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Flinging a New Star: “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star” as Reflections of Richard Wright’s Changing Relationship with Communism

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Abstract

Richard Wright’s collection of short novella’s, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, was originally published in 1938; in 1940, after the success of *Native Son*, a new printing of the text appeared with two additions. The first was the introductory essay entitled “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” which was written in 1937, and later served as part of *Black Boy*. The second was the novella “Bright and Morning Star.” Michel Fabre notes that *Harper’s Magazine* rejected this story, “but since it fit Party specifications even better than had the four previous stories, *New Masses* published it as part of a special literary supplement on May 10, [1938]” (164). In fact, perhaps because *New Masses* originally published the final story, critical attention to the revised edition of book almost exclusively posits that the 1940 edition reflects Wright’s commitment to Communism at the time. However, several of Wright’s other writings—including the introductory essay to the 1940 edition, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow;” “Blue print for Negro Writing,” first published in *New Challenge* in the fall of 1937; “I Tried to be a Communist,” first published in *Atlantic Monthly* in August and September 1944; and his responses to the Communist party’s review of *Native Son* in 1940—also indicate that his focus in the late 1930s was more on the development of an individual black consciousness than on advancing the causes of the Communist party. By juxtaposing the final two stories, “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star,” and considering them in terms of the other writings indicated above, I argue that the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* (with the two additions) demonstrates Wright’s growing ambivalence with the Communist Party between the years of 1937 and 1940.

Keywords: Richard Wright, Communist Party, Race, *Uncle Tom’s Children*.

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Richard Wright's collection of short novella's, *Uncle Tom's Children*, was originally published in 1938; in 1940, after the success of *Native Son*, a new printing of the text appeared with two additions. The first was the introductory essay entitled "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," which was written in 1937, and later served as part of *Black Boy*. The second was the novella "Bright and Morning Star." Michel Fabre notes that *Harper's Magazine* rejected this story, "but since it fit Party specifications even better than had the four previous stories, *New Masses* published it as part of a special literary supplement on May 10, [1938]" (164). Much has been made of the addition of the fifth story, with most critics focusing on Wright's own comments about the book in the introductory essay to *Native Son*, "How Bigger was Born." Timothy P. Caron points out that Wright's criticism of the original text stemmed from his realization that he "had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about" (qtd in Caron 46). Caron goes on to argue that with the addition of the introductory essay and the final story, "Wright deprived his readers of the consolation of tears and challenged them with a more unmistakably political work in the revised *Uncle Tom's Children*" (46). In fact, perhaps because *New Masses* originally published the final story, critical attention to the revised edition of book almost exclusively posits that the 1940 edition reflects Wright's commitment to Communism at the time.

James Giles, for example, asserts that the value of "Bright and Morning Star" lies in its completion of the narrative themes since "Sue . . . dies a martyred convert to Communism and thus triumphs over all the forces which have limited the characters in the first four stories" (266). More recently, critics have not veered much from earlier readings such as Caron's and Giles's. In his reading of the revised collection in *The Death-Bound-Subject*, Abdul R. JanMohamed contends that

the last two stories, which are concerned with examining the effects of death on the interiority of its protagonists, explore the more complex relations between emotions and political resistance (46-47) After having worked through the relations between religion and politics in the previous story ["Fire and Cloud"], Wright begins "Bright and

Morning Star” with a very explicit articulation of a transfer of utopian energies from religion to politics In short, a political rebirth and political organization as such now seem to Wright to be the better part of valor. (69)

While JanMohamed does broaden the scope of the reading to deal with psychological and emotional responses to death, he still concludes that the ultimate fulfillment in the texts comes when the characters align themselves with a political cause, namely Communism. However, Mikko Juhani Tuhkanen rightly notes that one would do well to retain a level of skepticism regarding “such propagandistic readings of even Wright’s earliest text” (126).

¹ Indeed, several of Wright’s other writings—including the introductory essay to the 1940 edition, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow;” “Blue print for Negro Writing,” first published in *New Challenge* in the fall of 1937; “I Tried to be a Communist,” first published in *Atlantic Monthly* in August and September 1944; and his responses to the Communist party’s review of *Native Son* in 1940—also indicate that his focus in the late 1930s was more on the development of an individual black consciousness than on advancing the causes of the Communist party. In fact, by juxtaposing the final two stories, “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star,” and considering them in terms of the other writings indicated above, I argue that the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* (with the two additions) demonstrates Wright’s growing ambivalence with the Communist Party between the years 1937 and 1940.

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright argues that “[w]ith the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Negro church, and with the increasing irresolution which is paralyzing Negro middle class leadership, a new role is devolving upon the Negro writer. His is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die” (43). These values changed dramatically for Wright during the time that he was associated with the Communist Party,

¹ See especially the note on page 132 of the article “‘A [B]igger’s Place’: Lynching and Specularity in Richard Wright’s ‘Fire and Cloud’ and *Native Son*.”

and the representations of them in fictionalized form from “Fire and Cloud” to “Bright and Morning Star” also changed. While I do not discount the thematic development and continuity of the unified whole, I will focus my attention on these final two stories for two reasons: first, because the other three were written before 1937 (Kinnamon 82), which was the date of Wright’s first break with the Party²; and secondly, because these are the texts which overtly address the presence of the Communist Party in influencing the actions of the main characters.

“Fire and Cloud,” first published in the March issue of *Story* in 1938, opens with Reverend Taylor returning from an unsuccessful trip to town to plead for relief from the white government for his black congregation.³ On this walk back, Taylor begins to muse about his early life when he felt the call of God to become a preacher. He says that “God had spoken to him . . . God had called him to preach His word, to spread it to the four corners of the earth, to save his black people . . . he had been called like Moses, leading his people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land” (159). However, in the face of the despair and hunger brought on by the Depression, Taylor begins to doubt the direction of God’s leading:

God had spoken . . . when He had called him to preach His Word . . . [b]ut now the whole thing was giving way, crumbling in his hands, right before his very eyes. And every time he tried to think of some way out, of some way to stop it, he saw wide grey eyes behind icily white spectacles . . . [m]abbe ef we hada demonstration like Hadley and Green [the Communist Party leaders] said we could *scare* white folks inter doin something. (160)

² Fabre points out in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* that James Farrell wrote to Wright “on February 9, 1937, saying, ‘I’m glad to hear you left the Party’” (138). Moreover, Fabre notes that “this first break . . . is also mentioned in Wright’s correspondence with Margaret Walker” (138).

³ In *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* Robert S. McElvaine demonstrates that “most early New Deal programs included the ideal of decentralized administration or ‘grass-roots democracy’ [which] . . . meant that local elites controlled the federal programs in their areas” (189), often discriminatorily towards blacks. Indeed, “relief payments to blacks in Atlanta averaged \$19.29 per month, while white relief clients in the same city received \$32.66, nearly 70 percent more” (190).

Significantly, it is the racism of the whites whose “gray eyes” cause him to question his stance as a Biblically passive leader and to consider Hadley and Green’s plans in effecting a change.

In “I Tried to be a Communist,” Wright identifies this as the same impulse that led him to embrace the philosophy of collectivity in Communism as a way to fight racial oppression. He says,

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. (118)

And like Taylor, “Wright was somewhat torn between his new sympathies and his mother’s religious beliefs, [but] he came to see in Marxism an organized search for truth about the life of oppressed peoples, and this convinced him that the Communists were sincere” (Fabre 97). Although Taylor never openly joins the Party, he chooses an alignment with them because of the hope that with them he can bring about some results in the fight against racial oppression.

In fact, “Fire and Cloud” seems to fictionally trace Wright’s own encounters with racism throughout the text. Taylor’s admonition of his son, Jimmy, that he and his friends not start any trouble with the white folk sounds very similar to Wright’s own admonition from his mother described in the first section of “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” that he “was never to fight any more wars. [He] was never, never, under any conditions to fight white folks again” (2).

In the ninth section of this essay, Wright says that in Memphis, his “Jim Crow education assumed quite a different form. It was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel. Here I learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that duel role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live” (13). Reverend Taylor seems to recognize fully this dual role when he asks May to help him with his plan to protect Hadley and Green from the mayor and the chief of police in the other room. Taylor asks May to tell the white folks that his is sick. Her

response to him is that “God *ain* wid yuh when yuh lie, Dan!” and he responds by telling her that “[w]e *gotta* lie t white folks! Theys on our necks! They *make* us lie t them! Whut can we do but lie?” (170). Not only do the whites pressure him into playing a dual role, they cause him to stray from an important tenant of his Christian faith by forcing him to lie. Significantly, this second move away from Christianity brings him closer to the Communist cause of Hadley and Green, since the lie is told to protect them. John Lowe’s insights are useful here:

God . . . gets replaced, at least in inspiration, for the march, by the Communist party . . . Hadley and Green, the party organizers, sit in the Bible room. Their placement there, in the realm of the sacred “word,” made possible by the displacement of the deacons to the cellar, underscores Wright’s intent to reinscribe the gospels with a communist reading, beginning with the harnessing of the voice of Christ’s chief rhetorician, Rev. Taylor. (67)

While the reality of white racism continues to push Taylor towards the Communist cause, he refuses to fully endorse their actions by allowing his name to be used on a flyer promoting the march to take place the following day. In justifying his reasons for this refusal, Taylor tells Hadley and Greene that he is “ackin as Gawd gives me the light to see” (178). Communism has not yet fully replaced his Christian vision or his conviction that God called him to save his black people.

After his kidnapping and beating by white people, however, Taylor recognizes more fully the failure of religion to unite people. While walking back from the woods after being beaten, Taylor sees a church steeple and recognizes it as Houston’s church. He considers stopping there for help, but decides against it because Houston is white and “[e]ven though he preaches the gospel [Taylor] preaches, he might not take [him] in . . . He passed a small graveyard surrounded by a high iron picket fence. A *white* graveyard, he thought and snickered bitterly. ‘Lawd Gawd in Heaven, even the dead can’t be together!’” (203). Wright further emphasizes this segregation under Jim Crow when, just after this Taylor has an encounter with a cop that mirrors one of Wright’s own experiences outlined in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” Taylor desires to run in order to lessen the time of his suffering, but realizes that “he

could not run in a white neighborhood. To run would mean to be shot, for a burglar, or anything” (205). In fact, a white policeman does stop him and after Taylor lies to him, he tells Taylor he may go only if he agrees to keep out of the white neighborhood after dark. Taylor’s responds with “Yessuh” (205), the same response that Wright gives when a policeman stops him after making deliveries in white neighborhood at night. After being unable to find anything incriminating on him, Wright says that he policeman said “[b]oy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighborhoods after sundown” (10). Wright responds with “Yes, Sir.” Eventually, Wright’s own encounters with Jim Crow living prompted him to flee to Chicago and to join the Communist Party.

While Taylor fails to commit fully to the party’s cause, soon after recognizing the failure of the gospel to unite black and white, he does solidify his commitment to fight against his white oppressors in the form of collective action. This commitment causes him to burn “like a pillar of fire [as] he [goes] through the white neighborhood. Some days theys gonna burn! Some day theys gonna burn in Gawd Awmighty’s fire! ‘Gawd ef yuh gimme the strength Ahll tear this ol building down! Tear it down Lawd! Tear it down like ol Samson tore the temple down!” (204). Even though Taylor still prays to God for help, by describing him as a pillar of fire, Wright puts Taylor into the position that God held in the Old Testament as the pillar of fire by night who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Christianity for Taylor—as demonstrated in his prayer with his congregation and his admonition to them to “[h]ave faith, Sistahs n Brothers. Gawd takes care of his own” (168)—has been a passive waiting up to this point. But, the fire instilled in him through his response to white racism pushes him into active doing. Wright fully demonstrates Taylor’s action when Taylor reveals to Jimmy and the congregation his new position on collectivity and the march. Despite uncertainty about the “Reds,” he tells Jimmy to “let nothing come tween yuh n *yo* people . . . It’s the *people!* Theys the ones whut mus be real t us! Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us!” (210). As Wright outlined in “Blueprint,” it seems that the new values being created in this text, through Taylor’s development, are the values of collective action.

Reverend Taylor carries these values to the congregation as well when he tells them “Ah done seen the *sign!* Wes gotta git together. Ah know what yo life is! Ah done felt it! Its *fire!* Its like the fire that burned me las night! Its sufferin! Its hell! Ah cant bear this fire erlone! Ah know now what t do! Wes gotta git close t one ernother! Gawd done spoke! Gawds done sent His sign. Now its fer us t ack” (218). This prompts the crowd to begin marching while singing “the sign of the fire by nigh N the sign of the cloud by day.” As Neil Graves argues, “[t]he symbols of the song—but especially the pillar of fire—are now embodied in the people, as they begin to move out of earthly bondage rather than waiting for a release in eternity” (287). Again, the pillar of fire, in the collective voice of the people, has replaced God, and the passive waiting that goes along with Christian suffering, with a more active God who encourages collective resistance to injustice, not unlike the philosophies that Martin Luther King and others espoused during the civil rights movement.

As the black marchers move closer to town, they meet the poor whites, and the sight of this interracial collectivity causes “[a] baptism of clean joy to [sweep] over Taylor” (220). Abdul JanMohamed rightly contends that this moment signifies Taylor’s transformation from an “acquiescent, fearful man to one who is proud, rebellious, and politically more sophisticated” (64). After replacing his passive Christian faith with an active faith in the people of both races, Taylor exclaims, “*freedom belongs to the strong!*” (220). Wright also celebrates the collaboration between blacks and whites in “Blueprint” when he says that

[on] the shoulders of white writers and Negro writers alike rest the responsibility of ending this mistrust and isolation. By placing cultural health above narrow sectional prejudices, liberal writers of all races can help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow. And, simultaneously, Negro writers can help to weed out these choking growths of reactionary nationalism and replace them with hardier and sturdier types. (49)

Taylor’s victorious end embodies all of the ideals that Wright sets down in “Blueprint.” Taylor overcomes Jimmy’s reactionary nationalism and replaces it with the “sturdier” plant of group action between whites

and blacks. In a recent article entitled “The Integral Function of Marxist Doctrine in Richard Wright’s ‘Fire and Cloud,’” Larry Marshall Sams cogently argues that Wright not only promotes cooperation between races, but that he intentionally uses Marxist principles in this text since “The plot of ‘Fire and Cloud’ proves the Marxist dictum that to survive a person must socially interact with others Wright weaves into the plot too many details that allude to details of Marxist doctrine for the parallels to be accidents” (16-17). Thus, it would seem that Wright overtly advocates Communist thinking in the story.

While this ending seems to confirm the positive role of the Communist Party in the lives of black people, one should keep in mind that white racism and an attempt to help *black* people serve as inspiration for Reverend Taylor to march. His commitment to saving *his* people, one way or another, prompts him first to be a minister and then to be an activist. These are very similar to Wright’s own motives for joining the Party because there “Negro experience can find a home, a functioning value and role” (“I Tried” 118). As mentioned earlier, “Blueprint” was published in 1937, the same year, according to Fabre, that Wright had his first break with the party when he was not permitted to march in the May Day parade (138). However, as Fabre is quick to note, “Wright was not prepared to abandon completely the ideal that had so inspired and even sustained him for several years” (138). This may account for why the 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* did not include “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and “Bright and Morning Star.”⁴

Despite his continued allegiance to the Party, Wright began to experience some disillusionment about Party ideals and his freedom to express the sufferings of black people. He says in “I Tried to be a Communist” that after he began taking notes on the life of one of his fellow black Party members, he was threatened by others with expulsion for being an intellectual. His response to this was an inability to understand “the danger in showing the kinship between the sufferings of the Negro and the sufferings of other people” (131). Wright experienced

⁴According to Michel Fabre, “The story [‘Bright and Morning Star’] was ready in time to appear in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, to which it could have been a fifth act, but it was decided to publish it separately” (164).

further disillusionment with Communism when he encountered the problem of racism within the Party as well. He tells of going to a writer's congress where, when he asked about housing accommodations, "the New York John Reed Club members, all white members of the Communist party, looked embarrassed. I waited while one white Communist called another white Communist to one side and discussed what could be done about me, a black Chicago Communist . . . [A]s I stood watching one white comrade talk frantically to another about the color of my skin, I felt disgusted" (137).⁵ Wright takes up the issue of what to do when collaboration between races and party activism are not enough to end racism in "Bright and Morning Star" in the character of Sue.

The story opens with the African American Sue reflecting on her conversion from Christianity to Communism while she waits for her son, Johnny-Boy, to return from doing Party work. She remembers that it was suffering that led her to her Christian faith: "[l]ong hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word" (224). And, like Taylor, the oppressiveness of white racism causes her to doubt that faith. However, unlike Taylor, Sue's sons are the reason she replaces her Christian faith with a faith in the Communist cause:

she had loved them, even as she loved them now; bleeding her heart had followed them. She could have done no less, being an old woman in a strange world. And day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision, and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace. The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the cross; the

⁵ It is difficult to discern the year when this encounter took place since, as Fabre notes, "Certain confrontations described in 'I Tried to Be a Communist' are placed in a biased context and out of chronological order . . . This, of course, is because the article was written in 1943 to answer accusations from former friends, . . . so that even if he was faithful to the psychological truth of what happened, he often combined several episodes into one for effect" (137). However, most important for my purposes, is the fact that despite these inconsistencies, "it can safely be assumed that the thirties was a period of definite evolution for Wright in relation to communism" (Fabre 137).

meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went. (225)

This conversion does seem to complete what Revered Taylor began in “Fire and Cloud” by overtly replacing religious faith with faith in the Party. However, Sue still retains in her subconscious some elements of her Christianity, as demonstrated throughout the story when she finds herself unconsciously singing old hymns. Later, the story also reveals that Communism cannot save Sue either. By the end of the story, she confronts the need for a third option that is neither Christianity nor Communism; rather, the third option is black pride. In fact, her decision to place her pride as a black person above her Communist convictions is strikingly similar to Wright’s own break with the Party, which was also fueled by a sense of black pride.

The first indication that Sue does not adhere to all the Party’s ideals is when she learns from Reva that someone has informed the police about a meeting the following night. Sue immediately assumes that one of the new white members betrayed them and tells Johnny-Boy that “[i]t wuznt nona *our* folks . . . Ah knows em *all* from way back. There ain none of em that *coulda!* . . . Son, it wuz some of them *white* folks! (233-234). Johnny-Boy responds by telling her, “Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black . . . Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men” (234). This response makes Johnny-Boy the ideal Party member, who, like the model writer outlined in “Blueprint,” recognizes the strength of numbers and interracial cooperation. However, unlike in “Fire and Cloud,” this belief does not bring a triumphant ending. Sue realizes that Johnny-Boy’s faith in numbers and collective struggle is strong, but her insight that “he believes so hard hes blind” (233) proves true. Johnny-Boy’s commitment to fighting classism blinds him to the larger problem facing them—racism.⁶

⁶ Kinnamon notes that “‘Bright and Morning Star’ does not resolve the question of trust or distrust of whites. Intellectual conviction and political necessity argue for the former, but experience, the logic of emotions, and the actual events of the story suggest the similar ambivalence in the author’s own mind and experience” (115).

Several critics have pointed to Sue's defiance of the white sheriff and his men, when they come looking for Johnny-Boy, as an example of her commitment to the cause of Communism and as a test of her new faith. However, I find it noteworthy that her refusal to reveal her son's whereabouts stems not from her desire to protect his mission (to warn his comrades that the police know of their meeting), but from pride in the face of their racism and their belief that they can scare her into giving the information. The sheriff tells Sue that they will spare Johnny-Boy's life if she tells them his whereabouts; if they are forced to find him on their own, they will kill him. Sue refuses to tell them, despite the fact that her refusal means her son's certain death: "She was consumed with bitter pride . . . she gave up Johnny-Boy, gave him up to the white folks. She gave him up because they had come tramping into her heart demanding him, thinking they could scare her into making her tell where he was. She gave him up because she wanted them to know that they could not get what they wanted by bluffing and killing" (239-240). This pride sustains her throughout the attack by the police and also prompts her, "wanting them to feel the intensity of her pride and freedom" (240), to shout as they are leaving "yuh didn't git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it!"(240).

Significantly, this impulse follows the sheriff's taunt that she should bring a sheet to collect her son's body because she will never see him alive again. The sheriff exemplifies his racism by calling Sue "Aunty" and reminding her that her black son will be killed for his involvement in the activities to challenge their authority. Additionally, he tells her that her son will only have a decent burial if she goes to collect his body. The pride that causes her to shout at these white men will be the same pride that allows her to use their racism against them in her final act of triumph at the end of the story.

Sue's pride does not come without consequences, though. It leads the sheriff and his men to beat her so badly that she cannot find the strength of that pride again when Booker comes to get the names of the other Party members. Sue instinctively distrusts Booker, but he convinces her to give him the names when he says "'[i]s yuh scarda me cause Ahm *white*? Johnny-Boy ain like tha. Don let all the work we done

go for nothin'” (246). By being weak enough to give Booker the names, Sue allows him to take away her pride in the face of white domination. He, unlike the sheriff, has been able to use her love for her son against her.

In contemplating what she must do to rectify her mistake, Sue again reflects on her past as a Christian and her new belief in Communism: “[m]ired she was between two abandoned worlds, living, but dying without the strength of the grace either gave. The clearer she felt it the fuller did something well up from the depths of her for release; the more urgent did she feel the need to fling into her black sky another star, another hope, one more terrible vision to give her the strength to live and act” (252). Critics have disagreed as to the significance of this crucial passage. Abdul JanMohamed, for instance, contends that “for Sue, the plan itself is a new morning star, another resurrection of her faith and capacity for resistance, and, if successful, it would mean a resurrection for the Party as well. . . . Thus, the meaning of her life is now defined not by pride or honor but by the political value of her death” (72-73). This reading aligns Sue’s momentum and clarity of will with a Communist aim—to give her life for a political cause. Yosinobu Hakutani claims that the other star that Sue seeks to fling into the sky “is for her to be a martyr” (59). Thus, he concludes, “Sue has . . . acted even more strongly than Taylor. As Taylor’s strength lies in the quality of his intellect and his support of others, Sue’s comes from within—her heart” (59-60). This characterization of Sue’s resolve to martyrdom aligns her with a Christian ethic of self sacrifice for love. In fact, what is crucial in this passage is that Sue rejects *both* Christianity and Communism because neither have the strength of grace to sustain her. Sue’s new star is the star of individual action brought on by a sense of racial pride in the face of white racism.

In recounting his own break with Communism, due in large part because the party was unwilling to encourage him as a black writer, Wright says in “I Tried to be a Communist” that

I headed toward home alone, really alone now,
telling myself that in all the sprawling immensity of
our mighty continent the least-known factor of
living was the human heart, the least-sought goal of

being was a way to live a human life. Perhaps, I thought, out of my tortured feelings *I could fling a spark into this darkness*. I would try not because I wanted to, but because I felt that I had to if I were to live at all. (162 emphasis added)

Wright's impulse to act by "fling[ing] a spark into the darkness" sounds almost identical to Sue's resolve to act in "Bright and Morning Star" to "fling into her black sky another star" (252). Both realize that in order to "sustain the human heart" they must act alone and they must act out of a sense of black pride. As Thomas Larson notes, "as she [Sue] replaces her old hunger, faith, vision, and hope with a new objective identity, based on her own actions, so, too, does she replace the agent of grace giving: she becomes responsible for her own grace" (154). As mentioned earlier, Sue loses her sense of pride when Booker tricks her into telling a white man, whom she instinctively mistrusts, the names of her son's comrades. Her decision to shoot him before he has a chance to reveal this knowledge is a way of reclaiming that pride. By shooting him before he is able to tell, she renders mute the very secret that represents her pride—she will ensure that the whites do not get what they want.

Moreover, the method she uses to save her pride is also important: "The sheet! Thas it, the *sheet!* Her whole being leaped with will; the long years of her life bent toward a moment of focus a point. Ah kin go wid mah sheet! Ahll be doin what he said! Lawd Gawd in Heaven, Ahma go like a nigger woman wid mah windin sheet and git mah dead son!" (253). By doing what the sheriff said, Sue subverts his racism by acting the way she is expected to act—*like a nigger woman*—in order to accomplish her own purpose of ensuring that they are never able to get what they want—submission to white authority from her and her son.

Sue's plan works; she goes to where her son is being tortured and thereby gets a chance to shoot Booker. While the ultimate result of Sue's being able to kill Booker is the assurance that the Party will be able to continue, as Fabre rightly points out, "Sue's heroic character dominates the plot at the expense of the Communists. Thus, when she gives her life to save her son's comrades, her primary motive seems to be because they belong to her race. This fundamental hesitation between the ethnic and Marxist perspectives certainly reflects Wright's own ambivalence at the

time of composition, in spite of his firm propagandist intentions” (164). In fact, Wright was working on “Bright and Morning Star” around the same time that he began writing *Native Son*, which also contains an ambivalent Communist stance. Regarding Wright’s responses to criticism waged against Party activists about *Native Son*, Fabre illustrates that Wright’s words “contain the germs of dissent hidden but growing, which eventually caused his rupture with the Party in 1942” (183, 228). Sue’s final impulse to give “up as much of her life as she could before they took it from her” (236) parallels her earlier impulse to give up Johnny-Boy. She again finds her sense of pride in not relenting to the scare tactics of the white sheriff and his men when she has the sudden impulse to talk and tell them for the final time “Yuh didn’t git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it!” (263). It also parallel’s Wright’s impulse to leave the party in order to focus more attention on his stance as a black writer rather than a Communist one.

Along with the addition of “Bright and Morning Star” to the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* Wright also added the essay “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” In light of Sue’s final determination to act alone—Reva knows nothing of her plans—Wright’s development as a writer in the Communist party and the thematic development of the book are completed. The incidents related in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” show how Wright and others living in the segregated south were forced to behave in the same way that Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* behaved—showing the utmost respect and deference to white authority without ever questioning it or seeking to challenge it. Throughout *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright’s characters try to escape this mold by variously defying white power, moving from the violent and impulsive Big Boy in the first story, to the calculated and purposeful Sue in the final one. Wright says in “I Tried to be a Communist” that after a Communist party member called him a fool for not following party decisions that “I stood recalling how, in my boyhood, I would have fought until blood ran had anyone said anything like that to me. But I was a man now and master of my rage, able to control the surging emotions” (147). The characters in the first three stories of the collection are still learning this lesson. However, just as Wright recognizes the problems with reactive anger in

his boyhood (and in the protagonists in the first three novellas), he follows his development as a writer who sought a voice in the Communist party in “Fire and Cloud,” and finally shows that the true course of action for expressing a black consciousness overcoming racism is the one that Sue charts in “Bright and Morning Star.” By recognizing the need to maintain individual black pride through rational opposition to white racism, Sue becomes the true child of the Uncle Tom who dictated black behavior under Jim Crow. She uses the tactics of Jim Crow to subvert white authority and thereby escapes from the legacy of Uncle Tom by leaving a new legacy for his children.

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