Black Boy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright grew up in Mississippi and Tennessee, and was raised mostly by an aunt and grandmother. Having performed extremely well academically until he was forced to drop out of high school and work to support his family, Richard Wright moved in 1927 to Chicago—a city that would allow Wright to develop as a writer and thinker. Wright saw his first short story published when he was sixteen years old. In Chicago, Wright joined, for a time, the Communist Party. After writing a first and only marginally successful novel entitled *Lawd Today*, he moved to New York City in 1937 and published the short-story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and the novel *Native Son* (1940), which launched his career and national profile. Wright's *Black Boy*, a somewhat fictionalized tale of his young life, was released in 1945, and also became famous. Wright moved to Paris in 1946, and lived there primarily until his death in 1960. Wright was a stated inspiration for other African-American writers of the time, including Ralph Ellison (author of *Invisible Man*) and James Baldwin, who would go on to critique Wright's work severely, but always with the acknowledgment of its influence on his own.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Black Boy's events take place during a period between the Civil War (and Reconstruction) and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. This period in the American South was dominated by a system of racial suppression and separation known, collectively and colloquially, as the "Jim Crow laws." Thus Richard's African-American heritage is the determinant of a great many aspects of his young life: his education (at poorly-funded schools which served only black students); his religion; his employment opportunities; and his ability to vote and participate in local politics. Jim Crow laws were complex and varied from state to state, but typically included provisions for the separation of races in public places and in some privately-owned businesses. African Americans were sent to different hospitals, made to use different entrances and water fountains, and forced to sit in the back of public buses. The Jim Crow laws represented a continuation of racist policies stemming ultimately from the institution of slavery in the South, and from the plantation system that forced African Americans to labor long hours in the fields as part of the region's primarily agricultural economy. The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and other federal political decisions (including the desegregation of public schools in the 1950s) helped to mend some of the policies, but inequality and de facto segregation in certain parts of the country have not disappeared, even in the 21st century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wright's *Black Boy* is ostensibly a work of non-fiction, and although it seems likely that Wright took certain liberties in "reconstructing" the events of his childhood, the book is typically read as being a more or less accurate encapsulation of the difficulties of Wright's young life. Narratives of African-American experience in the United States have a long history: most famous among them are *Twelve Years a Slave*, by Solomon Northup, and *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*. In the former case, Northup was a prosperous Northern musician who was kidnapped during a trip to Washington, D.C. and forced into slavery. In the latter, Frederick Douglass rose from conditions of servitude to become an accomplished man of letters and political figure in the second half of the 19th century. Of course, Wright was not born a slave, but the conditions of his life were characterized by racial cruelty, white violence, and white-dominated economic and political systems. Wright's Grandpa, too, was a soldier in the Civil War; thus the characters of *Black Boy* are not so far removed from the country's slave history, and indeed are living in a post-Civil War, pre-Civil Rights Act South that has yet to come to terms with its overwhelming racial inequalities. Other of the great novels of the 20th century written by African-American writers—including *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *Invisible Man*, by James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, respectively—include aspects of autobiographical writing and memoir as a means of investigating the nature of black-white relations in the United States. Wright's own *Native Son* provides, in the form of a fiction, a complex narrative of violence, power, politics, and racial struggle, set against the backdrop of a supposedly "freer," but still prejudiced, Chicago.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*
- **When Written:** 1943
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1945
- **Literary Period:** 20th-century African-American novel, American memoir
- **Genre:** Memoir, coming-of-age story
- **Setting:** Primarily Jackson, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, from 1908 till the 1920s; then Chicago, IL
- **Climax:** Richard finally decides to leave Memphis and start a new life in Chicago
- **Antagonist:** Granny; Pease and Reynolds

- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

"Bildungsroman." Although *Black Boy* is a memoir, it could also be classified as a "coming of age" story. The German term for this type of narrative is "Bildungsroman," or, literally, a "novel of education." In *Black Boy*, especially, Richard's personal education in the classics of world literature helps spur his journey to the North. (See, among other publications, the scholarly work *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*, by Geta LeSeur.)

Job. The epigram in some editions of the novel reads: "They meet with darkness in the daytime / and they grope at noonday as in the night." This is taken from the Book of Job, a notable book of the Hebrew Bible in which the main character suffers a series of trials and losses at the hands of God to determine if he is a worthy person and a true believer in divine power.

PLOT SUMMARY

The memoir begins in 1912 in rural Mississippi. Richard Wright, the author and main character, lives with his brother, mother, and father. Richard nearly burns down their house one day, at the age of four, out of boredom. His mother and father beat him mercilessly with a **switch**. Soon after, they relocate to Memphis, where Richard's father abandons the family. Richard's mother works in white kitchens to support Richard and his brother, but she cannot make enough money, and both boys are sent to an orphanage in Memphis, run by a kind woman named Miss Simon. Though Miss Simon takes a liking to Richard, Richard hates life in the orphanage. He will not accept money from his father to stave off his immense hunger.

Richard's mother eventually moves the boys back and forth between her mother's (Granny's) house, in Jackson, Mississippi, and her sister Maggie's house in Arkansas. Maggie's husband Hoskins, a prosperous tavern owner, is lynched by whites while Richard's family lives with them. Later, Richard's mother succumbs to a stroke and nearly dies. Richard settles into life with Granny in Jackson, and his brother is sent to live with Maggie in Detroit. Richard resents Granny's overbearing methods of parenting and her insistence on Christian dogma, and begins his schooling in Jackson. He reads as many **books** as he can afford. He also begins writing stories, which baffle his classmates and family members, including Addie, his aunt and schoolteacher.

Richard works a series of odd jobs in the summer and before school, to buy more food and books. Although his schooling has been frequently interrupted, he does well in 6th through 9th grades, and is named the valedictorian of his 9th-grade class. The principal gives him a speech to read before a mixed black and white audience. Richard believes he ought to deliver his own speech, however, and he does so, enraging the principal and costing himself a teaching job in the Jackson schools. By age seventeen, Richard resolves to move to the North to escape Southern racism.

Richard has trouble submitting to white authority in the workplace, but his friend Griggs, a schoolmate, convinces Richard that he must be theatrically polite to white people if he wants to keep a job. Griggs recommends Richard for an assistant position at an optometry shop in Jackson, run by a benevolent northerner named Crane, but Richard is chased out of the job after being intimidated and threatened by Pease and Reynolds, two of Crane's racist white assistants. Richard then works in a hotel—despite the fear that white patrons might harm him, if they believe he is consorting with the white prostitutes who use the hotel as a brothel—and later as a ticket-taker at a movie theater. At the latter, he colludes with two other black employees to defraud the owner of ticket sales, thus earning enough money to leave Jackson in the night and move to Memphis.

There, Richard rents a room with Mrs. Moss, whose daughter, Bess, wants to marry Richard. Richard demurs and takes a new job at another optometry shop, where he befriends other black men who work in the building, including Shorty, an elevator operator. Richard saves money in Memphis and begins reading a great deal, after securing a library card from a sympathetic white man named Falk. Richard's mother, brother, and Aunt Maggie move back to Memphis to be with him, and they decide to make a clean break for Chicago together. Wright ends Part One by stating that he will always keep a part of the South with him. He hopes that he may live a freer and more rewarding life in the North.

Part Two takes up immediately afterward. Richard and his Aunt Maggie live with their Aunt Cleo, and Richard's mother and brother join them later. Richard works many jobs. He is a porter at a deli, run by the Hoffmans, but he cannot escape his ideas of racial structure, which are informed by the Jim Crow South. For example, Richard believes the Hoffmans will not allow him leave from work to take the Postal Service exam. Richard thus lies to Mr. Hoffman when he does sit for the test, saying his mother has died in Memphis. Hoffman doesn't believe Richard, and Richard doesn't admit to his lie. He leaves the deli, ashamed, and finds a job washing dishes. He's eventually called to a temporary position at the Postal Service, but is let go because he can't meet the Office's minimum 125-pound weight.

The Great Depression hits, limiting Richard's employment opportunities. He collects insurance policies among black families on the South Side, and has an affair with one woman who is a policyholder. Although Wright is fascinated by black life in Chicago, he is also confused by it; many black people, like this unnamed woman, think Wright talks like an "intellectual." Eventually, Wright must go to the relief office to secure food

for his family.

This office places Richard in the animal lab of a fancy, white-dominated hospital. Richard works with three other black men: Bill, Brand, and Cooke. Doctors at the hospital largely ignore black laborers, and assume they don't understand anything about medicine or science. One doctor plays a prank on Richard. When Brand and Cooke get into a violent fight, they knock the animals out of their cages, and the four men must put animals back without knowing the experiments to which they belong. Although Richard fears they'll be fired for this, no doctor is ever the wiser.

Richard cycles in and out of the Postal Service as work becomes available. There, he meets white workers, mostly Irish and Jewish, who are members of the Communist Party. They encourage Richard to attend meetings of the John Reed Club, a Communist literary organization. Richard does, and finds that his poems and stories are accepted for publication by the Club's journals. Club-members elect him their leader, though Richard has been active only for two months. Richard gets a crash-course in Communist politics, including frequent intra-party fights. Wright officially becomes a member of the Party, but insists that the Club's writings should be creative and imaginative, not propaganda.

This attitude puts Richard at odds with Party leaders like Buddy Nealson and Ed Green, who want Reed Club writers to toe the Party line. Richard becomes more and more disillusioned with Party work. He interviews Ross, a fellow black Communist, for a series of biographical sketches. The Party is skeptical of this work, even as Wright turns these sketches into stories and publishes them. Discord between him and the Party grows, and Richard eventually resigns membership, though he does not renounce the political ideal of Communism.

The relief office shuffles Richard between jobs at the Boys' Club on the South Side, then the Federal Negro Theater. Richard develops a friendship with DeSheim, the white director of the Theater, who champions experimental work. The black actors do not like this work, though and accuse Richard of being an "Uncle Tom" for sympathizing with DeSheim over them. Richard is moved to the Federal Writers' Program, where Communists, his former Party comrades, do not speak to him. Richard attends a show trial, in which Ross, his former friend, "confesses" to crimes against the Party and begs forgiveness. Richard realizes that the Party is a group much like the Christian church of his Southern youth.

At a May Day parade, Richard marches with a mixed group of Communists, only to be kicked out by some still angry at his disavowal of the Party. At the close of Part Two, Richard returns to his small apartment, where he promises himself to build a literary career as an individual—but he will carry with him all he's learned about race relations and American society, and his writing will always be attuned to the possibility of human unity.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Richard Wright – The memoir's protagonist, author, and narrator, Richard Wright is born into poverty in rural Mississippi, then shuttles between Jackson, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Memphis as a young man, and does all he can to educate himself and earn enough money to leave the South and move to Chicago. Wright's childhood is filled with violence (beatings with the **switch**, often leveled by his own family), fear of white people's prejudice, and teenage battles with his mother, his Granny, and various aunts and uncles. Meanwhile, Wright is more moved by stories and literature than his grandmother's religion, and dedicates himself to getting educated. He begins reading a great number of **books**, even as he is forced to drop out of high school to help support his family. Wright's reading and his personal determination enable him to move to Chicago at the end of the memoir, where he joins the Communist Party. Wright ultimately finds that he too much of an individualist to deal with the Party, however, and he leaves it, though he still appreciates its ideals. As the memoir ends, he rededicates himself to focusing on his writing.

Wright's mother – Wright's mother works hard to support Richard and his brother from a young age, but after her husband leaves the family, she must take on additional work in the kitchens of white families. Wright's mother later succumbs to a series of strokes and is ill for much of Wright's young life. At the end of the memoir, however, Wright's mother has built up enough strength to be able to move North, to Chicago, with Wright, his brother, and Aunt Maggie.

Wright's brother – Though never named, Wright's brother is Wright's companion in childhood; he is then raised, partially, by Aunt Maggie in Detroi when Wright's mother becomes ill. Wright and his brother grow apart during their teenage years, but are reunited in Memphis, and the two of them, along with their mother and Maggie, move to Chicago at the memoir's end.

Granny – A stern religious practitioner, Wright's grandmother lives in Jackson, Mississippi with Grandpa, and runs a household that includes Wright for a great many years. Granny tries desperately to get Wright to believe in God, but it "doesn't take." She is often harsh with Wright, and never gives up the belief that Wright's interest in **books** represents "the devil's work."

Grandpa – A Civil War veteran for the Union, Wright's grandfather is denied his pension by a clerical mistake that misspelled his name, and which he believes was not in fact a mistake but was instead racially motivated. Having helped to achieve black freedom from slavery as a soldier, Grandpa's experience serves as a kind of symbol of the way that black people were exploited and thwarted immediately upon the attainment of their independence. Grandpa is mostly absent,

sick in bed, during Wright's youth, but Wright pays his respects to Grandpa at his funeral, and wonders whether Grandpa's life wasn't ruined by the impossible quest to receive his pension from a racist and impersonal federal government.

Aunt Addie – Granny's youngest daughter, and Wright's mother's sister. Addie is also sternly religious, and runs the Christian school that Wright attends in Jackson. Addie attempts to discipline Wright early in the memoir for dropping walnut shells in class, but Wright is innocent and maintains his innocence, ultimately threatening Addie. Addie then spends much of the rest of the memoir ignoring Wright and considering him a "plague."

Aunt Maggie – Another of Richard's mother's sisters, Maggie early in the book lives in comfort in Arkansas with her husband Uncle Hoskins, a successful owner of a bar. This comfort is shattered when Hoskins is killed by whites angry at his success, and the law does nothing to respond. Later, Maggie lives in Detroit with her boyfriend named Matthews, who has escaped the South for suspicious reasons. Maggie returns to meet Richard in Memphis at the close of the memoir, and travels with him North to Chicago.

Uncle Hoskins – The husband of Maggie, who lives with her in Arkansas where he is a prosperous bar owner. For a while Richard, his mother, and his brother live with Maggie and Hoskins, and it is there that Richard experiences true stability and first realizes that it is possible to not always be hungry. However, Hoskins is killed by whites who covet his business, and that sense of stability is destroyed.

Uncle Tom – Another stern disciplinarian, and Grandma and Grandpa's oldest son, Uncle Tom lives on the outskirts of Jackson and later moves into Granny's house. Tom attempts to discipline Wright and beat him with the **switch**, but Wright defends himself with a razor, saying that Tom has no say in his upbringing. Tom spends the rest of the memoir calling Wright violent and deranged.

Bess – A kind and relatively uneducated girl, the daughter of Mrs. Moss. Bess falls quickly in love with Wright, but when Wright suggests that they get to know one another before getting engaged, Bess becomes angry. Bess and Mrs. Moss later apologize to Wright and ask him to continue living peacefully under their roof.

Mr. Crane – An optometrist from Illinois who lives in Jackson, Crane gives Wright a job in his shop, and says Wright will get a chance to learn the trade. Though Crane himself is not overtly racist, he does nothing to stop the racist Pease and Reynolds from harassing Wright, other than to express sadness that Richard must leave the job.

Shorty – The elevator operator in Richard's building in Memphis (where he works at the second optometry shop), Shorty is willing to participate in racial prejudice—acting as a caricature of a black man for white entertainment—in order to gain small amounts of change from white elevator-riders. Although Richard criticizes Shorty for this, Shorty says only that he needs the money and doesn't mind making fun of himself.

Harrison – An African-American man who works at another optometry shop across the street from Richard's in Memphis, Harrison later agrees to box with Richard to entertain the white workers in that neighborhood. After the fight, both Richard and Harrison are ashamed of their performance for their white racist "co-workers," and the two rarely speak again.

Miss Simon – A kind woman who runs the orphanage in Memphis to which Richard is sent as a young child, Miss Simon takes a liking to Richard, who is so nervous that he cannot perform the tasks of her "secretary," as she desires. Miss Simon later punishes Richard with the **switch** for trying to escape the orphanage.

Comrade Young – A Communist who moves to Chicago, claiming to be from Detroit. Young is a painter, and Wright, who leads the John Reed Club at this point, welcomes Young into the fold. Later, after Young accuses a fellow Communist of sedition, Wright learns from a letter that the painter is an escaped patient from a mental asylum.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Wright's Father – Richard's father leaves the family when Richard is young. He lives an unstable and financially-precarious life, and after his abandonment Richard is raised mostly by his mother, aunts, and grandparents as he moves between homes in the South.

Mrs. Moss – A kind woman who lives in Memphis, on Beale Street, Mrs. Moss takes in Richard as a boarder, and wishes ardently that Wright would marry her daughter, Bess.

Brother Mance – A well-meaning and illiterate insurance salesman, Brother Mance takes on Wright as a secretary one summer, so that Wright can learn the insurance trade and help poor black families outside Jackson purchase life insurance plans.

Pease and Reynolds – Two white supremacists who work for Crane, Pease and Reynolds hound Richard, asking if he thinks he's "white" for wanting to learn more about optometry. They eventually threaten Richard so severely that he quits his job.

Olin – A white employee at Richard's optometry shop in Memphis, Olin initially convinces Richard and Harrison to box each other, saying he will pay each of them five dollars for the fight.

"Uncle" Matthews – A mysterious man who becomes Maggie's boyfriend in Arkansas sometime after Uncle Hoskins is killed, Matthews must flee with Maggie to Detroit in the middle of the night, after committing arson against a white family. Richard never learns the exact nature of, or motivation for, Matthews'

crime.

Uncle Clark – A kind man with whom Richard lives briefly in Mississippi, Clark attempts to provide food and shelter for Richard, but Richard is too frightened by the "ghost" of a dead child in his bedroom to adjust to family life there.

Aunt Jody – The wife of Uncle Clark, Jody is also kind to Richard, and hopes to provide a comfortable home for him, however briefly.

Mrs. Bibbs – A woman Richard works for while in high school in Jackson. Richard tries to work also for Mrs. Bibbs's husband at a sawmill, but is frightened by the physical nature of the work, and returns to work for Mrs. Bibbs.

Ned Greenley – A friend of Richard's from high school in Jackson, Ned Greenley is notable for informing Richard one day that his brother, Bob, has been murdered by white men, who believe Bob visited a white prostitute.

Bob Greenley – Ned's brother, Bob works at a hotel in Jackson. Bob is murdered by white men who believe that Bob slept with a white prostitute, thus violating the racial and sexual norms of the South.

The principal – Head of the junior high school where Richard attends ninth grade, the principal provides a school-sanctioned speech for Richard to read at his ninth-grade graduation. Richard refuses to do so, and the principal, in return, states that he will not hire Richard to teach in the Jackson school system.

Griggs – A friend of Richard's in Jackson, Griggs initially finds Richard the job at Crane's optometry shop, and encourages Richard to behave with servility towards whites, if only to protect himself from white supremacist violence.

Ella – A kind woman who boards with Granny and works as a teacher, Ella is an avid reader of **books**. After she shares books with Richard, and after Richard is later accused of lewdness by Granny, Granny forces Ella to move out of the house.

Tel – A black woman who works at a movie theater in Jackson, owned by a Jewish businessman. Tel works with another, unnamed man and Richard to steal from the owner. Richard uses some of this money to leave Jackson and head to Memphis.

Falk – An Irish Catholic who works at the optometry shop in Memphis, and who is less inclined toward racism against African Americans. Falk lends Richard his library card so that Richard can check out **books** written by H.L. Mencken and other famous authors.

Aunt Cleo – Another of Wright's relations. Aunt Cleo already lives in Chicago, and Aunt Maggie and Richard stay with her at first when they arrive in the city.

The Hoffmans – A Jewish couple living in Chicago. The Hoffmans run a deli, and Wright finds work there soon after arrival. He later leaves the deli after lying to the Hoffmans about taking his postal exam.

Tillie – The Finnish cook at the diner, where Wright works after the Hoffmans' deli. Tillie spits in the soup she makes. Wright finds this out and tells the boss, who observes Tillie and fires her.

The Unnamed Woman – A woman Wright meets when working for the insurance company. Wright has an affair with her in exchange for "forgiving" her late policy payments. The woman finds Wright intelligent but strange, and wants him to take her to a circus.

Ross – Wright's black comrade in the John Reed Club and Communist Party. Wright interviews Ross for a series of "biographical sketches" of black life in Chicago. These sketches raise the concern of Party leaders, who view them as "unorthodox."

Buddy Nealson – A prominent black Communist in Chicago. Buddy makes a series of veiled threats against Wright when Wright opposes Party propaganda in the John Reed Club.

Ed Green – A subordinate of Buddy Nealson's. Green often tries to intimidate Wright by telling him that the Party doesn't support his independent writing and **reading**.

DeSheim – A Jewish theater director. DeSheim is brought in to lead the Federal Negro Theater, for which Wright is a publicity officer, but the black actors don't like DeSheim's taste in experimental works, and force him to resign.

The Animal-lab Doctors – The white doctors who perform experiments in the hospital, where Wright cleans the floors. One of these doctors plays a prank on Wright, making him believe he'll die from inhaling a harmless chemical.

Bill, Brand, and Cooke – Wright's fellow laborers at the animal hospital. Brand and Cooke have a long-running feud, and one of their fights causes the animals to be loosed from their cages. The four men put the animals back in a disorganized fashion, though the doctors never learn of this.

The Diner Waitresses – White workers at the diner where Wright washes dishes. Wright remarks on the waitresses' unconcern with his blackness. He also realizes he has read far more than them—that he possesses far vaster cultural knowledge than they do.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM

Black Boy is a memoir of racism and racial identity. It describes the difficulty of surviving as a young African-American man in the South. As a boy, Richard sees that some people have lighter skin, and other people darker skin, but he only understands what these distinctions mean, culturally and politically, after observing the bigotry of whites and the fear with which black families live. *Black Boy* shows in brutal detail the consequences of Southern racism. It also demonstrates that racial distinctions are not "inherent" or "biological," but are products of a society that is economically and politically unequal.

Wright asks his mother, early on, if he is a "Negro." His mother replies that society will label him one, though he is actually of mixed white, Native American, and African ancestry. As he grows older, Wright notes that "white" children and "white" families in the South are a privileged class, and that "black" families serve those white families. Wright also realizes that white groups direct significant anger at black groups, for no reason other than those groups' "blackness." White children go to their own schools, they learn to read and write at a young age, and many occupations are open to them. Black families live in their own parts of town, and white families treat them contemptuously. They are believed to be inherently "criminal," disposed to lying and theft.

Throughout his young life in Mississippi and Arkansas, Richard is exposed to white violence against black people. Richard is physically threatened by Pease and Reynolds, and is forced to leave his job at Crane's eyeglass shop. Matthew, a boyfriend of Aunt Maggie's, must flee Arkansas because he has dared to fight back against forces of white supremacy. A brother of a friend, Ned, is killed in Jackson merely for the suspicion that he slept with a white prostitute. Uncle Hoskins, owner of a successful tavern in Arkansas, is murdered by white competitors eager for his business. In Memphis, Richard finds work at another eyeglass shop, but he is not permitted to train professionally in lens grinding. Instead, he must sweep the store for whites, who do the "real" work.

Characters respond to this overwhelming racism in different ways. Some black families, like Granny's, find solace in religion, but Wright does not have any "feeling for God," and rejects the stern discipline (symbolized by the "**switch**" used for beatings) that some black families impose on themselves. Some black workers, like Shorty in Memphis, act as "clowns" for white men to gain favors and make extra money, but Wright is unwilling to act submissively for white men's benefit, and he knows that Shorty will never save enough money to leave. Wright's only solace, and eventually his salvation, comes in the form of **books**. He begins a serious effort in self-education in Memphis, and reads enough to gain some knowledge of the world beyond the American South. This reading does not always help Wright overcome racial violence, but it gives him the confidence to try his luck in the broader world.

After moving to Chicago, however, Richard realizes that subtler forces of racial distinction exist in the North. Richard still has trouble finding a steady job, and whites control much of the city's economic opportunity. Even when he joins the Communist Party, which is supposedly committed to racial equality, Richard finds that white men direct most of its activities. Richard also learns that not all black workers in Chicago share his political beliefs. Some left-wing black radicals on the South Side think of Richard as an "intellectual," an "Uncle Tom" who sides with whites. And Richard finds some black artists too concerned with sex, or a return to Africa, to be taken seriously as social thinkers. By the end of the memoir, Wright sees race as a problem to be addressed, if not entirely overcome, by the conscience of every individual, attempting to make sense of the society in which they live.

MOVEMENT AND DISLOCATION

A defining feature of the memoir is its shifting setting. Richard Wright's young life is one of movement and dislocation, both physical and psychological. Wright is born in Mississippi, and Jackson, the capital, is a "home-like" place during his youth. But after his father's departure and his mother's stroke, Wright moves back and forth between relatives in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Memphis. This movement prevents him from feeling truly at home in a single location. His schooling is interrupted, and his formal education amounts to no more than a few years altogether.

Racially-imposed poverty prompts some of this instability, as does the overwhelming strictness of his grandmother's household. Wright's mother, now disabled, cannot work, and Wright's father refuses to pay child support. Richard's brother leaves and lives with relatives in Chicago. Many characters in the memoir, especially the young black men of Memphis, want to move North to escape lives of discrimination, violence, and servitude. Shorty, Harrison, and others with whom Richard talks and eats lunch during his time in Memphis, are jealous that Richard has saved up the money—and marshaled the courage—to head for Chicago.

There are many consequences of Wright's movement and his restless desire to improve his station in life. These desires cause him to feel psychologically separate from his schoolmates and friends in Mississippi and Memphis. Wright's intellectual aspirations are lofty, and he never loses sight of them, despite the horrors of his childhood. Wright also feels distant from many members of his family, but Wright concludes the first part of the memoir by saying that, though he is moving to Chicago, he will never abandon a piece of the South within him. That "southern" quality, the complicated life of black-and-white interaction, will always preoccupy him. He will learn to "transplant" it into the "new soil" of a freer life in the North.

But in Chicago, Wright's lack of roots takes its toll. He moves, with his mother and aunt, from apartment to apartment because his wages are too low for stable housing. And he moves between groups: from the "Bohemians" to the Garveyites, the John Reed Club and the Communist Party, and Boys' Club and the Federal Negro Theater. Throughout the memoir, Wright documents a search for stable community. And often when he finds a group that "fits," he soon realizes the group prizes its own stability and unity over freedom of expression. Wright desires this freedom above all else. It causes him to keep moving, physically and psychologically, in search of creative fulfillment.

HUNGER, ILLNESS, AND SUFFERING

Black Boy details Wright's physical discomfort and privation in both the South and in the North. Many characters in the memoir also suffer, because African-American families in the white-dominated US often cannot access proper food, medicine, and other necessities.

Wright is hungry for much of the memoir. Early on, Wright's father refuses to pay alimony. Wright and his brother must live on their mother's meager salary, earned cooking for white families. Although Wright's mother works in a kitchen, Wright must eat mush, very little meat or bread, and almost no fruits or vegetables. Later, when his mother becomes ill, Wright moves in with his grandmother in Jackson. There, his diet improves slightly, but he still does not eat enough to feel satisfied. Hunger becomes one of the dominant emotional states of his young life. It captures the pain of Southern racism, and Wright's gnawing desire to escape his surroundings. He does everything he can to fill his stomach, including drinking water to simulate fullness.

In Memphis, Wright limits his food intake to hamburgers, peanuts, and beans from a can. Now, Wright has enough money to eat better, and Mrs. Moss, whom he boards with, is willing to feed hi—but Wright wants to save money for his trip North. He does not want to depend on anyone else's food, since he believes it is important for a man to "make his own way." Wright's hunger continues through the end of the memoir's first part, when a white man approaches him in the eyeglass shop and offers him a dollar, saying Wright has the look of a starving man. But Wright will not accept the money from the white Northerner—showing that Wright's pride and self-reliance are more important than his physical needs, even in desperate times.

Others in the memoir experience physical torment. Wright's mother has a series of paralyzing strokes, causing her extreme pain. After several years, it becomes clear that she will never recover fully, and Wright will have to support the family. Grandpa, a veteran of the Civil War, is ill for years, and is denied health coverage because a white officer misreported his name on an official report. Older family members often beat Wright. He learns quickly that white families would just as soon kill black children they believe to be "criminals." Wright learns about lynching, the extra-legal killing of black men in the South, and is terrified of this vigilante injustice.

The only possibility for alleviation, Wright concludes, is a move to Chicago. There, Jim Crow laws are not in effect, and members of black society have at least a nominal chance at equal rights. Although Wright does not believe that Chicago will be paradise, in Jackson and in Memphis he sees what servitude, violence, and deprivation can do to black society. In Chicago, Wright still goes hungry, and he struggles to find an apartment big enough for his family. But his work prospects improve somewhat, and he's able to eat enough to maintain the weight required for the Postal Service. By the end of the memoir, Wright's hunger has transformed. It is no longer a simple physical need—though he could always eat more. Instead, Wright yearns for intellectual nourishment, the kind one gets from reading deeply, writing, and finding political community.

CHRISTIANITY AND "BEING SAVED"

Christianity is the dominant moral and religious system of the American South at the time of Wright's memoir. Many African Americans in Mississippi place their faith, and hope for salvation, in the Christian church. But Wright is not able to believe in God. His struggles against religious authority contribute to his desire to leave the South. Communism in Chicago then fills some of the void Christianity creates in Wright's life—but only temporarily.

Wright's mother is not especially religious, except for a brief period during remission from her illness. Wright does not attend church when he is young. Only after moving into Granny's house does Wright find Christianity to be a burden in his life—a moral system that he must fight against. The kind of Christianity practiced by Wright's grandmother and aunts is a harsh one, filled with rules, demands, and beatings with the **switch**. Reading of any extraneous material is not permitted. Wright is to pray constantly, in the morning, at night, and before meals. Any talk unrelated to faith is considered un-Christian.

Schooling is only useful, in Granny's eyes, if it contributes to Wright's Christian sensibilities. Granny and the aunts fear that Wright is a "plague" on the family, the cause of his mother and brother's torment. This stems from Wright's unwillingness to throw himself zealously into church life. Wright attempts to tell Granny, in one heartbreaking example, that he will believe in God if he sees an angel. But his grandmother misunderstands, and thinks that Wright has proclaimed he has *actually* seen an angel. This prompts Wright to clarify his speech in front of his grandmother, the preacher, and the congregation, leading to more household strife.

Wright treats Christianity in the memoir as a form of false "salvation," which black families imagine to make their daily suffering bearable. Wright does not believe his life can change if he asks a distant God for help. He instead believes that he must save himself—use his wits to pull himself out of impoverished circumstances. After the move to Chicago, this realization dovetails with Wright's awakened Communism.

Communist thought, unlike religious thought, seems grounded in facts, not wishes. The Communists of Chicago want to improve workers' rights the world over, and they have concrete plans to do so. But over time, Wright becomes disillusioned with the Communist Party and its literary activities. He finds the Party to be too much like a church: afraid of change, frightened of "unorthodox" ideas. Eventually for Wright, "salvation" does come, but it is inward: a feeling of intellectual communion with other authors of literary and philosophical texts. The essays of H. L. Mencken introduce Wright, in Memphis, to a world of writing from which he derives strength. After his attempts at political action in Part 2, Wright returns to his writing desk. He will put his stories, poems, and essays on paper without the sanction, or interference, of any church or Party.

READING AND WRITING

Black Boy is also a memoir of one man's personal education. Wright has a love affair with reading and writing, and these intellectual activities open him up to the wider world.

Wright is most satisfied when he reads the great ideas of the world and writes his own stories. He drafts a few "sketches" as a child, one of which is serialized in an African-American newspaper in Mississippi. Granny and Aunt Addie believe it is the "devil's work" to make up a story having nothing to do with Scripture, but for Wright, this "making up" is a fundamental creative act. It gives his life meaning. Wright has little by way of formal schooling, but he ends up helping the teachers to teach the class when he is around 15, and he delivers the valedictory speech at his ninth-grade graduation. His unwillingness to read the principal's prepared remarks, and his desire to read his own, keeps him from obtaining a teaching job in the district, but it also helps Wright become more confident in his talents as an author.

In Memphis, Wright gains access to books with a white man's library card. At the library, Wright discovers the essays of H. L. Mencken and the **novels** Mencken references, including those by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and other great European, American, and English writers. These books introduce Wright to new ideas: religious struggle, capitalism and Communism, and the philosophies of the West. Wright continues this reading in Chicago, adding more political tracts and the novels of Proust. Wright educates himself with these books, and they, along with memories of young life, will inform the texts he'll go on to write.

Thus *Black Boy* describes its own composition. It's the story of a writer coming into his own, learning about the world around him.

Reading and writing therefore satisfy two impulses in the memoir. First, they make Wright's immediate life of poverty and violence more bearable. They allow for escape into imagined worlds. Second, reading and writing provide a functional alternative to a life of menial labor. Through Wright's natural talent and extraordinary effort, he is able to educate himself. This spurs him to move to Chicago with his mother, brother, and aunt, wher he can begin a life less encumbered by violent, oppressive racism.

SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Black Boy describes a man charting his own path. The world Wright finds himself in is harsh. In the South, he struggles against white oppression, black expectations for "normal" behavior, and feelings of rootlessness. He wants to escape to the North—but in Chicago, these problems don't disappear. There, he struggles with the big, anonymous city. He looks for unity and human connection, but is often frustrated in this search.

In Wright's experience, Southern whites group all black people together. They assume there is no such thing as black individuality. Many whites automatically believe that Wright will steal and lie, and that he is capable of murder. The police warn Wright against riding his bicycle alone through white neighborhoods. Pease and Reynolds accuse Wright of asserting himself too vigorously when Wright wants to be come an optometrist. White oppression in the South is a systematic denial of black personality. If black people do not have an individual character, according to whites, then black servitude will remain the cultural norm under Jim Crow.

But Wright hardly has an easier time among his black peers. Granny, Addie, and Uncle Tom consider Wright's dreams—of becoming a writer, of leaving the South—to be "soft" or strange. Each encourages Richard to "fall in line" with Christian teaching. They want him to stay in Jackson, to live as they have. In Memphis, Wright observes that black workers, like Shorty and Harrison, are more concerned with "not making waves," with appeasing their white bosses. Wright's frustration with black resignation spurs his move to Chicago. There, he hopes to find other individuals who celebrate black culture, rather than shy away from it.

This isn't true of Chicago, though. Wright disagrees with other black writers, activists, and political figures there. He cannot become a lockstep member of the Communist Party or the John Reed Club. He argues with black actors who accept stereotypes of black life on the stage. Whenever Wright seeks out an *authentic* black community, he realizes that white supremacy has warped it in some way.

Wright's feelings of loneliness, of not *belonging*, encourage him to develop as a reader, writer, and thinker. Reading and writing, for Wright, are the ultimate assertions of individuality, as one may challenge, in writing, society's assumptions of "normal" black behavior. Wright makes his own voice through reading, and through quiet, careful, concerted work. Although this work takes on social problems and is geared toward a public readership, it begins in private. Thus, at the end of the memoir, Wright goes back to his study, to continue making his career on his own.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BOOKS AND NOVELS

Books symbolize a great deal of the memoir's most important ideas. Books provide an imaginative escape for Richard, whose life is lived in grinding poverty and amid terrible racial suppression and violence. They allow Richard to develop as an individual, and provide windows onto different parts of the world, places Richard can only dream of visiting one day, after he has left the South. They are hard for Richard to obtain (Ella, for example, lends him some, and Falk allows Richard to use his library card), but once Richard has them, their ideas can never be taken away. Thus books offer a respite from the difficulties of Richard's life. They are also a means of escaping that life, of attempting to set up a new and better home in Chicago. Finally, it is Richard's education in literature that allows him to write *Black Boy* itself. The memoir describes Richard's young life and Southern upbringing as forming his intellectual path, and included in the book are the events, and texts, that have shaped him. By the memoir's end, Richard is writing his own material—he is contributing to the "conversation" between books that has captured his attention since childhood.

THE "SWITCH"

Books liberate Richard; violence oppresses him. People use the switch (a rod or stick) to beat and punish Richard. Though he lives in fear of white violence, he is even more afraid of the switch, which his family uses on him. His Uncle Tom beats him for little reason, and his Aunt Addie wants to beat him after believing, wrongly, that Richard has littered her classroom with walnut shells. Granny and Richard's mother beat Richard when he is young, fearing that he's without religion—a "plague" in their household. Finally, Pease and Reynolds, at Crane's shop, threaten also to beat Richard (in their case, with a piece of steel) because he has dared to learn about their trade.

The switch and other implements of violence enforce the narrow social roles Richard is forced to fill, by whites and his own family. If he violates these roles, he is punished harshly. After his escape to Chicago, Richard leaves the switch behind, though not the threat of violence. It remains a feature of Northern city life. Even at the memoir's close, while marching in a peaceful parade, Richard is thrown aside by former comrades. For Richard, bodily harm is an obstacle to be surmounted. Free from this violence, he can continue in his project of writing and reading.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *Black Boy* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ There was the cloudy notion of hunger when I breathed the odor of new-cut, bleeding grass. And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights . . .

Related Characters: Wright's Father, Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Wright begins his memoir with impressions of his youth - what he saw around his family's home. He tells this not from the perspective of an adult but from the viewpoint of a child - what a child would have seen, how he would have seen it. Thus hunger was all around Wright as a young boy. He felt hunger even when he smelled the grass, for example - when he noticed something even remotely like food in the natural world around him.

But Wright was not a "normal" child - he tends to notice far more than others in his family. His sense of wonder at the natural world is the wonderment of a young artist, taking in information and attempting to make sense of it. Wright's time spent by himself, describing and cataloguing the land outside the family's home, is time spent away from the fundamental strife that the family experiences.

❝ You owe a debt you can never pay.

I'm sorry.

Being sorry can't make that kitten live again.

Related Characters: Wright's Father, Richard Wright (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a childhood trauma. Richard, playing with a cat, keeps his father awake with the noise, and his father begs Richard to "kill the cat" and make the noise stop. Richard is smart enough to know, even as a child, that his father is speaking metaphorically, but a part of Richard wants to get back at his father, so he follows his "orders" and really does kill the cat. Richard's father then makes Richard bury the cat and arrange a "funeral" for it.

His comments afterward to his son, that the cat's death is a "debt" that cannot be "repaid," haunts Richard. He fears precisely this—that he, as a young man, will do things for which he can never atone. And so Richard, for one thing, does not want to go near cats for the rest of his childhood. And, more broadly, Richard associates with his family ideas of terror, detachment, and violence that cannot be undone.

I was a drunkard in my sixth year, before I had begun school. With a gang of children, I roamed the streets, begging pennies from passers-by, haunting the doors of saloons . . . .

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Richard lives most of his young life out of doors, and does what he can in Memphis to survive. Sometimes, in order to make money from the old men who linger in the bars, Richard will repeat the "bad words" they tell him - and he drinks in response to it. This creates in Richard a taste for alcohol as a very, very young child - and his mother is appalled to discover this. But Richard himself finds the taste of alcohol, and the drinking, liberating. It makes him feel that he is a grown-up, even if he is only five or six years old. And it makes him feel, for a time, free of his family and of their control.

But this episode introduces another problem in Richard's life. He realizes, as a young age, that there are two paths he can go down. The first is the path toward physical decay - drinking, gambling, and the lack of an education. The second, and much more difficult and hard-to-find path, is that of personal growth, struggle, and education.

My father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city; a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city—that same city which had . . . borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Wright's Father

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Richard understands, when he is released from the orphanage as a young boy and spends some time with his father—and later, when he sees that his father has returned to a life of sharecropping - that his father has been chewed up by Memphis. Richard associates his father with the temptations and evils of the city - the lack of steady employment, the drinking and gambling, and of course the virulent racism of whites—and though he is at first surprised to see that his father has returned to the fields outside the city, he is not shocked for long. In some sense, Richard wonders how his father escaped from those fields to the city in the first place.

Richard himself is at best ambivalent about the city of Memphis, about the opportunities it provides (for work and education) and about the dangers it offers. But Richard knows that his life is to be found in the cities, and not in the fields surrounding them.

Chapter 2 Quotes

The next day Granny said emphatically that she knew who had ruined me, that she knew I had learned about "foul practices" from reading Ella's books, and when I asked what "foul practices" were, my mother beat me afresh.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Ella, Granny

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Richard's grandmother is deeply religious - and although

this changes the moral atmosphere of the home in which the family spends time (after the orphanage and in Georgia, as opposed to Memphis), it does not reduce the threat of physical violence for Richard. Because Richard has stumbled upon the book owned by Ella (a teacher boarding with the family), Granny mistakenly believes that the books themselves have corrupted Richard (as he has made a lewd comment to her while bathing). This lewdness, Granny believes, comes from an "educated" mind. To her, the only education necessary for a young man is that of Biblical precepts, and even those sparingly. For the most part, whatever is taught in the house is taught at the end of the "switch."

Richard's first real interactions with books, then, are tinged with secrecy and danger. Books, for him, represent liberation, a life lived beyond the confines of his family's home. But for Granny and occasionally his own mother, these books represent a threat to the purity of Richard's mind.

Mama, is Granny white?

If you've got eyes, you can see what color she is.

I mean, do the white folks think she's white?

Why don't you ask the white folks that?

But you know.

Why should I know? I'm not white.

Granny looks white. Then why is she living with us colored folks?

Don't you want Granny to live with us?

Related Characters: Wright's mother, Richard Wright (speaker), Granny

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this heartbreaking section, Richard begins to learn what "race" really means in the context in which he lives, and the role it will play in his life. Richard notes that his Granny's skin is lighter than his, and he asks, therefore, if Granny is white. But his mother notes that his Granny will be called "black," just as he will be called "black," even though their ancestry is a mixture of African, European, and Native American families. Richard begins to see that the color of the skin itself is not "important" to those living in the racist South, so much as the distinctions that come with this racial separation. In other words, Richard, through his mother, learns that he is "black" because society says that he is "black," and that society will treat him unfairly, often violently, as a black man regardless of what he says to them.

There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There were only silence, quiet weeping, whispers, and fear.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Uncle Hoskins

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Hoskins, the man whose funeral young Richard describes in this section, was the owner of a liquor store, and he was making good money in a part of Georgia where white people did not necessarily appreciate black men making any kind of money at all. Although Richard does not explain it directly, he implies that the while population near Jackson, MS, believes that Hoskins was doing too well for himself, and so he was killed - his liquor business thus making itself available to a white owner. Although Richard does not necessarily understand all that stands behind the killing - the fact that, for example, the police will not investigate it, because the police force protects white interest - he sees that the death is understood only as terrible luck. The family takes the news of the death quietly and with bitter anguish at the authorities, who will do nothing to protect them, and who seem only to reinforce the violent attitudes found in the white community.

Why are there so many black men wearing stripes?

It's because . . . Well, they're harder on black people.

Related Characters: Wright's mother, Richard Wright (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Richard's mother notes, without equivocating in any way, that it is simply more difficult to be a black man than to be a white man in the American South —and of course the events of the memoir up till this point reinforce that assertion.

Richard begins to understand, after Hoskins' death, that the world is deeply unfair to African Americans, especially in the South, where black men and women are presumed to be criminal, and where that "criminality" is punished by the state far more harshly than any overt criminality in white populations.

But at this stage, Richard is still making sense of this information - it is not reasonable, after all, that black men should be punished simply because of the color of their skin. Richard's innocence, which gradually gives way to a hardened understanding of what black men must do to survive in the South, is one of the great tragedies of the memoir - the way that he understands what it means to be a "black boy" becoming a black man in America.

❝ For weeks I wondered what it was that "uncle" had done, but I was destined never to know, not even in all the years that followed.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), "Uncle" Matthews

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

This is another instance of violence, and of Richard's coming to terms with that violence. The man Matthews, living with Richard's aunt, has committed a crime against a white family and, to hide further evidence, has burned a barn and killed a white person - and for this, he must leave town in the middle of the night, never to return. Richard is told by his mother and others in the family that he must never breathe a word of this to anyone - if he were to do that, the entire family could be in danger, could be targeted by white families or by the "law" in the area, and put in jail or killed.

Richard again notes that the law seems to work very differently for white and black families. If a person is white, the law defends those white families, especially against perceived African American aggression. But if that family is black, the law presumes that the family is guilty - and if the family is accused of violence against anyone white, the harshness of the penalties multiply.

❝ Christmas came and I had but one orange. I was hurt and would not go out to play with the neighborhood children who were blowing horns and shooting firecrackers. . . . Just before going to bed, I ate it, first taking a bite out of the top and sucking the juice from it as I squeezed it; finally I tore the peeling into bits and munched them slowly.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

On Christmas Day, Richard's family is so poor—and, in truth, has so little to celebrate, based on the violent difficulties of the past year —that Richard can enjoy only a single orange, which he has tucked away for the occasion. That orange seems, later on in his life, a poignant sign of the harshness of his childhood. But at the time, the orange was a small moment of salvation - a way to transcend the difficulty of his circumstances.

Richard will wonder, as he goes along, how he survived a childhood of such anguish, and indeed one of the primary shocks of the memoir is the overwhelming array of violent difficulties standing between Richard and a life as a writer. But Richard does in fact overcome these circumstances, and this moving scene of his enjoyment of the orange is a small flicker of hope in a landscape of mostly bleak and frightening events.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Out of the family conferences it was decided that my brother and I would be separated, that it was too much of a burden for any one aunt or uncle to assume the support of both of us. Where was I to go? Who would take me?

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Wright's brother

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that his mother had suffered a stroke, Richard realizes that, along with his brother, he would be "too much" to care for by any one family—and this means that he and his brother will be separated, and Richard will be forced to live away from all the relatives he has known up to this point in his life. This is another setback for Richard, who has achieved so little stability in his life since a young age, after his father abandons the family, and then he, his mother, and his brother move around the South, from family

member to family member, attempting to find a place to settle.

Richard is here told once again that he and his brother are a burden, and that others will have to care of him at great expense to them - that Richard and his brother, in other words, can only be tolerated and not loved.

All right, I'll send you home Saturday. Tell me, where did you learn those words Jody heard you say?

I looked at him and did not answer . . . . How could I have told him that I had learned to curse before I had learned to read? How could I have told him that I had been a drunkard at the age of six?

Related Characters: Uncle Clark, Richard Wright (speaker), Aunt Jody

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Although his Uncle Clark, living with his "middle-class" and "respectable" family in Greenwood, offers to take Richard in, and indeed does so, Richard has a very difficult time living with them—in part because he learns he has taken over the bedroom of Uncle Clark's son, who passed away. Richard has trouble sleeping in that room from then on, fearing that something bad will happen to him, too. This causes Richard to be more agitated than usual, and these circumstances, coupled with the dislocation of living in a new place, cause him to act out in school.

Richard notes to the reader, here, that his life has been so difficult - so filled with terror, and violence, and deprivation - that he has a hard time explaining how he could feel so angry or confused to anyone who has not experienced these things. Uncle Clark wants to do well by Richard, but he cannot understand what Richard himself is only just coming to terms with - that Richard's life has been almost unimaginably hard.

Chapter 4 Quotes

You're just mad at me for something!

Don't tell me I'm mad!

You're too mad to believe anything I say.

Don't speak to me like that!

Then how can I talk to you? You beat me for throwing walnuts on the floor! But I didn't do it!

Related Characters: Richard Wright, Aunt Addie (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Addie, another of Richard's relatives, teams up with Granny when Richard leaves the house of Uncle Clark - believing that Richard is an inherently bad boy, that there is nothing anyone can do to help or "save" him, and that Richard needs only the guidance of Christianity to admit to and amend his ways. Richard finds Aunt Addie to be extremely cruel, and when Addie punishes him for making a mess in school, Richard denies doing it - it was in fact another student. Addie will not hear this, and when Richard tries to defend himself against her beatings, Addie tells Richard that he is possessed by the devil, and that he will one day be executed for the crimes he will commit.

This sheds yet more light on Richard's circumstances. He has done nothing wrong in this instance, other than standing up for himself. But those in positions of authority around him believe, in part because he has moved around so much in his youth, that he is inherently wicked - and that Christianity, imposed harshly, is the only thing that will put a stop to it.

Daily I went into my room upstairs, locked the door, knelt, and tried to pray, but everything I could think of saying seemed silly.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

After being forced into it by his family members, Richard tries as hard as he possibly can to "get" religion. He attempts to pray, but finds that he has no one to pray to - he does not believe there could be a God looking down on the kind of world in which he lives, when so little is stable, and

so little seems to make sense. Richard understands, abstractly, that religion is "good" for him, that it will help him to become a stronger person - but when he sees the religious students in the school he attends, he wonders what it is they're praying for, and whether their prayers are any different from his.

Richard believes instead that this is all "silly," a game of make-believe that helps people to make sense of lives that have been twisted by the difficult conditions of the place in which they live. Richard will go on to find redemption from his circumstances, but it will not be through prayer - rather, it will come in the form of reading and self-education.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I burned at my studies. At the beginning of the school term I read my civics and English and geography volumes through and only referred to them when in class. I solved all my mathematical problems far in advance; then, during school hours, . . . I read tattered, second-hand copies of *Flynn's Detective Weekly* or the *Argosy All-Story Magazine*.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Richard begins to discover books and reading at this time, and realizes that there is a world beyond the world he has known in his youth. He gains access to this other world by immersing himself in the thoughts of others. Of course, many in his family, including his Granny and Addie, believe that "secular books" contain only falsehoods, and will pervert Richard's mind. This is the great irony of Richard's education - that it comes precisely at the moment when those around him tell him he cannot succeed in the "normal" classroom - when they argue that Richard is a boy without morals, without aptitude, without any sense of the spiritual.

For Richard, reading is a spiritual and personal exercise - it is something as close to divine as he has found in his young life. This reading can be done in private, and occurs only in the confines of his own mind. And no one can keep him from thinking the thoughts he thinks when he is doing it - it is a way for him to become free.

Uncle Tom, Granny says to come at once. Grandpa's dead.

You certainly are a prize fool. Don't you know that that's no way to tell a person that his father's dead?

I ran all the way out here . . . I'm out of breath. I'm sorry.

Related Characters: Uncle Tom, Richard Wright (speaker), Granny, Grandpa

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Richard famously notes at the end of this passage that "he can never seem to do what people expect of him." He has tried his best to rush over to Uncle Tom to tell him what has happened to his father - but Uncle Tom replies that Richard has not done this correctly. In a sense, Richard has never been socialized at all - he has not been taught how to behave with friends, or relatives, or strangers; how to act in polite company. Richard does not really know how a family works, how people sit down to eat together, or talk. For Richard, life has been a series of struggles simply to eat, sleep, clothe and house himself, and stay alive. So when Uncle Tom tells Richard he doesn't know what to do with himself, Tom is, though harsh, correct - Richard has simply never been taught what it means to be in the world. He knows only how to suffer through it.

Chapter 6 Quotes

What grade are you in school?

Seventh, ma'am.

Then why are you going to school?

Well, I want to be a writer.

A what?

A writer.

For what?

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Richard announces, to anyone who asks and cares to hear, that he does indeed have professional plans, ideas for his future - that he wants to write books, to participate in the joy he himself has found in the books he has read. However, many in his life refuse to see this as evidence of Richard's motivation. Instead, they think that books are things written by others, certainly not by poor black men from the South. Although Richard insists that this future will be possible for himself, and that he must gain an education in order to achieve it, those around him think it is a dream of the faintest order, if they even consider it at all.

Thus Richard must combat two things in his path toward an artistic life. He must gain an education however he can, by reading the books he acquires when he acquires them - and he must fight back against a world that thinks he can never write at all.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Son, you ought to be more serious. You're growing up now and you won't be able to get jobs if you let people think that you're weak-minded. Suppose the superintendent of schools would ask you to teach here in Jackson, and he found out that you had been writing stories?

Related Characters: Wright's mother (speaker), Richard Wright

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

As Richard grows older, he works in manual labor to continue to make money to attend school and buy books. At this point, some in his family, like his mother, tell him that it might be possible for him to get a job teaching—but only if he gives up the writing of stories, which many in the family consider a worthless and wasteful occupation, something that only the "soft-minded" or degenerate might do. After all, his family members contend, what does it mean to make up the events of a story? Anyone could make up anything - stories therefore have no value to anyone, and there is no purpose in reading or in writing them.

Of course, Richard understands that stories can be a gateway to another way of life, and he reads partly so that he might hone his craft of writing. Thus the overwhelming feeling on the part of his family members that writing is bad for him, and bad for his future, does not deter Richard from continuing to read and write.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Look, Dick, you're throwing away your future here in Jackson. Go to the principal, talk to him, take his speech and say it. I'm saying the one he wrote. So why can't you? What the hell? What can you lose?

No.

Related Characters: Griggs, Richard Wright (speaker), The principal

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Richard is given a speech by the principal of his junior high school, to deliver as that school's valedictorian. But Richard believes he has earned the right to give his own speech, and he labors over his words for weeks and weeks, doing everything he can to make them shine. Tom reads both speeches and says that the administration's version is better, but Richard believes in the principle at stake - that he has a right to say what is on his mind, especially if he has earned this right by being the best student in the class.

Richard knows, however, that there will be consequences for his actions - that he might not get a job as a teacher in that school if he is insubordinate to the school's administration. But it has become clear at this point in the novel that Richard does not want to stay in Jackson and teach, that he wants to move somewhere else and continue in his education - which is what he winds up doing.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ I reached my hands higher. They searched my pockets and packages. They seemed dissatisfied when they could find nothing incriminating.

Boy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighborhoods at this time of night.

Yes, sir.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

After being accosted by a white police officer, Richard realizes that, if he stays much longer in Jackson, he might suffer a cruel fate like those he has witnessed for many of the African American men in his life, since a young age. Richard does nothing to incite the hatred of the white people of Jackson, yet they are predisposed to hate him, to believe that he will harm them, that he is a criminal, or "impudent," unwilling to settle for white authority (of course Richard does reject white authority, but mostly in private). With every incident in which Richard is rebuked or physically attacked by white men in the town, he further resolves to leave Jackson, and to make his way northward. Although Richard knows that there is still a great deal of violence against black men in the North, he believes that at least there he has a better chance of simply surviving while

walking on the street and going about his work.

Chapter 10 Quotes

The words and actions of white people were baffling signs to me. I was living in a culture and not a civilization and I could learn how that culture worked only by living with it. Misreading the reactions of whites around me made me say and do the wrong things.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

Richard learns by his late teens that there is only one way to behave in order to get the white residents of Jackson to treat him with even a small amount of respect - or, at least, not to harm him physically. Though it pains Richard to do it, he resolves to abase himself to white authority - to pretend that he knows nothing, to acquiesce to all demands, to do only what is told of him, to joke and smile and otherwise be "docile." Richard understands that, in doing so, he is giving up a part of himself - he is making it seem, at least on the surface, that he accepts white superiority, that he is willing to live "in his place."

But Richard maintains his beliefs, deep down, that he will leave Jackson and begin a life of his own. He understands that this compromise is one he engages in only to survive, and that, once he begins his life independently in the North, or at least outside Jackson, he might be able to return to a more authentic version of himself.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Where might you be from?

Jackson, Mississippi.

You act mighty bright to be from there.

There are bright people in Jackson.

Related Characters: Richard Wright, Mrs. Moss (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Richard returns to Memphis, where he lived as a very young boy. He then realizes there that there is a strong bias against those from the "deep South," regardless of the color of that person's skin - that, in other words, the urbane residents of Memphis believe that people from Jackson would not know how to read, or how to speak properly, how to behave in a city environment. Of course, Richard has spent a great deal of time in his teenage years learning exactly how to fend for himself, and so is prepared to do whatever it takes to live in Memphis. But Mrs. Moss is still shocked to see that he is a self-made man from a part of the country where, she thinks, no one could be so polished and educated.

Richard embarks on a life in Memphis, in part, to prove that he is up to the challenge of living in a big city - something Richard believes his father could not do successfully.

Chapter 12 Quotes

How in God's name can you do that?

I needed a quarter, and I got it.

But a quarter can't pay you for what he did to you.

. . . My ass is tough and quarters is scarce.

Related Characters: Shorty, Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Richard realizes that many in Memphis do whatever they can do make their way in a city that is still staunchly segregated according to occupation. Shorty runs the elevator in the office where Richard works, at an optician's shop, and Shorty is willing to behave in a manner that whites view as stereotypically African American in order to receive a small tip. Richard considers this an abominable thing, even though earlier, and to a lesser degree, Richard has acknowledged that there were ways he showed deference to those in Jackson in order to survive, and not to "make waves" among whites in the community.

But at this point, Richard has vowed that he will be true to the principles of education and racial justice that have caused him to seek out life in the North - with Memphis as a way-station to Chicago. Thus, Richard is not willing to live as Shorty does in order to survive.

Chapter 13 Quotes

I wondered what on earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn of the South. The only people I had ever heard denounced in the South were Negros, and this man was not a Negro. . . Undoubtedly he must be advocating ideas that the South did not like.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

Richard realizes that there are those in the North (like Baltimore, which, though close to the South, is affiliated more with cities like Philadelphia and New York) who are willing to defend the cause of African Americans, to argue that Jim Crow laws are ruining African American lives. Richard believed, as he notes here, that only African Americans could be scorned in this way by whites in the South - but here, Mencken stands up not only for black populations, but for the idea that men are created equal, and that the laws of the country are designed to protect everyone, not just white men and women, and so he is scorned in a (somewhat) similar way. This is a revelation for Richard. Richard goes on to read whatever Mencken writes, on all possible subjects - and he believes that Mencken, at that point a critic of great renown in the United States, will help him to strike on his own as a writer - that Mencken can inspire him to read omnivorously, and to begin working on his own essays, stories, and journalism in earnest.

Chapter 14 Quotes

Yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South. So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, and bend in strange winds . . . .

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 284-285

Explanation and Analysis

This striking passage is one of the final parts of the book. Richard understands that so much of his life has been formed in the South, a place he understands as one of violence and deprivation, of the extremes of the human experience. But the South is still his home. And when he leaves the South, he insists to both himself and to the reader that he will not (and cannot) leave it behind in his imagination. Richard has learned, both in his life and in books, that all people are rooted in place - hence the metaphor of a plant used in this section—but that those roots might change over time, that they might find "new and cool rains." This is the hope at the end of the book, that Richard might be able to take what he has learned, despite the violence of his youth, and apply it in the service of his reading and his writing in a different location, in the North and its cities of which he has dreamed for some time.

Chapter 15 Quotes

But I was aware that she was a white girl and that her body was pressed closely against mine, an incident that had never happened to me before in my life, an incident charged with the memory of dread. But she was not conscious of my blackness or of what her actions would have meant in the South.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), The Diner Waitresses

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

Richard begins to understand the new racial realities of Chicago. Although there is a racial hierarchy in the city, it is not as strict as in the South. In the diner, white waitresses don't seem to mind Richard; they don't find his body objectionable. They are willing to talk to him. Richard wonders what they must think of him, whether or not he is a full human being in their eyes, but he also realizes that the waitresses do not have the same intellectual concerns he has. Their lives don't intersect with the troubles of black experience. The waitresses have problems, surely, but they are not Wright's problems, the traumas of his past—for example, in the South, having his "body [...] pressed closely against" a white girl would have put him in great danger.

Richard has spent his young life earning money to buy books. Work is only a means to an end; it allows him to save money to improve himself. But the waitresses at the diner don't seem to care about self-improvement. He finds their love lives and other stories to be trifling, but Richard remains grateful that the waitresses are at least kind to him. Richard's presence is neither confusing nor important to the waitresses. He is simply a part of their work environment—of the cosmopolitan life.

My purpose was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Wright believes that powerful writing can create emotional connections. He says he doesn't want his readers to become too hung-up on language; he wants, instead, to make an *experience* for them. This experience can be happy or sad; it can be social or intensely personal. But the act of reading and writing is, for Wright, a kind of long-distance connection. Reading books allowed Wright to feel he was part of an intellectual past—that he was doing the same work as Proust, Gide, and Dostoevsky. He wants to carry on in this tradition.

In this passage, Wright demonstrates how hard he is willing to work. He doesn't need his writing to be perfect from the start; indeed, he recognizes the hours he'll need to spend at his desk to craft an essay or story sentence-by-sentence. Perfection isn't the goal; the *practice* of writing is paramount. Nothing—no bad job, no family difficulties—will dissuade Wright from pursuing his career as a novelist and essayist. It is his supreme objective in life.

Chapter 16 Quotes

Each time I left her I resolved not to visit her again. I could not talk to her; I merely listened to her passionate desire to see a circus. She was not calculating; if she liked a man, she just liked him. Sex relations were the only relations she had ever had; no others were possible with her, so limited was her intelligence.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), The Unnamed Woman

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

Wright seems to understand that his relationship with the policyholder is ethically troublesome. She does not comprehend his world—the books he reads, the ideas he thinks about. She is concerned, in Wright's telling, only with physical pleasure. Wright also acknowledges that their relationship is predicated on an imbalance of power—that she cannot pay for her insurance policy with cash—but he does not worry too much about his actions, immoral though they are. He admits that others working for the insurance company do the same. It isn't pleasant, but it's tacitly accepted.

Wright wonders whether the circus has some deeper symbolic appeal for the woman, but in this passage he can find none. Her passion is only sexual passion; everything else is amusement, and the circus is unlike anything on the South Side of Chicago. It is simply an escape from the life the woman leads. She knows that Wright can offer this escape to her, can pay for her ticket—and that is all.

Of course, this is only in Wright's limited perspective—the woman's own words (or even her name) are never given. This is then arguably quite dehumanizing, as Wright uses the woman for sex and doesn't even acknowledge that she might have a complex inner life of her own.

But, as I listened to the Communist Negro speakers, I wondered if the Negro, blasted by three hundred years of oppression, could possibly cast off his fear and corruption and rise to the task [of tackling America's problems.] Could the Negro ever possess himself, learn to know what had happened to him in relation to the aspirations of Western society? It seemed to me that for the Negro to try to save himself he would have to forget himself and try to save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift toward self-destruction.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

Wright feels solidarity with black Communists in Chicago, but it's a complicated feeling. He agrees with their cause: he supports the rights of workers across the globe. He believes that, through unity of the cause, white and black workers can throw off the yoke of capitalism. But he is convinced that black thinkers and activists are at a disadvantage. They've been excluded from the American educational systems, to a large degree; they've been forced to work difficult, low-paying jobs. They do not have the same freedoms of thought and action that white Americans have—the luxuries of time and comfortable space. Even in

the North, black Americans lag behind, suffer, and must work hard to foster community.

Wright is sympathetic with these difficulties. Indeed, he has pulled himself out of grinding Southern poverty to make his way to Chicago, and has worked tirelessly to read and improve himself. But can his fellow black Communists, who haven't read as deeply, see the problem of global labor as he does? Can they all fight together, the intellectuals and the activists? Wright wonders aloud, in this passage, if such a thing is possible. Yet he sticks with the Party, at this stage in the memoir, to see what solidarity he can foster among black Chicagoans.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ After the meeting Comrade Young confronted me with a problem. He had no money, he said, and asked if he could sleep temporarily on the club's premises. Believing him loyal, I gave him permission. Straightway Young became one of the most ardent members of our organization, admired by all. […] No report about Young had come from the Communist party, but since Young seemed a conscientious worker, I did not think the omission serious in any case.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Comrade Young

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis

Young is a kind of double for Wright, and Wright seems to sense this. Both men are self-made, and both are artists: Wright a writer, Young a painter. Both have come from different cities to make a new home in Chicago. Wright appears to pick up on a desperation in Comrade Young's behavior, but he is still willing to let Young sleep at the Reed Club offices. He wants to help out another struggling artist, ardently devoted to the Party and its cause. He wants to believe that someone else would help him, under similar circumstances.

But Young is in another sense the opposite of Wright. Whereas Wright is a pragmatist—a believer in realistic viewpoints—Young is a romantic. Young's art is expressive and ecstatic, and Young quickly perceives that there are "enemies" in the Reed Club. He tries to make his way in the Party by accusing others of seditious acts. It turns out that Young has escaped from an asylum, and that his behavior cannot be trusted, but Wright will go on to observe other men, of "sane" minds, who will also accuse their comrades of treason. This revelation will shake Wright's belief in the correctness of Party doctrine.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Stalin's book had showed how diverse minorities could be welded into unity, and I regarded it as a most politically sensitive volume that revealed a new way of looking upon lost and beaten peoples. Of all the developments in the Soviet Union, the method by which scores of backward peoples had been led to unity on a national scale was what had enthralled me.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 335

Explanation and Analysis

Wright finds it ironic that he is accused of being a Trotskyite. He has read no Trotsky, and is instead a fan of his political rival, the leader of the USSR, Josef Stalin. Unlike many other members of the Party, Wright has read some of Stalin's writing, and he discovers there much to be enamored of. For Staling is a utopian thinker, and Stalin's racial theories play to Wright's own aspirations.

Wright has seen that white and black skin are strong differentiators in American life. The color of a person's skin can set their entire life trajectory, can determine whether that person will live safely and securely, or will suffer terribly. But there are often as many differences *within* racial groups in the US as there are between them. Wright does not agree with the ideas of many black Communists, let alone black people who are not members of the Party. Wright thus believes that no person should retreat into zones of absolute racial distinction. Instead, people should try to come together to achieve racial solidarity, with unity trumping difference. Stalin's vision therefore accords with Wright's longstanding personal beliefs on racial cooperation.

❝ Comrade Nelson ... a writer who hasn't written anything worthwhile is a most doubtful person. Now, I'm in that category. Yet I think I can write. I don't want to ask for special favors, but I'm in the midst of a book which I hope to complete in six months or so. Let me convince myself that I'm wrong about my hankering to write and then I'll be with you all the way.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Buddy Nealson

Page Number: 356

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is a strong reminder of the choice Wright must make. Nealson lays it out in no uncertain terms: Wright must be a Party member *first*, an artist second. But for Wright, it is precisely reversed: he is a writer who is also a Communist. Nealson demands fealty to the Party, and tells Wright he can find another opportunity to write, perhaps when issues are not as pressing. But Wright understands that this is only passing the buck—that there will always be a new emergency in the Party, a new piece of propaganda to produce.

Instead, Wright wants to be the master of his own voice. He wants to place his writing first, rather than subordinate it to the ideas of other people. After all, Wright has spent much of his life educating himself, despite the social pressures making that education difficult. He has sacrificed much for his knowledge, and he is unwilling to give up an author's freedom, even for a Party whose ideals he values deeply. He wants to convince Nealson of the power of writing, of individual expression, but Nealson will be unmoved by these pleas.

❝ This, to me, was a spectacle of glory; and yet, because it had condemned me, because it was blind and ignorant, I felt that it was a spectacle of horror. The blindness of their limited lives—lives truncated and impoverished by the oppression they had suffered long before they had ever heard of Communism—made them think that I was with their enemy. American life had so corrupted their consciousness that they were unable to recognize their friends when they saw them.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker), Ross

Page Number: 374

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most important passages in the memoir, as Wright describes witnessing Ross confess to "sedition" against the Communist Party. With the trial, Wright feels that this one man's spirit has been broken by the group.

The ambivalence here is central to Wright's attitude throughout. One the one hand, he cannot entirely condemn a Party with such a powerful vision. Wright believes in international Communism; he wants it to succeed. He feels that consumer capitalism is shallow and empty, and he finds Americans to mostly be politically apathetic, willing to accept unfair labor conditions without fighting back. This enrages Wright, and he thinks the Party is a useful mechanism for creating change in the world. It has given him a sense of unity across racial lines—with people brought together in their defense of labor.

But it is a horrible scene, too: it reminds Wright of the tenuous nature of individual freedom. Wright has worked from a young age to carve out a life for himself. He has read when he can, written late into the night—he has spent much of his money on books. He's suffered through humiliating labor to continue in his project of self-betterment. He cannot so easily give his freedom away; it is the fruit of a lifetime's devotion. The Communist Party says it represents free men, but Wright wonders what kind of freedom the Party actually prizes. If one cannot express oneself within the Party, then he is not truly free.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ I would hurl words into the darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.

Related Characters: Richard Wright (speaker)

Page Number: 384

Explanation and Analysis

Another important passage in the memoir, and the book's closing sentiment. Wright wonders who will listen to what he's written. This is the "darkness" he describes; the "echo" is the book's reverberation with another mind (the mind of a reader). If Wright can connect with one, or a few, people, his writing will not have been in vain. Perhaps, too, his ideas will inspire others, encouraging them to better themselves, pursue freedom and equality for all people. Maybe those people will also become writers and artists, and share their ideas with humanity.

But, of course, Wright has reached more than a few souls. His writings ignited passionate feeling across the political spectrum, in the middle of the twentieth century and beyond. Many white and black writers revered his work, took it to heart, and emulated it. Some writers, across the racial spectrum, criticized Wright—but all acknowledged the power of his work. They noted Wright's commitment to freedom of conscience and to the goals of personal fulfillment and social improvement. Wright believed that art

has value in itself, and that this value can better people's lives. This "inexpressible" human spirit is the subject of Wright's memoir—and a fitting note to end on.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The memoir begins as a four-year-old boy named Richard Wright—the book's author and narrator—and his unnamed brother sit quietly in their house in Mississippi. Their mother informs them that they must stay quiet, because their grandmother (their father's mother) is dying. Richard is bored, and, not knowing what to do to occupy himself, he sets fire to a few straws pulled from a broom. He then places the flame near the room's window curtains, not realizing it will cause them to blaze suddenly. Richard's brother is startled by the fire, and Richard, frightened, runs out of the house and crawls into its foundation, hiding underneath its chimney.

Richard often has a desire for action and danger that can make his own life difficult, endanger his safety, and frustrate those around him. It is telling that Wright begins the narrative with a story of his own misbehavior—as the memoir progresses, Richard begins to take into account others' feelings, just as the world seems to be lining up against him. The struggle to find one's true self in a world of strict external authority will be a central focus of the memoir.

Richard hears screams in the house, and continues to hide, hoping his family won't realize he is responsible for setting the house ablaze. Richard then feels his father tugging at him, and his father pulls Richard from out of his hiding place. Richard's mother and father at first seem relieved that Richard is okay, and they tell Richard that their grandmother and all other family members survived the fire, although half the house has been destroyed. But days after the fire, realizing that Richard was at fault for it, his parents beat him so heavily that he nearly dies. Lying in bed after his beating (with a **switch**), he hallucinates in a fever for days, but ultimately survives.

This scene foreshadows other instances in the memoir, in which Richard's misbehavior causes the adults in his life not to reason with him, or explain exactly what he has done wrong, but instead simply beat him for his indiscretions. Thus, he has a difficult time learning how to improve his behavior act in the manner expected of him. His mother's early violence, it seems, has a great deal to do with her own fears and anxieties as a parent. She perhaps worries that Richard will embark on a life of crime.

Richard the narrator then recounts a number of different memories and sensory experiences from his childhood, in no particular order, including: the beauty of the natural world around Natchez, Mississippi (the town of his birth and earliest years), the plants and animals he sees, and the sky in the evening. Richard then recounts his first move, with his family, to Memphis, where his parents have presumably gone to find work. The family lives in a small, decrepit tenement in Memphis, and his father works as an overnight security guard at a drugstore. Because he works at night, Richard's father is often tired and hard on the children, and he asks that they be quiet around the house when he sleeps during the day.

Even when Richard's father is present, providing money to the family and living under the same roof, he is absent in that he works during the night and sleeps during the day. Richard's father remains an enigma to him throughout the memoir—there is no moment of reconciliation between these two men. Indeed, Richard's relationships with ensuing "father figures," including Uncle Tom and Grandpa, tend mostly to revolve around punishment for Richard's perceived misbehavior.

Richard recounts a story in which he and his brother, playing with a cat, wake his father. Richard's father then tells Richard to kill the cat, or "do anything" to keep the cat from making noise. Although Richard and his brother know that his father does not mean to actually murder the cat, Richard pretends that he has understood his father's command literally, and he kills the cat by hanging it in a tree.

This is a gruesome scene, and perhaps the low point of Richard's childhood misbehavior. From this moment onward, Richard appears to understand, if imperfectly, that his actions have consequences and that killing the cat does not so much harm his father as it does hurt another living thing.

Richard's brother is horrified by Richard's actions, and Richard's mother chastises him, saying that it was a sin to kill the cat, and that Richard knew his father was not being serious with his "command" to do so. Richard's father realizes he cannot beat Richard for following his order—Richard has therefore gotten the upper hand on his father on this occasion—but Richard's mother punishes Richard by forcing him to untie the cat, bury it, and say a few words at its "funeral." This causes Richard to feel terrible for his act of brutality, and he states that, after this episode, he never wanted to see a kitten again.

Richard's mother's punishment might appear brutal, but it causes Richard to confront his murder of the cat and the ease with which he carried out the crime. The hanging of the cat (though not acknowledged by Richard in this way) also foreshadows the threat of death by lynching at the hands of white men that seems to follow Richard and all other black people in the South.

Richard reports that he begins feeling hungry, and that there is no food in the house. At first, when he tells this to his mother, she laughs and says he should catch a "kungry" if he's hungry—an imaginary beast that hungry boys can eat. But, after Richard complains more about his hunger pains, his mother tells him that his father has left the family, and that she will have to get a job to put food on the table. Richard and his brother periodically ask why their father is no longer living with them, but their mother refuses to explain why he's gone.

Although she becomes a more sympathetic character later in the narrative—especially after Granny is revealed to be one of the memoir's antagonists—Richard's mother is a serious woman, who is nearly devastated when her husband leaves the family. Hunger, meanwhile, is a constant in Richard's life—a product of both racially-caused poverty and his own father's abandonment.

His mother begins sending Richard out to buy groceries, and a pack of young boys in the neighborhood continually beat him up, stealing his food basket and money. Richard complains to his mother, who tells him he won't be allowed back in the house if he doesn't purchase the food. She gives him more money and a stick to beat off the bullies, which Richard eventually uses on them, scaring them away. At this point, Richard reports that he feels more comfortable walking the streets of Memphis, though he is only a young boy.

This is an example of Richard's mother's "tough love." Richard, for his part, fights the boys even though he is afraid of them, and he obeys his mother even though he understands that she is being particularly strict. Richard encounters a great many difficulties between the ages of four and seventeen, and his self-reliance and ability to fight back against his antagonists is an enormous boon for him.

Richard's mother begins working as a cook for a white family, and Richard—who is forced to watch the white family eat sumptuous meals, prepared by his mother—walks hungrily around town while his mother is on the job. One day, he wanders near a bar filled with drunks, and they invite him inside, saying that if he is going to "peep around" there in the daytime, he might as well have a drink. The drunks tell Richard inappropriate phrases to repeat to one another and to women in the bar in exchange for sips of alcohol, and Richard finds himself more or less constantly drunk for days at a time, though he is only six years old. His mother beats him with a **switch** to correct his behavior, and finally, after his mother hires a babysitter to look after Richard and his brother, the "taste of alcohol" leaves Richard, and he does not drink again until he is much older.

Although Richard seems quite innocent in some ways—not knowing, for example, that lighting the curtains on fire will nearly destroy the entire house—he has become hardened and mature in other ways. Here, Richard notes that he was a "drunk" before he was anything else—a student, a lover of literature, an émigré to the North. Throughout the memoir, there are moments when it is clear that Richard's life could have taken a different path. Here, Richard is thankful that he did not succumb to a lifetime of alcohol abuse—that his "taste" for alcohol was nothing more than a child's passing interest. Meanwhile, all the men who fed him alcohol for fun clearly took another path, and there is a sense that the black men in the bar seek their escape in alcohol and the frivolous, destructive behavior it encourages in them.

One day, Richard's mother orders coal for the house and tells Richard to wait for the delivery man to bring it. The man realizes that Richard is poor, hungry, and uneducated—that Richard does not even know how to count—and so the coal-man teaches Richard how to recite the numbers. Richard also begins picking his way through children's **books** left on the street by schoolchildren.

Because Richard has no father-figure in the home, it is only by accident that men in his life teach him anything. Of course, his mother, too, could have taught Richard the basics of reading and writing, but Richard's mother is working much of the day in order to feed her two children.

At this age—around six—Richard also learns of the hatred between "white" and "black" people from his mother. Richard is at first confused, since his Granny (his mother's mother) has very light skin but is considered black. His mother begins explaining to him that whites and blacks in Memphis are separate groups that do not mix, and that whites occasionally become violently angry at blacks. Richard "wonders to himself" what white people are "really like" when he sees them on the street.

Richard's understanding of "whiteness" and "blackness" is of central interest in the memoir. At first, Richard does not understand that these two categories—the former "good," the latter associated with "being bad"—have much to do with the color of one's skin. Richard instead thinks (rightly) that most people's skin exists on a gradient of lighter and darker shades, without falling into obvious racial categories. Richard also here thinks of whites as people whom he could get to know.

Richard's mother scrapes together money to send Richard to school—she must buy him a uniform so he can be admitted—and on the first day, Richard learns many slang words, mostly dirty, from his fellow students. On his way back from school, Richard soaps these words onto the windows of neighborhood houses, but when his mother finds out, she sends Richard back to erase his work. Wright remarks that he "kept those words to himself" from this point on.

Interestingly, this is Richard's first experience of "writing" in the memoir. The words are those he has heard in school—words that he knows are forbidden in his home, but words that have a powerful and immediate effect on the neighbors. Richard gives up swearing in this way, but he does not give up the act of writing—it is one of the primary activities of his life.

Richard's mother becomes more observantly religious after his father leaves, and she invites the preacher from the local church over for dinner. Richard cries out when the preacher takes nearly all the chicken from the dinner table, and Richard begins to sense, even at a young age, that preachers and religious men can have the same failings as non-religious people.

Most of the preachers in the memoir are concerned with a theatrical presentation of scripture and with ensuring that the church is continually growing and adding new members. Richard does not seem to find any preachers who talk to him genuinely about their experiences of faith.

Richard goes to court with his brother and mother as his mother attempts to argue before a judge that Richard's father should pay child support. The father says he is doing all he can, that he has no more money, and the judge accepts his argument. Richard and the family continue living in near-total poverty. They are hungry much of the time, especially after his mother becomes sick with an undisclosed illness, and can no longer work. She places Richard and his brother in a local orphanage, in the care of Miss Simon, because she cannot afford to feed, clothe, and house the boys.

Richard's father's defense would be laughable if it weren't for the horrific circumstances Richard and his brother face. Both children barely have enough to eat, and Richard's mother is so concerned with their wellbeing that she is nearly crippled by anxiety. Yet Richard's father lies to the judge, says he is doing all he can, and continues to provide no money at all for child support.

At the orphanage, Richard continues to be hungry—they are mostly fed a kind of gruel—and the boys spend their days with the other children, pulling grass out of the orphanage lawn, because the facility is too poor to afford lawn mowers. Miss Simon takes a liking to Richard and asks if he would like to be adopted by her, but Richard says that, at this point, he has "learned to distrust everyone," and rebuffs Miss Simon's advances. Miss Simon wishes for Richard to be her "secretary," and she asks him to blot letters for her, but he freezes and cannot complete the task. Miss Simon asks what's wrong with Richard, and he leaves the room.

Miss Simon's motivations in this section aren't exactly clear, although she appears simply to like Richard and to want to help him in any way possible. Richard's family has already been torn apart once, however, when his father left, and when his brother is placed with Aunt Maggie in Detroit, it will be torn apart again. Perhaps Richard simply has no room in his life for another maternal authority figure—one who might, when things become difficult, choose also to abandon him.

Later that day, Richard decides to leave the orphanage, and he runs away into the streets of Memphis, where he is soon picked up by a white police officer. The officer takes Richard back to the orphanage, where he is lashed by Miss Simon. When his mother next visits, she tells Richard that he must remain in the orphanage and be a "good boy," or else he will only cause her pain and suffering.

Richard's early run-ins with the law have little to do with his actual criminal endeavors—his fights, his drinking—and much more to do with the racial composition of the local police force (mostly white). Here, Richard is spotted on the street and immediately identified as a runaway.

His mother agrees to take Richard out of the orphanage if he will go to his father and ask for money to feed the family. Richard, understanding that he must make difficult choices like this if he wants to survive, agrees to do so, and goes with his mother to his father's new house, where he lives with a "strange woman," his girlfriend. His father tells Richard that Richard can live with him—he would then have "all the food he wants"—but Richard tells his father that he hates him and the strange woman. His father offers a nickel to feed the family, but his mother tells him not to take it, out of principle, and Richard refuses.

Richard believes he is desperate enough to be able to ask for money from his father, but he realizes that doing so would be more painful than the hunger he is experiencing on a daily basis. Richard's ability to suffer through physical discomfort in the name of principle will continue throughout the text—he is hungrier for respect and independence than he is for food.

Wright then closes the chapter with a vision of his father 25 years later, when he next sees him. Richard has returned on a visit from the North, and finds that his father is now a sharecropper, or farm-servant, on a plantation outside Memphis. His father has been hobbled by years of hard work in the fields, and though Richard understands that they are related, he feels he has nothing in common with this man. Richard says that his father "tried to make it in the city, but failed," and returned to the countryside, where he, a black peasant, felt more comfortable, and where the work required only physical strength and constant toil.

This is an emotionally devastating passage, and Richard does not return to subject again in the memoir. The specter of Richard's father haunts the story, however, and Richard does everything he can to leave the South and establish himself in the North so that he can avoid his father's fate. Richard also places a great deal of emphasis on his education—particularly on literacy—since he believes that a good deal of his father's suffering, and the suffering of many African Americans, stems from a lack education.

CHAPTER 2

Richard's mother comes back to Richard—who has not yet left the orphanage, since his mother still cannot afford to care for him—and says that she, Richard, and his brother will be moving to her sister's house in Elaine, Arkansas, after stopping to see Granny in Jackson, Mississippi. Richard is so overjoyed at this news that he quickly packs and leaves the orphanage, not even stopping to say goodbye to the other children. Richard remarks that later on, he came to believe that black people were often unkind to one another in this way, not out of any deep-seated inhospitality, but because the degradations and difficulties of their lives made warmth and politeness more difficult within the black community.

Richard's remark on black fellow-feeling is interesting, since it opens Wright up to the accusation that he is denigrating his own people—that he is somehow self-loathing, or willing to entertain some of the same stereotypes whites have leveled against black families. But Wright seems to appreciate, here, that black family trauma is not an "inherited" or biological quality, but might be, instead, a simple response to generations of unfair living conditions.

Richard's mother and the two boys stop in Jackson to see Granny, who lives in a relatively large house. Granny is a deeply religious woman, who is black but has very light skin. She has a young girl board with her, a teacher named Ella. Ella reads **novels** frequently, and tells Richard the plot of the novel *Bluebeard* after Richard repeatedly asks what it's about. When Granny discovers that Ella has told Richard about this novel, she declares it the "devil's work" and slaps Richard, warning him not to read such "filth" in the house. But Richard realizes that novels and stories strike a deep chord in him, and he hungers to read more.

Ella is the first character in the novel to read seriously and for pleasure, and Richard is entranced with this activity. Richard seems most of all to envy Ella's ability to escape the problems of the "real world" and to find in literature another life that can be lived in the imagination. Although Richard's reading skills at this point in the narrative are limited, he appreciates this power of literature—its ability to enable him to transcend his circumstances.

Richard's mother falls ill again and remains in her bed. One night, when Granny is bathing Richard and his brother, Richard asks Granny, without thinking, to "kiss" his backside—a playful jest, he thinks. But Granny slaps him hard on the face, and calls to his mother and to Grandpa, her husband—a veteran of Union forces in the Civil War—who threatens to shoot Richard if he does not come into the main room for his beating. Richard is beaten savagely with a **switch** by his mother, but cannot tell his family where he learned such "dirty" language. Granny assumes Ella taught it to him and sends her away—she weeps as she leaves, knowing that she has been wrongly accused of encouraging this "filth" in Richard.

Richard does not seem to recognize the power that his language might have. For him, language as a tool is not yet refined—sometimes he repeats words simply to repeat them, to hear their sound, as he did in the bars when he was six years old. Granny, however, believes that language can be immensely dangerous, and that irreligious language can do "the devil's work" and cause people real harm. Thus Granny punishes Richard severely for what was, in essence, a child's misunderstanding.

In another brief section, Richard recounts the natural beauty of Jackson, and some of the more peaceful moments he and his brother enjoy with Grandpa and Granny. But Richard's mother soon takes Richard and his brother aboard a train to Arkansas, where they will live with her sister. On the train, Richard asks if he can speak to the white passengers, though he knows this is not allowed. He asks, too, if Granny is white, because of her light skin. His mother replies that Granny and Grandpa were both slaves, that their last names were given to them by white owners, and that some African Americans have lighter skin than others, but whites consider people with even distant African ancestry to be "black."

This is another of Richard's question-and-answer sessions with his mother regarding race and its social construction. Here, Richard is not sure whether his light-skinned Granny ought to be considered "white" or "black." Again, to him, skin is neither white nor black, but is rather somewhere in between; thus, any of the social characteristics attributed to "white" or to "black" people are not immediately obvious to Richard. But his mother makes clear that in the world of the South there are no gradations of black. To the dominant whites, anyone who appears even slightly black is treated as inferior.

Richard asks if he is black, and his mother says that society will view him as "colored," but that Richard's ancestry is really a mix of white, African, and Native American. Richard's mother is uncomfortable with the conversation, but Richard resolves, internally, that he will live as a "colored" man, and that if anyone challenges him, or if whites want to fight him, he will learn to fight them back.

Richard has a complicated lineage of white, African, and Native American, and yet the white-dominated society of the South ignores all of that—ignores his history and what makes him who he is—in seeing him solely as black. This fills Richard with anger and a determination to fight back in some way—and much of the book details the ways that he fights, which he can only think of in physical terms at this young age.

Richard, his brother, and his mother move in with his Aunt Maggie—his mother's sister—and her husband, Uncle Hoskins. The house in Elaine provides Richard, for the first time, with ample food, and he cannot believe that eating so well is possible. He puts biscuits in his pockets during meals in case there is no food the next day, although he slowly realizes that Hoskins and Maggie simply have enough to feed everyone.

Moving in with Aunt Maggie and Uncle Hoskins provides Richard with the first stable, loving environment of his life. It is the first time his hunger is satisfied, and it is a testament to Richard's experience of life that at first he can't believe this is possible to maintain.

Hoskins owns a bar in Elaine, and though Richard wants to visit him at work, his mother and Maggie tell Richard it's dangerous. Richard grows close to Hoskins. One day Hoskins, on his horse cart, offers to show Richard the river nearby, but Richard is so afraid of water that he forces Hoskins to take the horses back.

Hoskins is a real father figure to Richard—he's kind, and helps Richard to experience the world. Richard's fear of the river is never explained, but adds an ominous undertone to the scene.

A few days later, Hoskins goes to the bar and does not return that evening, and the family fears that something has happened to him. Finally, a messenger comes to the house late at night and says that Hoskins has been shot by an angry white man in Elaine—someone who coveted his lucrative liquor business. Although Maggie wishes to go down to the bar to find out what happened, Richard's mother urges her to stay home. Because Hoskins was killed extra-legally, and because the white authorities in Elaine will do nothing to help Maggie's case, Maggie and Richard's mother fear for their lives, and Richard's mother decides to move the family again, this time back to Granny's house in Jackson.

The brutal cruelty of racism is fully felt in Hoskins's death, and rams home the understanding in the reader (and Richard) that success for a black man in the South is impossible—white Southern society won't allow it. Richard's mother and aunt immediately know that Hoskins's absence is scary—they live in constant fear. Not even the law will step in to handle the case of the clear murder of a black man, and so racism forces the breakup of the first comfort Richard has found in his life.

In Jackson, Richard observes two different groups of men walking by when he is playing in the fields: the first is a line of soldiers, training for battle in World War I, which is raging in Europe at this time; the second is a line of black prisoners, working on a chain-gang and observed by white wardens. When Richard asks why the prisoners are all black and the guards are all white, his mother replies that "the law is harder on black people." Richard asks why the black people don't fight the wardens, and his mother says that only the wardens have weapons to fight with.

Following Hoskins's death, Richard is becoming more aware of the perniciousness of white racism and domination. White society, which controls the law, both punishes black people more harshly and stops them from being able to fight back against this injustice. Richard, however, is clearly interested in fighting back in some way, though he continues at this point to see this as meaning something physical.

After some time, Richard's mother decides that Granny's strict religious rules in the house are too much to bear, and so she moves Richard and his brother back to Arkansas, to the town of West Helena, near Elaine. There, Richard and his brother become friends with the some of the black boys in the neighborhood. The boys all play together in the local garbage dump or in the streets, and Richard joins with the others in singing lewd and anti-Semitic songs about a Jewish grocery-story owner. Wright acknowledges at the time of his writing that this prejudice was loathsome, especially in children experiencing their own prejudice, but he says also that mistrust of Jewish people was ingrained in African American communities at the time.

Wright recognizes when he's older that he was participating in racist activities directed against the Jewish grocer, even as he was subjected on a daily basis to the insults of white children who hated African Americans. Richard offers little explanation for why they targeted the Jewish grocer, other than to imply that they simply did so because he was "different," and because they too needed a kind of social satisfaction derived from the exclusion of another group for their lives. Richard grows up to regret this bigotry, and in revealing it and his own response to it he also exposes the awfulness of all of the Southern whites who neither recognize nor repent of their own racism.

Richard discovers that, on Saturdays, a great many men enter the house next-door to his own. A girl on the street tells Richard, who does not know what "business" goes on there, that the neighboring house is a brothel. Richard sneaks in and observes a man and woman engaged in a sex act, but the landlady running the brothel finds him and carries him back home, then launches into a tirade when Aunt Maggie and Richard's mother return from their jobs (they are once again cooking for white families in the area). The madam of the brothel, who also owns the apartment Richard's family rents, forces the family to leave, and they take up lodgings down the street.

Richard comes into close contact with numerous brothels during his young life. Here in his innocence he wanders into the one next door. That the proprietress of the brothel then criticizes Richard and his family and essentially evicts them exposes the hypocrisy of society, the way those with any power use it to maintain that power. This is of course not on the same par as the white man's murder of Hoskins, but it is another example of the way that society restrains and punishes the individual.

At the new house, Richard becomes aware of another intrigue: namely, that his Aunt Maggie has begun seeing a new man, named "Uncle" Matthews, who appears to be a kind of preacher or social leader, and who dresses formally, in a "high white collar." Matthews appears to be in hiding, as he only visits Richard's house at night, and when Richard asks his aunt and mother about this, they reply that Matthews is on the run from white people who wish to kill him.

As Richard later explains, he never learns the nature of Uncle Matthews's occupation, or the reasons for his crimes. It might be that Matthews was a freedom advocate for black people and was doing his best to help their cause in the South—or it might be that Matthews was a kind of "terrorist"—a man who simply wanted to destroy parts of white society.

One night, Matthews enters the house in a hurry and tells Maggie and Richard's mother, with Richard overhearing from his bedroom, that he (Matthews) has set fire to a house with a woman inside, as a means of destroying evidence and keeping the white family from finding out what has happened. Matthews and Aunt Maggie decide to leave in the middle of the night. Before they do so, Maggie says a tearful goodbye to Richard and his brother. The next morning, Richard asks his mother what has taken place, and she says only that if Richard speaks about these events to anyone, he and other members of the family could be killed. Richard never brings up the event again, but he also notes that he never learns the exact nature of the crime Matthews committed, and why he did it.

Richard learns from his mother another fact of life in the South—black people must know when to speak and when to keep silent. The white assumption in the South is always that any black person is potentially a guilty party. Thus, Richard's mother wants to keep Richard out of trouble and away from the gaze of white men, who will presume him to be a criminal even if he has committed no crime. Here, Richard's mother does not want Richard even to know or acknowledge his relationship with Uncle Matthews.

The family once again needs money, as Aunt Maggie is no longer living with them and bringing home her income from cooking. Richard goes door-to-door in the white neighborhood of town, a few days later, to try to sell his dog, Betsy, a white poodle given him by Matthews before he left town. Richard finds a young white girl who wishes to buy the dog for a dollar, but when she returns to the door with only 97 cents, Richard refuses the money out of principle and takes his dog home. The dog is later crushed by a car, and his mother calls Richard a "fool" for not taking the money—as now the family has no money to use for food, and no dog to sell.

This is a strange episode in the memoir. Richard knows that 97 cents is almost as good as a dollar, but his anger toward the white girl, who comes from comfortable circumstances, is such that he cannot allow her to "take" three cents from him. Richard's pride will not allow him to accept any less than what he is owed. His mother takes an opposing view: that he should recognize that white society will never give any black person what they are worth or owed, and so the only non-self-destructive response is for the black person to take what they can get.

Wright notes that, at about this age (around eight years old), he began to live more and more in fear of white violence. The World War is winding down, and the return of black and white soldiers to the South has inflamed racial tensions. Richard hears stories of lynchings of black men, and of a black woman who gets vengeance on the white murderers of her husband by shooting them with a concealed weapon at her husband's own burial. Richard says to himself that, like the black woman just described, he, too, will fight tooth-and-nail to defend himself if white men ever try to beat him up or harm him. But Richard also lives in fear of white anger on a daily basis.

The story of a black woman killing whites after her own husband has been killed is a kind of strange and morbid fantasy for Richard, but he never personally exercises this kind of violence against whites. Richard is surly and disobedient in his early jobs, when the owners are white men and women, but he stops at real violence against these parties, knowing that, if he were to fight back, he would be instantly imprisoned or killed. Richard instead comes to aim for subtler, more passive forms of resistance.

Richard's mother finds a new job as an assistant to a white doctor, and her wages are sufficient to place the two children back in school. Richard goes to the first day of class and is asked to write his name on the board, but he freezes in public, as he has done before, and though he knows his name and can write, he is unable to perform this task in front of the room. Then, many weeks later, the entire school is dismissed in the middle of the day—the World War is officially over. In a crowd in the middle of the street, Richard sees a plane in the sky for the first time, celebrating the end of the conflict. For Christmas that year (1918), Richard remembers receiving just one orange, which he saves and eats slowly over the course of Christmas Day.

The story of the orange is another small and poignant one that at the same time hammers home the extent of Richard's racism-enforced poverty. Any joy, however small, must be savored by Richard until it is all gone. In World War II black soldiers fought alongside whites to preserve the "free world," only to return to a South that did all it could to restrict those black veterans freedom.

CHAPTER 3

Wright discusses how, as he got older (around ten years old), he began hanging around with a group of young black people in town, and began speaking as they spoke, in a shared slang and with shared anger toward whites. Richard and his friends often meet in the streets just to talk about their days, what they had eaten, what their parents and friends had heard and seen in their interactions with the white world of Arkansas. Wright states that, although he did not intend to begin speaking this way (for example, using the "n-word"), he did so mostly to fit in with his peers.

This is Richard's first real friendship group consisting of other black men. In hindsight, at the time of the memoir's composition, Richard understands that a good deal of the slang, the self-identification with the "n-word," and the use of exaggerated terms for white intolerance were ways of discussing the black condition indirectly. At the same time, Richard's adoption of his peers' language shows how groups can influence or affect the behavior of their members.

Richard also gets into small fights with the neighborhood's white gang—the black and white gangs fight over a boundary marked by the "roundhouse," or train-shed, in town. After one such fight, Richard is hit in the head with a rock, and when he later shows his mother what happened, she beats him, saying that white boys could kill Richard in a fight if he's not careful. Richard begins working odd jobs for extra money—carrying lunches to workers, stoking wood at a café, carrying coal—as his mother's health deteriorates.

Richard's mother understands that children get into fights, and indeed she told Richard to fight off other black boys with a stick in Memphis, but she also knows that fights with white boys mean that the parents of those white boys might become involved, and if this is the case, then there is nothing—no law, no police force—that can save Richard from serious bodily harm, or even death. Racism makes "boys being boys" incredibly dangerous.

One day, Richard's brother calls him in to his mother's bedroom, and the two boys discover that their mother is paralyzed on her left side, and can barely speak, move, or eat. Some neighbors come by, called for by Richard, and announce that their mother has had a stroke. Richard finds Granny's address and writes to her in Jackson, asking her to come to Arkansas to help care for daughter. After several days, during which Richard barely eats the food given to him out of charity by his neighbors, Granny arrives and takes over management of the family from Richard.

Richard's mother's strokes are a refrain throughout much of the rest of the memoir. Just as she appears to be improving, she has another bad turn, another stroke, and when her paralysis appears to be leaving here, she is bedridden again. By the end of the memoir, through means not described by Richard, his mother does recover enough to travel to Memphis and then to Chicago. But for much of Richard's childhood, she is bedridden.

Granny dictates letters to Richard to be sent to other family members asking for money, and she arranges for the two boys and their mother to be transported by train back to Jackson, where Granny can care for her in her own home. Various relatives arrive in Jackson: Aunt Maggie, who now lives in Detroit; Aunt Cleo (from Chicago); Uncles Clark, Edward, and Thomas from Mississippi; Uncle Charles from Mobile; and Aunt Addie from Huntsville. Richard begins sleepwalking at night out of anxiety for his mother's condition, and Granny feeds him more and has him nap in the afternoons, in order to make Richard more comfortable.

Granny is one of the many characters in the memoir who is illiterate. Richard's struggle for literacy, and then for mastery of the English language, derives in part from the very limited education given to African Americans at this time. Richard had to want to read and write badly just to be given the opportunity to acquire a few novels, or paper and pencil.

After several days, an uncle (Wright does not specify which) calls both boys into a room filled with family, and says that Granny is too old to care for both Richard and his brother, and that the boys will be raised separately. Richard's brother is to head north to Detroit to live with Aunt Maggie, and the uncle asks Richard where he'd like to go: Richard answers that he wants to be with Uncle Clark in Greenwood, Mississippi, because it's the closest town to Jackson.

Here is another example of a society, in this case Richard's family, deciding what is best for individuals—Richard and his brother—with results that are not clearly in those individuals' best interests.

Uncle Clark takes Richard by train down to Greenwood, where he meets Aunt Jody, who will help to care for him. The two assign Richard some chores around the house and say he will be sent to school; they appear to be a rule-abiding, God-fearing middle-class family. Richard gets in a fight on his first day of school—the scuffle ends in a draw—and students no longer fight him after seeing that he can defend himself. A few days later, a man named Burden comes by—a previous owner of Clark and Jody's house—and tells Richard that his son, who is now dead, used to live and sleep in Richard's room. This information terrifies Richard, who begins having nightmares about the young, dead boy, and cannot sleep.

It is unfortunate that Richard has trouble adapting to life with Clark and Jody, since their house is a comfortable one, and they are able to provide him with a good deal of food, clothing, and access to an education. But Richard has trouble dealing with the "ghost" of the dead child, and perhaps this is really a way of saying that Richard has trouble being separated from his mother and brother. It would not be strange for a young boy to feel traumatized after so much disruption in his family in such a short time.

Richard can barely sleep for days afterward, and begs to sleep on the couch in the family room of the house, but Clark and Jody will not let him. Richard then asks to be sent home, but Clark says that Richard will have to wait till the end of the school term, since he has not had even "one year of uninterrupted schooling." One afternoon, after carrying water outside and spilling it on his clothes, Richard unleashes a string of expletives and is heard by Jody, who promptly tells Clark. When Clark takes Richard inside to beat him for his insolence, Richard begs again to be sent back to Jackson, to Granny and his mother, and Clark finally agrees to do so. By the end of the week, Richard is back on a train to Jackson, with Clark and Jody puzzled as to Richard's inability to accept their kindness and generosity.

Clark and Jody are only willing to let Richard go once they realize that they cannot reason with him, that he will stop at nothing to get back to Granny, whom Clark and Jody know to be a brutal disciplinarian and a strictly religious woman. Clark and Jody no longer appear in the narrative after this. Richard, for his part, understands their kindness but simply states that life with them outside Jackson was simply too uncomfortable for him to bear—mostly on account of the "ghost" in his room.

After returning to be with his mother, Richard realizes that her series of operations and treatments will leave her mostly sick for the rest of her life. Wright writes that his mother's constant suffering will stay with him for the rest of his life, and this pain, joined to the constant pain of racial prejudice in the South, will be two of the largest determinants of his personality. Richard is twelve at this point in the memoir, and has only had about one year of "formal schooling."

Richard implies that his mother's physical pain is in many ways symbolic of the racial and political pain of the entire black South, which is kept from living a full and healthy life by white authority. Richard feels that the only way out of the cycle of black subjugation is to move to a place where black people can make their own lives, and to attempt to heal there. For him, this place is Chicago.

CHAPTER 4

Richard recognizes that he is now an "uninvited dependent" in Granny's home—since his mother is no longer earning money, but rather lying in her bed, and since Richard's brother is now in Detroit—so he must submit to Granny's will. Granny, for her part, is an extreme adherent to the doctrines of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Her youngest daughter Addie (Aunt Addie) returns from Alabama to Jackson to teach in the church's religious school, which Granny forces Richard to attend. Addie is nervous in front of the classroom, and Richard is annoyed by the "docility" of the other students, who are not as rough and boisterous as the public-school crowd.

Although Richard does not address the issue directly, it seems especially cruel to make a young child whose mother is quite ill feel that he is not welcome in his own family's house. Addie and Granny often tell Richard that he is partly responsible for the family's "bad luck," that his inability to follow religious teachings is what keeps his mother sick. They are attempting to force him into living as they want him to, but Richard's disdain for the "docile" kids in Addie's class suggests his devotion to maintaining his individuality.

Granny and Addie both feel that Richard is an ingrate, because he refuses to accept the teachings of their church, and is therefore not "saved." One day, in the schoolroom where Addie is the teacher, Addie observes that crushed walnuts are under Richard's seat, though they were left to fall by the student in front of Richard. Richard denies that he was eating in the classroom, and cannot believe that the student in front will not own up to his "crime." Addie decides to make an example of Richard anyway, and whips him with a **switch** in the front of the classroom.

Once again, Richard is punished not for one of the things he has actually done wrong, but for something Addie only believes he has done wrong. Addie believes that Richard's denials are only evidence of his guilt. Addie adopts the accusatory attitude of white society, assuming that black people are always guilty.

Later that day, Richard and Addie return to Granny's home, and Addie begins yelling at Richard, again, for not respecting her and for eating in class. Richard again denies the charge, saying that the boy in front of him left the shells, and that Addie would not let Richard defend himself publically in class. Addie then yells at Richard for "lying" about his crime and begins whipping him again for his "lie." Richard then picks up a knife from the kitchen and says that he will kill Addie if she tries to beat him, since he has done nothing to deserve punishment. Granny, Richard's mother, and Grandpa finally persuade Richard to put down the knife, but Granny and Grandpa call Richard "wicked" and say that "the gallows await him" for his crimes.

Richard's threat with the knife is perhaps credible, although it is hard to imagine the young man actually stabbing and Addie. His anger is palpable and real, though, and Addie understands that Richard feels backed into a corner. Addie, once she realizes that Richard was not guilty of dropping the shells, yells at him for "lying" to her and not accusing his classmate, but one can readily anticipate that, if Richard had done this, Addie would then be angry at Richard for attempting to pin the blame on someone else, for not being "responsible" for his actions. Addie's real goal is to save face for herself and force Richard to behave as she wants him to.

Richard continues going to school in Addie's classroom, though she no longer calls on him, and barely acknowledges his presence around the house. Richard is encouraged by Granny and others in the house to pray constantly, and the family incorporates religious rites into nearly every activity in the home, including chores and meals. Granny also brings Richard to all-night prayer sessions, in the hopes of converting him to Jesus's path. Wright says that, although he respects to an extent the emotional severity and beauty of parts of the Christian service, too much of his personality "has been formed" by the difficult events of his young life, and he does not believe in God, nor look to Him for salvation. Richard, aged twelve, also begins to go through puberty, and spends a good deal of time in church, when he is supposed to be praying, instead looking at the young women around him.

To Richard, church is simply a time when people in the community come together and sit with one another. He understands the social element of the church, and to the extent that he responds to church activities, he does so by conceiving of them as a gathering of likeminded people. But Richard does not possess any religious "feeling," and praying is time he could be spending reading or writing. Later on, when Richard writes his first story, he does so when his grandmother assumes he is up in his room, asking Jesus Christ for forgiveness for his sins. Richard looks not to God or religion for salvation; he looks to himself.

Granny prepares to make one final effort to convince Richard to become a full-fledged member of the Seventh-Day Church. Richard's extended family arranges for a faithful young boy (unnamed) to come and speak to Richard about his soul. Richard disputes the boy's conclusions about God, saying that he (Richard) simply has no "religious feeling," and he concludes by saying that, "If he thought he could lay down his life to end suffering in the world, he would do so, but he doesn't believe that this sacrifice would help anyone." The boy is stunned by Richard's bleak and convincing conclusion, and he goes away without having converted him.

Wright's personal philosophy is here on display when he is only about twelve years old. Richard recognizes the power of the story of Christ's sacrifice, and he perhaps even wishes that this story were true, but he has had no occasion in life to view religion as a benevolent force. To Richard, religion is simply a way for even stricter order to be imposed on the black population of the South, and one which in embracing it black people now impose on themselves.

Granny, then, "mounts one final attempt" to bring Richard to the church. She takes him to a revival, or long worship ceremony, at which the elder gives a long speech about Jacob, who was visited by an angel. Richard, trying to reason with Granny, tells her in the pews that if he ever sees an angel, he will convert on the spot. But Granny mishears and believes that Richard said he *has* in fact seen an angel; Granny rushes up to the elder and tells him so, and the elder pulls Richard in front of the congregation to celebrate his conversion. Richard then embarrassedly tells the elder, Granny, and the rest of the churchgoers that he had been speaking hypothetically, and all are disappointed—Granny most of all, because she believes for a time that Richard has intentionally tried to make her look foolish in front of the church.

As Richard states, his intention here was positive, thinking that there would be no case when anyone would actually believe that Richard had seen an angel. But Richard realizes after the fact that everyone in the church was already primed to see angels, and that the preacher and Granny would readily accept the idea that Richard had been visited by the holy spirit in the church hall. Thus, Richard manages to upset his Granny and to alienate himself further from the church community.

Granny soon believes Richard's apology, however, and asks him to continue praying in his room for forgiveness. Richard tries but "does not feel the holy spirit close to him," after many days and nights of attempting. One day, while he is supposed to be praying, Richard's mind wanders, and he begins thinking of a **book** on Native Americans he read recently. He quickly drafts a story of a young Native American woman sitting in the woods, and though the story "lacks plot" and is by Wright's account only a crude effort, he is so excited to have written something that he runs next door later that day and reads the story to a young woman, his neighbor. The woman is baffled by Richard's story, and asks why he has written it and where he thought it up. Richard is struck by the disconnect between his excitement at the story's composition and the young woman's confusion as to why he wrote it at all.

Many of Richard's early literary efforts are attempts to imagine the world from different perspectives. Here, Richard does all he can to understand what a young Native American woman might experience if she were simply looking at nature. Wright says later on that he comes to understand literature as perhaps the most powerful tool, for him, in the lifelong project of understanding other people's viewpoints. For Richard, literature is therefore a force for empathy in the world—a substitute for religion, which he experiences as other people trying to force him to adopt their viewpoints, and an art form in which he can believe absolutely.

CHAPTER 5

Granny and Addie give up on converting Richard to Christianity, and Richard settles into an uneasy truce with them, as his mother recovers enough at least to encourage Richard in his studies from her bed. Richard enrolls in the local public school and is placed in the fifth grade, despite his age (he is roughly thirteen). He is soon promoted to sixth grade, on account of his reading and writing abilities. Richard again defends himself in front of the other children in the schoolyard, who taunt him for his new hat on the first day of classes. After fighting two of them, he is taken into the office by a teacher, where he says he had to stand his ground. The teacher grudgingly sends him off to join the other students.

Richard once again feels the need to "establish himself" in the school and to protect himself from those who seek to bully him. It's unclear, however, whether it is always useful for Richard to fight his way out of these particular scrapes. The black community accepts his instinct to protect and stand up for himself, but when Richard encounters white society as an employee it becomes clear that such straightforward refusals to bend won't work.

Granny and Addie will not give Richard money for "earthly **books**," meaning anything that is not the Bible, and they continue to feed him on a diet of mostly greens and mush, with very little for lunch on school days. Richard begs Granny that he be able to work on Saturdays—which Granny considers the Sabbath—in order to buy food for himself to eat during school lunch, but Granny forbids this, saying that the Sabbath is for rest only, and even if Richard is not religious, he will follow the house's religious rules.

Granny does not care whether Richard starves, or whether he has anything to occupy his mind. She uses religion as a kind of defense against parts of the world that she does not wish to engage with. Thus, because Granny herself has no need for books, she assumes that Richard, too, can gain nothing from reading them.

Richard finds a young boy in his sixth-grade class who is selling newspapers with a "magazine supplement" in the back, serializing *Riders of the Purple Sage*, an adventure story. Richard is enticed by the prospect of reading this serial each week and of making some money to buy lunch, and so secures a subscription to the paper and begins selling the papers throughout the black neighborhoods of Jackson. He is able to do so, in part, because Granny permits work on non-Sabbath days, and because she cannot read, so she does not know what the paper and supplement are about. Richard does not read the paper either, only the stories in the back, and he is pulled aside one day by a black man, a carpenter, who tells Richard that the paper is an organ of the KKK, and that it spouts only Klan doctrine, including racist caricatures and rumors about African Americans.

This is an upsetting episode in the memoir. Richard wants desperately to be able to read, and so the job delivering newspapers seems like a perfect one—it enables him to take the magazine supplement and to enjoy it every week. But Richard finds out that his job has a terrible dark side. Richard perhaps wonders at this point if his efforts to buy books and fill his belly are even worth it. At every turn, either Granny or some aspect of white society attempts to thwart Richard, to make it difficult for him to earn money respectably. But Richard does not give up in his quest for greater understanding.

Richard is appalled, and vows to the man never to sell the papers again; his friend, too, stops selling them, although the boys are too embarrassed to discuss with each other the contents of the papers they were so eager to share with the world. The carpenter tells Richard that people in the neighborhood assumed that Richard was simply unaware of the material he was selling, but Richard is nonetheless ashamed. Richard works hard that year in school, and reads whatever dime-store **novels** he can get his hands on in his spare time. As summer begins, however, Granny still will not permit him to work a job that meets on the Sabbath. Because Richard can find no other kind of employment, he is mostly idle.

Richard wants to engage his body and his mind, and to make money to help to support himself, but Granny, out of an abstract principle, believes it is more important to starve and maintain the Sabbath than it is to be comfortable and happy in one's work. This paradox is one of the frustrations that helps keep Richard away from Granny's strict religious views.

One summer day, Richard is sitting on the porch steps with Granny, Addie, and mother. Granny and Addie are arguing about "religious doctrine," as they often do, and Richard is mostly silent. When a point strikes Richard as interesting, he chimes in, only to be swiped at by Granny, who often hits Richard when he is "bold" enough to speak without being spoken to. Richard dodges Granny's blow, however, and the force of her swipe causes her to tumble forward and hurt her back.

Not only do Granny and Addie require Richard to pray for long stretches of the day, but they also establish a family rule according to which Richard cannot speak unless spoken to. Richard violates this rule and behaves naturally—hoping to avoid a blow—but Granny's ensuing injury is nonetheless blamed on Richard and on the "bad spirit" he brings into the house.

Addie goes inside, where Richard has run to his room out of fear, and yells at Richard, saying that he has hurt Granny, that he is a fool and does the devil's work. Richard responds that he was only attempting to protect himself, and when Addie continues to yell at him, Richard says he will sleep with a knife under his pillow in case Addie ever comes into his room to chastise him or beat him. Addie then leaves, and Wright remarks that though their house was "religious," he has never found a more violent or disputatious place, a home so bereft of love and kindness.

Richard reprises his threat of the knife to Addie—and again, it is not clear whether he would actually use the knife on her, though she appears to believe he is not bluffing. Richard finally notes what has become obvious—that, though the house claims to observe strict Christian teachings, it is a house devoid of love, fellowship, and happiness. It is instead a home full of violence, anger, and recrimination.

Richard finally finds a job that summer working as a secretary for an insurance salesman named Brother Mance, who cannot read, and who goes about the plantations outside Jackson to sell insurance policies to poor black families. Richard, in seeing these families, is ashamed at his own roots—he, too, was born on a plantation. He wonders what is to become of large segments of the Southern black population, who are too poor to gain an education and to move away from the difficult conditions of plantation life. The job is somewhat rewarding work, though, and Richard is sad when Brother Mance dies soon thereafter, as the insurance company will not allow a minor to continue in Mance's place selling policies. Richard returns to school in the fall and starts the seventh grade—he still reads a great deal in his spare time, and is still often quite hungry.

Richard's job with Brother Mance is perhaps the one he enjoys the most before he is hired in an optometrist's shop. Richard enjoys especially the opportunity to read and write, and to deploy those skills in the service of others. But Richard also recognizes that he recoils at the sight of many of the rural "peasantry" in Mississippi, and he is embarrassed that he, too, has ties to this particular region. Thus it is with his characteristic mixture of empathy and antipathy that Richard describes the Southern, rural, black society into which he has been born.

Richard comes to the kitchen table one day that fall and learns that Grandpa is very sick—that, as Granny puts it, he is now in his "final illness," although Grandpa has been sick for many years, on account of a wound suffered during the Civil War. Richard recounts that his Grandpa's name was mis-transcribed at the end of the war as Richard Vinson, not Richard Wilson (Grandpa thought this had been done on purpose by racist bureaucrats in the War Office); therefore, Grandpa never received his military pension, though he fought for the Union with great bravery, and maintained a lifelong hatred of the Confederate States.

The story of Grandpa's elusive pension would be comical if it weren't a source of eternal torment for him and for the rest of the family. Grandpa recognizes the irony in having fought a war to emancipate slaves, and then to have his own pension deferred because of racist bureaucrats and general antipathy toward black people, but Grandpa's lack of formal education keeps him from petitioning the government more vigorously—he is reliant on the help of others even to write to the War Department offices.

Richard goes upstairs to say "goodbye" to his grandfather, but when he asks Granny about the words Grandpa mumbles to him one his deathbed, Granny slaps him, tells him to be quiet when "the angel of death is in the house," and sends Richard out to the far edge of town to fetch Tom, Grandpa's son, to tell him of Grandpa's death. Tom yells at Richard for announcing his father's death so brusquely, then makes Richard walk back home alone. After this episode, Wright remarks to himself "that he can never seem to do what people expect of him."

Tom will recur as another negative father figure, a man who does nothing but discipline Richard without offering him productive guidance of any kind. Tom will later attempt to punish Richard for a crime Richard does not even understand, and at this point, Richard makes clear that he will tolerate living in the same house as Tom, but nothing beyond that.

Granny does not allow Richard to attend Grandpa's funeral, but Richard does not mind too much, and he notes that life continues more or less as usual after Grandpa's death. One day late into Richard's seventh-grade school year, however, Richard finally confronts Granny, begging her only to let him work on the Sabbath so that he can have money to buy "long pants" (since only children wear the shorts Richard has been accustomed to wearing for years). Granny says that Richard will go to hell for doing this, but when Richard threatens to leave school and the house altogether, Granny relents, and Richard is permitted to work on Saturdays. When Richard tells his mother this, she is proud of him for standing up to Granny and Addie.

Richard's mother's relationship to religion is never fully explained, although it seems that at some moments in her life she is deeply religious (perhaps following Granny's example), and at other moments appears to disregard the necessity of religious teaching. Here is an example of the latter case. Richard's mother believes that Granny's rule prohibiting work on the Sabbath, can do nothing but cause Richard pain. Richard's mother wants Richard to earn money and possibly leave the South entirely.

CHAPTER 6

In the seventh grade, Richard again searches for employment in order to make enough money to buy food for himself and **books** to read. He asks his fellow students if they know of any work helping white families with chores, and he is recommended to one family, where the woman of the house asks if Richard steals. Richard responds that, if he did steal, he wouldn't tell her—but the woman does not like Richard's humor, and Richard realizes he must appear to be more deferential in order to appease white people—although this deference does not come naturally to him. After a day of doing chores in the house before and after school, Richard realizes that the food the family gives him is stale or rancid. The woman of the house also asks Richard that evening why he wants to be a writer, since the idea is crazy for a black boy from Jackson. Richard leaves quietly that evening, realizing he will not go back to work for that family.

Throughout the memoir, Richard's relationship to food remains a fraught one. First, as a young boy, he barely has enough to survive, and must fill his gut with mush and water just to simulate a feeling of satiety. Later, Richard begins earning a small amount of money and buying food during school hours. But in these jobs, when white families appear to be offering Richard their leftovers, Richard first finds that he is more or less eating table scraps, expired food, and garbage. Just as the white families treat him as subhuman in terms of the food they give him, the white woman can't even conceive of a black person becoming a writer.

Richard then takes on a job with another white family, doing similar chores, although this family also teaches him how to milk cows and do basic farm work. Richard earns a good deal—for him—of money with this job, and eats the food the family sets out for him in abundance. But Richard is also horrified by the petty and openly mean way in which the white family members talk to one another—they seem to ignore Richard and direct most of their vitriol at each other. Richard uses his proceeds from this job to buy new clothes and lunch during lunchtime, but he is so tired from his long mornings of work that his "studies begin to falter."

In his job working for this second white family, however, Richard is at least provided a good deal of non-rancid food. Yet the white family's cruelty is shocking to Richard, as he perhaps assumed that white families, having as they did enough to eat and more than enough money to go around, would be naturally more inclined toward happiness than poor black families. Also note how Richard's poverty forces him to work, which then interferes with the education that might allow him to escape that poverty. The racist South is a kind of trap for black people.

Richard's mother again begins to recover from her stroke-induced paralysis, and starts going to a Methodist church in Jackson, although Granny does not support this, believing that the Seventh-Day Church is the only true one. Richard's mother asks Richard to go with her, and he begins to, not out of religious feeling, but because he enjoys meeting the other young men and women in the church. During another long prayer revival, the preacher takes the young men who claim not to believe in God—Richard is in this group—into a room and begs them to accept the church. The preacher then leads the young men back into the main chapel and asks their mothers to come up next to them, to pray for their souls.

Here is another attempt at a conversion to Christianity, this time spurred on by Richard's mother and her apparently reinvigorated attitude toward the church. Richard's mother perhaps fears that she is going to die, and wants to know, if this does happen, that her son is safe and right with God. Or perhaps Richard's mother attributes her continued survival to a divine presence, and wants to be sure that Richard will continue religious observance in order to keep their household safe.

Richard's mother does so, and begins weeping and praying for Richard, begging him to accept Christ and make her happy. Richard finally agrees to accept the church—again, not out of religious conviction, but simply because he wishes to give his mother some solace. Richard agrees also to be baptized, and though he tells his mother that he "feels nothing" of the holy spirit, she says that this feeling "will come." Richard goes to church for a while, but begins skipping Sunday School after a number of other young men also fall off in their adherence to the faith.

Richard finally seems to understand that "becoming part of the church" really means placating his mother. Their relationship was difficult when Richard was younger, but now that he is a teenager he understands her suffering and wants, when possible, to ease her pain and make their home-life more bearable. His decision to become a member of the congregation underscores this new agreeableness.

In the summer after seventh grade, Richard's mother again falls ill. To bring in extra money and help around the house, Granny and Addie have Uncle Tom and his family, from the outskirts of Jackson, live in the house. One day, Tom asks Richard if he knows what time it is, and when Richard gives him only an approximate answer, Tom flies into a rage, calling Richard rude and saying that he will give him a "beating Richard should have had a long time ago." But while Tom goes outside to find a **switch**, Richard grabs a razor blade from the house and approaches Tom, showing him that if Tom beats him, Richard will slash him with the razors. Tom is horrified by Richard's violence, and begins speaking to him softly, saying that Richard is "damned." Richard maintains that Tom has no right to beat him—Tom hardly knows him—and Tom eventually walks away, leaving Richard to go to work at the white family's home.

Interestingly, and perhaps coincidentally, Uncle Tom shares a name with another famous literary character, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a character not known for his violence and anger, but rather for his Christ-like self-sacrifice and desire always to please others (and the name "Uncle Tom" has since come to refer to a black person who is especially servile and accommodating towards white people). In many ways Richard's Uncle Tom is the exact opposite of Stowe's—this Tom is perpetually angry, and he believes even more virulently than does Granny that Richard's independence and refusal to do exactly as told makes him a bad omen, a bringer of bad luck onto the family. Tom sees the switch—violence—as the best way of forcing Richard into what he sees as "proper" behavior.*

CHAPTER 7

The summer of 1923 continues, and Richard looks again for better-paying work to enable him to eat and buy **books**. He gets a job as a water-boy at a brickyard, where he is bitten by the white owner's dog and worries the bite will become infected. The owner says not to worry, since "dogs can't hurt" black people with their teeth—Richard is relieved when the bite does not become infected. After a brief attempt at being a caddy for a white man on a local golf course, Richard enrolls again in school in September—the eighth grade—but has to work nights and weekends just to afford school books.

This is a brutal episode, one that is indicative of white conceptions of the black body. Here, the white man in charge of the brickyard does not seem to understand that African Americans feel pain in the same way that white Americans do. This, more than anything in the memoir, is perhaps the most striking encapsulation of the attitude of white Southerners toward their black neighbors.

One afternoon that fall, Richard writes a story about a man who attempts to steal an old widow's home, and he titles it "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre." He takes it to the local black newspaper, where the editor agrees to run it in three installments, but says the paper cannot pay Richard, because it is "young in business." The piece is published, and his friends at school wonder what it is about. They have trouble believing that Richard wrote it himself, and did not copy it from another source. Granny worries that Richard is "doing the devil's work," as does Addie, and Tom complains that the story is "plotless."

This story hews more closely to Richard's life experience, although Richard himself has never been widowed—in other words, it represents Richard's treatment of a social situation somewhat similar to his, but with characters who depart from his own life. In some sense, then, this is what the author Richard Wright did in his novel Native Son—he takes a character who shares his own outlook at times, and places him in a highly dramatized fictional situation.

Richard is now fifteen years old, and the small success of "Voodoo" stokes his dream of moving to the North and living as a writer. Although his family finds this dream "foolish" and "weak-minded," Richard has convinced himself, from **novels** he has read secretly in his spare time, that the life of a writer is possible for him, and that he can make enough in the North to support himself. Richard acknowledges that, at the time, he had little by way of formal schooling, but his ambition was great, and he looked all around him for ways to learn about the world and to write down what he saw.

The success of Richard's first published story causes him to decide, without consulting anyone else in his family, that he wishes to become a writer, and that this dream coincides with his dream of moving to Chicago. Richard also senses that although formal schooling is important, what he really needs to do is read voraciously and write as much as possible, to gain experience in his chosen field. He sees education as something he must attain for himself, not by relying on any social institution.

CHAPTER 8

The summer after eighth grade arrives (summer 1924), and Richard must once again look for full-time work. He works for a woman named Mrs. Bibbs doing odd jobs, and asks if her husband, who is foreman at a sawmill, can get him work there. When Richard visits, though, he is startled by the heavy lifting, the buzz of the machines, and the dangerous nature of the work, and he decides to find something else. One afternoon, he is walking down the street and runs into a friend from school, Ned Greenley. Ned's brother Bob has been killed recently by angry whites who believed that Bob (an employee at a local hotel) slept with a white prostitute. Richard is so rattled by this news, and by the violence with which whites "deal with" black people, that he takes a day off from his job search and ruminates alone on his porch.

One of the greatest fears in the South was the "mixing" of races, or the idea that blacks and whites could engage in sexual activity and potentially produce offspring. Of course, the reader also knows that Wright himself is of mixed Native American, European, and African descent, meaning that, at some point in the not-so-distant past, there was exactly this kind of mixing occurring in his family. Another tenet of Southern culture was the belief that whites and blacks could never socialize together, despite overwhelming evidence that this did happen a great deal across the region.

Richard discovers that his Uncle Tom has been keeping all his children away from Richard, since Tom still fears that Richard is violent and unhinged (from the episode, several years back, in which Richard defended himself with razors). Richard begins his ninth-grade school year, again working for Mrs. Bibbs, and vows to leave Jackson at the end of the year. His brother returns to Jackson to visit from Chicago, where he has moved (Wright first reports this move here). Richard realizes that his family members love and respect his brother more than Richard, and wonders how he, too, can flee to the North and start his own life.

Richard's relationship with his brother is not so much strained as nonexistent at this point in the narrative. When his brother returns from his stay in the North, Richard finds that the two have relatively little to talk about, and that the family appears to favor Richard's brother more highly because he has escaped the South. When Richard voices this same desire to leave and go North, however, the family does not appear to support his plan, nor his goal of becoming a writer.

Richard does well in school, and is named valedictorian of his ninth-grade class. He also helps the teacher to teach the class from time to time, an honor conferred only on the best students. He is selected to give a speech at the graduation ceremony, and soon afterward is called into the principal's office, where the principal gives him an "official" speech Richard is to read. Richard, who has written his own speech, is offended that the principal would attempt to dictate his remarks, but the principal notes that the graduation will be open to both black and white families, and Richard, he claims, does not know enough to be able to speak effectively to both groups.

The principal does not feel that Richard is capable of speaking to a mixed audience—perhaps he worries that Richard will say something undiplomatic regarding the fraught racial politics of the region.

Richard stubbornly continues to want to read his own speech, even after Tom tells him (after having read both speeches) that the principal's is more polished. Richard borrows money from Mrs. Bibbs, buys a suit (his first), and delivers his own speech, which is received mostly with silent indifference by the audience. The principal has indicated that Richard's stubbornness will likely cost him a teaching job in the school district, despite Richard's high grades, but Richard believes he has done the right thing by reading his own remarks in the face of overwhelming pressure to conform to the school's policies.

Richard already seems to know that a job in the South, teaching English literature in Jackson's segregated schools, would be a kind of steady profession but also an acknowledgment that his life cannot transcend its origins. Richard is willing to risk his livelihood for his own ideals, and it is this daring that puts him at odds with white Southern society at various times, but also that ultimately allows him to escape that society and move to Chicago.

CHAPTER 9

It is 1925, and Richard is 17, looking for full-time employment year-round. He takes a position as an assistant at a clothing store, owned by a white family, which sells clothing to black people "on credit." One day Richard observes that the white family brings a black woman into the shop and beats her in the back because she has not yet paid her bills. Richard becomes even more attuned to the cruelties white people inflict openly on black people in Jackson. Another day, Richard is making deliveries on a bicycle when he is picked up by a few white boys in a truck, who offer to give him a ride and appear to be nice to Richard. But when they offer him a drink and he declines without calling the boys "sir," the boys throw a bottle at his face, causing him to bleed, and leave him behind, saying Richard should "be more careful" around whites; otherwise he could be killed.

These white boys paradoxically think they are being kin to Richard by stating that, if he would have been picked up by any other boys, he would have surely been beaten or even killed. Richard recognizes that these white boys are no better than other, more violent groups. The danger of growing up in the segregated, Jim Crow South is not always the immediate danger of physical destruction; it is also the much more unnerving idea that, at any moment, a black person can make a mistake that could cost them their life. Richard cannot stand living this way, in constant fear.

Another evening when is making deliveries on his bike, Richard is pulled over by a white cop, who tells Richard to tell his boss not to send him on errands "in white neighborhoods at night." Finally, Richard's white boss calls him in and asks why Richard doesn't "joke and laugh" like the other black employees. When Richard responds that "there isn't much to smile about," the man fires him, afraid of and angered by his "impudent" attitude toward white authority.

Here, Richard has not done anything wrong—in fact, he is simply doing his job, making a delivery in a white part of town. But the police also participate in the de facto separation of whites and blacks, making Richard feel that he is not welcome even to ride through a neighborhood inhabited by white families.

Richard tries to hold down a series of similar jobs working for whites in Jackson, but he is let go for his "rudeness": his inability to appear jovial when chastised by white authority. Richard asks his friend Griggs, a former school classmate, if Griggs can find him a job, and Griggs replies that he might be able to, but that Richard must learn to get out of white people's way in public, to appear always deferential to them, and to call them "sir." After a few days, Griggs says he can set up an appointment soon with a northerner named Crane, who runs an optometrist shop and needs a black assistant. Griggs stresses that, although Crane will be relatively kind to black people, Richard must be well-behaved and deferential.

Griggs's character is the closest to what might be called an "Uncle Tom" figure, or one who, as in Stowe's novel, puts on a façade of cheerfulness in front of white society, in order to gain their favor. But Griggs is more practical than Stowe's Uncle Tom—he believes that, in order to survive in the South, a black man must behave diplomatically toward white authority. It is not an issue of ideals, but rather of tactics; Griggs wants to make sure he can continue earning money, supporting himself, and protecting himself and his family, and is willing to betray his own dignity to do so.

After several more days have passed, Griggs tells Richard that he has arranged the job with Crane, and that Richard will be paid five dollars a week—for Richard, a large sum. Richard meets with Crane, who seems reasonably polite, and Crane introduces Richard to the two white assistants who grind the lenses, Pease and Reynolds. Richard is tasked with keeping the shop tidy and running errands.

Richard believes he has had a stroke of good luck, and that because Crane is a Northerner, he might be more willing to explain to Richard the ins and outs of the optometry trade. These high hopes later lead to a feeling of despair on Richard's forced withdrawal from the job.

Although Crane tells Richard that he will learn about optometry from the white employees, Pease and Reynolds do not teach him, and when Richard asks each about their work grinding lenses, they only reply that black people should not learn such things, and that Richard "is trying to be white." One afternoon, Reynolds and Pease corner Richard while Crane is out of the office, and accuse him of calling Pease "Pease" and not "Mr. Pease." Richard is terrified, as both men threaten him with physical violence, and Richard says that he will quit the job, that he does not remember calling Mr. Pease "Pease," and that he will go away peacefully.

The memoir contains a series of hints as to how black people are expected to refer to whites. Whites are always in a position of authority, so they are always "sir," "Miss," or "Mr." Likewise in the workplace, whites are always superior, therefore it would be considered highly informal and irregular for Richard to call Mr. Pease "Pease." Pease also knows that Richard would never do this, but uses this naming "etiquette" as a means of picking a fight with Richard.

Richard meets with Griggs later that day, who says Richard got a "tough break," and Richard sneaks into the office the next morning to meet with Crane before the rest of the employees arrive. Richard tells Crane that he is afraid for his life working at the shop, and that both white men threatened him. Crane calls in Reynolds and Pease when they arrive, but Richard refuses to explain in front of them what they did to him the previous day. The two men leave, and Crane gives Richard a small severance, saying that "it must be difficult for Richard" in the South, and that perhaps it's better that Richard wants to find employment up North. Richard leaves the shop, devastated at this turn of events, since he thought this position might enable him to earn money and continue his education.

Crane is a character who, though sympathetic with Richard's situation, does little actually to help him. Instead of firing or even just chastising Pease and Richard, Crane instead tells Richard that his life is difficult, and does nothing to change the status quo at the shop. This was the way that Jim Crow laws allowed white authority in the South to perpetuate itself—because no single white person felt fully responsible for the horrors of that system, and therefore few white people agitated for its change.

CHAPTER 10

Richard realizes that in order to save up enough money to leave Jackson, he must pretend to be docile and deferential to whites, and must do everything he can to hold a relatively high-paying job. He begins working as an assistant at a drugstore soda fountain, but in his attempt to get along with the white managers, he becomes awkward and slow, continually confused by how best to respond to outbursts of white anger. He is "let go" by the soda fountain, since they believe he is not up to the work.

Richard is not a clumsy person, but he still gets flustered when a great deal is asked of him in a short period of time. Here, at the soda fountain, he is bombarded with requests and cannot process them all at once; as a result, Richard is fired from the job, and forced to find work that is more suitable to his relatively private and somewhat brooding temperament.

At this point, it is the fall of 1925, and Richard does not go back to school for tenth grade. He takes a job as a mop-boy in the same hotel where Ned's brother Bob was murdered—a hotel that is used as a brothel by white men and white prostitutes. Richard worries that he will not be able to keep himself out of trouble with the white patrons, but he befriends several of the other black workers, who are "smooth" around white people, and Richard slowly learns how to stay out of the way of the white guests. When one white man slaps a black female coworker of Richard's on the backside, Richard attempts to be civil to the man, but later chastises the woman for allowing the man to treat her so poorly. The woman replies that Richard does not understand how things are at the hotel, and that he shouldn't worry about such overtly racist and sexist white behaviors.

Richard's time at the hotel seems perfect for him. The pace is a good deal slower than the soda fountain, and at the hotel there are many other black employees, some of whom are kind to Richard. It is difficult to imagine, but other than these employees, as well as Shorty and Griggs, there is almost no one with whom Richard is close friends. Richard has spent much of his young life in the company of a family who largely ignores him, or with himself, reading and writing. Thus, these moments of friendship are revelations to Richard.

Richard also learns that many of his black coworkers, along with black men like Griggs who work in other places, steal frequently from their bosses in order to supplement their low wages. Richard has never stolen before, but he worries that he will save money so slowly if he does not steal that he will never be able to leave the South before something bad happens to him—before another run-in with white men causes him to lose his life. Richard considers whether he could steal a neighbor's gun—he knows where it's located—and earn money from stealing at his job. These two illegal acts could allow him to depart from Jackson and head North more quickly.

Richard knows that stealing is wrong—he does not want to steal, and he understands that no society could exist if it were founded on stealing. But Richard also knows that the system in which he lives and works is "rigged," meaning it's impossible for a black man to get a fair chance at living a prosperous life. Therefore, Richard begins to understand that he can only leave the South by cheating those who have cheated him *his entire life.*

Richard considers his options and is promoted to bell boy at the hotel; he often goes into the rooms where white patrons and their white prostitutes are "entertaining," but these patrons only tend to yell at Richard when he looks at them or reacts to them overtly. Otherwise, Richard is more or less invisible to the white guests at the hotel. One day, a fellow worker at the hotel tells Richard that a movie-house in Jackson owned by a Jewish businessman is looking for ticket-takers, and that this job would allow Richard to steal by reselling tickets and pocketing the difference in the house's earnings. Richard decides this is his chance, and is given the job by the businessman, who sees that Richard has no criminal record of stealing.

Richard recognizes that his job as ticket-taker could be the way in which he leaves the South. He also understands that it is in some ways far more dangerous to be a young black adult than a child in the South, since white men are more inclined to fight, and perhaps murder, a black man for any perceived slight, real or imagined. Richard, paradoxically, is hired to steal from the owner because he does not having any theft on his record.

Richard begins working and, one afternoon, is called to by a man who knows another female employee at the house. The man tells Richard that the owner will be out that day, and that they can put their plan into action reselling tickets. Richard is nervous to steal, but recognizes that this might be his best shot to make money quickly. With Richard and the female employee (named Tel), the man orchestrates the reselling of tickets, and at the end of the busy weekend night, Richard has made fifty dollars. He goes through this nerve-wracking process of theft the following weekend, and has saved 100 dollars, or roughly the amount he believed he needed to be able to flee northward.

This is one of the few times in Richard's life that he receives a break. Typically, Richard has been on the unfortunate end of things—his brother receives a better "placement" with Aunt Maggie in the North, and Richard's Granny, Uncle Tom, and Addie all assume that Richard is causing mischief when he is in fact keeping to himself. Richard seems to recognize here that, although he knows stealing is wrong, he has been due for some good luck, and perhaps it is time for him to make his escape.

Richard then steals the gun located in his neighbor's (empty) house, and gathers two friends to help him steal cans of food from a local college's pantry. Richard buys clothing and a suitcase, and announces to his family one night that he is leaving town for Memphis, and that he won't be returning any time soon. His mother worries that he is leaving to avoid some crime he has committed, and Richard does not deny this explicitly. Instead, he tells his mother he loves her, apologizes for the difficulties they have shared living in Jackson, and rides in a "black-only" coach north to Memphis. At the end of the chapter, Wright reflects that he hated the feeling of theft, but considered it necessary to leave Jackson. He also says he never again stole for the remainder of his life.

Mercifully, Richard is never in a position where he has to use this gun—one can only imagine the disastrous consequences of such a choice. In many ways, the character of Bigger in Wright's Native Son is a version of Wright's own, younger self, had Wright been forced to make the kind of destructive, difficult choices Bigger makes. Thus Richard understands that he has been lucky—at least, lucky enough to educate himself and to leave the Deep South—even if his young life has been one of intense suffering and privation.

CHAPTER 11

Richard arrives in Memphis and immediately heads to Beale Street, an area of the city that he has heard is filled with "prostitutes and criminals," but also with cheap places for rent. Richard finds a woman named Mrs. Moss in front of her house, which Richard assumes to be a brothel, but he is pleasantly surprised when she offers him a place to stay at reasonable rent. Mrs. Moss says that she lives in the house with her husband, a baker, and her daughter, Bess. Mrs. Moss appears kind to Richard, says that he can eat with the family, and also admits that Richard is permitted to drink on the premises, so long as he is courteous to the family. Richard cannot believe that Mrs. Moss is so kind to him.

Richard's run of good luck appears to be continuing. He expects that life in Memphis will be difficult, filled with tortured encounters with the law, and perhaps a struggle even to find a place to sleep at night. Instead, Richard is rewarded with a good, cheap, safe place to stay, and although Mrs. Moss wants Richard to marry Bess, she eventually relents and leaves the two of them alone. Richard feels, for the first time, that his living situation is not fraught—that he is free to work and spend his time as he pleases.

Richard has dinner with Bess and Mrs. Moss that evening, and Mrs. Moss embarrasses her daughter by saying that Bess is of marriageable age, and that Richard would be a great husband to her. Richard too is flummoxed that Mrs. Moss is so willing to almost immediately offer her daughter to Richard in marriage. After dinner, Richard and Bess talk for a moment, and she shows him her **schoolbooks** (she is 17 but only in fifth grade); Richard goes up to his room that night, worried that he will be "trapped" by the Moss family, or that he will somehow be forced to marry Bess against his will.

Richard's attitude toward books is in some sense diametrically opposed to Bess's. For Bess, books are simply a means to an end—a thing one carries to class in order to become "educated," even if one does not read or understand them. But for Richard, books are like a window onto a world he has only imagined before. Books quite literally inform Richard as to the life he will soon lead.

Richard goes out before bed that night and finds a job as a dishwasher for twelve dollars a week. Mrs. Moss is surprised and happy that Richard has already found work, and calls out to Bess, saying again that Richard is a fine man and a good one to marry. Richard is shocked again at Mrs. Moss's forwardness regarding his and Bess's possible relationship, as they have barely spoken. The next day, Richard tries to eat from a can of beans alone in his room, instead of at the dinner table with Mrs. Moss and Bess, but Mrs. Moss convinces Richard to have chicken with Bess. Afterward, Bess combs Richard's hair, saying that she loves him and that she would make a good wife. They kiss briefly, and Richard asks to take Bess up to his room to see "how far" she'll go with him. Richard stops their cuddling after Bess says that her mother wouldn't like her in Richard's room. Richard tells Bess they ought to "get to know each other better" before planning a life together, and Bess goes off in a huff. Richard smokes silently, alone, and goes to bed.

Bess is looking for a husband, someone who can support her and upon whom she can depend. In some ways, this can be seen as just another way that society seeks to restrain Richard. Were he to marry Bess he would have to work to support her and any children they might have, and he would not be able to focus on books and writing. Richard, as is typical for him, refuses to be thus restricted. He does try to see if he can get sex without the restrictions of marriage, however, which isn't very considerate toward Bess and perhaps detrimental to her reputation.

The next morning, Richard eats beans out of a can with his fingers and slips out of the house, avoiding Bess and Mrs. Moss at breakfast. Richard goes out and smokes a cigarette, watching the sun rise over the Mississippi. Another black young man comes up to him, telling Richard that he has found a barrel of liquor in the weeds, and that the two of them should sell it and split the profits. Richard, not believing his good luck, agrees, and they find a white man and lift it onto his truck—the white man then drives away, and the black young man goes off to "make change" to split the money with Richard. Richard then realizes that the young boy is never coming back—that he has simply used to Richard as an accomplice to bootlegging, while giving him none of the profits. Richard wonders if the white man, too, was in on the crime, and curses himself for being as naïve that morning as Bess was the previous night, asking Richard to marry her.

This episode, following as it does on the heels of Richard's rebuff of Bess, shows quite clearly that Richard himself can still be tricked, and that city life in Memphis will not be so easy as the stay in Mrs. Moss's house seems to suggest. Richard understands that there are those in the wider world who wish only to do him harm or to use him, but he also has a great deal of confidence in his ability to protect himself. Because Richard has not encountered an alcohol bootlegger before, however, he is flummoxed as to this sequence of events, and must consider himself lucky that the police were not nearby to catch him in the act (as alcohol was illegal in the US at this time).

CHAPTER 12

Richard walks around the city of Memphis that Monday morning after the run-in with the bootleggers, and comes upon another optician's shop, similar to the one where he worked in Jackson. Richard rides the elevator in the large city building up to the sixth-floor shop, and speaks to the white owner, explaining that he (Richard) has experience working for Crane, an optician in Jackson, and that he only left because he was hounded off the job by ignorant white workers. The owner agrees to take on Richard as an errand boy, and Richard begins work that day, doing similar tasks to his work in Jackson, only under the less-threatening glare of whites without the overt prejudices of those in Jackson.

Richard's good luck continues. Here, he happens to find a job much better than the dishwashing gig he was originally to take in Memphis, and it is in a field with which he is familiar. Although Richard knows that as an "errand boy" he will not come much closer to actually grinding lenses, he also recognizes that in Memphis, the "Upper South," relations between black and white employees are more outwardly diplomatic, and less systematically brutal and cruel.

Richard tells Mrs. Moss that he has taken a better job at the optician's, and she is again proud and supportive of him. She asks Richard a few days after he starts work what happened between him and Bess, and Richard explains that, although he likes Bess, he does not wish to marry her. Mrs. Moss pushes the idea of their marriage for a few more days, but after Richard threatens to leave the house because of her pressuring, Mrs. Moss brings Bess in to Richard's room and they both apologize, saying that they like his company, and that they will leave him alone. Richard begins working harder than he has ever worked, and scrimps and saves with the ultimate goal of sending money back to his mother in Jackson. Richard also begins reading as many magazines as he can get his hands on, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *The American Mercury*.

Richard begins reading periodical magazines at the same time that he finally asserts to Mrs. Moss that he will not be marrying Bess, and that if she continues to push the issue, he will be leaving the house, even though Mrs. Moss charges a very reasonable rent. Richard has become more vocal about his independence, and more committed to expanding his intellectual domain—and these two go hand in hand. Richard's increased confidence regarding emotional dealings with others, seems to bolster his increased intellectual confidence, derived from reading—and vice versa.

Richard also learns about the ways that Memphis black people appease the white people they work for. Shorty, the elevator man in Richard's building—a squat, comical fellow—often makes himself into a racial caricature in order to beg quarters from white elevator passengers. Although Richard finds this behavior abhorrent, and wonders if Shorty doesn't hate himself for doing it, Shorty replies that he gets the quarter from most white passengers, and that he is strong enough psychologically to make fun of himself in this way.

Shorty's "song" for the white businessman is an example of the kinds of sacrifices black people must make to their self-esteem in order to "get along" with others in Memphis. Richard stops short of blaming Shorty absolutely—Richard himself will do nothing of the sort, but he also recognizes that Shorty has very few other options, and that he will most likely not be able to leave Memphis. Therefore, Shorty must make it in the city however he can.

Richard becomes friends with Shorty and other black men who work in the building in service occupations, and learns their methods for dealing with white customers. Richard himself is approached by a white, Northern customer one day in the optician's shop, who sees that Richard is skinny and offers him money for food. Richard, however, is too proud to accept the charity, and tells the man that he is not hungry, and that he does not want the dollar. The man, confused by Richard's refusal of his help, leaves the shop.

This is another instance of Richard refusing money from someone. As was the case with his father when Richard was a very young child, Richard know that to take the money would be to satisfy his immediate cravings, but the blow to his dignity that Richard would feel having accepted charity would make him upset in a far more lasting and significant way.

Another day, Richard is approached by Olin, a white foreman in the optician's shop, who tells Richard that a young black man named Harrison, in a "rival shop" across the street, wants to fight Richard. Richard is confused by this, since he has never said anything against Harrison, and in speaking with Harrison later that day, they each realize that Olin has told the same thing to both, hoping to spark a fight between the two young men. Richard and Olin are somewhat wary of each other still, but no violence passes between them.

Richard and Harrison quickly realizes that Olin is only looking to start a fight any way he can. At first, Olin seems content with this fight being the kind of back-alley brawl that might spring up "organically," owing to an actual disagreement. But Richard and Harrison are too hardened in the ways of life to take Olin at his word, and they continue to be outwardly peaceful toward, if wary of, one another.

Then, a week later, Olin and a few other white men from the shop ask Richard if he would fight Harrison with gloves, while other white men stand around watching and betting on the action. Richard's immediate response is not to do it, since he doesn't want to be made "sport" of, but Harrison tells Richard that they are "made fun of by the white workers anyway," and both Richard and Harrison could use the five dollars that Olin promises to each of the fighters. They accept the offer to fight.

Harrison's logic here might be persuasive, but it is also intensely self-defeating. Olin might attempt to make fun of Richard and Harrison regardless, but if the two men fight one another then they are more or less submitting to a kind of white "entertainment" that Richard later understands to be utterly demoralizing and humiliating.

The fight is held on a Saturday, and Richard and Harrison are surrounded by agitated and boisterous white men, who begin shouting when the fighting starts. Richard and Harrison start out slowly, but then begin fighting each other with greater power and pummel each other for long rounds, drawing blood. Richard and Harrison soon become enraged, mostly out of embarrassment at their white "fans," and when the fight is called (with no decision announced), Richard takes his money and leaves, angry. He writes that he never really talks to Harrison again, and feels that he has "done something unclean" for agreeing to fight his fellow man as entertainment for whites, "something for which I could never properly atone."

There are some moments in Richard's life that he will never forget, and this appears to be one of them. Although Richard has gone to Memphis to escape the overt racism of Jackson, he has found there a more submerged and "gentlemanly" but no less destructive form, in which black men are co-opted to be a means of entertainment for whites. Just as Richard was upset with Shorty for performing for white men, so too, here, does Richard recognize that he is just as capable of doing so, if half-unwittingly.

CHAPTER 13

One day Richard finds in a Memphis newspaper an article railing against the writings of H. L. Mencken, a reporter who also edits the *American Mercury*, a magazine Richard occasionally reads. Richard feels that any writer believed to be dangerous by Southern whites must be a writer worth reading, and decides he will get his hands on Mencken's **books** from the public library, which is for whites only. Richard asks an Irish Catholic man at the optical shop named Falk if he will allow Richard to forge a note from him, allowing Richard to check out Mencken books on Falk's apparent behalf. Falk agrees, but says that Richard could get in trouble for doing this. Richard, however, is determined to read Mencken, by whatever means necessary.

Mencken is, in many ways, Richard's final inspiration—the writer who most clearly contributes to his professional resolve to become a writer. Here, Richard must take a small risk—asking a white man for his library card—in order even to look at books written by Mencken. But Richard has been hardened by the difficult events of his life up till this point, and he is not afraid to tell a small lie to get around the restrictions imposed on him by Southern white society in order to be rewarded so richly.

Richard shows "Falk's" note to the librarian at the Memphis library, and she agrees to lend the **book** to Richard "for Falk," although she worries for a moment that Richard himself will read them (he tells her he is illiterate). Richard takes home Mencken's *Prejudices* and *A Book of Prefaces*, and begins reading the latter. He is shocked by the range of Mencken's intellect and the power of his writing; Richard also encounters, for the first time, the names of many famous writers, including Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Nietzsche.

Not only is Richard in awe of Mencken's prose style, but he also uses Mencken as a gateway to other writers. Richard has been perhaps dimly aware of the history of world literature, but in Mencken he finds a teacher and a guide, a critic who explains the importance of each of these writers and who encourages Richard to read their works as well.

Richard begins staying up most nights reading. He checks out more **books** from the library, using Falk's card, including novels by Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Richard does not read so much for the "plot" of the novels, but rather for the "point of view" they espouse—the novels are, to him, a window onto other ways of life. People including Olin and Mrs. Moss ask Richard why he is reading so much, but Richard hides his passion from them, saying only that he works his way through the books "to kill time."

Now that Richard has access to a library, the greatest problem of his young life—his inability to purchase books—is resolved. Richard can now spend whatever free time he has sitting in his room and reading. He smartly hides the purpose behind his reading, assuring that neither white nor black society can interfere with his plans. His education is a purely individualistic endeavor, and through books he is exposed to the full breadth and ideas of the wider world. Books are the way out of the South for him.

Richard's brother, who has been living in Jackson with their mother, comes up to Memphis with her to join Richard, and the three move into a house together in the winter of 1926. Richard continues with his reading, and feels that "a gulf is widening" between himself and those around him, uneducated black people who do not desire to move North, or have no means to do so. Richard makes early attempts at writing and plans, with his mother and brother, to move north to Chicago. He realizes that he will not be able to be deferential to white authority like Shorty, nor will he survive forever in a "business" context with whites, whose power Richard resents too deeply.

As he begins making his way through the canon of Western literature, there is a feeling brewing in Richard that perhaps he is further alienating himself from the people around him—some of the few friends he has made in his life. But Richard's desire to learn outstrips everything else, including his desire for human companionship. Luckily, when Richard's mother and brother return, they seem more amenable to Richard's intense study, and his near-constant reading.

CHAPTER 14

Aunt Maggie also moves to Memphis, as she is looking for work (her boyfriend, that "uncle" Matthews who burned down a white person's house earlier in the memoir, no longer lives with her). Maggie, Richard's mother and brother, and Richard all decide simply to leave for Chicago as soon as possible, for they worry that "if they plan too much," they will never have the courage to leave. Richard tells his boss and others at the optician's shop that he's leaving, and though they ask why he's going to Chicago, and wonder if the **books** he reads have encouraged him to leave, Richard simply replies that he is moving North to be with his mother, who also wants to move there. Shorty says a rather bitter goodbye to Richard, wondering if he, too, could ever leave the South, then concluding that he's not motivated enough to get out from under the authority of the whites who treat him as a kind of vulgar comic relief.

The family's actual trip to Chicago is in some ways anticlimactic. Once they have assembled in Memphis, they realize that Chicago is not too far away, and that it is more important to travel quickly than it is to plan out every little detail of the trip. Richard has already, in some sense, made the "break" from Memphis society by immersing himself completely in literature and devoting himself to a life of reading and writing. This break is most clearly exemplified in Richard's goodbye with Shorty—although Shorty is happy for Richard, Shorty also seems to recognize the incredible effort Richard has made toward securing a better life for himself in the North, and his own inability to make such a leap.

Wright states that he and his family left the next day, and that the reading he did as a young man "evoked in him vague glimpses of life's possibilities," and gave him the ultimate impetus to try for a different life in the North. Wright tells the reader that white people in the South never learned his true nature, and that he had never "known himself" while in the South, as he had spent so much time trying to understand the will of white people, and to appease them.

Richard sees the issues of the South as originating from a lack of understanding and of empathy—whites don't (or refuse to) understand blacks, and as a consequence blacks cannot know themselves. It is interesting that literature, by exposing people to the viewpoints of others, seems like a cure for what Richard believes ails the South.

Wright also concludes that his upbringing in the South, and the hardships it provided on a nearly constant basis, are now too deep inside him to ever be removed. He speaks of himself as a "plant," one that grows a certain way in the South and is native to it, but that must be moved to "alien soil" in order to grow larger and more fully. Richard goes north with his family, "full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated," and that there might be some greater sense of fairness in the way human beings interact with one another.

An important analogy is here laid out at the end of the memoir's first part. Richard feels that the South can never be stripped away from him, but that the lessons he has been taught there can be taken to a new place and a new context, and, with luck, can be grafted onto some of the knowledge Richard has gained from life experience and books. He does not wish to abandon his roots, but wishes instead to take what he has learned and make a better life for himself in a freer, more open environment where people interact as humans rather than as black and white.

CHAPTER 15

In 1927, Richard takes the train north to Chicago with his Aunt Maggie. He remarks on the "unreal" quality of Chicago, full of dirt, smoke, and heavy industry. He is surprised, too, that the train station is not segregated, as Southern stations are. Richard begins to understand that he won't feel in Chicago the same racial anxiety he felt in the South, but he imagines this will be replaced by the daily demands of a giant city, where people appear to worry only about their own survival. Richard and Aunt Maggie sit next to a white man on the streetcar to their Aunt Cleo's apartment, where they will be staying. Richard is amazed that the white man has no problem sitting near a black man.

Life in Chicago will be vastly different from life in the South. Chicago is a metropolis, almost too large to be understood by one man. Wright has viewed the North as an antidote to the South, but here the picture is murkier. If Chicago seems more open on questions of race, it also seems less defined and classifiable in its racial divisions. Race is still a subject of debate, but it's not the primary means of defining a person. Richard wonders how this new pattern of political and social organization will affect his life.

After a restless night at Aunt Cleo's, Richard takes the streetcar south to a white neighborhood to look for work. He stops at a deli run by Jewish merchants, the Hoffmans, and Mr. Hoffman offers him a job immediately as a messenger and all-around helper. Richard is embarrassed that he can barely understand the Hoffmans' English, as they speak with an Eastern European accent. He worries that the Hoffmans and others in their neighborhood secretly believe him to be ignorant because he is black.

Richard is given a lesson on these racial dynamics right away. The Hoffmans, too, are migrants to Chicago, and like Richard, they are excluded from the "white" (west-European) power centers of the city. But Wright wonders, still, if the Hoffmans aren't closer to whiteness than he is. He fears he is once again at the bottom of a racial ladder.

In a commentary on these memories, Wright realizes that his younger self was mistaken about race relations in Chicago. The Hoffmans really *were* trying to help him, and they did not condescend to him. They also didn't keep the same strict racial hierarchy in their neighborhood that American-born whites kept in the South. Wright wonders if those hierarchies aren't somehow soothing, even to the blacks they subjugate, but he also cannot forgive Southern black workers who concede to the cruel demands of their white bosses.

Wright raises an important and controversial point about racial organization in a society by emphasizing the dislocation he felt on arriving in Chicago. Of course, Wright has done everything possible to leave the segregation of Jim Crow and the American South, but he finds in Chicago a realm without clear racial rules, and with far more ethnically subdivided populations. This new system confuses him.

Richard finds out that the Postal Service examination is to be held on a Monday, and he decides to take it. He's exhausted from work at the Hoffmans, and fears that, if he tells them about the test, they'll think he's ungrateful for his job at the deli. In the South, Richard remarks to himself, a boss might have become angry at the thought that a black worker was trying to leave a menial job and improve his career. Richard decides to skip work for the three days to rest for and take the exam. Because he is afraid of the Hoffmans' imagined anger, he tells them nothing about his absence.

The Post Office represents a path out of blue-collar labor. It is a government job, and will afford Richard more time to devote to his art. More important to him than anything else is the opportunity to think, read, and write. Working for the Hoffmans pays little, but it is even more damaging for Richard because of its intellectual isolation. The Post Office, by contrast, promises a path forward for Richard's fledgling writing career.

The day after the test, Richard returns to work, where he's greeted by Mr. Hoffman. Richard says that his mother died in Memphis and he had to return for her funeral. Mr. Hoffman understands that Richard is being untruthful, and asks him why. Instead of admitting his falsehood, Richard continues in it, saying his aunt lent him money for the trip. Richard believes it would be worse to admit to taking the exam than to tell an obvious lie to his boss. Mr. Hoffman replies to Richard that he knows he's lying, but that it's all right, and Richard can continue working at the deli. Richard, however, is ashamed of his actions, and confused that the Hoffmans didn't fire him, either for his absence or his lack of honesty. Richard quits the next weekend without telling the Hoffmans that he's leaving.

Richard has trapped himself in his conversation with Mr. Hoffman. Because Richard has only known the race dynamics of the South, he can't predict how Hoffman will respond to his desire for a new job. As it turns out, Hoffman was willing to talk to Richard about his absence, but Richard did not give his boss the opportunity to do so. Thus Richard has anticipated a relationship with Hoffman—one of strict subordination—that Hoffman does not subscribe to. Having erred by lying, Richard commits the additional error of believing the Hoffmans will never forgive him, when they are in fact ready to do so.

Richard next finds work washing dishes on the North Side. He is the only black worker at the diner, where the waitresses are white women from the neighborhood, and the cook, Tillie, is from Finland. Richard is surprised that the waitresses are untroubled by his blackness: they ask him for favors, talk honestly to him about their lives, and aren't afraid to work in close quarters near him. Wright tells the reader that he is amazed by the shallowness of these waitresses' existences. They seem to demand very little from life. He says that black experience is "truer and deeper," because black people in America are forced every day to confront their position in society. But he is also in awe of the waitresses' serene, uncomplicated attitudes.

Wright begins to sketch out a new theory of race, class, and politics. In the South, race and power went hand-in-hand. The people who ran Southern cities were white, and the richest members of Southern society were white. But in Chicago, race, culture, and money intersect in more complicated ways. Richard feels intellectually superior to the white women he works with, and those women have no strict views on Wright's supposed "inferiority." Instead, they seem to enjoy speaking to him, even though he doesn't find their conversation stimulating.

In another commentary, Wright explains his views on white and black experience in America. Because American culture is consumer-driven, and because whites are socially dominant, white culture and consumer culture in the US become unified. White culture excludes black culture, as it has since the beginning of American democracy. Thus African Americans not only lack social equality with whites—they also find themselves outside the consumer utopia white culture has created. Returning to 1927, Richard describes the surprise of the "boss lady" at the diner when she realizes that Richard reads **The American Mercury**, H. L. Mencken's magazine. No one else on the staff concerns themselves with that kind of high culture.

Wright continues in his analysis of race and culture. He has worked his entire life to learn to read, and to read widely. Mencken is a cultural hero for him. The women at the diner only know vaguely about Mencken's views, but they recognize him as a scholar. It is surprising, then, that Richard is reading the Mercury, *but it's perhaps* more *surprising for them that a diner-worker (black or white) is trying to better himself. Richard is learning that his isolation as an intellectual compounds upon his isolation as a black man in a white-dominated society.*

Richard realizes that Tillie has been spitting in the soup she makes. He tells a recently-hired black waitress, but they are afraid to inform the boss. Eventually, the black waitress does tell the boss, and Richard confirms the story. The boss is skeptical until she spies on Tillie as she spits; the boss fires Tillie at once, and Richard recalls the times he has been fired for offenses far less unsavory than Tillie's.

In this instance, Tillie is only fired and not physically harmed. She is allowed to leave with her dignity intact. Wright implies that, in the South, a black man would almost certainly be beaten for this kind of insubordinate behavior. In Chicago, he wonders what his punishment might be if he were to misbehave as badly as Tillie.

A temporary position opens up at the Post Office, and Richard is called to take it. He quits at the diner, relieved to have a white-collar job. The new role pays him 70 cents a day, enough finally to eat three regular meals, but the job also has a weight requirement of 125 pounds, and Richard is 15 pounds short. Though the irony is not lost on him, his previous periods of hunger, brought on by low wages, are now coming back to haunt him at the first job that pays him a reasonable wage. He tries all summer to eat substantial meals to bring his weight up, which would allow him to keep the job.

This is one of the great ironies of the second part of the book. There is no clear reason supplied for the Post Office's 125-pound rule; whether it is designed to be discriminatory or not, the rule keeps Wright from stable government employment. But this same government, demanding that he be well-fed, does little to provide Wright with the food he needs to thrive. Only through Wright's continued hard work is he able to eat enough to climb the social ladder.

During this time, Richard moves with his Aunt Maggie out of Aunt Cleo's apartment. Richard's mother and brother also move in, and they live in close quarters together. Richard spends much of his free time **reading** (Gertrude Stein and Dostoevsky especially), and he practices his own writing, despite his family's disapproval of his constant study. In September, however, he falls short of 125 pounds and is fired from the Post Office. He returns to the diner and promises himself he'll eat as much as he can, to secure another postal job when it becomes available in the spring.

Wright takes pains to note the complexities of his continuing education. His family does not support his reading, and they are even confused and frightened by it. Reading allows Richard to communicate with the thinkers who have come before him, but it also produces resentment in those around him. They wonder if Wright feels he's superior to them because of his learning.

Until then, Richard busies himself at the diner. He reads Proust and continues his project of intellectual betterment, though it's difficult to maintain his schedule, continue his broad reading, and deal with his family, who are confused by his dedication to **books**. Although he is lonely, Richard finds hope in the texts he's reading. He vows to continue on his path toward a literary career.

Proust's long novel is an apt choice for Wright. In Remembrance of Things Past, *Proust recounts his long path toward a creative life—the life that has prompted him to write the very novel. In a sense, Wright is doing the same thing in* Black Boy, *laying out his own intellectual history for the reader.*

CHAPTER 16

Richard reapplies to the Post Office that spring, and is accepted, having now achieved 125 pounds. He makes more money, and his family finds more comfortable lodgings. At the Post Office, he becomes friends with a group of Jewish and Irish self-taught intellectuals, who discuss some of the **books** and pamphlets they've been reading, including discussions of contemporary society. Richard is dismayed to discover, however, that not all black intellectuals on the South Side share his interest in politics. They, by contrast (and in Richard's terms) concern themselves with "twisted sex problems," and mostly write about their romantic relationships. Richard realizes that similar racial experience does not necessarily lead to group solidary and cohesion. He believes these romantically-obsessed black writers are trying for, and failing to achieve, "Bohemian life."

In Chicago as in Memphis, Wright finds himself at odds with members of black society. He realized in Memphis that black workers choose to respond to their white supervisors in different ways, and here, Wright sees that literary fashion in the black community is as complex and multifaceted as in the white community. Wright is not just interested in aesthetic concerns, but also social problems and their solutions. He views literature as a vehicle for social change—although he also wants literature to capture the human imagination. An art only concerned with sexuality is, for Wright, a limited art.

Richard does respect the political activities of the Garveyites, followers of Marcus Garvey, who advocate a return of black Americans to Africa. Richard feels that Africa is under the thrall of international capitalism, however, and that the wild, beautiful Continent the Garveyites hope to rediscover is only a fantasy. In the winter of 1929, Richard learns that the stock market has crashed. His coworkers at the Post Office complain of cutbacks to their hours. Richard has a political awakening, and when fellow postal clerks begin discussing Communism, he pays attention, wondering if it offers a critique of the capitalist-consumerist way of life he's observed throughout working-class Chicago.

The followers of Marcus Garvey represent a different kind of political activism. They wish to redirect black life in America toward a reimagined Africa. But Wright sees this as no less a fantasy than that of the "black Bohemians." For Wright, there can be no escape from capitalism. Imperialism has affected black life around the world, and Africa is no safer from it than America. Instead, Wright believes that black liberationists should focus their attentions on American concerns.

Richard is eventually let go from the Post Office, because of the start of the Great Depression. He looks for work elsewhere in Chicago, and gets a job at a burial and insurance agency run by a "distant cousin." The job requires Richard to sell expensive insurance policies to black families who mostly cannot afford them, and who are in times of personal crisis. The job is unsavory to Richard, but he knows he needs to work to support himself and his family. He visits many black families on the South Side during his tenure at his cousin's company.

This section of the book points to Wright's moral complexity. Although he knows that his work for the insurance company is, at best, amoral—and probably immoral—he continues in it. In part he needs the money, but he also uses the occupation as a window into black life in Chicago. He visits the apartments of many people, and learns more about their lives. This allows him to collect material for his later writings.

Richard begins with a sexual relationship with a woman who is unable to pay for her insurance policy. Their relationship is, in part, an "arrangement" to keep her from defaulting. Richard is confused that the woman, who cannot read or write, desperately wants to go to a circus. She asks Richard to take her, although he never does. Richard has mixed feelings about the job and the relationship, which he soon ends. He realizes that the insurance companies are scamming black residents out of money they barely have, and taking advantage of them during catastrophic moments in their lives. Richard feels powerless to stop this, however, and he says that the black men in charge of the insurance companies are "leaders in the Negro communities" and are "respected by whites."

This is one of the book's more poignant sections. As above, Wright's relationship to this unnamed woman is far from ethically pure. He is essentially paying her for sex, in keeping with a longstanding company policy for women who can't afford their insurance plans. Wright doesn't speak much about his romantic life in the memoir, and this interaction might cause the reader to question his empathy for others' lives (especially other women's lives), but Wright is unstinting about his own feelings. He does not sugarcoat or justify his behavior—he merely reports it.

On his rounds for the insurance company, Richard walks through speeches given by black Communist leaders near Washington Park, on the South Side. Although Richard is sympathetic to their political cause in theory, he finds that many black speakers and rank-and-file members of the Party are uninformed about world events, and the details of revolutions in countries like Russia and China. When one speaker tries to convince a crowd that God does not exist, Richard despairs, since he doesn't believe that black Communists will convince their fellow men by denigrating their Christian ways of life.

This is another of Wright's disputes with the black community on the South Side. By this point, Wright is swayed, at least in theory, by the idea that men must work together to achieve labor equality. He is on the road to becoming a Communist. But he resents the black Communist leaders who don't seem to understand the speeches they're giving. In this way Wright maintains his status as an intellectual, sometimes resistant to those who've not read as much as he has.

Richard becomes dejected at the thought of political progress in America for blacks or for whites. The Depression is getting worse, and the insurance companies can no longer make money selling policies on the South Side. He and his mother move to a cheaper apartment, which is falling down and miserable. Unable to find work, he resolves to go to the relief office to beg for food.

Again, Wright refuses to sugarcoat his experience. Although he wants Communism to work nationally and internationally, he fears for its viability. He worries that its practitioners aren't educated enough to understand what they preach, and he wonders how to counteract so much misunderstanding.

CHAPTER 17

After standing in line for hours at the relief office, Richard is sent away with the assurance that food will be delivered to his house. He's also given a new job, cleaning at a fancy Chicago hospital that conducts medical experiments on animals. Richard works with three other black men: Bill, an alcoholic, and Brand and Cooke, who can't stand each other for unknown reasons. When he's not withstanding Bill's rants about race relations (which terrify him) or breaking up Brand and Cooke's fights, Richard works with young doctors of Jewish descent. Richard remembers that, once, he loved science, but now he is dismayed by his subordinate role at the hospital, where he holds open the mouths of dogs so white doctors can sever their vocal cords—keeping them from barking during experiments.

Wright's work at the hospital comprises one of the memoir's most vivid passages. Wright describes his coworkers as men exhausted by an unfair system, and forced to work a humiliating job for very little pay. The doctors, it is strongly implied, treat the animals far better than they do the black workers at the hospital, and Wright and his colleagues are shielded almost entirely from the research that goes on around them. When doctors do speak to Wright, they almost invariably complain to him that he's not doing something right, or that he's needed for an invasive or gruesome procedure.

One young doctor catches Richard smelling nembutal, a numbing agent, and decides to play a prank on him. He tells Richard that the substance is poison, and that it will kill him in minutes if they don't find a specialist. Richard runs through the hospital, only to see the doctor cracking up with laughter; he realizes he's been pranked, and fumes while Brand looks on. Embittered, Richard tells Brand not to relate the story of his pranking to anyone else.

This is a cruel joke. Wright wonders if maybe the doctor is looking out for his best interests, but instead, the doctor proves he only wants to humiliate him. Indeed, much of Wright's time in the hospital is spent ashamed. Brand, for his part, seems to keep his promise to Wright, and does not tell the other workers about this "joke."

Work at the hospital takes on a sadistic edge, as a monitor from management arrives to time Richard on his cleaning rounds. He tells Richard he must clean all rooms in seventeen minutes or fewer, and must mop the steps constantly, even as doctors walk through them and muddy them again and again. Richard can't believe the inhuman remove of management, who seem only to find news ways for the black cleaning-men waste their time.

Wright describes the dehumanizing effects of "mechanization" and "streamlining." The man timing Wright has no idea what it's like to clean in the hospital. He only knows it's his job to insure Wright cleans as fast as humanly possible—or maybe even a bit faster. Wright's complaints about this practice fall on deaf ears.

One day, Brand and Cooke get into a fight about Chicago's newspapers—a fight, in other words, about nothing. Cooke picks up a knife and Brand an icepick, and they attack each other, knocking over the room's cages of small animals (dogs, mice, guinea pigs). When the two men realize what they've done, they're terrified. Richard worries they'll all be fired. Without knowing which animals belong in which cage (and thus with which experiments), Richard, Brand, Cooke, and Bill simply put the animals back wherever they can.

This is a moment of possible crisis. First, as is the case so many times in Wright's life, violence seems to come out of nowhere. Here, the violence is all the more shocking for having almost no basis in reality. Brand and Cooke simply hate each other, and no other explanation for their behavior is offered.

When the doctors arrive later, pulling out (what they believe to be) specific animals for specific experiments, the four cleaning-men fear that someone will discover the big mix-up. Days, then weeks, pass, and Richard realizes that no doctors are aware of the changes. The four men have probably altered the scientific research the hospital has been tasked with performing, but Richard knows that the institution cares less for its black workers than for anyone else it employs. He realizes he has no desire to maintain a "code of ethics" and tell the hospital the truth.

This passage can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, it demonstrates Wright's lack of concern for the hospital's research. On the other, it's humorous. Wright reveals that the hospital's science isn't perhaps so rigorous as it initially seems, and the doctors' officious attitudes toward the black menial workers might hide the fact that they—men of science—don't have too firm a grasp on the work they oversee.

CHAPTER 18

Richard continues hanging out with a group of white postal workers, who discuss their membership in the Communist party. Richard remains distrustful of Communism, because he believes too many workers parrot its messages without really understanding the plight of laborers around the world. The postal workers encourage Richard to visit the South Side chapter of the John Reed Club, a Communist artistic group. Although Richard is initially dubious, he's quickly embraced by the Club's predominantly white members. Richard detects no racism in their actions, and the higher-ups in the Club seem to appreciate his poetry, recommending it for publication in some of the group's affiliated magazines (*Masses*, *Anvil*, *Left Front*).

The John Reed Club represents literary opportunity for Wright. Moreover, it joins this opportunity with social conscience. As opposed to the "black Bohemians" of Chicago, the writers of the John Reed Club concern themselves explicitly with political questions. They believe that writing has real value for social change. Although Wright worries about joining a club of any kind, the John Reed writers represent as much community as he's been able to find in Chicago.

When Richard's mother realizes that her son has been reading Communist material, she worries. Richard remarks inwardly that his mother is afraid of the Communist iconography in publications like *Masses*: these stark images of united workers seem ominous to her. Richard believes that his mother would prefer her son to be swayed by Christian imagery, but Richard has no patience for organized religion. He finds himself beginning to wonder if "solidarity" and "unity" among workers really might be possible on an international scale.

Here, Wright addresses explicitly what the reader has noticed for some time. Wright does not believe in Christian teachings, but he has, in a sense, substituted the lessons of Marx for those of the Gospels. The John Reed Club offers community and solidarity, just as a church might. As will be seen later, though, the Club is also as defensive against alternative views as a church might be.

Richard attends meetings at the John Reed Club for two months. While he's still learning the ropes at the organization, a "fraction" among members (divided between two literary magazines) prompts a new leadership election. Because Richard is untainted by existing squabbles between members of the Club, he's elected leader of the entire group. Amazed at this development, he offers to resign, but the other members, largely white, won't hear of it. They seem happy to have elected a black man as their leader. Richard notes that equal treatment for black Americans is a pillar of the Communist Party in the US.

This is a stroke of good fortune for Wright—or so it seems at first. Wright implies that he's elected because he's unobjectionable to the other members of the Club; he does not belong to one "fraction" or another. He's also a new enough member to be impressionable. He is able to carry out the demands of others—or so those supporting his candidacy might think. Wright is aware that he might be used by those around him, but he takes the job anyway, eager to see where it leads.

Richard discovers that there are complex political loyalties within the John Reed Club. The most important involves official membership in the Communist Party, which is affiliated with, but distinct from, the John Reed Club. After much thought, Richard decides to sign up for the Communist Party, thus uniting, in his leadership of the John Reed Club, that organization's mission with the mission of the Party in Chicago. Around this time, a young man from Detroit called Comrade Young appears at the Reed Club offices.

This section demonstrates the complications of leading a group like this. The John Reed Club is related to, but not the same as, the Communist Party. Wright joins the Club before the Party, and in a sense, this remains true of him throughout the rest of the memoir—he is a writer first, a Communist second. When these loyalties are called into question by the Party, Wright must decide whether his writing or his membership is more important to him.

Comrade Young is a painter. At first, Richard and the other members of the John Reed Club are impressed by his passionate embrace of Communism, but it soon becomes clear that Young is interested in intra-party fighting more than anything else. Young accuses a man named Swann of sedition against the Club and Party, which forces Richard to hold proceedings to determine if Young's accusations are true. During this process, with Swann's fate hanging in doubt, Young disappears, and Richard and other members try to find out information about his life. When they write to the Detroit Reed Club, they learn that Young is mentally ill and was a recent inmate of an asylum. Shocked at this, Richard clears Swann of wrongdoing, and learns that club administration is filled with challenges, confusion, and paranoia.

The episode with Comrade Young is a destabilizing one. Young is, in a sense, a double for Wright, almost an inversion of him. Both are men who've traveled away from home and are willing to do whatever it takes to make their art and serve the Party. But whereas Wright is sane, sober, and clearheaded, Young is given over to flights of fancy. When he loses his grip on reality, the Party becomes a space in which Young's bitter fantasies are played out. Wright never becomes so wrapped up in his own imagination.

CHAPTER 19

Richard becomes disillusioned with aspects of the John Reed Club and the Communist Party. At a meeting of his "unit," a subsection of the Party, he is laughed at by other black Communists, who believe he is too "bourgeois" and too educated to be a trustworthy member of the Party. Later, Richard has an idea: he plans to write "biographical sketches" of Communist Party members, both to try out a new kind of narrative and to showcase the social backgrounds of its rank-and-file. He begins by interviewing a man named Ross, who has been charged by Chicago police "with 'inciting a riot.'"

An important section in the memoir. Wright is beginning a new artistic project, one that will inform the more mature phase of his career. The memoir has been a story of Wright's young life, but it's also been a tale of his self-creation as a writer. In this portion of the memoir, his authorial "experiments," as he calls them, become more and more central. His decision to ground these experiments in the lives of those around him demonstrates his commitment to a socially-conscious fiction.

After meeting with Ross several times and learning the story of his life, Richard runs into an unnamed black Communist in the streets of the South Side, a member of the Party outranking Richard. The man implies that Richard is acting seditiously toward the party, like Trotsky, who opposed Stalin in the USSR. Wright remarks to the reader that at this time he'd read no Trotsky, and was instead a reader of Stalin's work. Richard thus finds the man's accusations laughable. Richard is taken with Stalin's idea that the ethnic "minorities" of the USSR might be joined into a social "unity." He wonders, too, if this is possible in America.

When the Party calls enemies Trotskyites, they don't really believe that these breakaway members are followers of that breakaway Russian leader. Instead, the term is used as an indiscriminate signifier—that someone is against the Party's doctrine. Thus, though it is notable that Wright has read Stalin and not Trotsky, it doesn't matter much. Wright is on an independent path, and in the Party's eyes, this is unacceptable.

Another Party official, Ed Green, visits Ross, Ross's wife, and Richard at Ross's apartment one day. Although he says nothing about it outright, Richard realizes that Green, like the previous, unnamed man, is trying to dissuade Richard from his biographical sketches. Ross, for his part, doesn't worry too much about Green's involvement. After this surprise meeting, they continue their interviews together, but Richard feels that Ross is less expansive in his comments, shaken by the Party's implicit control of his speech.

Wright and Ross are also doubles in the text. Both work together on the interviews that will ground some of the biographical sketches, but later on, both men will be called to account by the Party, and only one, Wright, will stand up to it. Ross seems, even in this passage, more willing to bend to the Party's demands. He wishes to remain a part of the group, whereas Wright yearns to be free of it.

Richard changes his idea from a set of biographical sketches to a collection of short stories. He derives his information from Ross and others in his social circle, and finishes a story that's published in an anthology of black writing. Richard writes a few more, using information from his and his comrades' lives, but he feels they don't "catch the quality of the experience" he's seeking. Around this time, he also begins working at the South Side Boys' Club, arranging activities for young men in the area and noting down their habits and social interactions.

This is another important moment in Wright's artistic career. He moves from a kind of journalism, or reporting, to the making of fiction. In Black Boy, *Wright is committed to talking about the life he has lived, but in his other works, like* Native Son, *fiction becomes the basis of the creative act. In both cases, however, real life and real social problems are the foundations of the writing.*

Richard becomes more deeply disillusioned with the John Reed Club and the Communist Party in Chicago. After a series of discussions at the local and national level, the Party diminishes the influence of local John Reed chapters. It announces that properly Communist writing should be in the form of informational pamphlets, not creative fictions. Richard believes these decisions are not in the best interests of worker unity, but he cannot convince the Party brass of his ideas. He realizes that some Communists, like many Southern whites, want to suppress his ability to speak his mind.

Wright does not believe that writing should be subordinate to any other activity. Writing that simply accepts, without analyzing, the Party line is unacceptable to him. Propaganda is used by the Party to supply thoughts for other men, and Wright opposes this. He wishes to give people tools to think for themselves, to create their own thoughts. Wright has learned this from his own extensive reading, and it remains important to him now.

In 1935, Richard travels to New York for a conference of national John Reed Clubs and Communist Party locals. Quickly, Richard becomes upset with the conference's lack of support for Reed Clubs, and for creative expression more generally. He has difficulty finding a place to stay in the city, and on the last meeting day, all national Reed Club chapters are officially disbanded by the Party. Richard returns home, dejected, and believes his career as a Communist intellectual is largely finished.

In case Wright thought these problems were specific to the Chicago Communist Party, he sees in this passage that they are national problems. The New York branch consists of many other members who wish to disband the John Reed Club. There is no group of intellectuals advocating to save the kind of writing Wright values. He is alone in the Party.

Richard is surprised to be met at his apartment soon after by Ed Green, a Party higher-up. Green tells Richard that Buddy Nealson, an influential black Communist in Chicago, wants to meet with him. Richard agrees, and Nealson tries to encourage Richard to stay with the Party, and to accept a new committee assignment. Richard, however, says he needs time to focus on his writing. Nealson and others in the Chicago Communist Party try to convince Richard to stay, but at this point, the breach between the writer and organization is too vast. Richard gives a speech at a unit meeting, offering his resignation. He pointedly says he denounces no Communist principles, only the administration of the group. He believes this will allow him to leave the Party freely, and without fear of recrimination.

Wright, independent throughout, refuses to denounce the mission of the Party. He still agrees with its principles: that men should be free and united, and that they should fight against racism. He objects instead to the forces within the Party that cramp individual expression. This expression is what Wright values above all else. There is no creed for Wright more important than the freedom to think as he pleases. Members of the Party, especially its leaders, sense this, so they do what they can to make others suspicious of Wright, a "freethinker" who might, in their view, be agitating against *the Party.*

Soon after, two men from the Party come to Richard's apartment and accuse him of being a Trotskyite traitor. Richard is aghast at these accusations, which are untrue. He also realizes he was naive to think he could leave the Party so easily. He tells the men that, if Nealson continues slandering him, he will defend himself. No further action is taken by the Party. Richard remarks to the reader that he was too much of an individualist for Communist organizing, even though its ideas are important to him.

Again, the term Trotskyite is used for any enemy of the Party. At this point, Wright is a bit more familiar with Trotsky's idea, but he does not wish to join a faction opposing the Party. Instead, he seems to resent Party structures themselves. Wright wants to support the ideals of the Party without accepting its shackles on speech and thought.

The relief office transfers Richard from the South Side Boys' Club, where he's been working, to the Federal Negro Theater. Richard becomes the head of PR for the group. He is upset, however, to learn that the theater produces mostly "Africanized" versions of repertory drama—which hew mostly to stereotypes of black life. He encourages the theater to find a new leader, a man named DeSheim, whose passion for black realist drama Richard shares.

This theater for black actors is an important cultural institution in Chicago, but it presents a depiction of black life that is out of step with the black lives Wright has observed. In concert with DeSheim, Wright agitates for a more realistic, more politically-engaged black theater.

Richard is saddened to learn, though, that the black members of the company don't like the work DeSheim champions. They call for DeSheim's removal. When they learn that Richard supports DeSheim, they label him an "Uncle Tom," and threaten violence against him. Richard calls the relief office and asks to be transferred. He is sent to a white-led experimental theater, and he wonders at the mindset of those in the Federal Negro Theater, who were convinced he was not sympathetic to them.

Once again, Wright objects to the political and aesthetic ideals of those within the black community. Here, he believes that actors in the company are too willing to accept a kind of theater that displays them as stereotypes. Wright wants to show black life in all its complexity, but instead, he finds himself run out of a theater whose focus is black art

Soon after, Richard is called to a meeting by former comrades in the Communist Party. They tell him that Ross, whom Richard interviewed, is being tried for crimes against the Party. Richard fears that he, too, will be charged, but his comrades say he's only to be there as a witness to the proceedings. The trial is long, and involves lectures on international Communism and its values. Richard finds himself with deeply mixed feelings about the Party: its dream of universal brotherhood, and its reality of petty in-fighting and intrigue.

During this meeting, Wright goes over what he loves and loathes about Communism. He still feels solidarity with other workers, and he still believes that an organized, international fight against capitalism is possible, but he does not wish to continue in this fight within the Party's strictures. He fears what the Party will do to those who disagree with its tenets, and he wishes to protect his own intellectual freedoms.

At the end of the trial, Ross is accused of seditious acts by his own close comrades. Richard is shocked at this development. He is even more shocked when Ross confesses entirely, begging to be readmitted to the Party. Richard believes this event to be both "horrible" and full of "glory." It is *horrible* because one man's spirit has been broken by a more powerful group. But it is *glorious*, because that man is recommitting himself to a global struggle for equality. Richard is allowed to leave the meeting unharmed. He is less sure than ever about his views of the Party, and whether it is a force for good or ill.

The Communist Party is horrible and glorious at the same time, and these parts seem very difficult to separate. Wright leaves this last meeting as confused as he's ever been, but he explicitly does not reject the ideals on which the Party was founded. This leaves open the possibility that Wright could continue to support its objectives, in some form, in the future.

CHAPTER 20

Richard finds another new job, at the Federal Writers' Project. Former comrades from the Communist Party are on staff, and they do not speak to Richard. Richard's boss at the Project tells him during a meeting that some on staff believe Richard is writing and editing poorly. Richard realizes the Communists are doing what they can to thwart him, a perceived traitor, but the boss reassures Richard that he'll be secure on the job.

Wright finds that there are some who will support him. Here, his boss recognizes Wright's independence of thought, and at least tacitly agrees with it. There are not many instances in the text in which Wright finds a kindred spirit within an institution or workplace, but this is one of those rare moments.

Wanting the Communist Party to stop hounding him, Richard tries to speak to the Chicago General Secretary, but he is denounced as a Trotskyite by an underling. Later, on May 1, 1936, Richard decides to march with his fellow union writers in a citywide parade. On the march, he falls in with a group of black Communists, who welcome him despite their intra-party differences. Richard is cheered by this, but then a group of white Communists nearby spot him and tell him to leave. When he does not, they throw him out of the parade. Richard, bruised, realizes that no black Communists defended him. He sees in the parade the "horror" and "glory" he observed at Ross's trial. He returns to his tiny apartment.

The parade represents a flowing-forth of humanity—exactly the human experience Wright has tried to chronicle in the South and in Chicago. Like any group of people, this one is complex. There are some who support Wright, and more who wish to kick him out. Like other moments in the memoir, there is violence, although Wright is spared the worst. When he leaves the parade, he resolves to engage with life in a different way—to take his protest from the street to the page.

There, Richard decides that he must continue his creative projects on his own. He does not yet know what they will be, but no Party will be able to direct him. He recalls his young life in the South, and his years amid the political confusion of Chicago. He vows that no Party will ever break his resolve. He ends the book insisting that his writings will "keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human."

This last phrase is Wright's statement of belief. His memoir has not glossed over the difficult or immoral parts of his life, nor has it insisted that these moments should define him as a man. Rather, Wright's memoir shows one person's immensely difficult fight to learn more about himself and those around him. Wright promises himself and his readers that he'll never stop this work.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Schlegel, Chris. "*Black Boy.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Jun 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Schlegel, Chris. "*Black Boy.*" LitCharts LLC, June 18, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/black-boy.

To cite any of the quotes from *Black Boy* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Wright, Richard. Black Boy. Harper Perennial. 2015.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Wright, Richard. Black Boy. New York: Harper Perennial. 2015.