

Black Boy Book Notes

Black Boy by Richard Wright

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Author/Context

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on a farm in Mississippi in 1908. He lived with his brother, born 1910, his mother, a school teacher, his father, a farmer; and his grandmother, who had been a slave before the Emancipation, became a nurse afterward, and was a devoted Seventh-day Adventist. His father deserted the family in 1913, and they fell into extreme poverty.

After moving around the South for several years, including a month spent in an orphanage, they moved in with Wright's Aunt Maggie, his mother's sister, in Elaine, Arkansas. However, when her husband was murdered by whites, they quickly moved to West Helena, Arkansas. His mother had a stroke, and Wright left school to earn money. By 1921, Richard was back in school, this time at a Seventh-day Adventist institution run by his youngest aunt, Addie.

He entered fifth grade in 1921 at a school in Jackson, Mississippi, but was quickly promoted to sixth grade. He worked briefly for a traveling insurance agent, and was disturbed by the poverty and ignorance he witnesses in the South. He worked various odd jobs for the next few years, reading voraciously. He published his first story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," in 1923. He graduated high school in 1924 as the valedictorian, and moved to Memphis, Tennessee. Soon after, his family joined him and he works several low-paying jobs there.

Moving to Chicago, he found urban life exciting and draining; he also observed less racism. Working in the post office and writing furiously, Wright made friends with artists and writers and various revolutionary thinkers, black and white. Falling in with the John Reed Club, an organization for such people, and the Communist party, he published various short stories in revolutionary literary journals. In 1939 he married Dhima Rose Meadman and finished "Native Son".

He slowly became disillusioned with Communism, mainly because of the party's desire to control his writing. He became involved with, then married, Ellen Poplar. He worked extensively with various playwrights and actors, including Orson Welles, to produce plays and music. His daughter Julia was born in New York in 1942. In 1943, He gave a speech to Fiske University about his experience with racism, and the strong reaction from the crowd incited him to write *Black Boy*. By 1946, the book was a success and he was living in Paris, meeting many of France's most prominent writers. He read deeply on the subject of existentialism, having long conversations with Jean-Paul Sartre. His daughter Rachel was born in 1949. He was published in anthologies with the likes of Arthur Koestler and Andre Gide, and traveled widely in South America. He worked for several years on his own existential novel, "The Outsider," a work influenced by Albert Camus. Meanwhile, he continued to support his family, who had moved back to Mississippi.

During the fifties, he grew alienated in Paris, as he was quietly critical of the Algerian war for independence. He was quite active politically, organizing the First Congress of

Negro Artists and Writers in 1956. There were rumors that he was an agent of the FBI. In 1959, the year his mother died, he fell ill with amoebic dysentery. He continued to speak out against governmental control of artists and writers, especially racist control. Beginning with "Native Son," he was writing black literature that "refused to compromise with many white expectations." (Felgar 78) In November 1960, he died of a heart attack, and was cremated with a copy of *Black Boy* in Paris. He is remembered as the "virtual father of the post World War II black novel" (Felgar 175) and a mentor to anyone who despairs that his or her voice might never be heard.

Bibliography

Felgar, Robert. *Richard Wright*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Collins, Perennial Classics Edition, 1998.

Plot Summary

Black Boy (American Hunger) is a fictionalized memoir of Richard Wright's childhood and young adulthood. It is split into two sections, "Southern Night" (concerning his childhood in the south) and "The Horror and the Glory" (concerning his early adult years in Chicago).

The book begins with a mischievous, four-year-old Wright setting fire to his house, and continues in that vein. Wright is a curious child living in a household of strict, religious women and violent, irresponsible men. He quickly chafes against his surroundings, reading instead of playing with other children, and rejecting the church in favor of atheism at a young age. He feels even more out of place as he grows older and comes in contact with the rampant racism of the 1920's south. Not only does he find it generally unjust, but he is especially bothered by whites' (and other blacks') desire to squash his intellectual curiosity and potential. His father deserts the family, and he is shuffled back and forth between his sick mother, his fanatically religious grandmother and various aunts and uncles. As he ventures into the white world to find jobs, he encounters extreme racism and brutal violence, which stays with him the rest of his life. The family is starving to death. They have always viewed the north as a place of opportunity, and so as soon as they can scrape together enough money, Richard and his aunt go to Chicago, promising to send for his mother and brother.

He finds the north less racist than the south, and begins forming concrete ideas about American race relations. He holds many jobs, most of them menial. He washes floors during the day and reads Proust and medical journals by night. His family is still very poor, and his mother is crippled by a stroke, and his relatives continue to annoy him about his atheism and his reading. They don't see the point of it. He finds a job at the post office and meets some white men who share his cynical view of the world, and religion in particular. They invite him to the John Reed Club, an organization that promotes the arts and social change. He becomes involved with a magazine called Left Front. He slowly becomes immersed in the Communist party, organizing its writers and artists.

At first he thinks he will find friends within the party, especially among its black members, but he finds them to be just as afraid of change as the southern whites he had left behind. The Communists fear anyone who disagrees with their ideas, and Wright, who has always been inclined to question and speak his mind, is quickly branded a "counter-revolutionary." When he tries to leave the party, he is accused of trying to lead others away from it. After witnessing the trial of another black Communist for counter-revolutionary activity, Wright decides to abandon the party. Still, he remains branded an "enemy" of Communism, and party members threaten him away from various jobs and gatherings. Nevertheless, he does not fight them because he believes they are clumsily groping toward ideas that he agrees with: unity, tolerance, and equality. He ends the book by resolving to use his writing to search for a way to start a revolution: he thinks that everyone has a "hunger" for life that needs to be filled, and for him, politics is his way to the human heart.

Major Characters

Richard Wright: The narrator. Black Boy deals with his childhood and young adulthood. He is an extremely intelligent African American boy coming of age in the South in the early 1900's. The brutality and ignorance that he sees between Blacks and Whites influences his views on race relations. He considers racism and its ills to be American problems, and believes that American politics must change if society is going to change. He joins the Communist party because he thinks it, of any political body, most taps into 'the hunger' of humankind: what people want out of life. He finds ignorance and violence within the party as well, but remains hopeful.

Ella Wright: Richard Wright's mother. She is a dark figure in Wright's life, administering extreme beatings when he gets into childhood trouble, guilt-tripping him into attending church, and refusing to answer any questions about their past or current environment. For a curious child, she is a stifling presence. After suffering a stroke, she is bedridden. She remains with Wright throughout the book, moving from apartment to apartment and gradually becoming more understanding of his life.

Granny: Granny, who sometimes lives with the family, is Richard's mother to an extreme. She beats him casually, and berates him, telling him he is full of sin. A Seventh Day Adventist, she is a ridiculous and frustrating figure when she bans books from the house and forbids Richard to get a job on Saturday Sabbath, even though they are starving.

Father: Wright's father, though he does not appear much in the book, is an important figure in his development. He is first seen as the lawmaker, and Wright is terrified of him. After he abandons his family to live with another woman, Wright finds him a pathetic example of a man who responded to the struggle of being black by drinking and womanizing. Wright views his father as something he does not ever want to become.

Aunt Addie: Aunt Addie is just one of the many characters who tries to discipline Wright. His aunt but also his teacher in Sunday school, she too beats him indiscriminately when his attitude offends her. Finally, though, he lashes out against her for good, threatening to kill her if she hits him once more. This showdown plays a big part in the family's gradual decision that Wright is a lost cause. By the time he has moved out of the house, he is considered by many family members to be a lost soul.

Minor Characters

Griggs: A classmate of Wright's. He tries to show Wright how to get along with white people so that he won't make them angry. He is an intelligent boy who differs from Wright in that he is willing to play the role designed for him by whites: laugh and be cheerful in public, but hate whites passionately behind their backs. He explains to Wright that what whites most want is deference: they want to be shown that blacks know they are white.



Shorty: A black man who works with Wright in a hotel. He, like Griggs, is intelligent and yet totally submissive to whites. He is more than willing to 'act the clown.' He claims to hate racist whites but will never leave the south, because, he says, he is too lazy. Unlike Wright, who wants to make his living as a man, Shorty is happy to take any opportunity he can get. When he wants a quarter for lunch, he invites a white man to kick him for it, saying, 'My ass is tough and quarters is scarce.'

Mr. Olin: One of the white men Wright works with at an optician's shop in Memphis. As a joke, Olin tells Wright that Harrison, one of the other black boys at the shop, is angry at him and is waiting with a knife for him. Olin gives Wright a knife, and meanwhile tells Harrison the same story and also gives him a knife, hoping that they will kill each other. When Wright finds out about the plan, he realizes how brutal and scheming white men can be, and cannot trust them for years to come.

Mr. Hoffman: A Jewish man who owns the Chicago store where Wright works as a porter. Although he and his wife are not racist, Wright does not trust their motives and expects them to beat or dismiss him at any time. They are the first genuinely nice white people he has met, and he is frightened of them. Also, he feels guilty about the anti-semitic views he had as an ignorant child in the south.

Ross: A young black Communist who is put on trial for vague offenses like 'counter-revolutionary activity.' Wright uses him as the subject of a character sketch, trying to hit on why Ross became a Communist. Essentially, he is trying to gain an intimate understanding of Ross' character. However, the other Communists are very suspicious of this, and eventually Ross is afraid to be interviewed: there are rumors that Wright is a policeman. Disgusted, Wright realizes that many Communists are so skeptical that they don't know who their friends are.

Buddy Nealson: A Communist leader who Wright sees as close-minded and ignorant. He directs other Communists to terrorize Wright, threatening him off jobs and inviting him to rallies just so they can reject him again. He represents the many other Communists who act brotherly but who are merely serving their own political interests.

Objects/Places

School: School is various things to the young Wright: it is a place where he has the opportunity to get away from his family and learn, but it is also a place where he has to gain the respect of his peers. He does a lot of fighting there, especially because he is often a new student, since his family moves often. He devours the books given to him and then analyzes the boys and girls around him, listening to the way they talk about each other and about the whites many of them work for.

Church/Religion: The church is the primary way that Wright's granny and mother use to discipline him. Because he refuses their church (Seventh Day Adventist) in favor of atheism, he is branded a sinner who will send the entire household to hell. In addition, he is rejected from the social life his peers have constructed around the church. They threaten him, plead with him and humiliate him in public, but he can never 'feel God.'

Beale Street: Beale Street, in Memphis, was viewed by the family as a den of sin. However, when Wright leaves home he is drawn to it, and meets Mrs. Moss and Bess, his landlady and her daughter. Both women are as kind as they are naive. They feed him and care for him, and quickly suggest that he marry Bess, because he is such a nice boy. Wright is taken aback, and realizes that things are not always what they seem to be; he had originally thought the place was a whorehouse!

Hospital: In the hospital, Wright is a custodian working with a few friends, specializing in preparing animals for experiments. When two of the men get into a fight and knock over the animal cages, they are unable to right things because the white doctors had always refused to tell them anything about the experiments. They hide the damage as best they can, and are never caught. This sort of incident is quite similar to others in Wright's professional life, where whites do not seem to mind if blacks cheat or steal or lie, as long as they do not try to gain power or information.

Communism: Joining the Communist party opens Wright's eyes. He realizes that not everyone is racist, and that some people have the drive to realize their full potential as humans. Like Wright, they attempt to change themselves, and the world, through politics. And yet they are also ignorant and suspicious. They are skeptical of Wright, calling him an intellectual even though he mops floors for a living. He leaves the party but retains its values of united striving for justice and peace.

Quotes

Quote 1: "...the faint cool kiss of sensuality when dew came onto my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning." Chapter 1, pg. 9

Quote 2: "I'm hungry now, but I won't live with you." Chapter 1, pg. 33

Quote 3: "I'm doing all I can," Chapter 1, pg. 36

Quote 4: "When you get through, kiss back there." Chapter 2, pg. 41

Quote 5: "white, red and black," but quickly tells him to hush, saying, "They'll call you a colored man when you grow up. Do you mind, Mr. Wright?" Chapter 2, pg. 49

Quote 6: "You can't eat a dead dog, can you?" Chapter 2, pg. 71

Quote 7: "If I kissed my elbow, I would turn into a girl." Chapter 2, pg. 72

Quote 8: "At the age of twelve, before I had had one full year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase, a predilection for what was real that no argument could ever gainsay, a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering." Chapter 3, pg. 100

Quote 9: Since Richard is "no longer set apart for being sinful," his family leaves him alone. Chapter 5, pg. 123

Quote 10: "I said to myself, that boy just doesn't know what he's doing," the man tells him. Chapter 5, pg. 132

Quote 11: "The naked will of power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn." Chapter 5, pg. 136

Quote 12: her "humanity [triumphs] over her fear." Chapter 5, pg. 144

Quote 13: "You ought to know God through some church." Chapter 6, pg. 150

Quote 14: "even if that isn't right, it's not far wrong." Chapter 6, pg. 157

Quote 15: "I never saw a dog bite that could really hurt a nigger," Chapter 7, pg. 163

Quote 16: While in eighth grade, Richard writes "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," a story that "stemmed from pure feeling." Chapter 7, pg. 165

Quote 17: "the principal's speech is the better speech." Chapter 8, pg. 177



Quote 18: "That's what we do to niggers who don't pay their bills," one man tells Richard. Chapter 9, pg. 184

Quote 19: "Could she ever understand my life?" he wonders about Bess, doubtfully. Chapter 11, pg. 217

Quote 20: "My ass is tough and quarters is scarce." Chapter 12, pg. 229

Quote 21: "This was the culture from which i sprang. This was the terror from which I fled." Chapter 14, pg. 257

Quote 22: "Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life," he explains. Chapter 15, pg. 266

Quote 23: "Having been thrust out of the world because of my race, I had accepted my destiny by not being curious about what shaped it." Chapter 16, pg. 288

Quote 24: He finds that these people "believe in life." Chapter 18, pg. 320

Quote 25: "Trying to please everybody, I pleased nobody," he says ruefully. Chapter 18, pg. 324

Quote 26: "We must have a purge." Chapter 18, pg. 326

Quote 27: Richard is still convinced that he can win their trust eventually, because he cares about their fate so much, but he also "fear[s] their militant ignorance." Chapter 19, pg. 332

Quote 28: "You lost people!" he cries Chapter 19, pg. 337

Quote 29: Ross is charged with vague crimes like "anti-leadership tendencies." Chapter 19, pg. 340

Quote 30: He wonders if a black man "ever live like a halfway decent human being in this goddamn country." Chapter 19, pg. 349

Quote 31: One actor says, "I lived in the South and I never saw any chain gangs." Chapter 19, pg. 365

Quote 32: But the actors find out that Richard has been talking to him, and grow furious, calling him an "Uncle Tom," Chapter 19, pg. 366

Quote 33: they hate him for the "tone of [his] thoughts." Chapter 19, pg. 369

Quote 34: "[Last night] was horrible." Chapter 19, pg. 375

Quote 35: "Get out of our ranks!" Chapter 20, pg. 380

Quote 36: "I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger of life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human." Chapter 20, pg. 384

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age

Chapters 1-5

Coming of Age 1: When he kills the kitten his father had angrily (but not seriously) told him to kill, he shows his father what he thinks of him, without getting into trouble. His father realizes that if he were to chastise Richard for following his orders, no matter how flippant he was being, that he would be showing Richard that he need not always be taken seriously. Since he wants to be seen as the lawmaker of the family, he is willing to give up his sense of reason in order to appear powerful. Richard's recognition of this stubbornness is an important discovery.

Coming of Age 2: When he sees his father for the last time, he sees him as a pathetic and lost figure who tried to make it in the big city and failed. This separates him even more from his father, since he himself was able to become a successful person in the even bigger city of Chicago. He only has to think of himself standing his ideological ground in the faces of white, Northern Communists to realize how far he has come.

Chapters 6-10

Coming of Age 3: He leaves the church quietly and for good. Later, he fights with his extended family (Uncle Tom, Aunt Addie) about the issue, but, as he gets older, he never uses it against his mother. He simply removes himself from something he does not agree with.

Coming of Age 4: His passionate rebellion against Aunt Addie and Uncle Tom makes them view him as a lost cause, but the outcome is that they never bother him again. That is, he decides that he would rather prove that he is strong enough to stand up for himself than continue fighting in a childish way. He wants to resolve their differences once and for all, and ends up looking like a violent lunatic. He shows Addie and Tom that they should be scared of him, and though they judge him very harshly, they also leave him alone.

Coming of Age 5: Meanwhile, he publishes "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre" despite criticism from his family. He says that if he had known how radical he was being, he would have been too frightened to continue. But he does not realize just how far he is moving against the norm when he writes a pulp short story with the word "hell" in the title, after growing up in a family where any kind of literature is considered sinful.

Chapters 11-15

Coming of Age 6: When he moves out on his own to Beale Street in Memphis, he realizes that his assumptions (based on what his family and friends told him) can be drastically wrong: on the supposedly sinful street, he meets the most trusting and friendly people he has ever known.

Coming of Age 7: In Memphis, he finally has the opportunity to learn about what kind of adult he wants to be. When he watches Shorty make a fool of himself for money, he understands that he could never compromise himself that way. He feels distanced from his fellow workers, but all the more certain of himself.

Coming of Age 8: With his growing ambition, he is able to get a library card from a white man, since he can't have one himself. It is a frightening situation for Richard, since he does not know whether he might ask the wrong man for a favor and be beaten. His hunger for knowledge is strong enough to overcome his fear.

Coming of Age 9: He finally leaves the South to go to Chicago, a place he has never been and knows nothing about. He has enough faith in himself and in the idea of North to go without even having a place to live when he gets there.

Chapters 16-20

Coming of Age 10: After warily becoming associated with a headstrong, intimidating group of Communists, he rebels against them even though he knows he will get into trouble, and that he is standing alone. He reads Communist literature, whether sanctioned by the party or not, until he feels he understands the issues, and then makes his own decisions about them. The party cannot accept that, but Richard is confident in himself and continues to support the Communist's vision, despite their fear of intellectuals.



Topic Tracking: Ignorance

Chapters 1-5

Ignorance 1: As a child, Wright is lied to or silenced when he asks his family profound questions. If he is simply curious about something he sees and asks about it, he will likely hear "Why do you want to know?" and when he cannot come up with a practical reason, he is laughed at.

Ignorance 2: He never knew or understood his own father. Seeing his father abandon his family, and suddenly becoming the man of the house, changes Richard forever. He has many ideas about his own masculinity, some of which are based in wanting to be as little like his father as possible.

Ignorance 3: He is ignorant of his whole family's past and heritage (even when he asks simply "is Granny white?" because she looks white, he does not get a straight answer). Everyone seems either too afraid or too angry to explain the differences between Whites and Blacks in America. And yet more and more, Richard observes that that forced ignorance is what keeps Blacks from really knowing and understanding each other.

Ignorance 4: Wright's own ignorance when he sells KKK newspapers without realizing it. He reels with shock and quickly stops selling them, feeling like a fool for not even looking at the paper he sells.

Chapters 6-10

Ignorance 5: He does not know how to handle whites. It often gets him into trouble because he does not know how to pacify an angry, suspicious or ignorant white person.

Chapters 11-15

Ignorance 6: Bess and Mrs. Moss, who automatically accept Richard as a good boy, seem to be the epitome of blissful ignorance. When he argues with them, saying that he could easily be a dangerous criminal, they confidently reject the idea, based on his politeness and pleasant demeanor. Richard is mystified.

Ignorance 7: Being cheated by some bootleggers in Memphis, when he thought he was worldly-wise, shows Richard that he too can be a victim of blind ignorance.

Ignorance 8: When he wants library books and is forced to stay ignorant until a white man lets him use his card, Richard feels the tension of trying to be different in the highly structured Southern society.

Chapters 16-20

Ignorance 9: Communists, who call him an intellectual just because he is articulate and reads a lot, make Richard furious. He tries to argue, saying that he sweeps floors for a living, but to them, superficial appearance is paramount.

Topic Tracking: Loneliness

Chapters 1-5

Loneliness 1: He never knows his father, which obliges him to become the father in the Wright family, forgoing neighborhood games to work and falteringly trying to "become a man." This isolates him from people his own age, and makes him wary of his elders.

Loneliness 2: He feels intellectually and spiritually alone in the South, where every one he knows is religious. His family and friends repeatedly try to convince him he needs God. It is only when he comes to Chicago that he meets people as admittedly cynical and atheist as he is.

Loneliness 3: In addition, he cannot understand why Blacks are content to remain uneducated and compliant with the way society is organized. Even when he is a very young child, he is continually questioning life and trying to learn new things.

Loneliness 4: This contributes to his feeling lonely in the church because even when he tries to pray he never feels anything--it just does not seem to relate to his life. For a long time he sees himself the way his family does: as an incorrigible sinner.

Chapters 6-10

Loneliness 5: All throughout his life, he is violently forced away from the white world by fear of abuse. Although he at first tries to talk to white people naturally, he soon realizes that even the kindest of Southern Whites assumes that he is above Richard in some way.

Loneliness 6: Stratified in terms of gender as well, he cannot relate to women (examples: Bess and the woman who wants to go to the circus). Most of his relationships with them are purely sexual, and there is never any mention of a girlfriend.

Chapters 11-15

Loneliness 7: Richard is ignored or silenced even at work. No one is interested in helping him, even to learn a new skill that would benefit the company. In general, his suggestions are met with skepticism or hostility. He longs to go North, where he thinks he can truly make something of himself.

Loneliness 8: Upon arriving in the North, he feels lonely at first because he cannot understand what anyone is saying (because of their accents), and he does not know their motives, because they are friendly to him even though he is black. He keeps trying to discern racism in their actions, but cannot. This frightens him more than any Southern white man, because it is utterly unknown to him.

Loneliness 9: He has no friends in the North until he meets the Irishman at the post office. Up to that point, everyone around him is so different as to be impossible to relate to.

Loneliness 10: He associates himself with Communism, and hopes to befriend black Communists, but he understands them just as little as anyone else he has met. This is a grave disappointment for him, especially because their reaction to him is so insulting: they view him as an intellectual and laugh at the proper way he speaks.

Topic Tracking: Violence

Chapters 1-5

Violence 1: His mother beats him until he nearly dies. He begins the story with that beating, which sets the scene for the violence all around him. He views violence as a way of life, from the moment he is born until the end of the story.

Violence 2: Throughout his childhood, his father is nothing to him but the threat of punishment. They have no kind of friendly relationship; respect is won through blows, at times given precisely because they are not deserved. He thinks of his father as the man he has to be quiet for (because his father sleeps during the day.)

Violence 3: In his father's tradition, his grandmother casually slaps him throughout the book. He is taught not to resist these slaps, but to rather welcome them as an indication that he has done something wrong.

Violence 4: At school, he must fight to be accepted. He cannot try to make friends until he has shown himself to be a force to be reckoned with. This is accomplished by the typical knocking-the-hat-off-the-new-boy's-head-to-see-if-he-will-fight ritual.

Violence 5: His Aunt Addie, in the tradition of his grandmother, beats him because she cannot admit she is wrong. Richard continually meets people who feel they can abuse him for whatever reason they can come up with. Addie sees him as a threat to her authority, so she beats him.

Chapters 6-10

Violence 6: His Uncle Tom tries to beat him to discipline him, but Richard pulls a razor blade on him. When Richard fights back, he shows Tom that he cannot be intimidated, that he is reckless and dangerous and therefore powerful. Tom is very angry, but also respectful. This is one of the first times Richard uses violence against others.

Violence 7: He is repeatedly threatened and injured by whites. Some, like those he works for in the clothing store, are merely haphazardly threatening. Others, like Mr. Olin at the optical company, seem bent on orchestrating Richard's demise. Mr Olin even tries to get Richard and another young man, Harrison, to kill each other, simply for his own sport.

Chapters 11-15

Violence 8: He and Harrison humiliate themselves by fighting for money. They try to make some money by putting on a show, but are unable to fake a fight and so are forced to actually injure each other out of fear of white people and desire for a new suit. Richard feels deeply ashamed.

Chapters 16-20

Violence 9: When Richard moves to Chicago and joins the Communist group, he learns how frequently he police beat protesting Communists. Richard seems to move from one outcast group to another, never escaping the threat of those in charge. He never feels completely safe.

Violence 10: At the end of the book, Wright is forcefully thrown from the ranks marching Communists during a parade. Even though they espouse peace, they fear Richard so much that they feel justified in injuring him in public. The incident parallels many others in Richard's life, most obviously that of Granny's "religiously sanctioned" violence against Richard.

Chapter 1

Richard Wright is a four-year-old wandering around his house with his three-year-old brother as his grandmother lies sick in the next room. He is so bored that he sets fire to the window curtains and burns down the house. When his mother finds him, she beats him so badly he falls unconscious and hallucinates for days. That pattern of mischief followed by brutal punishment is a recurring one in Wright's childhood. Still, he is not simply a trouble-maker: he also has probing questions and a deep appreciation for the world around him. He notes, for example:

"...the faint cool kiss of sensuality when dew came onto my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning." Chapter 1, pg. 9

When his family moves to Memphis, he is naturally excited at the idea of being on a boat, but his mother answers all his questions about it with a "just because" or a "hush."

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 1

Topic Tracking: Violence 1

Richard's father, a sharecropper, is known to the family simply as the lawmaker. Richard thinks he is cruel but has no way to let him know until a kitten comes onto the property, making noise while Father is sleeping. Father yells at Richard and his brother to shut the kitten up, saying that they can kill it if they have to. Wright knows he is not serious, but he kills the kitten anyway. His father cannot punish him, because then he would be showing that sometimes he is not to be taken seriously. In this way, Richard exerts power over his father. Soon after, his father deserts the family to live with another woman, leaving them impoverished. Wright further assumes the role of the head of the household. His mother sends him out to buy groceries at one point, and the money is stolen by boys on the street. His mother gives him more money and a big stick, forcing him to face the boys. He runs down the street, swinging the club viciously, and returns with the groceries. He is six years old.

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 1

Topic Tracking: Violence 2

He soon runs into more trouble by becoming overly curious about a local saloon. Its patrons think he is cute and invite him to drink. Unbelievably, within a few weeks he becomes a drunk, begging for alcohol. His mother finally gains control of him, but she cannot be with him at school: there he meets children who will teach him any dirty word he wants to know. Of course, he repeats them to townspeople, and gets into more trouble.

Meanwhile, Richard's family is starving. His mother finally convinces him to go try to get money from his father, but when they arrive at his home he refuses. He tells Richard to come live with him, but the boy proudly says, "I'm hungry now, but I won't live with you." Chapter 1, pg. 33 Even when taken to court, his father says, "I'm doing all I can,"

Chapter 1, pg. 33 and the judge accepts that. With no money, Mrs. Wright can do nothing but move her two children to a Methodist orphanage, where they stay for a month. Richard dislikes the headmistress and runs away, but returns. Richard flashes back to the time that his father, seeing him starving, offered him a nickel, and then ahead twenty-five years, where his father is still working on a farm. Richard marvels at how much his father is controlled by his animal impulses, and how completely alienated Richard feels from his own blood.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 2

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 2

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 1

Chapter 2

When they finally scrape together enough money to move, they make a stop at Richard's Granny's home in Jackson. Granny, a strict Seventh-day Adventist, has skin that is so light it is almost white, and she is often mistaken for a white woman. There, Richard first comes into contact with books and stories. A young woman who is boarding at Granny's house reads Richard the story of Bluebeard, who murdered his wives and hung them in a closet. When Granny finds out, she chides the woman, saying that stories are sinful. Life with Granny is full of punishment, but Richard still cannot contain his mischievous spirit. At one point when Granny is bathing him, she tells him to bend over so she can scrub his behind. He does, then whispers, "When you get through, kiss back there." Chapter 2, pg. 41 He is able to hide for a few hours before his mother finally catches him and beats him.

Topic Tracking: Violence 3

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 2

Meanwhile, he is slowly learning about the racism that is everywhere in the South. He notices for the first time, upon boarding the train that would take him to his newest home in Arkansas, that there are separate lines for blacks and whites. His curiosity prompts him to question his mother about his own family, asking whether his grandmother is white or black, and what race he and his father are. His mother answers his questions curtly, saying they are "white, red and black," but quickly tells him to hush, saying, "They'll call you a colored man when you grow up. Do you mind, Mr. Wright?" Chapter 2, pg. 49 He cannot communicate to her just what makes him curious, because it does not seem to have any practical basis, and yet he hungers to understand.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 3

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 3

In Arkansas, the two boys and their mother live with her younger sister, Maggie, and Maggie's husband Uncle Hoskins. Richard likes both of them, and he gets enough to eat there. Nevertheless, he begins hoarding food from the dinner table because he is afraid they will run out of it at any moment. Uncle Hoskins runs a profitable saloon, but he has been told repeatedly that neighboring whites are jealous. Finally, he is murdered. The family flees to back to Granny's home in Jackson, then to another town, West Helena. There, Richard befriends some children and engages in anti-Semitism. The boys are young and ignorant, and Richard explains in hindsight that he is ashamed of blindly following his prejudices.

Aunt Maggie is now with another man, who calls himself Professor Matthews and who has been visiting while Richard and his brother are sleeping. Mrs. Wright and Maggie decide that Richard and his brother should be allowed to meet the professor, but that they must be quiet about his being there. They are bribed with various treats, including a poodle. They are not told why, except that "people are looking" for the professor. One day soon after, the professor comes to the house telling Maggie she has to leave with

him, because he has knocked a white woman unconscious and then set fire to her house. The two leave, and Richard never finds out exactly what happened.

Without Maggie around, they are hungry again, and Richard resolves to sell his dog to a white person. He rings a doorbell in a white neighborhood and a young girl comes to the door. He tells her he wants a dollar for the dog, and she goes to get it. While he waits there, he begins to think about how orderly and clean everything is in the "white world," and how these are the people who "made Negroes leave their homes and flee in the night." By the time she comes back he has decided not to sell the dog to her, even though he is hungry. A week later, the dog is hit by a car, and his mother only says, "You can't eat a dead dog, can you?" Chapter 2, pg. 71

Richard becomes more aware of his surroundings, absorbing myths like "If I kissed my elbow, I would turn into a girl." Chapter 2, pg. 72 He leaves West Helena and returns to school, where all his mischievousness turns into shyness. Even though he can read and write, he cannot do it in front of a classroom. He curses himself. The children ridicule him, and he must fight to show his worth among his fellow students.

Topic Tracking: Violence 4

Soon after, the war ends, Christmas comes, and Richard is disappointed at the single orange he receives, though he eats the entire thing, including the peel.

Chapter 3

Family life gets worse when Mrs. Wright has a stroke. She is bedridden and unable to work, and Richard has a hard time accepting charity from neighbors. It is then decided that he and his brother should live with relatives, though they must be separated because no one has enough money to care for two children. Richard goes to live with his Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody because they live nearest to his mother. They are nice to him, but they are also somewhat cold. They discipline him and tell him which chores he is to complete, but he never feels at home there. He cannot get used to being made to live a certain way, especially by people he does not know. Then he discovers that a boy died in the bed he has been sleeping in. It terrifies him so much he cannot sleep. He asks to return to his mother and is allowed to do so. Again he has rejected comfort and food in favor of his own ideas. He says:

"At the age of twelve, before I had had one full year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase, a predilection for what was real that no argument could ever gainsay, a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering." Chapter 3, pg. 100

Chapter 4

Living again with his grandmother, Richard is obliged to pretend to follow her religion. He is believed to be a sinner, and in Granny's eyes, that could damn the whole house. However, she finds an ally in her struggle for his soul in his Aunt Addie. Only nine years older than Richard and fervently religious, she teaches at the Seventh-day Adventist school at which he is forced to enroll. Even more fanatical than Granny, she beats him repeatedly in order to dominate him, because she is worried that having a relative in her class will make her look weak in the eyes of the other students. Richard will not stand for it, and fights back against her, to the dismay of all the older members of his family, who believe in respect.

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 4

With his entire family and most of his friends longing for him to find God, Richard feels guilty, and tries to explain to Granny that if he were to see a miracle, like an angel, he would believe. She thinks he means that he HAS seen an angel, and tells the preacher, who announces it in public. When the truth comes out, Granny is humiliated into silence and Richard burns with shame. He gets baptized. He writes a morbid story about a little girl, and when he shows it to people they can't understand why he wrote it. This reaction pleases him for some reason he does not understand.

Chapter 5

Since Richard is "no longer set apart for being sinful," his family leaves him alone. Chapter 5, pg.123 He is transferred to a new school, and is forced to fight for the respect of the other students there. Although he is enrolled in fifth grade, two years behind his age, he quickly gets promoted to sixth. Feeling like he can do anything in the world, he dreams of being a doctor and decides to get a job. However, Granny will not allow him to work on holy Saturday, and no job will allow him that day off. Bored and frustrated, he wanders around town, giving up his noontime meal to explore even though he is starving. One of his schoolmates alerts him of a job delivering newspapers, which both of them appreciate since the paper carries a pulp story section. He sells the papers for a little while, until a man calls him aside. The man asks Richard if he has read the paper itself, and he answers no. It turns out that the paper is produced by Ku Klux Klan sympathizers. "I said to myself, that boy just doesn't know what he's doing," the man tells him. Chap.5, pg. 132 Richard is shaken and grateful to him, and again realizes the problems that come with trusting white employers.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 4

Richard's struggles with Aunt Addie continue, and he sees that often religion is used to exert power over people: "The naked will of power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn." Chapter 5, pg. 136 At the end of the summer he obtains a job selling insurance to poor blacks, and he is shocked at how naive his clients are: they seem to buy insurance from him because they think it will connect them somehow with a smart city boy.

Topic Tracking: Violence 5

Richard's grandfather had fought in the Civil War, but was denied his pension because of a bureaucratic error that changed his name from Wilson to Vinson. He writes the government endless letters and falls into extreme bitterness. Finally he dies, and Richard does not know how to handle the somber atmosphere of death: when he runs to tell his Uncle Tom the news, he blurts it out bluntly. Tom chastises him, and Richard is baffled at how angry his mistakes seem to make everyone.

Richard decides to defy Granny and get a job. At first, she tells him to leave the house before he damns them all, but finally her "humanity [triumphs] over her fear." Chapter 5, pg. 144 Only his mother is pleased, and kisses him.

Chapter 6

While searching for a job, Richard meets a white woman who tells him he should quit school, because he will never be a writer. Angered, Richard decides not to take the job; he cannot stand the ignorant woman acting as though she knows him.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 5

The family continues to struggle for Richard's soul, and even his mother says, "You ought to know God through some church." Chapter 6, pg. 150 He is brought to a church and singled out with a few other children as one who has not yet accepted God. The preacher goads the children into being baptized, since if they refuse their families will be humiliated. Richard feels ridiculous about it but feels obliged. The children attend church for a while, until they admit that it is a fraud and quit going.

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 3

Uncle Tom is now living with them, and he and Richard do not get along. At one point, Tom asks Richard the time, and Richard tells him, saying, "even if that isn't right, it's not far wrong." Chapter 6, pg. 157 For some reason this infuriates Tom, who decides to beat Richard. Richard will not stand for it, and pulls out a razor blade. He claims that he will cut Tom rather than be beaten, even if he himself also gets cut. Tom is in shock, especially because Richard has just been baptized. Richard is never beaten, but the family is growing more and more fearful of him.

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 4

Topic Tracking: Violence 6

Chapter 7

Still living at home and now working, Richard gets bitten by a dog his boss owns. Looking at the wound, his boss comments, "I never saw a dog bite that could really hurt a nigger," and dismisses Richard. Chapter 7, pg. 163 There is a lot of complaining about the boss among Richard and his co-workers, but no one can do anything. The wound gets better, luckily, because Richard has no money to see a doctor.

While in eighth grade, Richard writes "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," a story that "stemmed from pure feeling." Chapter 7, pg. 165 He rushes to the local newspaper to have it published, supremely proud of himself. His family and friends are disturbed by the idea, especially because the story is so dramatic. He points out that if he had known how much he was going against the norm (writing fiction as a young black man in the rural South) he would have been too afraid to continue.

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 5

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 5

Chapter 8

As it is, Richard is very isolated; his family does not understand him and he has no friends. In 1925, at age 16, he is ready to graduate the ninth grade. Now valedictorian, he is allowed to make a speech at the graduation. His principal calls him into the office and gives him a pre-written speech, which Richard refuses to accept. The principal tells him there will be whites and blacks in the audience, and that Richard doesn't know what he's doing. Uncle Tom reads both the principal's speech and the speech Richard has prepared, and says, "the principal's speech is the better speech." Chapter 8, pg. 177 Richard trusts his uncle's judgment, but maintains that whatever speech he makes, no matter how amateur, must be his own.

Chapter 9

Forced to go to work to avoid total poverty, Richard works at a clothing store run by whites. The store sells clothes to poor blacks on a highly expensive layaway plan. The plan cheats them, but they are too poor to buy things any other way. At the store, Richard witnesses extreme brutality. One woman is beaten bloody and then thrown into the streets, where she is arrested for drunkenness. "That's what we do to niggers who don't pay their bills," one man tells Richard. Chapter 9, pg. 184 Later, another man pulls him aside and asks why he doesn't smile and laugh like the other blacks on the job. When he tells him he doesn't see much to laugh or smile about, the man gets nervous and angry and fires him.

Topic Tracking: Violence 7

Soon after, he sees Griggs, a boy he went to school with, washing windows outside a shop. Griggs mentions that he is aware of Richard's problems with fitting in on the job. He tells Richard that he must smile and be submissive when whites are around, always showing them that he remembers that they are white, and that when he is alone he can think whatever he wants. Richard says he can't act like a slave, but Griggs counters with the notion that he doesn't want to end up dead either. With Griggs' help, he gets a job at an optician's office. His boss, a Northerner ("Yankee"), is sympathetic and instructs Richard's fellow workers, all white men, to teach Richard some of the optical trade. The men seem friendly, but never offer to help him. When he finally asks to be taught, they turn on him, threatening him until he promises to leave the job. Mr. Crane, his boss, knows something is wrong and so gives Richard extra money on his last day.

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 6

Chapter 10

Next, Richard goes to work at a hotel, where most of the employees are also black. There is much talk of sex and gambling, and the roles that blacks play for whites become very evident to Richard. Even the black women are treated in ways unacceptable to Richard: they allow themselves to be groped by any white man.

Dying to go North, Richard begins stealing various small material goods to sell. He gets involved in bootlegging, a business run by the prostitutes at the hotel. Richard does not like to commit crimes or get involved in such sordidness, but he thinks it is necessary. His guilt and fear over stealing climaxes while he is working at the movies. The ticket-taker and clerks have a system in which they work together to pocket some of the theatre's profits. When Richard is let in on the scheme, however, he is unsure about whether he is being trapped by his boss or not. Terrified, alone, but desperate for money, he takes part in the plot. Everything goes smoothly, and he gets enough money to move to Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee.

Chapter 11

Beale St. is rumored to be a place of crime and depravity, so when Richard sees a rent sign in the window of a house, he worries that it might actually be a brothel. A woman sees him outside and heartily calls him inside. Her name is Mrs. Moss, and she introduces him to Bess, her daughter who is about his age. Contrary to all he has been told, these are the friendliest and most innocent people he has ever met. Within a few hours, Mrs. Moss has decided that Richard is such a nice person that he would make a great husband for Bess. Bess seems stupidly naive to Richard, but he wants to be polite and does not know what to say. He wants to move out, because he is getting more uncomfortable and Bess is becoming more and more strangely seductive, but they won't let him--they know he is hungry and are kind and supportive. "Could she ever understand my life?" he wonders about Bess, doubtfully. Chapter 11, pg. 217 To Richard, they are sweet but painfully simple. He stays with them.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 6

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 6

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 7

In Memphis, he has an experience that makes him realize that he is not as sophisticated or worldly as he thought: he meets a boy by chance on the road, and they come upon a jug of bootleg alcohol. The boy suggests they sell it to an approaching white man. The man agrees and tells them to transport it to his car. He gives them some money, which the boy then goes to get changed. When he does not return, Richard realizes that the man and boy were using him to dispose of their stash!

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 7

Chapter 12

Working at another optical company, Richard meets more blacks who are willing to abandon their principles for a dollar. A man named Shorty one day needs a quarter for lunch, and allows a white man to kick him in exchange for it. When Richard asks him how he can stoop so low, he responds, "My ass is tough and quarters is scarce."

Chapter 12, pg. 229

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 7

One day Mr. Olin, a white co-worker, approaches Richard and advises him that Harrison, a young black co-worker, hates Richard and wants to hurt him. Olin tells him to watch out, and offers him a knife. Bewildered, Richard takes it, but later finds out that Olin had told Harrison the same story: he wanted them to attack and kill each other. Richard is furious and further disillusioned with whites. Soon after, Harrison convinces Richard to stage a fight for the white men for money. The boys imagine that they will not really hurt each other, but when the fight begins they realize that they don't know how to fake it, and end up beating each other brutally.

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 8

Topic Tracking: Violence 8

Chapter 13

Richard is dying to read, but blacks are not allowed library cards. He finds a white man in the office who is Irish and therefore likely to be looked down on by the other workers. Hoping he will be sympathetic, Richard asks to borrow his card. The man agrees, and soon Richard is reading H.L. Mencken, whose radically intellectual views shock him. He realizes that some people fight with words--and are successful. Despite the critical eyes of his co-workers, Richard is enchanted and reads more and more classics. However, he still feels crushed and frightened in the South, and longs to get out.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 8

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 8

Chapter 14

Finally, Richard and his Aunt Maggie buy a train ticket to Chicago, promising to send for his mother and brother when they get settled. When leaving his job, Richard cannot say that he has decided to go to the less racist North: it would be too suspicious. So he says that his mother is taking him there. Still, his co-workers do not like the idea, worrying that it will change his view of whites and make him bold. One cautions him not to fall into Lake Michigan. Shorty is jealous, saying that he could never go North because he is too lazy. Book One ends with Richard's synopsis:

"This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled."
Chapter 14, pg. 257

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 9

Chapter 15

Although Chicago's industrial streets intimidate him, Richard finds that it is less frightening to try to find a job there than in the South. People are kinder and more courteous, inviting him to come inside from the cold, for example. He gets hired as a porter for a Jewish couple, the Hoffmans, who own a deli. Their accents are so strong that he cannot understand them, and feels tense even though they do not act racist. They try to reassure him but he is too frightened and accustomed to racism to change. "Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life," he explains. Chapter 15, pg. 266

He takes a day off to try to get a job with the postal service, and lies to his boss, telling him he had to go to a funeral. Though the boss knows he is lying and tries to convince him that he needn't be afraid to tell him the truth, Richard is too frightened of being beaten or killed. Extremely embarrassed, he leaves the job.

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 9

He quickly finds another job as a busboy, and is amazed at how friendly and relaxed the white waitresses are around him. The cook, however, is a problem: he catches her spitting in the food. Not knowing what to do, he alerts a fellow black employee. She cautiously tells their white boss what the white cook is doing. After initial suspicion, the boss realizes they are telling the truth and fires the cook, and Richard wonders if whites view blacks as disgusting and inhuman in the same way that they view someone like that cook.

At this point in his life, Richard has no friends and no need for friends. Although his mind churns with ideas, he thinks nothing of keeping them to himself, because he doesn't know anyone to share them with. He is working menial jobs and living with his Aunt Maggie, mother and brother, who disdain his voracious reading. He tries to write, and feels claustrophobic; finally, he moves in with his mother and brother and his Aunt Cleo.

Topic Tracking: Loneliness 10

Chapter 16

Soon after, while working in the post office, Richard meets a young Irishman who shares his cynical and atheist views. Through him, Richard meets other intellectuals of many breeds. Most interesting to him are the black intellectuals, who are strangely even less like him than many whites he has met! He sees them as ignorant, vain and focused on sex, and not really interested in learning anything.

Meanwhile, the depression hits, and since the volume of mail drops, he loses his job at the post office. Depressed, he comments: "Having been thrust out of the world because of my race, I had accepted my destiny by not being curious about what shaped it." Chapter 16, pg. 288 He starts selling insurance to poor blacks, reluctantly scamming them when he can so that he can make any profit at all. He also blackmails poor women into sleeping with him in exchange for their monthly insurance payments.

Richard learns more about the Communist party, appreciating its members' courage in speaking out but doubting their wisdom. He notices that their style of dress is copied from Russian Communists, and that their manner is copied from black preachers, yelling to drown out the opposition in debates: they clearly are unsure of themselves and not very thoughtful. He believes they are basically right in their view of the world: they are for equality in everything from race to economic class. But he thinks that their melodramatic idealism and close-minded fervor cannot be defended. They try to convince people by screaming at them, when Richard thinks that the people must be slowly moved in the direction of revolution. Violence is a way of life for them, as they live in fear of the police. He sees the problem of American life as one of meaning, and so believes that black people, the most outcast of all Americans, could change America so that all its citizens could live fully human lives.

Topic Tracking: Violence 9

In the midst of the deepening Depression, Richard loses his job and moves to an apartment so decayed that his mother cries when she sees it. Finally, he is forced to go to the Public Welfare Office, a place he has avoided out of pride.

Chapter 17

At the relief station, Richard notices other impoverished people talking together. He realizes that this communication could lead to organization of the poor, and eventually revolution. He wonders what direction they would go: would they accept Communism? He becomes less cynical and more questioning. He argues that those who remove themselves from a society, rather than those who actively fight it, pose the most threat to it.

At Christmas time he is working again, this time in a hospital as a janitor in experimental labs. He notices that although the racial situation seems to be slowly changing enough that he is invited into the homes of whites, there is still a sharp racial divide. Various passersby lazily walk with muddy shoes over the floor Richard has just cleaned, and do not even notice him. The white doctors will answer no questions about their experiments, preferring to leave the curious Richard ignorant. They use the same stupid jokes as Southern whites, saying that if he learns too much, his head will explode. One day, two of Richard's co-workers get into a fight and knock over many cages holding experimental animals. Frantic, the men quickly place the rabbits and guinea pigs back in cages according to the only system they can come up with: external clues such as those with shaved bellies versus those without. Richard wryly observes that if he had been told anything about the experiments, he would have known how to organize the animals. He notes that whites seem willing to suffer any consequence in order to keep blacks ignorant and segregated.

Chapter 18

Richard meets a friend of the Irishman from the post office, who invites him to join the John Reed Club, a revolutionary organization for artists and writers. Not wanting to be organized, Richard goes to a meeting for fun and ends up joining the editorial board of its magazine, "Left Front." He meets many now-famous artists, and becomes friendly with many different kinds of people, most of them white. He worries that they are secretly racist, but is so taken with the idea of a unity of purpose in workers around the world, that he drops his cynicism. He finds that these people "believe in life." Chapter 18, pg. 320 His mother, however, looks over the magazine and is horrified at its violent vision of uprising. He tries to explain its symbolism to her, but cannot. Disturbed that a publication meant for working class people is written in a way that cannot be understood by them, Richard complains to the Club. They give him no satisfactory answers. Still, they publish his poetry, and their ambitions (to force the government to provide funding for struggling artists) impress him. He decides to try to let other blacks know about Communism, and plans to write a biographical sketch of a black Communist.

There is a bitter rift between the artists in the club, who control the policy, and its writers, who side with the interests of "Left Front." A reelection of club officials is called for, and Richard, despite being greatly ignorant of the club's aims, is elected secretary (a position of leadership). He later learns that he was used by the writers to gain control of the club, because they knew that its artists could never deny office to a black man, since their philosophy was supposed to be racial equality. Richard resents being used.

Meanwhile, another battle is going on: a few of the members of the John Reed Club are also members of the Communist party. Because these few were often the most convincing during the club meetings, the Communist party exerts a certain amount of control over the club. Eventually this leads to Richard being forced to join the party if he wants to continue in the club. He is torn between the demands of the party and his loyalty to "Left Front": "Trying to please everybody, I pleased nobody," he says ruefully. Chapter 18, pg. 324

Into the mess of a disintegrating club, there arrives a Communist from Detroit, Comrade Young. Young seems strange to Richard, but he accepts him into the club and writes to the party, asking for Young's references. Young quickly becomes an ardent and respected member of the club. One night, he requests to make a speech, and launches into a strange and wild attack on the integrity of another club member. Since Young is a Communist, the club assumes he is voicing the opinion of the party, and they are afraid to disagree. Still, everyone finds it odd. When Richard questions him, Young says, "We must have a purge." Chapter 118, pg. 326 He claims to have the support of the party. Yet when the charges are brought against the party itself, and party officials promise to consider them, Young suddenly disappears. He is later discovered to be back in a mental institution from which he had escaped! Richard wonders what kind of club he is running, if a lunatic could step in and take charge of it. He decides to keep the information secret, and feels very disturbed.

Chapter 19

Richard feels ready to write his biographical sketch of a black Communist. He goes to a meeting of a black Communist faction on Chicago's South Side, and is surprised to find himself laughed at as an intellectual. The group's members patronizingly accept him, but find him a caricature of a dapper young man, since he dresses cleanly and speaks articulately. He learns that they are not cruel, but simply ignorant. They fear any book or attitude not endorsed by the party. Richard is still convinced that he can win their trust eventually, because he cares about their fate so much, but he also "fear[s] their militant ignorance." Chapter 19, pg. 332

He meets a black Communist named Ross who is under indictment for inciting a riot. Ross agrees to let Richard interview him. Richard is desperate to understand this man, and to make him understood by others. But when others find out about his plan, they hint that he may be expelled from the party. Intellectuals do not fit in well, they say: their ideas depart from the party's too often. Suspicion against Richard continues to mount: party members worry that he is a Trotskyite (Trotsky having recently been expelled from the party for counter-revolutionary activity). Ironically, it is the highly respected Stalin that Richard agrees with the most: he appreciates the vision of unity put forth in Stalin's books. He reads about Russian peasants being appreciated for their own customs and ideas, rather than forced to follow those of the ruling class. He thinks of how different that is from the plight of black Americans, who are obliged to try to be as white as possible. He cannot understand why his efforts to change this are met with fear.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 9

Soon after, in an interview with Ross, someone from the Central Communist Committee arrives to question Richard about his intentions. It turns out that the man, Ed Green, is Ross' lawyer and is worried that Ross might be telling Richard incriminating things. Insulted and shaken that black Communists cannot trust each other, Richard bangs his fist on the table. "You lost people!" he cries Chapter 19, pg. 337. Richard loves the militance of party members but despises how fearful and violent they are. He cannot gain their trust, and, since they are the first people he has opened his heart to, he feels more isolated than ever before.

The work he gets from government relief stations has left him and his family barely subsisting. He begins work at the South Side Boy's Club. Ross is charged with vague crimes like "anti-leadership tendencies" Chapter 19, pg. 340 and Richard is ordered to stay away from him. Since Richard has done nothing wrong, he refuses to submit to the will of the party. Party members grow more and more angry. Working at the Club, he meets many young, violent, alienated black boys who, he feels sure, are far from understood by Communists.

The party expects more and more from the John Reed Club, and eventually "Left Front" is canceled to give more focus to protest activity. Richard tries to support creative work within the party, but his suggestions are rejected. He sees that the John Reed Club is

no longer unified enough to continue, and votes to dissolve it, which is viewed as treason. Everyone suspects him now.

At a national Club conference, Richard meets many people who feel as he does, but who are afraid to speak out. Then he learns that the Clubs across the country are being dissolved. A single national club would be formed--and all members of the old club would be denied membership to the new one. Richard is shocked: many artists and writers he knows had joined the Club in the hope of making something of themselves, and now they were being cast aside. Utterly disillusioned, Richard tries to distance himself from the party. Then he is invited to be a delegate at a writer's conference in New York City, and warily agrees. Once there, he finds that he cannot get a place to stay because he is black. Disgusted, he rejects his fellow (white) delegates' attempts to help him and he wanders the streets. Finally he stays with a white woman, and then at the Y.M.C.A. He wonders if a black man "ever live like a halfway decent human being in this goddamn country." Chapter 19, pg. 349 At the meeting, he again votes in favor of the clubs, knowing his actions will be interpreted as dissension.

He decides to leave the party. The stress of working and writing furiously have made him ill. Then Ed Green, Ross' lawyer, comes to see him. Bluntly, Green tells him that Buddy Nealson wants to see him. Nealson is the head of black Communist work programs. Richard imagines that he might help him understand why black Communists acted the way they did. But when he goes to see him, Richard is only confused. Nealson flatters him, telling him he can write and that the party needs him, but then he questions him subtly about his involvement with Ross. Richard swears that he has no political ambitions and that his interest in Ross was purely personal. Nealson seems distrustful but hides it under friendliness. He tries to draw Richard away from his writing in order to get him to study the high cost of living. Richard is doubtful, and Nealson tells him that the party has decided that he must take the project. This means that if he rejects the decision, he rejects the party. Faced with such pressure, Richard is noncommittal, biding his time. He knows he should leave the party but has not the courage yet.

Soon after, while Richard is grudgingly observing food prices, Nealson summons him again, this time with a friend named Smith. They both ask Richard again to become more involved in the party. He refuses, and Smith calls him a fool. Deeply insulted, Richard decides to leave the party. At the next meeting he makes a public speech, explaining that he hopes to stay involved in projects over which the party has influence, and to perhaps rejoin, but that for now, he would like to leave the party. Nealson states that a party decision will be deferred, and Richard leaves in an atmosphere of hostility. He feels grown up: he had been honest and forthright. He hopes the party will eventually change its violent and fear-driven tactics, so that he can rejoin. Later, Nealson sends him the message that he cannot resign from his duties, or he will be publicly and officially denounced. Angry, Richard says that he isn't afraid of that. He reflects on his experience in the party: he was feared for reasons he could not understand, and he never felt at home, even though those people seemed to be the most like him anywhere.

Topic Tracking: Coming of Age 10

He is transferred from the Boy's Club to the Federal Negro Theatre, where he begins work as a publicist. The theatre is currently producing classic plays with some "black" twists, which Richard thinks is a waste of talent. He brings in a special director, Charles DeSheim, to stage a controversial play about serious racial issues. The all-black cast, however, finds the play offensive, and votes it down, thinking it is unrealistic. One actor says, "I lived in the South and I never saw any chain gangs." Chapter 19, pg. 365 Richard is angered, because he knows that the awful conditions depicted in the book are realistic. When the actors try to get rid of Mr. DeSheim too, Richard informs him of their plan in order to help him convince them to let him stay. But the actors find out that Richard has been talking to him, and grow furious, calling him an "Uncle Tom," Chapter 19, pg. 366 because DeSheim is white. Richard quickly gets himself transferred away from the job, because he fears he will be murdered.

Topic Tracking: Violence 10

Soon after, a group of Communists come to Richard's home and ask that he attend a meeting with them. Suspicious, Richard questions them: if they will not speak to him on the street, why do they want him at their meetings? They finally divulge the secret that Ross is to be tried, and they want Richard to see what happens to those who go against the party. They want to save him, they say. Overcome with curiosity, Richard consents to go.

At the meeting Richard again reflects on how dangerously militant the Communists are. He loves their compassion and their vision of the future, but he fears their violent suspicion. He draws parallels between Chicago and the South: in the latter, they hated him for the color of his skin; in the former, they hate him for the "tone of [his] thoughts." Chapter 19, pg. 369 He believes it may be related to reading: he is a self-taught person, passionate about ideas, and that scares a movement that depends on the co-operation of its members in order to literally survive. He explains that Communism is fighting for freedom of thought but is at the same time terrified of it. Still, he views Communism as the only way of life that can accommodate humankind's full potential: he believes that eventually it will win over the entire world. He believes that one can understand the human heart through political movements, and that Communism is the most true.

All of this is communicated to Richard during the trial, which begins with a general overview of Communism's effects throughout the world. Those present then list all of Ross' transgressions, all the times and ways he has challenged the party. He cannot deny it, and breaks down in front of the crowd. He pleads with them, saying that he will reform. Richard notes that Ross, though in disagreement with the party, does not want to leave it: he has fallen in love with the vision of brotherhood of the Communist Party. Richard sees that the party has awakened Ross, rather than brainwashed him. They have made him see how wrong he was, and accepted him completely, trying to make him unified with all the others, through the party. Richard sees this as a glorious thing, steeped in morality. And yet the way they let their ignorance and fear guide them is also horrific to him. Richard leaves the room, overwhelmed. The next day, a single

Communist has the courage to see him, apologizing for his past ignorance and saying, "[Last night] was horrible." Chapter 19, pg. 375 Richard is grateful.

Chapter 20

Having been transferred to the Federal Writer's Program, Richard is now working with several of his old Communist comrades. They continue to ignore him, following the Communist edict of avoiding "traitors." Then he learns that they are trying to have him fired. His boss laughs it off--but unwittingly reveals to Richard that the Communists had been responsible for his being forced to leave his job with the Federal Theatre as well. Then, a group of protesting Communists sees him on the street and screams curses at him. Completely fed up, Richard decides to make an appointment with the local party leader to try to explain himself. He is not allowed the chance. He falls into despair, wondering why even Ross is not as hated as he is. Without having made any public anti-Communist statements, he is their mortal enemy.

Working as the chairman of a worker's union, he runs into constant opposition from the party: to hurt him, they are even willing to dissolve the union! Then, Richard arrives too late on the day of an important protest march. An old friend from the party sees him and invites him to march with the Communists. Doubtful, Richard hesitates, but the man invites him so heartily that he accepts. He is quickly spotted by another Communist who shouts, "Get out of our ranks!"

Chapter 20, pg. 380 When Richard looks to his friend for defense, the man is too frightened to say anything. Richard is forcefully thrown from the parade. Sitting on the sidewalk, Richard contemplates his history with the party. He feels that he will never accept it as fully as before, but he still has faith that, once it resolves its internal differences, it will succeed.

At home, Richard considers what he has learned from his life so far. His major problem remains the one of how to live a full life. He does not think that Americans, white or black, know how to really live. He resolves to try to write about the problem, to communicate with anyone who will listen or help. He concludes:

"I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger of life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human."
Chapter 20, pg. 384