in his life. He has gotten the call to preach and to lead and has built his church. Yet, as his conversation with the mayor shows, he has also given the white power structure his patronage thus far, playing the peacemaker and the mediator of disputes, helping the white community to keep order among the blacks. It has come to the point where the mayor treats Taylor as his man, in his pocket, and Taylor must decide if he will go along with this. The communists Hadley and Green recognize that Taylor wavers before the whites and call him on it. They challenge him to stand up and not let the whites walk all over the blacks. Taylor must find it in himself to make the choice he knows he must, against all of his fears and uncertainties. If the march goes badly, his people could suffer greatly. However, merely preserving an unjust peace never got any people to their Promised Land.

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 7-9

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 7-9 Summary

Taylor must deal with Deacon Smith and the other deacons. Deacon Smith is alarmed when Taylor mentions the involvement of Lowe and the Red Squad. Deacon Smith argues passionately against marching and associating with the communists. Taylor lays out the situation, the threats, the three hundred police officers and the lack of relief and makes the case in favor of marching. Deacon Smith calls Taylor on being scared and on trying to placate the mayor and the communists at once. Smith wants to keep waiting and becomes very heated as he denounces Taylor. Taylor accuses Smith of scheming to take control of the church. If the people are going to march, Taylor says, Taylor will march with them. Smith makes an ambiguous statement that could mean he will go to the whites to stop the march. Taylor tries to find out what Smith means, but a car pulls up outside with white men. When Taylor goes out to meet them, they punch him and beat him badly and then throw him into the back of the car.

Moving through the night, the car drives Taylor in a direction that he, lying on the floor in the back, cannot discern. They stop in the woods and bring him out. In his hurt state, Taylor cannot make out anything but four blurry white faces. The whites start to whip him, calling it a "nigger-lesson." They say they will teach him not to work with the communists and threaten white people, and they make him take off his vest. They whip him and manhandle him. He protests that he has not done anything. The whites want him to pray, and after much whipping, when the blood starts to run, he says the Lord's prayer. Then he passes out.

Waking up, Taylor realizes he is not dead. He recovers his shirt, but his back is too raw to put it on. He finds his way through the dark, picking out landmarks, including a white man's church. He does not go to the church because he does not trust the white preacher, Houston, not to turn him in. He passes a white graveyard and laughs a bitter laugh. Even the dead of the two races cannot be together, he thinks. He puts on his shirt so he can walk through the white part of town. He imagines God giving him the strength to destroy the white sections of town or destroying them with fire. Just then a policeman stops him, searches him and questions him. Taylor makes up a story about going to see one of his congregants at night, and the policeman lets him off with a warning. Returning home, he must peel his shirt off. His back burns like fire, and he puts a damp cloth on it and cries.

"Fire and Cloud," Parts 7-9 Analysis

Deacon Smith represents a threat first because he is wise to Pastor Taylor. He recognizes Taylor's indecision and makes it an issue. Smith also represents a threat because he seems willing to go to the white people. Smith sees an opening for himself in Taylor's association with the communists. Smith, by denouncing Taylor to the whites,

sees how he can take control of the church and presumably play Taylor's role as black power broker and mayoral sycophant. In addition to being the Judas among Taylor's disciples, Smith, in his scheming and willingness to go to the whites, offers a more corrupted version of Taylor, what Taylor could become if he let his closeness to white power change his internal compass.

To beat a black man with a whip, as the white thugs beat Taylor in the forest, is to bring back the ghost of slavery. The attack has both a painful physical component and a deeper psychological dimension. The thugs' goal is not only to dissuade through fear of violence, but also to assert their dominance as white men. Taking Taylor to the woods, they create a primal scene for him in which, stripped of both his shirt and his dignity, he can see their world as it is, with whites controlling blacks by pure force. Their world lacks the illusion of power and self-determination that Taylor has developed dealing with the mayor. To have him pray for them is to make them his new God and to desecrate his religion and his vocation as a preacher. In this way, the white thugs have carefully calculated how to make Taylor both physically afraid and mentally, morally and spiritually humiliated.

Walking through the white neighborhood presents an additional trial for Taylor. His walk also alludes back to Wright's own encounter with the police in a white neighborhood while delivering groceries. Having been beaten clarifies Taylor's view, strengthening his hatred of whites. He notes the absurdity of their system; even the dead are segregated. A preacher, he imagines the comforts offered by the Old Testament, which promises God will destroy the enemies of his chosen people. Described as "like a pillar of fire," he thinks of the white neighborhood burning. Yet at that point his vision is interrupted by the police, and he must return to a reality still fraught with prejudice.

"Fire and Cloud," Part 10

"Fire and Cloud," Part 10 Summary

Jimmy enters the room and sees something is wrong with Taylor. Taylor feels shame in front of his son, but he admits he was whipped. Jimmy wants to get his friends and fight; he does not want to wait anymore. Taylor cannot think of the right words to tell his son. Jimmy also says that the deacons have voted Taylor out of the church, thinking he ran away. Taylor wonders out loud if God has left him. Jimmy still wants to fight and does not hear anything from his father that could change his mind. Taylor realizes, speaking it at the same time to Jimmy, that the only way to fight is with the people, not alone, and that his whipping is the same as what has been happening to all of them.

May comes to the door. She sees that Taylor has been whipped, and Jimmy tells what happened. May washes Taylor with warm water and oil, and Taylor feels himself change. He feels his pain turning into conviction. Taylor is visited by Brother Bonds, of the deacons. Bonds also has cuts and bruises. The whites have beaten him as well as Bonds' wife and children. Bonds relates how the whites have beaten the communists and thrown them in jail, threatened and beaten many black people and killed one black man who resisted.

Taylor finds his church full of bandaged up, suffering people. Deacon Smith thunders at him, blaming him for the suffering. Taylor feels ashamed again because he cannot talk to his people. Jimmy tells him the people are assembling outside for the march. The crowd is willing to march. Having already been beaten, they think nothing worse can happen at this point. Deacon Smith claims Taylor will get everyone killed. A fat woman demands Smith shut up. When he does not, she slaps him. The crowd pushes away Deacon Smith.

Taylor, finding the words to speak, gets up and gives a speech. He talks about being whipped, about how he thought he had been doing right to work with the mayor and about how his attackers made him take God's name in vain. He says that he has seen and felt the sign of God in the fire of being whipped. The crowd takes this up, and they begin to march, singing a song about the Promised Land, involving the sign of the fire by night and the sign of the cloud by day. Taylor looks at the march and sees in its collection of placards and gentle mass of people that it is the sign of the cloud. They get to City Hall, untouched by the police. Taylor demands that the mayor come out front and talk to him there. The mayor obeys, and Taylor realizes that freedom belongs to the strong.

"Fire and Cloud," Part 10 Analysis

In the last section of the story, Taylor is transfigured. In other words, he undergoes a fundamental change to his nature and character. He realizes the meaning of the two key

symbols of the story, the fire and the cloud. The way he comes to know these symbols is the crucial feature of the story.

Initially, walking through the white neighborhood, he thinks of God as simply wreaking destruction on the unjust. However, this does not happen, at least not in the easy, direct way Taylor imagines. Instead, Taylor gains an understanding of his own experience. He can only reach this realization by standing before his son and feeling the full weight of wordless, abject humiliation. As if from nowhere, he finds the words, or as Wright says, he discovers the words as he says them. Being whipped and humiliated has stirred something deep in his identity, touching on the experiences of his forefathers. Where before he has grown apart from the black community, towards the compromises of his political alliance with the mayor, now he reconnects with his people.

In a Christian reading, the whipping is Taylor's crucifixion. Coming home and laying on his bed is the same as Jesus being laid in his tomb. May washing his back with warm water and oil is like a pieta - a figure of the Virgin Mary with her dead son - and also signals the beginning of his resurrection. His rise from the dead becomes complete when he fully comprehends the meaning of the fire and the cloud.

Like Christ and his transfiguration on the cross, Taylor changes from an individual to one whose suffering is universal. He changes from one who is hesitant to join a larger movement to one who understands that strength lies with all of the oppressed. Finally, he changes from a man in doubt to a man who has fully renewed his covenant with God.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 1

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 1 Summary

Sue, an old washerwoman, looks out into the night, seeing only the airport beacon swinging like a lighthouse beam. It is raining, and she waits for her son, Johnny-Boy, to come home. She contemplates a pile of damp clothes and then starts to iron them as she has her whole life. Without thinking, she sings a song about Jesus as a "bright and morning star" but then catches herself. She wishes her other son, Sug, could join them for dinner.

Johnny-Boy is out late rounding up white and black people for a communist meeting. Sug has already been beaten and arrested for doing this, and his arrest has caused great fear in Sue for Johnny-Boy. Sue has been trying to help them by washing clothes and earning money, but she finds the work harder and harder.

Singing the song again, Sue considers her past beliefs. She was a Christian, thinking of the white world as a white mountain that oppressed her with temptation. She believed in God because she needed to make sense of her suffering, and she felt a kinship with the suffering of Jesus. She had her two sons, and then her husband died. When grown, her sons convinced her to believe in a communist vision instead. The suffering of Jesus was replaced with the suffering of black people, and the beginnings of the party became the new resurrection. This new vision gives her strength, though sometimes she sings the old songs from her Christian days.

Reva, a white fellow communist, knocks on the door. She is looking for Johnny-Boy to warn him that the sheriff knows about the upcoming communist meeting at Reva's father's house. Someone must warn the comrades not to go because the sheriff has laid a trap for them. In addition, someone in the party has snitched on the others. Sue realizes Johnny-Boy will have to warn the comrades. Sue also thinks of how much she loves Reva and that Reva's love is an antidote to the white mountain. Reva leaves.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 1 Analysis

Sue has had two belief systems inform her life, Christianity and communism. Yet she has not necessarily changed her beliefs. She has simply changed the terms of the beliefs. Starting from a Christian perspective, she gave new meaning to the major figures of Christianity. Christ became the universal suffering of black men. The party became the redemption and resurrection, the sole hope for the oppressed. She has plugged one system into the sockets left by the other, and so one has to wonder if she has really changed her core beliefs. Wright shows her confusion with her singing of the hymn out of habit. The old faith seems to be just underneath the surface of the new one, ready to reemerge. That her working burden gets heavier by the week may indicate that she cannot subsist on communist belief alone.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 2

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 2 Summary

Sue recognizes the sound of Johnny-Boy's feet tramping through the yard. She thinks briefly of how her son more and more resembles his father and of how happy she was when she learned that Reva loved Johnny-Boy. She fixes Johnny-Boy supper as he puffs on his pipe. She gives him a pillow for his head, waiting to tell him he must go warn the comrades. She gives him his supper; he is extremely tired. She tells him about the sheriff visiting Reva's father, Lem, about the meeting. She also worries out loud about the number of white people Johnny-Boy has been recruiting for the party. She claims that her knowledge of the local black people, running back many years, makes them more reliable. Johnny-Boy says he has to trust the whites in order to make the party stronger. He also does not believe in white and black, only rich and poor. Worried he might have to go on the lam, Sue gives her son some money she has saved. Johnny-Boy puts on his coat and goes out to warn the comrades.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 2 Analysis

In light of what happens later on in the story, Sue's warning to Johnny-Boy about white people in the party is important. It also reveals that she has not fully given herself over to the communists' color-blind doctrine, as Johnny-Boy has. Instead, she is in an in-between state, relying partially on communist ideology and partially on her own local knowledge, which is less easily summed up by ideology. Since she is proved correct in her suspicions, one could argue that Wright may agree with her and be proposing that any communist action taken by blacks not be so enthusiastic that they forget their own communities and the unique knowledge that goes with them.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 3

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 3 Summary

Sue is floating in between sleep and waking when the sheriff knocks open the door. She confronts the group of white men in her kitchen and orders them out. They throw her greens, hot though not scalding off the stove, in her face. She orders them out again. She talks back to the sheriff as he tries to verbally dominate her. When he warns her that she is talking to white men, she says she does not care who she is talking to. He asks where Johnny-Boy is. She refuses to tell him. The sheriff slaps her. She refuses again, and again he slaps her. Taking this abuse, she feels her own pride welling up. This pride will cost her shortly. Seeing she will not talk, the sheriff tells her to get a sheet to collect her son's body. He and his men start to leave. Going to the door, full of her pride, she yells after them that they will never get what they want. The sheriff returns and beats her unconscious this time.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 3 Analysis

Earlier, describing the development of Sue's faith in Jesus, Wright charts how Sue used religion first to make sense of her singing of songs in church, then her suffering in hard, dull work and finally her understanding of the oppression of white people and their laws. At each point in her life, her experience came first, and her belief system followed and gave that experience meaning. Her life has been mainly about enduring and putting off her own desires. To her, Christianity and then communism both represent tools to use in order to continue enduring, and importantly, each system has allowed her to justify this endurance. Christianity allows the believer to draw quiet strength from suffering; after all, Jesus promises that the meek will inherit the earth. Communism allows its adherent a more active strength. One could state the communist parallel to Jesus' promise: the meek will rise up and take the earth.

As Sue heads toward the door to yell defiantly and, it turns out, stupidly after the sheriff, Wright frames her actions in terms of her strong faith that leaves her "all but blinded." Sue's character functions by taking the raw suffering she experiences and feeding it back through a belief system. The experience strengthens the belief, and the belief in turn strengthens and justifies the experience. In effect, by making her suffer, the sheriff short circuits this feedback loop, causing Sue's faith to flare up in her, and that is why she yells at him so brazenly, in effect demanding more suffering. This act determines the story that follows.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 4

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 4 Summary

Sue wakes up slowly, seeing a blurry white mass before her eyes. She feels fear rising in her as she realizes this mass is a white face. The face belongs to Booker, a party member who has just joined. As Sue returns to consciousness, her fear continues to gather and centers on Booker. She tells him what happened, and he curses the sheriff's men repeatedly. He carries her to the kitchen as she protests. Booker gets her to the kitchen, holds a damp cloth to her head and tells her some bad news. The sheriff has caught Johnny-Boy by Foley's Woods and is trying to make him reveal the identities of the other communists. Sue realizes she will have to tell the comrades, since she does not trust Booker to do it. She tries to get up but cannot. She feels the presence of the fearful white mountain in her imagination as Booker steadies her and asks her for the comrades' names. Sue wants to trust Booker because Johnny-Boy would, but her instincts are against it. Booker keeps pushing her, asking if it is because he is white and appealing to her regard for Johnny-Boy.

Finally, Booker says names, and Sue says yes or no. As she does this, she feels a sense of horror. Afterward, Sue realizes that, in arguing with her, Booker mentioned that the sheriff had staked out Lem's house. Sue asks Booker how he knew this information, and he gives a flimsy answer. Sue lets him leave and feels her fear of the white mountain leaving with him.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 4 Analysis

Wright defines Sue's fear and sense of oppression with an image, a white mountain. Yet this image is not very specific. After all, Wright does not make it a high, sharp mountain white with snow, or a squat, cubic mountain of solid quartz. Wright also does not locate the mountain in either a real or imaginary landscape. He just calls it a white mountain and situates it in terms of Sue's emotions and worldview. The mountain's essential meaning comes from its vagueness. It is an undefined mass somewhere in Sue's universe. She cannot know its location or its dimensions or any other attribute that would allow her to climb it or even approach it. She can only say that it, and the world of whites it represents, exists somewhere distant, blocking her vision and her life, and that its mass exerts a gravitational pull on her she cannot deny.

The vagueness of the white mountain image allows Wright to blur and superimpose it onto Booker's face in this scene. Being picked up and carried by Booker, Sue experiences feelings of vertigo and of being pushed towards an abyss. These resemble Sarah's dream in "Long Black Song" of being dragged toward a pit as she spends the night on the hillside. That Sue's instinct proves correct gives credence to the white mountain image as an accurate figure. Not an irrational dream, just a vague one, and fearful in its vagueness, the white mountain is like Sue's sixth sense for race relations.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 5

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 5 Summary

Sue sits paralyzed by guilt, hoping that somehow Booker is not actually an informer. Reva arrives and gasps at how badly Sue is hurt. Reva sees to Sue's wounds in the kitchen. Reva asks if Sue told Johnny-Boy to tell the comrades. Sue says yes, but she does not mention Booker. Sue begins to cry. Reva comforts her and relays her father's warning that Booker is a stool. Sue realizes that her premonition was correct but cannot tell Reva what she has done. Sue decides to convince Reva to go to sleep and to stop Booker herself.

Sue manages to put Reva to bed and then thinks over what she will do. She realizes that her shouting back at the sheriff and causing him to beat her weakened her so that she could not stand up to Booker. She thinks over how she believed in Jesus, then communism, and realizes that now she is confused, stuck between the two belief systems. She realizes that she cannot persist in this state because she cannot draw grace from either system anymore. She remembers the sheriff's warning to get a sheet to collect her son's dead body and is suddenly inspired. She plans to take Johnny-Boy's gun and hide it inside the sheet. Sue looks at Reva and thinks that Reva and Johnny-Boy could never have been happy together in the South. Sue sets out into the rain for Foley's Woods, carrying the white sheet and, inside it, the pistol.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 5 Analysis

Reading the song lyrics that Sue repeats to herself ("he's the lily of the valley, the bright and morning star"), the white mountain is the opposite of the "valley" in which Jesus is the lily. So the symbol of the white mountain may have come partially from the imaginary landscape contained in Sue's hymn. The symbolic antithesis of the white mountain, the bright and morning star appears in this section as a symbol, not just a song lyric. Where the white mountain represents confusion, fear and the indefinable and unknowable world of whites, the bright and morning star symbolizes guidance, a definite purpose and clarity of knowledge. In trying to substitute communism for Christianity, Sue has been lost and has not even realized it. Instead of making a clean break with Christianity, her faith in God became confused with her faith in the vision of the communist struggle. Sue does not resolve this struggle. Instead, her immediate need to stop Booker causes her to radically alter the nature of her beliefs. Where before she had believed in endless suffering and struggle in both Christian and communist terms, she now sees that she must do more than just bear a burden for a long period of time. Where before Sue lived only for a worthy vision of the future, now she has to act entirely in the present.

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 6

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 6 Summary

Sue hurries through the rain, carrying the sheet and gun. She fords the river and finds herself among the parked cars of the sheriff's posse. Men with shotguns confront her. She tells them she has come for her son. When she tells them the purpose of the sheet, they are slightly amazed and laugh. They say Johnny-Boy is not dead and will not die if he talks. Sue says he will not talk. They make fun of the idea of a black revolution. Then they lead her to the sheriff as she clutches the gun inside the sheet.

The sheriff promises Sue that he will not kill her Johnny-Boy if he talks. She says she cannot convince him to talk. The sheriff takes her to a clearing where Johnny-Boy is tied up. They try to get Sue to talk to him and convince him to talk and save himself. Sue will not budge. They threaten to cripple Johnny-Boy, bracing a log against his kneecap. Sue does not say anything. They swing a crowbar and break her son's knee over the log. Sue remains silent. They break the other kneecap. Johnny-Boy tells her to go away. She begs the sheriff to shoot Johnny-Boy and stop his suffering. Instead, the sheriff breaks Johnny-Boy's eardrums by sealing an open palm against the ear and then punching it. Johnny-Boy is in great agony, and Sue wishes she could shoot him and put his out of his misery. Just then, Booker arrives. Booker starts to say he has the names but stops in astonishment when he sees Sue. She shoots him through the sheet, immediately turns to kill Johnny-Boy, but the sheriff's men wrestle her down before she can shoot. She looks up at the men and this time does not see their faces as a white mountain. They yell out that Booker is dead. They shoot Johnny-Boy twice so Sue will know he is dead. Then Booker's pal claims the right to shoot Sue and does. As Sue dies, she silently mouths out the words, "yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted."

"Bright and Morning Star," Part 6 Analysis

One can read Sue's sheet with the gun inside it as the most potent symbol in the story. The sheet itself, wound into a bundle, is like a miniature version of the white mountain Sue has feared so much in the past. Indeed, the need for the sheet comes from the white people's world, specifically from the sheriff. When he mentions that Sue should bring a white sheet to collect Johnny-Boy's body, he probably means this statement more as a figure of speech to scare her. However, Sue takes his words literally but adds a twist. The white sheet is also a sign of reverence. In addition to the association between the color white and purity, the sheet itself wraps around Sue's hands, bringing them together as if in prayer. Sue must appear reverent to the white gunmen, who make fun of her by asking if she wants to hold a prayer meeting.

In a symbolic reading, the gun inside the sheet can be seen as the bright and morning star that Sue finally perceives. The weapon embodies her purpose and is the instrument of the total act that she decides upon. As she shoots the gun from inside the sheet, the

bright and morning star emerges from the confusion of the white mountain, which is destroyed by the bullet tearing through it. The bullet then tears into another embodiment of the white mountain, Booker's head, and with this Sue achieves her newly discovered, final purpose in life.

Characters

Big Boy

Big Boy is a large, probably adolescent boy. Strong enough to wrestle his three friends at once and win, he leads the group as they skip school and roam the countryside on a hot afternoon. Big Boy leads his friends to the swimming hole, and he leads them as the white woman catches them swimming. Instead of hiding, he approaches her, asking for his clothes. When the white officer shoots Buck and Lester, Big Boy grapples with him, gets his gun and kills him.

Having to flee, Big Boy is smart enough to think of the kilns as a hiding place. He is brave enough to fight and kill a large snake that crawls out from his kiln. He is quick enough to get there before Bobo, who gets caught and brutally killed by a lynch mob. Big Boy, crouching in hiding, fantasizes about killing this mass of white people one by one and feels the beginning of an adult hate take hold in him. As the leader, the strongest and the most ingenious, Big Boy is able to survive and escape.

Mann

As his monosyllabic name suggests, Mann operates with a basic set of motivations. That does not make him a simple person necessarily. Rather, the circumstances of the story determine his standout characteristics, as they require him to act on simple imperatives.

Stuck in the flood with the waters rising, Mann needs to save his family. He needs to get his wife, Lulu, to a hospital; she has been in labor for the past four days. He needs to get his mother-in-law and his young son, Peewee, to safety in the hills. To accomplish all this, Mann needs a boat.

Unable to trade or sell Mann's donkey for a boat, Mann's cousin Bob has stolen a white person's boat. Stuck with this literally and figuratively white vessel, Mann must pilot it to the hospital. Already sick with flu, Mann must row against the current. This is only the beginning of his misfortunes. When the boat's angry owner spots them in his craft, he immediately starts shooting at them in the darkness. Mann has to shoot back, killing the white postmaster in self-defense while the man's wife and son watch from the window. Mann then gets Lulu to the hospital, but he is too late. She dies along with the unborn baby, and Mann and his family must receive this news in front of a roomful of callous white people. "Poor nigger" is the best one nurse can offer.

Once Mann's family is evacuated, Mann finds himself pressed into service at gunpoint to fix the failing levee, which breaks before he can reach it. Returning to the hospital, he heroically helps save its patients. He then goes looking for survivors in a boat and comes upon the wife and son of the white man he kills earlier. The son recognizes him, and Mann contemplates murdering the witnesses with his ax. Just then, the floodwaters

shift the house, and when Mann regains his footing, he cannot kill the boy or his mother. Instead, he ferries them to dry land, where they have him arrested by the soldiers. Sure he is condemned to die, Mann tries to run and is shot down.

Mann reacts. He works hard. He struggles. Nonetheless, he sees only doors closing in his face as he makes his way through the flood. He seems to have no good choices and can only try to hold out as a web of racism, the Jim Crow version of a web of fate, first encloses and then crushes him.

Sarah

As "Long Black Song" opens, Sarah is taking care of her baby, Ruth, and wondering when her husband, Silas, will return from selling his crop. She soon falls into a reverie as she looks out across the fields in the dying sunlight. Wright uses especially lyrical language as he describes her watching the sunset, especially the image she envisions of the fields lifting up and floating slowly skyward.

Sarah seems somewhat detached from life, dreaming of her earlier romance with a man, Tom, who has now gone off to fight in World War I and has not been heard from since. She married Silas because she needed to, not because she loved him. She does respect him and is fond of him, and she appears resigned to her fate on a practical level. Tom's leaving for war left "a black hole in her heart," a hole that Silas has "not quite filled."

The crucial event for understanding Sarah is her encounter with the salesman. The seduction scene confronts the reader with difficult questions. She resists the salesman's advances at first, and yet she then leads him to the bedroom and appears to engage him as much as he engages her. Perhaps she feels trapped by him and says to herself that if she must give in, she will do so on her terms. Alternately, one could read her poetic, lyrical character as impulsive and willing to follow the moment where it leads. Since Wright describes the scene in highly figurative language, Sarah's motives at this point are probably left unclear intentionally.

Things happen to Sarah. She does not make things happen. She does, however, offer an interesting perspective on what happens around her, full of philosophical and imaginative observations. Only Sarah can watch the tragedy unfold as Silas goes into battle and still think in grand terms, realizing that somehow, the fates of all men, white and black, are linked, as she envisions, "like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel."

Silas

At the midpoint of "Long Black Song," when Silas returns to his modest property, the reader finds out that he has been working hard for ten years to own his land free and clear. He has just attained this goal and then some, having sold enough crop to purchase an additional ten acres. Silas despises his lot as a second class citizen under Jim Crow, and he hates the whites who would keep him dependent and subservient. He

has the pride that goes with singular achievement and yet also seems to have nursed himself toward his goal with an anger that has hardened over the years. What Silas really wants is to be entirely his own man, treated with the respect for his abilities and drive that he deserves. However, the idea that working hard and owning land in will earn him respect is an illusion in an unfair, racist world, as he discovers.

Silas has a wife, Sarah, and a daughter, Ruth. His wife respects him but does not love him. She is a somewhat dreamy woman and still fantasizes about an earlier romance she had with a man named Tom. Sarah also becomes Silas' undoing, as she is taken to bed by a white traveling salesman, unable to resist for either lack of willpower or the feeling that she has no other choices.

That Silas reacts with anger to Sarah when he finds out what happened - she is not exactly raped, but succumbs to a coercive seduction - shows that Silas does not truly know or trust his wife. Silas may also know inside himself that Sarah has feelings for someone else. This anxiety on his part, combined with the affront of a white man having casual sex with his wife, causes Silas to take the most extreme course of action possible. He flies into a murderous rage, driving Sarah, who holds the baby, from the house. Then he fights the white man when he returns, first whipping him and then shooting him dead. Then, instead of fleeing, he waits for the whites to return and engages the posse in a suicidal gunfight.

Before the final showdown, Silas protests that he does not want to die, but he feels he must because his situation is hopeless. He is a strong character, out of place in a system that ignores merit, unwilling to bend to it, and for this reason, he is doomed.

The Victrola Salesman

Unnamed, the white salesman shows up in Sarah's yard in the dusk. It is probably the end of his day trying to sell combination clock-record players, and while stopping at a white person's house would be improper so late at night, the salesman probably believes he can make a final quick sale to a sharecropper briefly flush with cotton-money. He first comes off as eager and inexperienced. He seems genuinely surprised when Sarah says she does not keep time with a clock, and he readily tells her his plans to go to college in Chicago. In fact, he is probably a northerner, since he speaks to Sarah without the brusque distance typical of the southern white men in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Also, he is probably around the same age as Sarah.

Sarah thinks of him as "jus lika lil boy." However, the salesman's advances by the well are those of a man, or at least a boy conscious of the power he wields in the situation. His motivations defy easy interpretation, and his story becomes more dubious. Either he really is an innocent, pre-college lad, or he is actually just feeding her a line, creating a sympathetic story after pegging her as an easy conquest. Whatever else he is or is not, he is a salesman, who brazenly - and fatally, it turns out - believes he can still sell her a graphophone. He leaves the machine with her as he steals from her bed. That he offers her a ten-dollar discount as he leaves would be funny, were it not for the disturbing

scene that precedes the offer. When he returns the next day and finds Silas waiting for him with a whip and a gun, this salesman definitely gets more than he bargained for.

Pastor Dan Taylor

Pastor Taylor starts out in "Fire and Cloud" confused about how he will obtain government relief for his starving congregation. As the story progresses, he gains greater clarity on what he must do and how he must do it, and so he revives his mission. As the background lays out, Taylor had been a farmer but found himself called to preach. He built a church, and now he heads a congregation. Yet along the way he has made deals with the white mayor. He has benefited from favors, such as the mayor releasing one of Taylor's accused congregants. Taylor sometimes wonders if he uses the mayor, or if the mayor is just using him to keep the peace among the black community. To add to his worries, a member of his board of Deacons, Deacon Smith, has been acting up recently, clearly wanting to take control of the church.

At the core of Taylor's mission is his belief that he must lead his people to the Promised Land, just as Moses led the Hebrews to Israel. He finds himself asking God for signs like the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that Moses followed. He has a strong negative vision, feeling shut out of the land by whites, and he secretly prays and hopes that God will wreak a terrible vengeance on the unjust whites. Still, Taylor lacks a positive vision, having committed his congregation only partially to a large, black and white communist demonstration.

After being rebuffed by the relief office, Taylor returns to his church where all his troubles seem to have gathered. His congregants are in terrible shape and beg for his money. Communist organizers are in one room wanting more commitment from him, and the mayor is in another room, wanting Taylor to keep his flock from marching. All the while, Deacon Smith hovers around the margins, looking for an opening. Taylor can give satisfactory answers to no one, including himself and his son Jimmy.

That night, thugs, probably associated with the sheriff, come and take Taylor to the woods. They whip him past the point of defiance, until he breaks down and says the Lord's Prayer as they order. They let him live but demand that he not march. On the way home, he feels a new sense of purpose. He asks God to give him the strength to knock down the buildings of the whites. When he returns, he finds others in his congregation have been beaten during the night. He realizes that strength is with one's people, and he tells this to Jimmy conclusively.

By the end of "Fire and Cloud," Taylor realizes he must march. He easily deals with the rebellious Deacon Smith, who is shouted down by the rest of the church members. Finally, he understands what signs he must follow: the fire of his wounded body, burning with lash-marks, and the cloud of white and black protesters marching together for justice and relief.

The Mayor

The caricatured image of a corrupt cracker political boss, Mayor Bolton has a fat red face, usually with a cigar stuck in the mouth. The mayor is an entirely political creature. He leaves his dirty work to his pit-bull of a sheriff, along with an even more sordid array of shady thugs. The mayor favors political solutions over violence and is very willing to do a deal. He has a political relationship with Pastor Taylor. This relationship shifts over the story from one where the mayor has the advantage to one where Taylor holds the cards, and the mayor must deal more on Taylor's terms. This shift becomes complete when the crowd reaches City Hall. The mayor must come out and speak to Taylor where Taylor wants to speak instead of having Taylor come in to see him as he would like. Whether Mayor Bolton ordered Taylor beaten up the night before the march or his sheriff thought of that himself is unclear. However, Mayor Bolton clearly knows when he has lost and when Taylor has won.

Sue

Sue works as a laundry lady for white customers, carrying a hundred pounds of wet clothes balanced on her head as she steps over fields she has known for her entire long life. She used to feel a kinship with Jesus, who she thinks of with the old hymn calling him a "bright and morning star." She imagines the world of the whites, the source of most of her misery, as a white mountain pushing down on her, with God the only relief. She used to compare her suffering with Jesus' crucifixion, and she lived for the life he promised would come. However, her sons Sug and Johnny-Boy have convinced her to give up religion for communism. She has replaced Jesus with the suffering of black men and the Resurrection with the rise of the party. Her old religious convictions still seem to run below the surface, as she finds herself still singing the "bright and morning star" hymn.

Sue's two sons, Sug and Johnny-Boy, are working as party activists and organizers. The party itself has started only recently and is still a fledgling organization. Sug has been captured, beaten and imprisoned for organizing, and the memory of this fills Sue with dread for Johnny-Boy as he goes about organizing. Along with this dread, she has an iron will forged by years of hard labor.

When Reva tells Sue that the latest party meeting plans have been found out, Sue does not hesitate to send Johnny-Boy out to alert the party members, even though he could suffer the same fate as Sug or worse. Sue displays yet more iron when the sheriff shows up. She defies his attempts to reach Johnny-Boy and speaks bravely and insolently to him. He beats her. As he is leaving, her pride gets the better of her, and she gloats. He returns and beats her unconscious.

In a weakened state, Sue tells the party members' names to the informant Booker, though she mistrusts white party members. Realizing what she has done, she sets off to kill Booker. To do this, she cleverly remembers the sheriff's taunt, that she'll need to bring a sheet to fetch her son's body. She takes an actual white sheet and wraps it

around a pistol. She then walks straight into the assembled sheriff and his men, ignoring their torturing of Johnny-Boy before her, and shoots Booker dead when he appears. Along the way, Sue receives a vision that resolves her conflict between religion and her sons' party activities. She decides her life will become a "total act," and this act, the killing of Booker, becomes, finally, her guiding star.

Johnny-Boy

Sue's son Johnny-Boy believes ardently in the communist cause and willingly puts his life on the line for it. He has convinced his mother to give up her religious views and instead believe in the struggle to end the suffering of the poor. Johnny-Boy refuses to base his suspicions on race, as his mother does, instead following a color-blind creed and making alliances with poor whites. Among these is Reva, daughter of a party organizer. She loves Johnny-Boy for his natural leadership qualities, though she hasn't told him this yet.

By the end of the story, Johnny-Boy is little more than a live body tortured and abused by the sheriff in attempt to break Sue. Johnny-Boy represents all the hopes Sue has in life, as well as all that she must sacrifice for the cause and the struggle.

The Sheriff

One of several interchangeable white enforcer characters, the sheriff has no compunctions about striking an old lady if her skin is the wrong color. The attitude of this sheriff, not that different from that of the other Jim Crow thugs in *Uncle Tom's Children*, is that all options are on the table when dealing with blacks. He beats up Sue and is entirely prepared to commit murder and kill Johnny-Boy, which he does by the story's end. His character is actually very simple. He has a mandate to do the whites' dirty work, along with a free hand to act, so long as he does his most sinister business in the dead of night.

Objects/Places

The Cinder Yard

Richard Wright's early home's backyard was filled with black cinders from the nearby railroad. He and his friends would have play-wars with these cinders.

Broken Milk Bottle

Wright describes how, when young, he and his friends tried to have a cinder war with white children, one of whom threw a broken milk bottle at him, seriously cutting his neck.

The Kilns

Big Boy, Buck, Lester and Bobo created earthen structures for burning fires and pretending they were train engineers. Big Boy hides in his kiln, and from this vantage point he sees Bobo tarred and burnt alive by the lynch mob.

Old Man Harvey's Swimming Hole

Lester, Buck, Bobo and Big Boy go to Old Man Harvey's swimming hole while playing hooky. The chain of killing that forces Big Boy to leave town begins at this muddy swimming hole.

Will's Truck

Elder Peters' son Will drives a delivery truck to Chicago. Big Boy plans to escape to Chicago by hiding in this truck.

The White Rowboat

Mann must use a white boat stolen from Postmaster Heartfield to get his sick and pregnant wife, along with the rest of his family, to the hospital in the middle of the flood.

The Hospital

Mann must get his pregnant wife to the hospital, which has white and colored wards. She dies here, and later he must help evacuate the building.

The Levee

The flood strains the levee, threatening to break it and destroy the partially flooded town. Black males in the town, including Mann, are pressed into service at gunpoint to shore up the levee with sandbags.

The Ax

Given an ax after being pressed into service by the army, Mann first uses it to smash a hole in the hospital ceiling, facilitating the rescue of those inside. In the Heartfield house, he considers using this ax to kill Heartfield's family, the only witnesses to his earlier crime.

Silas' Farm

Silas works for ten hard years to pay off his patch of ground and modest, rough-wood house. Rather than surrender, he makes a final stand there as the house burns down around him.

The Clock-Graphophone

The clock-graphophone is a fancy, fifty dollar record player left by the white salesman, seemingly in exchange for sleeping with Sarah and as a sign of his return (he only gives her a discount). Silas smashes it when he learns what's happened.

The White Handkerchief

Silas finds the salesman's white handkerchief in the bed next to Sarah, confirming his suspicions that she's been unfaithful.

Taylor's Church

Taylor built his church himself, and it is where he meets with both the white mayor and the sheriff, as well as the communists Hadley and Green.

The Whip

The sheriff's thugs use a leather whip to flog the preacher Taylor so he won't march the next day.

City Hall

Preacher Dan Taylor leads his congregation, along with other demonstrators, to City Hall and defiantly does not go in, instead demanding that the mayor come out and talk to him in the presence of the crowd.

The White Mountain

Sue carries an image in her mind of a white mountain that represents to her the white man's laws and world. The despair this image inspires her toward God.

The White Sheet

In "Bright and Morning Star," the sheriff tells Sue she should take a sheet out to fetch her son Johnny-Boy's body. Later, when she realizes she must stop Booker, she hides a pistol in a sheet and disguises herself to the sheriff.

Foley's Woods

Sue knows she can intercept the stool pigeon Booker and kill him if she can get to Foley's Woods, on the other side of the swollen river.

Social Sensitivity

Uncle Tom's Children originally contained four lengthy stories: "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down By the Riverside," "Long Black Song," and "Fire and Cloud." "Bright and Morning Star" was added to the 1940 edition. The book is unified by the stories' shared social context, common themes, and consistent narrative technique. It is made coherent by an arrangement that leads the reader toward increasingly sophisticated examples of self-realization.

The stories are set in the rural South of Wright's childhood, and they graphically portray the systematic racial oppression suffered by southern blacks. The black characters portrayed in them are weakened by poverty, threatened with racist violence, and tested by death; yet, they reveal an inherent strength and a potential for heroic rebellion.

But Wright's concern is not merely racial, for the stories describe the perennial hard times of the rural South, exacerbated by the Great Depression.

Against this background of class animosity and social upheaval, Wright projects the ideal of interracial collective action.

Techniques

Many critics have suggested that Wright's southern stories are his best work, and it is clear that they have continued to be widely read and often anthologized. Despite their occasionally too obvious didacticism, the stories in Uncle Tom's Children convey an emotional power that has not been diminished by the passage of time nor the alteration of the social conditions they address.

Uncle Tom's Children shows the influence of literary realism and naturalism.

Wright's prose is direct and graphic, focusing on the dark and violent aspects of life in the rural South during the 1930s. His effective use of dialect and black folk culture increases the realism of his stories. As in much literary naturalism, Wright's characters sometimes seem doomed by their social environment.

Yet, Wright's style in Uncle Tom's Children is also affected by his didactic purpose. Wright's straightforward narration emphasizes his message, and like other proletarian authors Wright breaks from the pessimistic determinism of naturalism by idealizing some characters and supporting their heroic opposition to oppression with an underlying hope for melioration.

Wright's simple narrative technique is enriched by the use of symbols and allusions. Characters' names, natural phenomena, colors, and pervasive Biblical references are used to strengthen Wright's messages. As a result, the stories take on many of the characteristics of allegory.

Themes

Themes

The common theme of the stories in Uncle Tom's Children is the struggle to find personal dignity in an oppressive society, but the individual stories in the collection describe various levels of self-awareness and portray various reactions to oppression. Throughout the book, a tension between Wright's faithful presentation of the Communist Party line and his heretical, intuitive belief in black nationalism is evident.

Written before Wright broke with the Communist Party, the stories express his belief in Marxist theories of economic determinism and his belief in the efficacy of collective action. This didactic presentation of Marxist theory is most obvious in "Fire and Cloud," which concludes with a triumphant, though improbable, interracial protest march, and in "Bright and Morning Star," which idealizes the personal sacrifices made to protect the secrecy of an interracial Communist organization. However, parallel messages are communicated less directly in the other stories, for all of the stories demonstrate the deterministic influence of social and economic conditions and the futility of an individual's effort to rebel unless that effort is part of a collective action.

Nevertheless, the stories also display Wright's intuitive belief in black nationalism. His black characters, often through a revelatory experience of racist violence, are made aware of their status as outsiders. There is no emotional shading, and the reader must sympathize with the oppressed blacks and despise the cruelty of the whites.

Although Wright introduces sympathetic white Communists in two stories, they are not believable, and the ideal of interracial cooperation is undercut by his graphic depictions of racist violence committed by whites.

Violence and Power

Each episode in *Uncle Tom's Children* revolves around some violent act or series of acts. Usually, the violence rises to the level of the horrific and spins out of control, destroying both white and black lives. The violent acts depicted include murder, torture, coercion and intimidation. Inevitably, given the Jim Crow power structure in place in the American South Wright portrays, black people end up bearing the brunt of the violence. Their bodies suffer, and yet Wright also charts more insidious, less visible types of violence at work, such as violence done to family and community ties, human dignity, justice and even the ability of words to have meaning.

In light of the brutalities that follow in the five fictional episodes, the beatings Wright describes suffering in "The Ethics of Jim Crow" seem, if not mild, at least non-fatal. Yet on closer inspection, one must question the quality of the life preserved. What is worse? To have the white children turn the childish cinder-fight vicious by hurling broken bottles or to have your own mother turn on you rather than comfort you? By beating him until

he becomes sick, Wright's mother continues the earlier injustice. As a mother should, she lays down the law. Yet the law of Jim Crow is essentially that if you are black you are guilty. It is unfair and unreasonable, a perversion of justice, and it perverts the parent-child relationship, turning it monstrous.

Wright experiences a similar perversion as a young man, when he cannot stand up for his girlfriend, but must instead pretend to like it when a white man touches her sexually. In this case, violence never rises above the level of threat. However, this potential violence destroys Wright's masculinity through a logic that defines any assertion of dignity as cause for deadly force. Wright notes this with irony, describing the man who humiliates him as having a reputation for killing black men in "self defense."

This logic justifies white dominance by defining blacks as always already guilty of savage lusts and bad intentions, making "defensive" violence acceptable. This definition lies at the root of the confrontations in the five fictional episodes. The white woman Bertha instantly assumes Big Boy and his friends mean to rape her, ignoring their statement that they merely want their clothes. Her fiancy Jim, the officer, assumes the same and shoots first without asking questions. In "Down by the Riverside," Mann suffers a similar prejudgment by the white postmaster Heartfield, who charges the boat Mann stole, guns blazing, without seeking any explanation.

The projection of innate guilt takes on more subtle forms as well, extending beyond male confrontation into the realm of man-woman sexual relations. Sarah, the heroine of "Long Black Song," finds herself at the center of an escalating storm of violence initially caused by her attractiveness. The unnamed white salesman crudely seduces her in a semi-rape, in a manner that assumes only animal lust on her part. The violence only increases from there. Returning and finding out what happened, Silas threatens to whip her. She flees, and he murders the salesman. The story ends with his death in a hail of bullets and fire.

In the first three stories, "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside" and "Long Black Song" - which mainly deal with individuals and single families - violence has an inexorable, unstoppable quality. It is present in all black-white interactions, usually latent but easily manifested. Once manifested, as the three stories described above show, initial violence inevitably spawns retribution, and there is no room in between for fact-finding or fair hearing. Knowing themselves already guilty, in fact born guilty, the black men Wright depicts (as well as Sarah) must either flee their homes and families or, like Silas, bring about a suicidal, apocalyptic confrontation. This last case, where Silas battles to the death from inside his burning home, sketches in miniature how a system that substitutes violence for law ultimately plays out in full-on race war, one that will most likely annihilate the blacks involved. This is the truth Wright's mother understood and beat into him: that the Jim Crow system offered blacks only submissive survival or death.

In the final two stories, "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star," the violence portrayed becomes more complex, taking on a political dimension. Instead of individual cases, these tales deal with collective action, which presents a thornier problem to the

whites, who seek to maintain dominance without provoking open rebellion. Thus the white enforcers see more value in breaking Pastor Dan Taylor by forcing him to pray under the whip than in killing him. By cowing him, the leader, they hope to cow his congregation and limit its urge to march in protest. Similarly, the sheriff holds off from killing Sue because she has valuable information about a communist cell. Once she loses this value, proving she would sooner commit murder than name names and that she will sacrifice her son as well, the sheriff readily guns her down.

Over *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright conducts a tour of violence against blacks in the South. The tour ranges from cases where the violence occurs almost automatically, without consideration, to cases where violence is applied more selectively, with much more strategic or political thought. The violence Wright depicts is disturbing, realistic and detailed, but it is not included simply to appall the reader. Rather, each instance offers a detailed study of how one group constantly reestablishes its power through the use of force, not law. If there is any law in the world of these stories, it has already found all black people guilty as charged and then departed with the door left open to force.

As the final result of this violence, words can no longer be true. Without any law, words mean only what dominating force wants them to mean. Thus Wright in "The Ethics of Jim Crow" can stand accused of calling his white coworker "Pease" instead of the required "Mr. Pease," with the added misfortune that he cannot contradict his accuser without calling him a liar. Since both positive and negative replies from Wright will result in a beating, the lie achieves equal value to the truth. In this manner, violence effectively demolishes the meaning of language.

Ownership of Land

One of the original sins of reconstruction following the Civil War was denying de facto the right of southern blacks to own land. An initial offer of forty acres and a mule to any freed slave soon proved hollow, as the federal government caved to southern white political pressures. This allowed southern whites to control black ownership of land. Blacks could own land but usually only the poorer quality parcels. Most blacks were simply stuck sharecropping, farming a white person's land for a portion of the harvest. This lack of formal ownership by many blacks left them in a vulnerable position, often economically dependent on whites, approximating slavery.

Characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* long for ownership of the land. This longing takes several forms. Wright links his own first experience of racial inequality to his comparing his yard - barren except for cinders from the nearby railroad - with the yards of white people. In his mind, the well tended yards and clipped hedges of the whites "grew into an overreaching symbol of fear." Big Boy and his friends want to go swimming. To do so, they must trespass on old man Harvey's land, and they end up paying a dire price. Stuck in the flood in "Down by the Riverside," Mann does not care about owning land. He only wants to bring his family to dry ground amidst rising waters. He lacks the economic means to do this and must use a stolen boat. Again, the results are grim, and the desire to attain land legally - at least safe ground - is frustrated.

Silas does own land and yet finds this ownership corrupted when he returns home from selling his crops. By seducing Silas' wife in his absence, even in Silas' marital bed, the white Victrola salesman stakes a claim of ownership in the most intimate possible way, going to the center of what Silas has labored for ten years to build and taking it from him. As Silas complains about white people, "There ain nothin in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!"

The link between women and land in "Long Black Song" bears a closer look. Wright uses strongly lyrical language to tie Sarah to the land, melding her mood to its qualities, her sadness to the afterglow that "lingered, red, dying, and tenderly sad" on the fields and her happiness to the "long gladness of green cornfields in summer." For Silas, this link between Sarah and the land means that, if a white man can walk up and possess his wife, so too can whites casually void his land ownership.

Pastor Taylor of "Fire and Cloud" expresses the sense of disinheritance most directly and speaks of it to his congregation and to God. He accuses the whites of having "put the lans of the worl in their pockets," and keeping out others with fences. Taylor's complaint rises beyond that of Silas to a religious plea. Wright links this plea with Taylor's belief that his people are part of a Biblical exodus out of slavery and are bound for a promised land. Indeed, the "fire" and "cloud" of the title refers to the Hebrew experience leaving Egypt and passing through the wilderness, where God led his people with a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. The promised land black people desire in "Fire and Cloud" is both literal, a land they can work and live by, and a figurative land, a state of being in which God's justice reigns supreme and replaces the oppressive white system.

Uncle Tom's Children explores another type of land ownership as well. While most characters legally lack title to the ground they live upon, they have an intimate knowledge of this land that others lack. This knowledge enables them to use the land to their advantage and amounts to informal ownership. For example, Big Boy knows where to hide when he must escape, and he effectively avoids the white mob by using the kilns he built with his friends. In an even more striking instance, Sue knows the land around her well enough that she is confident she can intercept the informer Booker by taking a shortcut, even in the dead of night and the pouring rain. Only this knowledge allows an old woman to move faster than a spry younger man. If the white people refuse to formally recognize Sue's ownership of the land around her, her final actions in "Bright and Morning Star" demonstrate it in the most starkly practical way possible.

Black characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* find themselves constantly frustrated in their pursuit of land ownership. Yet as they are mostly blocked from owning the land as property, going unrecognized by the white state, they nonetheless stake what claims they can. They create a spiritual land, imagining it from prayers and Bible verses, as well as deriving ownership of the physical land simply from highly practical, day-to-day living, an ownership nearly complete, unpossessed in name only.

Communism/Christianity and Black Struggle

Communist-driven social action and Christian religion occupy an uneasy, shifting space within Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. The two paradigms, taken at the doctrinal level, must exist one opposed to another, since Marx described all religion as "the opiate of the people," and Jesus taught that all salvation must be through himself alone. However, on a practical level, as described in *Uncle Tom's Children* - particularly the final two tales - communism and Christianity often work together, with aspects of each reinforcing the other.

The first four episodes, comprised of Wright's nonfiction framing essay and the first three fictional episodes, do not explicitly lay out communist and Christian narratives as the last two stories do. Instead, these initial episodes state the problems in terms understandable in either system.

"The Ethics of Jim Crow" is an exception; Wright, speaking in his "autobiographical sketch," clearly sees the problem rooted in social inequality derived from an economic system. Essentially a list of injustices perpetrated by a ruling class on an underclass, the essay hardly mentions God or religion. It only hints at revolution, concluding with Wright's friend's prediction that, without oppressive structures in place, "there wouldn't be nothing but uproar" as the beginnings of social revolution. While not a major "communist" or "Christian" statement on its own, Wright's personal essay plays an important part, vouching for his ability to relate a more general southern black experience in the fiction that follows.

Read from a Christian perspective, "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside" and "Long Black Song" all take place in a world and among a people crying out for deliverance by God. All three stories feature a point of reaching out: Big Boy realizing in the kiln that his life is in God's hands, Brother Murray sending Mann on his ill-fated boat journey in the flood with a long prayer and Silas crying before God that he doesn't want to be filled with murderous rage. The stories do not necessarily suggest God hears and responds to these prayers, at least not on any case-by-case basis. However, taken together, the individual plights in these three stories make up a litany of injustices similar what one might find in the Old Testament, like the books of the Hebrew prophets detailing ills of their time and imploring God to restore justice and righteousness to society.

Read from a communist perspective, the three initial fictions pose their characters' problems as stemming from their status as members of an underclass. Under this reading, it is notable that Big Boy and Mann's families both work at the bottom of the sharecropping economy. This status isolates them from the fruits of their labor, leaving them mostly without the wealth they produce and the power and self-sufficiency that goes with it. Perhaps if their families had greater economic sway in the larger community, they could have mediated the misfortunes that forced Big Boy and Mann to flee. In a communist reading, blackness serves as a convenient excuse used by the

white ruling class to maintain power, and the casual murder of blacks by whites, or acts like the torching of Big Boy's parents' shack, sow the fear that preserves this order.

Silas does have land, has worked hard to increase his holdings and seems on the point of breaking free from the exploitative system. However, when he discovers that the white salesman has slept with his wife, he realizes that his freedom is an illusion and that he will always remain a part of the exploited class. The whites can always come and possess what he thinks is his, and his land, he realizes, is similarly subject to their whims. One should also note how the salesman accomplished his brutish seduction: through a useless consumerist trinket, a combination clock-gramophone.

Only in "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star" do the communist and Christian themes move from the implied to the applied. Both stories blur the lines between the two systems, with aspects of one system flowing easily into those of the other. For example, Pastor Taylor hopes to find the Biblical symbols of the fire and cloud, the signs used by God to lead the Hebrews to Israel. Over the course of the story, Taylor discovers that, in the 1930s American South, the fire is the sting of the oppressor's whip and the cloud the multiracial assembly of communist demonstration. The text very clearly states these equivalencies; Wright obviously does not intend to bury them in any subtext.

In the beginning of "Bright and Morning Star," Sue has communism as her guiding light. She has, through her son Johnny Boy's urging, changed her beliefs away from religion and towards class struggle. Where she used to see her own suffering and hard work as emblematic of what Jesus suffered, as the story opens she envisions her travails in terms of what poor blacks and whites suffer as an exploited underclass. Again, the story blurs communism into Christian themes. Sue doubts her loss of faith and cannot stop herself from thinking in terms of religion as the story approaches its climax. Jesus, after all, is the "bright and morning star" in the hymn she remembers, and she resembles Mary at Jesus' tomb in going out with a sheet to retrieve her son's body. Yet, in a figure that neatly sums up how the story "bundles" communism and Christianity, the sheet hides a gun that she will use to save the party. This blurred symbolism continues when she finds Johnny-Boy alive and yet gives him up to die a horrible death similar to the Crucifixion. She then shoots Booker through the head in a distinctly un-Christian fashion and is shot in turn.

The play between communism and Christianity goes unresolved at the end of "Bright and Morning Star." Instead, Wright opts for the ambiguity of the story's final phrase, "the dead that never dies." Does he mean the resurrection, the death of the individual for the communist collective or both? Wright most likely did not intend to neatly resolve the communist and Christian themes in *Uncle Tom's Children* in favor of one or the other system. While doctrine sets the two at odds, in the experience of oppressed blacks as Wright depicts it, their similarities rise above their differences.

Style

Point of View

Except for "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," *Uncle Tom's Children* is told in the third person. Wright does not violate any unified sense of perspective by relating "The Ethics of Jim Crow" in the first person. This first episode must stand apart, as it functions as a crucial statement of the author's own experience, which the author possesses by using the first person voice.

Generally, using the third person creates a narrative told dispassionately, like a piece of journalism. The facts can speak for themselves, without interference from any distinct narrator's agenda. This leaves the reader free to come to conclusions on the evidence presented, as no reason exists to doubt the narrator's reliability. Thus one reads about crimes committed - Big Boy killing the white man Jim, for example - and forms a judgment on what happened as a neutral observer. This detached perspective allows Wright to plumb larger forces at work, beyond the concerns of individual characters.

While the third person narrator in *Uncle Tom's Children* is omniscient, it does not distance itself from individual characters entirely. The narrator often relates the interior monologues in the minds of black characters at crucial point in the story. For example, Sue's dilemmas in "Bright and Morning Star," such as her inner conflict between Christianity and communism, or her mistrust of many white Party activists, or her confrontation with the sheriff, are related partially through her inner voice. The reader hears her thoughts and not those of other characters. Similar forays into character's minds occur in all five fictional episodes. While third person narratives, this selective interior exploration adds a psychological dimension to the work.

One final dimension concerning point of view merits discussion. There is a reoccurring situation in several stories where the main character must look on helplessly as a brutally violent scene takes place. Big Boy must watch his friend Bobo torn and burned by the lynch mob. Sarah must watch Silas die in a gunfight. Sue must watch the sheriff and his men torture her son to near death and then kill him. In each case, the main character is paralyzed, either in hiding or otherwise unable to act. This narrative setup recreates one of the most wrenching aspects of the Jim Crow black experience Wright describes, having to look on and do nothing as fellow blacks are beaten, mistreated or even killed. Put in such situations, certain characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* take on the role of "third persons," paralleling the reader's position as observer of this third person narrative. These disturbing instances challenge the reader to action. After all, if one wishes Big Boy could stop the lynching going on before him, one might ask if similar atrocities were going on unstopped in real life.

Setting

The setting for *Uncle Tom's Children* is, of course, the American South under Jim Crow. The presence of cars, telephones and airports indicates that the stories take place in the present day for Wright, who wrote them in the 1930s. However, the most notable aspect of the setting is its vagueness, at least in the five fictional episodes.

Rarely does a detail give away a location more specific than just the South. "Bright and Morning Star" offers an exception in the sweeping airplane beacon in "far off Memphis." Even this does not exactly create a precise setting for the story, at least in the terms of an official map. "Down by the Riverside" presents a similarly ambiguous location. If one assumes the only river that could create such a flood as the one in the story is the Mississippi, then one can situate the story only as somewhere along the Mississippi.

The other stories are even more ambiguous as to where they occur. Place names are almost entirely absent from dialogue or narrative description. The towns in the stories are usually just "town." The country is described in general, elemental language with attention paid to color, terrain, dustiness or associations with individual characters, and not the land's county or state name or any local names beyond the highly colloquial.

When Wright chooses ambiguity in his story settings, Wright places them everywhere and nowhere. The injustices and oppression he describes do not stem from any local factors, only from a generalized situation across the American South. In other words, keeping locations vague drives home that the stories could happen anywhere a system like Jim Crow exists. Black people can expect the treatment described wherever they go in the South. Indeed, the state of the black characters does not change from story to story, where, while the locations are not explicitly different, the locations also are not linked in any way. Wright's own experience as he describes it confirms this universality of oppression. He does list a variety of different places as settings for his various vignettes in "The Ethics of Jim Crow," however the discrimination and brutality he found in each location left one place barely distinguishable from another.

Language and Meaning

American writers and cultural figures have concerned themselves with what black speech is and how to represent it from the earliest American literature to such contemporary cases as the Ebonix movement or Bill Cosby's objections to it. With *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright makes a definite and interesting decision in depicting how black people talk. He chooses to represent his characters' speech and internal thoughts as phonetic, not "proper" English. On the one hand, this seems to split language into a hierarchy, with a high language, correctly spelled out on the page, and a low language, incorrectly spelled, that must be sounded out by the reader. On the other, this choice allows for the possibility that black English is a distinct form of the language and that understanding its meaning requires understanding it as a spoken language.

Wright adds an interesting twist to this opposition by giving the speech of white characters a similar phonetic treatment. *Uncle Tom's Children* does not portray the inner thoughts of its white characters as it does those of its black characters. However, if the text did, the white thoughts would most likely be represented as phonetic, just as their speech is.

Some white characters, such as the general in "Down by the Riverside," do speak "correct" English, as indicated by proper spelling in the text. However, a close examination of who speaks correctly and who speaks incorrectly reveals the determining factor to be class, not race. In following this rule, Wright bases his depiction of spoken and thought language more closely on the actual South, where individuals of similar economic status and educational level would likely have sounded indistinguishable from one another, regardless of race. This suggests that Wright, unlike the many writers who preceded him and used speech style as a cue for race, sees the way people talk as coming mainly from economic circumstances. This outlook is compatible with the many communist themes of class struggle explored in the text.

Structure

Introduced by a nonfiction essay, the body of *Uncle Tom's Children* consists of five fictional episodes of roughly the same length. Each episode centers on a main character as he or she deals with a misfortune or fatally serious problem arising out of the unfair Jim Crow social structure. Each episode takes place in the narrative present, referring to the past only for background information. The action in each story plays out over a twelve to twenty-four hour period.

Setting each story within a twenty-four hour period gives the tales additional meaning. The action of Greek tragedies generally takes place over a single day, in what the philosopher Aristotle observed as the unity of time. Wright's stories follow this unity as well as the Aristotelian unity of action, which demands that a tragedy's action be self-contained, with a beginning and a resolution. In a day, Big Boy kills the white man in self-defense and flees. Even less time elapses as Sue must send her son Johnny-Boy out to save the party members and then must do so herself. The unity of place is also observed, and so one can read these stories as distinct tragedies following the classical unities. One could also read the twenty-four hour time framework as giving the stories an immediate, journalistic style, making them dispatches of recent events occurring in a land foreign to the likely readers of *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Having five stories, roughly equal in length, with similar characters and similar themes, similar settings and similar actions, allows Wright to develop his work by examining these similarities over different sets of circumstances. Notably, the stories grow more complex and seem to build on one another, with progressively older characters. Big Boy is at most a young man, likely a child, certainly no older than eighteen. Mann is the head of a young family. Silas is an older man, probably in his early thirties. Pastor Taylor has a full-grown son. Sue has two full-grown sons, and she is definitely an old woman. The action and thematic discussion also become more complex with each story. "Big

Boy Leaves Home" merely describes the killing and subsequent flight. Big Boy's reactions to his circumstances are simple fear, regret and the desire for revenge. By the end of the book, in "Bright and Morning Star," Sue must deal with a wide variety of characters, sometimes with questionable motives (such as Booker), and she places her experience in a complex communist worldview derived from a highly developed religious outlook. Where Big Boy arouses sympathy as an unfortunate individual crushed beneath an unfair system, Sue actively deals with all the major themes Wright explores, and her story serves to sum them up.

Quotes

"I was never to throw cinders any more. I was never to fight any more wars. I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle." "The Ethics of Jim Crow," I, pg. 2

"Even today when I think of white folks, the hard, sharp outlines of white houses surrounded by trees, lawns, and hedges are present somewhere in the background of my mind. Throughout the years they grew into an overreaching symbol of fear." "The Ethics of Jim Crow," I, pg. 3

"If I had said: No, sir, Mr. Pease, I never called you Pease, I would have been automatically calling Morrie a liar. And if I had said: Yes, sir, Mr. Pease, I called you Pease, I would have been pleading guilty to having uttered the worst insult that a Negro can utter to a southern white man. I stood hesitating, trying to frame a neutral reply." "The Ethics of Jim Crow," I, pg. 6

"They closed in; but, by Gawd, he had done his part, hadnt he? N the newspapersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED! Er mabbe theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little. That wouldnt be so bad, would it?" "Big Boy Leaves Home," IV, pg. 50

"'LES GIT SOURVINEERS!' "He saw the mob close in around the fire. Their faces were hard and sharp in the light of the flames. More men and women were coming over the hill. The long dark spot was smudged out. "'Everbody git back!' "'Look! Hes gotta finger!' " 'C MON! GIT THE GALS BACK FROM THE FIRE!'" "Big Boy Leaves Home," IV, pg. 56

"The black faces he passed were blurred and merged one into the other. And he heard tense talk, whispers. For a split second he was there among those blunt and hazy black faces looking silently and fearfully at the white folks take some poor black man away. Why don they hep me? Yet he knew they would not and could not help him, even as he in times past had not helped other black men being taken by the white folks to their death...Then he was back among the soldiers again, feeling the sharp prod of the muzzle on his backbone." "Down by the Riverside," VI, pg. 117

"Yes, killing of white men by black men and killing of black men by white men went on in spite of the hop of white bright days and the desire of dark black nights and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer and the deep dream of sleeping grey skies in winter. And when killing started it went on, like a red river flowing. Oh, she felt sorry for Silas! Silas...He was following that long river of blood." "Long Black Song," IV, pg. 153

"'The white folks say we cant raise nothin on Yo earth! They done put the lans of the worl in their pockets! They done fenced em off n nailed em down! Theys a-tryin t take Yo place, Lawd!' "*speak t em lawd* "'yuh put us in this worl n said we could live in it! Yuh said this worl wuz Yo own! Now show us the sign like Yuh showed Saul! Show us the

sign n well ack! We ast this in the name of Yo son Jesus who died tha we might live! Amen!'" "Fire and Cloud," III pg. 168

"'Wes all sick, son. Wes gotta think erbout the people, night n day, think erbout em so hard tha our po selves is forgotten...Whut they suffer is whut Ah suffered las night when they whipped me. Wes gotta keep the people wid us.'" "Fire and Cloud," X, pg. 211

"Taylor felt himself moving between the silent lines of blue-coated white men, moving with a sea of placards and banners, moving under the sun like a pregnant cloud." "Fire and Cloud," XIII, pg. 219

"'*Freedom belongs to the strong!*'" "Fire and Cloud," XIII, pg. 220

"Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word." "Bright and Morning Star," I, pg. 224

"The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went." "Bright and Morning Star," I, pg. 225

"And then it was, while standing there feeling warm blood seeping down her throat, that she gave up Johnny-Boy, gave him up to the white folks. She gave him up because they had come tramping into her heart demanding him, thinking they could get him by beating her, thinking they could scare her into making her tell where he was. She gave him up because she wanted them to know that they could not get what they wanted by bluffing and killing." "Bright and Morning Star," III, pg. 240

"Focused and pointed she was, buried in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength; and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies." "Bright and Morning Star," VI, pg. 263

Topics for Discussion

How is the flood in "Down by the Riverside" a liberating experience for Mann? How is it an oppressive experience? What does this say about the difference between manmade laws and the laws of nature? How does Mann fare within each set of laws?

Characters such as Big Boy, Silas, Mann and others must try to persevere in a nasty, brutish world that seems set against them. Where do they draw the strength that keeps them going?

Uncle Tom's Cabin is the title of a famous novel written before the Civil War that harshly criticizes the South and slavery. What might Wright be saying by calling his work *Uncle Tom's Children*? Has the situation of his characters changed much from slavery?

With particular attention paid to "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star," describe Wright's treatment of religion versus communism. In what ways are the two belief systems opposed in Wright's text, and in what ways do they reinforce each other? Do the two ever get confused?

Uncle Tom's Children is striking for its light and dark imagery. Many important sections take place in pitch darkness, at the dead of night, while light and illumination also play crucial roles in all the stories. Examine Wright's use of light and dark imagery, paying special attention to the metaphorical meaning or meanings this imagery creates.

Aside from the initial, nonfiction essay, *Uncle Tom's Children* is told in a third person voice that tells the story from both outside and inside the characters, sometimes relating their thoughts and sometimes not. What effects does this narrative voice have on the storytelling? Discuss how point of view functions, when it's interior, when it's exterior and when it's blurred, to create a narrative.

Discuss free choice in the five fictional episodes of *Uncle Tom's Children*. Can the characters make choices, or are they powerless to determine their own fates? How does Wright depict fate and choice over the course of the work?

Discuss *Uncle Tom's Children* as a political manifesto, that is, as a document charting a course of action for a group of people. Assuming this is the case, what is the action Wright recommends? What techniques does he use as a polemicist? How does he portray the struggle, create sympathy in the reader and argue for action?

How do the forms of resistance against white oppression change over the course of the five fictional episodes? Is Wright offering a model for how blacks in the South should resist oppression? If so, what is it? If not, why not?

The five fictional stories of *Uncle Tom's Children* notably use a wide variety of songs. What is the role of music and song in these stories? How do they reflect on the characters' desires, dilemmas and pasts? Do they touch on larger themes?

How does Wright describe the natural environment of *Uncle Tom's Children*? How does he describe land, the weather and natural events? Is his vagueness regarding place names important? Does his depiction of landscape have any greater meaning, beyond just being background scenery?

Assume that Wright intended *Uncle Tom's Children* as a unified work in six parts, not simply a collection of freestanding pieces. Looking first at the five fictional episodes, what is the larger story they tell? How does it progress from one episode to another? What is the effect of having a nonfiction introduction?

How "realist" is *Uncle Tom's Children*? Discuss "real" elements that might correspond with actual, historical and social experience, such as journalistic details and other references. Are there any parts of the book that seem unrealistic? If so, what are they, and why might they be there?

Literary Precedents

As Wright recounts in Black Boy (1945), literary naturalists such as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis formed his earliest reading and provided the aspiring writer with models: "All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novels, and I could not read enough of them." After moving to Chicago, Wright was also influenced by the proletarian literature published alongside his poetry in leftist literary magazines. Meanwhile, the American public was being prepared for less romantic and more pragmatic explorations of American society and the human condition by the popular social novels of John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck.

Related Titles

Bigger Thomas of Native Son can be read as a continuation of the character Big Boy, a connection that is implied by their names. In this sense, Native Son extends the process of cruel discovery that begins in "Big Boy Leaves Home," and "Big Boy Leaves Home" provides sociological documentation for a character like Bigger.

Wright's autobiographical Black Boy recounts the first seventeen years of his life and provides a parallel to the sort of experiences dramatized in Uncle Tom's Children. As in "Big Boy Leaves Home," Wright's own life included violent confrontations, racist hatred, and an escape from the South.

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