



Georgia Southern University
Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of

2011

Appealing to the Middlebrow Reader: Changes Made to Richard Wright's Black Boy

Donald R. Hatcher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Hatcher, Donald R., "Appealing to the Middlebrow Reader: Changes Made to Richard Wright's Black Boy" (2011). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 183.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/183>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

APPEALING TO THE MIDDLEBROW READER: CHANGES MADE TO RICHARD
WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

by

DONALD R. HATCHER JR.

(Under the Direction of Caren Town)

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger) A Record of Childhood and Youth*. The book's original format underwent a couple of major changes in order to be accepted by The Book-of-the-Month Club, which were the elimination of the entire second half dealing with Wright's time in the North and the rewriting of the end of the first half in order to give closure to the shortened book. In my thesis, I will discuss these changes in detail and explain how these changes undermined Wright's original intentions. Furthermore, I will show how The Book-of-the-Month-Club's influence affected the many readers of Wright's book.

INDEX WORDS: Richard Wright, North, South, Black, White, Boy, African American, Book-of-the-Month Club, Revising, Editing, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Native, Son

APPEALING TO THE MIDDLEBROW READER: CHANGES MADE TO RICHARD
WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

by

DONALD R. HATCHER JR.

B.F.A., University of Georgia, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2011

© 2011

DONALD R. HATCHER JR.

All Rights Reserved

APPEALING TO THE MIDDLEBROW READER: CHANGES MADE TO RICHARD
WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

by

DONALD R. HATCHER JR

Major Professor: Caren Town
Committee: David Dudley
Richard Flynn

Electronic Version Approved:
Summer 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	6
2 EDITORIAL HISTORY OF <i>BLACK BOY</i>	13
3 THE SHAPING OF AMERICAN TASTE	19
4 THE RESHAPING OF WRIGHT'S <i>BLACK BOY</i>	27
5 CONCLUSION	42
NOTES	46
REFERENCES	47

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright, a prominent early 20th century African American writer, perceived imminent peril on the horizon for his native country. He believed that the segregation dividing Blacks and Whites and the racism that split the country would have dire consequences if left unchecked. Consequently, Wright set out to write didactic books illustrating the conditions African Americans faced in the United States. His own experiences of living in the South as a youth and as a man in the North gave him a broad understanding of the ways his people lived. From birth, Wright experienced extreme hardship, not uncommon among Blacks in the South. He both witnessed and lived through racism at a time when disdain for Blacks was commonplace. His move to the North served him no better than life in the South, however Wright continued to feel the isolation that so many of his fellow African Americans felt as Northerners as well. For a person of color, life in America, North or South, entailed extreme hardship and struggles with bigotry and racism at every turn.

After the experiences Wright had, he decided that the moment was right to write about African Americans' lives in the United States. Wright felt that his voice and his message could make a nation see the tragedies experienced by people of color. Arnold Rampersad writes, "The dehumanization of African Americans during slavery had been followed in the long aftermath of the Civil War by their brutal repression in the South and by conditions of life in many respects equally severe in the nominally integrated North" (ix). In other words, while African Americans continued to experience hardship in the South, moving to the North to escape racial prejudice were met with circumstances that,

in most cases, paralleled their treatment in the South. Wright set out in his books to expose the raw and gritty truth behind what it meant to live in both the Northern and Southern United States as a Black man. He wanted to reveal the truth so that all would know the reality of the conditions facing his people.

Wright had a new voice; he wrote in such a way that neither placated Whites nor made light of the facts. He wrote about what he saw and what he experienced in the most honest way that he knew how. Wright cared little about offending people; instead, he sought to tell things the way he saw them, truthfully and honestly. He wanted to shake up White complacency, apathy, and lack of knowledge or understanding about the conditions African Americans experienced. Rampersad states, “Wright understood fully that this message was radical to the core, and that his . . . was like no other book in the history of African-American literature” (x). He wrote books that revealed things many Americans knew nothing about or simply chose to ignore.

In order to understand the great impact Wright had on literature, it is important know where he came from. Wright was born on a Southern plantation in the tiny rural town of Roxie, Mississippi, on an autumn day in September of 1908. His life consisted of pain and terror around every corner, a direct result of Whites’ hatred towards African Americans. He grew up in the midst of all this racial violence and came to know, firsthand, the story of African Americans growing up in the South. Very early in Wright’s life his father left him, which only compounded the problems of his childhood. With no steady stream of income, Richard, his mother, Ella, and his brother, Leon, were frequently evicted. While living in Memphis, Tennessee, for several years, Wright began a period of unsupervised mayhem because of his mother’s deteriorating health.

Eventually they moved to Elaine, Arkansas, to live with Ella's sister, Maggie, and her husband Hoskins. Hoskins ran a successful business and was able to comfortably support the family. Because of his success, the local White population became jealous and eventually killed him. This in turn caused Ella, Maggie, Richard, and his younger brother to flee once again. Before the age of nine, Richard Wright had experienced paternal neglect, dire poverty, and racism.

After his mother suffered a paralytic stroke, Wright moved in with his religious grandmother, whose strictness made Wright's life difficult. It is here that he learned to defend himself from attempted beatings. As he grew older, Wright began to envision the North as the answer to all of his problems. While planning his trip to the North, Wright decided he must collect as much money as quickly as possible in order to escape the drudgery and danger of the South. He ended up stealing to acquire the funds he would need for his journey. Wright eventually moved to Memphis where he encountered even more racism. One of Wright's coworkers started a quarrel between Wright and another Black man, Harrison, as a form of entertainment. The manufactured disagreement between them led to a fight in which Richard and Harrison beat each other in order to avoid a confrontation with the White men.

After facing much adversity in the South, Wright finally made it to the North where he faced a similar fate. Racism, segregation, and poverty were not exclusive to the South, and the disillusioned Wright quickly learned this lesson. As he struggled to come to terms with the problems the North posed for a Black man, Wright soon discovered the Communist party. It was there that Wright began to hone his skills as a writer and to visualize the power of his words. Arnold Rampersad notes, "If, as Wright later claimed,

he had learned from the iconoclastic journalist H. L. Mencken how one could use ‘words as weapons,’ the Communist party offered him and other writers, in the midst of the Great Depression, a sense of ideological and political purpose and consistency, as well as international connections” (xiii). Wright’s involvement with the Communist party led him to realize that his writings about his own experiences could become a vehicle for a revolutionary approach towards the problems his people were facing in America.

Wright found a connection with the Communist Party in part because it stood for the common man and was accepting of African Americans as members and in part because he thought Communism could be the answer to the problems facing his race in America. Wright entered headlong into the Communist Party and began to write for the Party’s cause. As his writings progressed, the Party began to raise concerns with his biographical style. As Wright entered deeper into Communism, he soon realized that this was not the answer and that party ideology was not as accepting as he once thought. Eventually he cut ties with the Communist party but continued to write about the strife he and his people endured in America.

In March of 1945, Harper and Brothers published *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. Supported by the immense popularity of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright’s memoir reached number one on the best-seller list between April 29th and June 6th, 1945. This original version underwent considerable revisions, including an omission of the entire second half of his original manuscript, consisting of approximately 122 pages. Pressure from outside sources affected Wright’s decisions to alter his autobiography in order to make it more appealing to the White population and to make it more patriotic. The Book-of-the-Month Club in particular considered the book to be too

explicit for its mostly conservative White audience. Because the second half was omitted, six pages of prose were added to the ending of part one to conclude the work.

Forty-six years later, The Library of America published a restored text of *Black Boy*. Restoring this text was a monumental and much-needed project. The new version, entitled *Black Boy (American Hunger) A Record of Childhood and Youth*, omitted the revised six-page ending to the book (but puts this material in a note) and restored the complete second half of the autobiography. The restored text shows Wright's original open-ended autobiography¹, one that provides no specific answers but rather shows a more philosophical and realistic view than the text that was originally published in 1945.

In this thesis, I will outline and compare the 1945 and 1991 editions of *Black Boy*. I will also look at the publishing history of *Black Boy* and how the variations between the two books affect the plot, theme, characters, and philosophy of each edition. In addition, I intend to explore the impact the Book-of-the-Month Club had on the book. I will focus on the revisions made to this work as well as the differences between both the edited and unedited versions. Through this analysis, I will establish an understanding of what this fictionalized autobiography meant in its sociological and literary time period.

My interest in this topic initially came about after writing a paper on *Black Boy* in a 20th-century American literature seminar. Then, after completing a seminar in African American literature, my interest increased in this field of study. I believe that it is important to know the history of the books we read, for we are better able to understand the stories if we know the history behind their creations. I think it is important to know what the author had in mind as he or she was writing, as well as what was happening in the author's life during the book's creation. This is especially important for Wright

scholarship and in particular, *Black Boy*, since the story is closely based on Wright's own life and imbedded within the Jim Crow era.

First, I will explore the editorial background of Wright's famous book, *Black Boy*. I will discuss how his book is received now, after its full restoration, as opposed to how the edited version² was received. In reviewing the various perspectives concerning Wright's autobiography, I will be able to better explain the impact the two versions had during the time of their release. Additionally, a review of the reception will aid me in my understanding of what was lost in the edited editions and what effects those editing decisions had.

Next, I will examine the impact the Book-of-the-Month Club had on Wright's book, *Black Boy*. I will argue that Wright's vision was strongly compromised by the Book-of-the-Month-Club. Before *Black Boy* had been thoroughly cut and edited, Wright's famous novel, *Native Son*³, also underwent changes at the hands of the Book-of-the-Month Club and thus was well received by the public, selling tens of thousands of copies. Economics made the decision to alter the books a logical one. But understanding what was lost in the cutting and editing lies at the heart of this thesis. Above all, I will make a case for why editing and censorship should never have entered the discussion about publishing *Black Boy*, and how these decisions may have paved a new (and perhaps destructive) path towards the future. The disconnection between the editor and the author served as a major motive behind the decision to alter the books from their original form. Unlike the edited version, Wright intended to comment on the entire nation, rather than just the South.

Finally, a chapter will be devoted to focusing on the changes made to *Black Boy*, and the repercussions of these changes. The changes significantly alter what is at the core of this book, which is a rare glimpse into the complexities of the legacy of slavery and the oppression of the Black man in America. Among other things, the South was demonized as a result of this book's publication. All in all, an unbalanced portrayal of life in the South resulted from Wright's work being published in its revised form.

Richard Wright wrote two of the most powerful works ever to explore the racial divide between African Americans and an oppressive White society. The first of these works, the novel *Native Son*, was published in 1940 and achieved immediate success. Wright's next book, *Black Boy*, published in 1945, had an equally successful debut. Unfortunately, these published works were not Wright's original visions. Instead, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were significantly cut and edited, leaving out portions of both books. In this paper, I will explore the decisions behind the changes made and how these changes significantly altered the text of *Black Boy*. In performing these tasks, I hope to deduce the logic behind and the effects of such dramatic changes.

CHAPTER 2

EDITORIAL HISTORY OF *BLACK BOY*

Comparing criticism from the past and present, it is plain to see that debate exists about which version of *Black Boy* represents the better literary achievement. According to Robert Felgar, “The reader should be cautious . . . about assuming uncritically that censorship always decreases literary quality; it may be the case that the shorter, 1945 version of *Black Boy* is the stronger book, because Part Two lacks the vividness of Part One” (62). Felgar’s assumptions miss a critical point, however, which is that the censorship of the book not only cut the entire second half, but also created an entirely new ending, written in collaboration with another writer. Felgar also states that “the 1945 edition . . . concludes on an upbeat note . . . and the 1991 edition that includes not only part two . . . but also a much more negative ending to part one” (62). This kind of alteration of the original ending has the potential to undermine the intentions of the author. The shift from an open ending (an ending to a book that leaves the reader with questions rather than answers) to a defined ending (an ending that completes the story with resolution and a finite goal being achieved) creates an altogether different kind of book. Janice Thaddeus comments on the change when she asserts that “in spite of *Black Boy*'s insistent refusal to resolve the oppositions upon which it rests, the final six pages of the edited text nonetheless attempt to summarize the preceding experiences, to explain them, give them a defined significance” (202).

Wright never intended for his book to have an upbeat ending, but he changed it nonetheless in order to appease the Book-of-the-Month Club, thereby ensuring his book’s success and subsequent distribution to a great many readers. *Black Boy* was supposed to

be a record of the childhood and youth of a Black boy growing up in the South *and the North*, not a feel-good story of hope and freedom. Wright's vision of showing the world the pain and suffering of a Black child would never completely be realized until 1991, when, ironically, the oppression of Black people had become considerably less of a problem in America. The world will never know what could have been had this book been published in its entirety from the beginning. Wright's depiction of life for a Black boy may have altered the views of the North and the South and America as a whole.

At the Book-of-the-Month Club's request, the last third of *Black Boy* was removed and several new pages of concluding prose were added. By March of 1945, *Black Boy* appeared at the top of many best-seller lists and had sold over 400,000 copies. The edited edition is a condensed version of his autobiography. The ideas, which were painstakingly built throughout his manuscript, are undermined by the addition of the final six pages and the removal of part two. In addition to this dramatic change, a few more pages were added to Wright's original ending of part one, thereby concluding Wright's book. Janice Thaddeus notes:

The final pages of the full *Black Boy*, unlike those of the revised *Black Boy*, do not in fact explain how Wright managed to separate himself from his black confreres in the South, how he became a writer. They do not even hint at his future successes, but rather at his sense of quest, and as Michel Fabre has put it, his feeling that the quest was unfinished and perhaps unfinishable. Wright did not plan to create in his readers or to accept in himself a feeling of satisfaction, but of hunger. (135)

The omission of part two and the insertion of a new ending to wrap up the book redefines Wright's autobiography from an uncertain quest to a completed tale. Wright's original manuscript ends with these words: "I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human" (384). Thaddeus remarks that "This statement is an admission that Wright cannot produce a work that is neat and conclusive, and as a result the content and effect of these final pages clash with the revised ending of *Black Boy*" (205-6). The two endings are clearly different and give an entirely new dimension to the revised edition. It would take forty-five years before the world would be able to see Wright's true vision of *Black Boy*.

Even though Wright wrote both versions of *Black Boy*, the earlier edition, according to Janice Thaddeus, represents a defined autobiography while the edition that reinstated Wright's original intentions and stayed true to his original manuscripts represents an open autobiography. Thaddeus posits:

The writer of an open autobiography differs from [Frederick] Douglass and others like him in that he is searching, not telling, so that like Boswell or Rousseau he offers questions instead of answers. He does not wish to supply a fulcrum, does not proffer conclusions and solutions, and consequently he refrains from shaping his life neatly in a teleological plot. (199)

Clearly, Wright had intended for his autobiography to offer questions rather than answers, but in changing his book, it comes to a distinct ending. Thaddeus goes on to say,

“The search for truth, for as much truth as one can possibly set down, is the primary motive of a writer of an open as opposed to a defined autobiography. He is not trying primarily to please an audience, to create an aesthetically satisfying whole, but to look into his heart” (207). Wright’s unedited manuscript ends with himself searching for answers, just as he intends his reader to do. But the edited version goes to great lengths to sum up the story with a neat and tidy conclusion.

The cut version of 1945 completely removed part two, “The Horror and the Glory,” from the book. Wright’s vision of his autobiography was shortened, and the public had to wait until 1977 when part two of his original manuscript would finally reach publication. (Wright did release most, if not all, of the “The Horror and the Glory” in various magazines, however.) Thaddeus posits,

The omitted second section of the autobiography expresses the tensions, the unresolved conflicts, of the first. It is the story, chiefly, of Wright's unsatisfying relationship with the Communist Party. Here, the themes of black American Literature and White are more subdued, but the theme of hunger persists and becomes more elaborate and universal. Of course, the question of black and White as a simple issue of race continues, but as Wright notes, he now feels “a different sort of tension,” a different kind of “insecurity.” (Thaddeus 214)

Thaddeus points out the shift in the book’s overall meaning from a story mostly concerned with race issues, to one that expresses a more general tone of uncertainty about life and a persistent hunger for more. In its fuller version, the books appeals to a much

larger audience than just Blacks, to all those who feel an insatiable hunger for equality and justice and who oppose apathy.

The original manuscript Wright wrote “emphasized the lack of conviction, the isolation, and finally the lack of order in Wright's world as he saw it, a sadness and disarray which his truncated autobiography *Black Boy*, as published, seems at the end to deny” (Thaddeus 214). When this original version was published in 1991 readers are able to follow Wright through his Southern childhood and his Northern youth and to see the necessary uncertainty of his vision.

The 1945 edition, on the other hand, conveys a sense of accomplishment that the 1991 edition does not contain. Thaddeus describes this well:

Readers of [the original] *Black Boy*, no matter what their race or persuasion, often made the easy leap from the trip North to best-sellerdom and success. But for Wright himself this leap was not easy, as readers of [the 1991 version] know. Although pieces of the end of the original . . . were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Mademoiselle* before *Black Boy* itself actually appeared, it obviously could not reach as large an audience as *Black Boy* itself. Even readers who later read most of this material in *The God that Failed* or in *Eight Men* could not intuit the negative strength of the omitted pages which immediately followed Wright's escape to the North in *American Hunger*. Nothing short of Wright's opening words can convey the desolation he felt on arriving in his hoped for paradise: ‘My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies’ (215).

This opening line of the omitted part to Wright's autobiography sets the stage for what lies ahead of him in the North. Wright's intentions of showing the desolation and consternation awaiting him were lost due to the cutting of part two from original publication.

Critics had mixed responses to Wright's works, but one point remains consistent-- his books incited fervor in his readers, something he very much wanted. Rowley states "Wright passionately believed in the revolutionary potential of writing; his words were going to 'tell' and 'march' and 'fight.' Seeing himself as mediator between cultures, he aimed to 'build a bridge of words' between the Black and White worlds he inhabited" (625). Wright's ideas were extremely potent, and he knew that the truth must come out. Unfortunately, the range of his experiences were cut short and only partially given to the world when the world needed to hear his thoughts on race relations the most.

CHAPTER 3

THE SHAPING OF AMERICAN TASTE

Founded by Harry Scherman and Robert K. Haas in 1926, the Book-of-the-Month Club intended to distribute new books chosen by a panel of judges and based on certain criteria through the mail to club members. While these criteria remain largely unspecified even today, this small group of individuals decided which books would be read by their millions of members. *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, were both Book-of-the-Month Club main selections in February 1940 and March 1945, respectively. The Book-of-the-Month Club promoted and distributed Wright's two books, but it also had, unfortunately, significant influence over the content of the works.

Harry Scherman, co-founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club, states, "if you are to deal with or think about the American people en masse, you must regard them as little different from yourself in all essentials" (qtd. in Lee 47). It was this kind of thinking that permeated the minds of the men and women in charge of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Unfortunately, the populace bought into the club and supported with their dollars the decisions the club made. Once the Book-of-the-Month Club reached a sizable number of members, it began to make requests of authors to change the original texts of their books.

Janice Radway, in her *A Feeling for Books*, discusses her meeting with editors at the Book-of-the-Month Club. Radway writes that "I found the individuals who worked within the organization both oddly familiar and significantly different from the group of literary intellectuals I admired who constituted my academic peers and whose approbation I sought professionally" (6). To Radway, literary intellectuals' way of thinking seemed to represent a more scholastic view of book selection. Radway continues

her evaluation of the men and women responsible for selecting the books available to members: “The Book-of-the-Month Club editors proved compelling to me because they talked about books with a kind of intense fervor and expansive pleasure I had not heard since my conversations with the librarians of my childhood” (6). Choosing a book and its content based solely on pleasurable reading undercut the true significance behind what books like Wright’s represented which was a way into the minds of those written about. These editors were deciding the reading material for a newly-forming group of Americans that Radway refers to as “middlebrow culture.” Radway continues her discussion of these editors by reporting that

Not only did they facilitate the day-to-day business of selecting books for distribution, but more important perhaps, they fostered the definition of an imagined community of general readers, both within and without the club, who were fascinated not by aesthetic intricacies of verbal compositions or by the challenge of a unique figural language or even by a new way of representing experience. Those readers, rather, were understood to be captivated by books in all their immense diversity and by the manifold pleasures of buying them, owning them, reading them, and using them (Radway 6).

These are the men and women who decided what Americans would read and also decided the fate of Wright’s autobiography. By buying books in such a fashion, the book lost its significance as a vehicle for change, and became just another dusty book on a shelf of endlessly read books.

Wright's autobiography was not the only text altered by the Book-of-the-Month Club. *Native Son* became the first novel by an African-American author to be chosen as a Book-of-the-Month main selection, and a majority of the sales of this book can be directly attributed to this label. Wright's novel sold more than 200,000 copies in a little less than three weeks and was number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list for several weeks. Because the Book-of-the-Month Club had such a large membership, Wright agreed to change whatever the club wanted him to change. His need for financial stability outweighed Wright's desire to stay true to his original manuscript. The publishing company Harper and Brothers sent a proof of Richard Wright's first novel, *Native Son*, to the Book-of-the-Month Club in August of 1939 (Radway 286). The judges of the club felt the time right to promote the work of a "Negro writer," but because of the explicit sexual nature of the book, the club felt it necessary to make changes to the novel in order to avoid offending Book-of-the-Month Club members.

The club contacted Edward Aswell, Wright's editor at Harper and Brothers, to make the appropriate changes to the novel. According to Radway, "They wanted Wright to remove, among other things, explicit references to masturbation from a scene where Bigger Thomas and his friends watch newsreels about the beach antics of the daughter of the rich. Wright agreed to this change as well as to others (he removed all mention of a flirtatious Mary Dalton from the description of the newsreel, thereby softening his ironic depiction of the rich) and, in the process, significantly changed his portrayal of Bigger's sexuality" (286). Wright consistently complied with all demands he received from his editors.

The Book-of-the-Month Club also made considerable changes to *Black Boy*. Wright's autobiography initially consisted of the first half of what was originally titled *American Hunger*, the longer version that recorded Wright's years in the South, as well as his time in the North. *American Hunger* had been accepted for publication at Harper and Brothers in 1944, but the Book-of-the-Month Club selection committee requested that Wright cut the manuscript where he leaves the South. The committee also wanted him to compose an epilogue for the shortened version. Wright did as asked and submitted six additional pages that wrapped up his early years in the South and gave reason for his flight to the North, ending the book in a cautiously hopeful way. Because he did as instructed, the Book-of-the-Month Club published his book.

Wright's autobiography "*Black Boy* benefited significantly from its status as a book-of-the-month. The autobiography was first on the bestseller list from April to June 1945 and finished the year among the top five bestsellers in non-fiction with over half a million copies sold, nearly two-thirds of which were distributed through the Book-of-the-Month Club" (Madigan 53). The money and fame that Wright obtained probably quelled any doubt he may have had about making so many substantive changes.

There is little evidence as to exactly why the judges at The Book-of-the-Month-Club decided to make the cuts to Wright's autobiography. Most of the information available states that the changes made to the work were probably made in order to reach a larger audience and to not offend the more conservative members of the club (Radway 286). In response to these changes, Janice Radway writes, "Surviving documents tell us little about the motives of individual judges, but they apparently informed Aswell and Wright that they hoped these changes would enable the book to reach a larger audience

without offending the more conservative members within it. There are limits, apparently, to the kinds of identification middlebrow personalism could promote” (286). While the judges wanted to identify with the book, they were afraid that many of the readers would not connect to the more extreme elements found in the book. The conservative nature of the Book-of-the-Month Club influenced readers who were never given a choice, but rather the choices were being made by the Book-of-the-Month Club for them⁴.

August of 1944 saw Wright’s book, which was now titled *Black Boy*, accepted by the Book-of-the-Month Club (Karem 704). Wright, with the help of Dorothy Canfield Fisher, created a new ending to the autobiography (703). Working together, they were able to make a cohesive ending that would finish the book off after the first part. Work on the new ending began with some difficulty. However, Wright received numerous letters from the Book-of-the-Month Club asking him to consider making a revision to the ending of his book (704). In a letter to the club, Wright says, "I fully understand the value of what you are driving at, but, frankly, the narrative as it now stands simply will not support a more general or hopeful conclusion. The Negro who flees the South is really a refugee; he is so pinched and straitened in his environment that his leaving is more an avoidance than an embrace" (qtd. in Karem 704). Clearly, Wright attempted to resist the club’s request and insisted on leaving the book as it was. Wright’s ideas were dismissed, however, and, against his better judgment, a more general and hopeful conclusion was written. Robert Felgar states that this idea “is such a compelling version of that favorite American tale, the Horatio Alger Myth—the notion that even if one is born on the wrong side of the tracks, one can make it in America” (xii). The new version was in place, and it

offered hope of new future on the horizon for the young protagonist. This edited version would go to print as the conclusion to the 1945 edition of *Black Boy*.

Particularly revealing is the correspondence between Fisher and Wright during the revision stages of *Black Boy*. It is easy to see through these letters the influence she had over the ending of Wright's autobiography. When she initially wrote to Wright on June 29, 1944, she asked him to make revisions to the closing pages of the books (Radway 286). Fisher writes, "I have read these pages several times over, with the closest attention for they are vital to the impression made by the book. And the last time I went over them, it was with pencil in hand, to see if perhaps I might have a helpful suggestion or two to make, as from an older writer to a younger comrade in authorship" (qtd. in Madigan 231). Fisher plainly states that she made her own revisions to the final pages of the book. She goes on to say "I've drawn a pencil mark around . . . phrases I think might be improved, like the phrase marked on page 3 which seemed a little awkward and involved. Perhaps the idea could be put through the process of distillation . . . which will more surely and directly give its essence" (qtd. in Madigan 231). Her involvement with the changes made to Wright's autobiography is clearly evidenced in these letters between the two of them. Fisher continues:

I add to these verbal suggestions one idea which came into my mind as I read. My idea is this: you ask 'What was it that always made me feel that way? What was it that made me conscious of possibilities? From where had I caught a sense of freedom?' We too ask ourselves that question . . . following the example of their parents and grandparents, have done what they could to lighten the dark stain of racial discrimination in our nation.

What we have hoped . . . was that those efforts of men of good-will have somewhat availed . . . enough so that those suffering from racial injustice might catch a glimpse of the fact that such efforts are rooted in those 'American principles' so mocked and degraded by the practice of racial discrimination. In the South, it is frankly violent brutality which bars the way to free Negro development. To keep that conception in regard to decent race-relations alive and growing has been the aspiration of generation after generation in many American family, judging by my own, and by those I know. To receive, in the closing pages of your book, one word of recognition for this aspiration, if it were possible for you to give such recognition honestly, would hearten all who believe in American ideals. (qtd. in Fisher 232)

Fisher sets forth her ideas for the book's ending in the closing remarks of her letter to Wright. She insists that the book's ending tap into a patriotic American code. Fisher argues that freedom and justice should end the book and that Wright's journey through life should show that he has achieved these American aspirations. She even goes so far as to specifically mention the tyranny of the South⁵, with no mention of the cruelty that African Americans experience in the North. In spite of her stance, she is sympathetic to the overall cause.

In order for the Book-of-the-Month Club to publish his book, Wright would have to make the changes requested by Fisher and supported by the club. Resisting would mean a major reduction in media attention and thus a tremendous reduction in income. No longer would this book be a story of his life in the South and the North, but instead

the book would take on a much more concise approach, dealing only with his childhood as a Southerner. Ultimately, Wright knew that working in conjunction with the Book-of-the-Month Club would propel him to fame and place his books into the hands of many readers. Even though this revised version does not represent his original intention, it would at least shed some light on the troubling issues surrounding racism in the South.

CHAPTER 4

THE RESHAPING OF WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

Wright's literary career began to gain considerable momentum with the publication of *Native Son*. According to "How 'Bigger' Was Born," written as an explanation of the origins of *Native Son*, Wright says that "The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect" (10, Intro). Wright's straightforwardness about the difficulties facing Black men cannot be denied when again he references a great many Bigger Thomases. Wright writes, "If I had known only one Bigger I would not have written *Native Son*" (10). This same logic can be applied to Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*.

Unfortunately, changes made to *Black Boy* turned the book into a *Bildungsroman* of growing up in the South. Several theories have been advanced about the reasons why the changes were ordered. Some say the book could not be printed in its entirety due to paper shortages because of the war (Webb 207). Others speculate that the publishers wanted a more succinct book that handled only a particular aspect of Wright's life, his childhood. Still another argument dealt with the influence of the Communist Party and its reservations about having a less-than-appealing account of its activities published (Karem 706). Although there have been no definitive conclusions reached, the fact remains that the initial publication of Wright's book altered his original meaning. The changes made by the Book-of-the-Month club may also have altered history, giving people the false notion that the North acted as a haven for African Americans and that they need only to make their way North in order to achieve sanctuary.

But before Wright would ever make it to the North, he had to endure the harshness of living in the South. Wright's navigation through childhood occurred mostly alone. We are reminded of his defiance by the numerous acts of rebellion he exhibits during his adolescent years. According to Steve Mintz in *Huck's Raft*, "by the 1920's families were less important in transmitting status and social position than schools and jobs" (216). This is largely seen in *Black Boy* through various interactions he has during his schooling and through odd jobs he had, which gave him more control over his daily life. Although his initial motivation to get a job was influenced by his need to eat, this responsibility at such an early age enabled Wright to begin to formulate his opinions and understanding of society.

Mintz goes on to say "early twentieth century families contained, on average, just three children, half the number in 1850, allowing more self-expression for each family member. But there was a decrease in the physical interdependence of family members" (216). With his father out of the picture, and his mother being incapacitated most of the time, Wright found himself alone most of the time, thus leading him in the direction of an independent thinker. Wright's isolation and independence makes him that much more responsible for the way in which the original "Southern Nights" ends, on his own terms, in his own words. "I stepped from the elevator into the street, half expecting someone to call me back and tell me that it was all a dream, that I was not leaving" and continues on with "This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (257). The ending emphasizes his responsibility for his own life, showing that the choices he made were his own. By changing the ending, the responsibility shifts from Wright to those around him. Claiming responsibility for one's self is at the very core of *Black Boy*.

Wright had a very direct statement to make about taking responsibility for your own action rather than blaming others and he makes a direct correlation at the end between himself and the man who stands by doing nothing.

In the six or so additional pages added to Wright's original manuscript, Wright, with the aid of Fisher, attempts to conclude a story that was far from over. The book abruptly ends just as Wright is beginning to reveal the horror and the glory of his life. He places this in the opening paragraph of the conclusion written for the 1945 edition of *Black Boy*. Wright quickly moves from the South and heads to the North. "The next day when I was already in full flight—aboard a northward bound train—I could not have accounted, if it had been demanded of me, for all the varied forces that were making me reject the culture that had molded and shaped me" (Wright 412). In the sentence before (which concludes the first part of the original manuscript) he acknowledges that "this was the culture from which I sprang" (257). Now, suddenly, Wright rejects his culture. In order to refocus the ending of the book, Wright must change his stance to demonstrate his antipathy for the South. He states, "I was leaving without a qualm, without a single backward glance" (412). No longer did he care about what he was leaving behind--his family, his friends. Wright's condemnation of the South continues when he says, "The face of the South that I had known was hostile and forbidding, and yet out of all terror, I had somehow gotten the idea that life could be different, could be lived in a fuller and richer manner" (412). Wright contrasts the South, which he directly mentions, to the North, which he indirectly refers to as a place where he could live a more robust life.

Wright's recalls the first time he ran in order to get away: "As had happened when I left the orphan home, I was now running more away from something than toward

something. But that did not matter to me. My mood was: I've got to get away; I can't stay here" (412). Wright's displeasure with the South would cause him to do just about anything in order to not suffer the ordeal of living there. For now, Wright's answer to the formidable problems he faced was to flee to another place; a place he had been raised to believe would be the answer to a life of prejudice and racial bigotry.

Wright continues in his closing remarks of the revised edition to question his ideology when he writes, "But what was it that always made me feel that way? What was it that made me conscious of possibilities? From where in this southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom? Why was it that I was able to act upon vaguely felt notions? What was it that made me feel things deeply enough for me to try to order my life by my feelings?" (413). Wright is aware that good exists in the world, but he wonders how he could know this, having lived in the oppressive South all of his life. Wright would trust in his belief that the North would offer a place of salvation, based on what he had heard. Wright goes on to tell of his experiences with White people by stating, "The external world of Whites and Blacks, which was the only world that I had ever known, surely had not evoked in me any belief in myself. The people I had met had advised and demanded submission" (413). During his time in the South he had only known Southern Whites, with the exception of one White Northerner (who Wright thought was actually a Southerner trying to deceive him) (231). His ideas of the South are tainted by the relationships he experienced while there, in the edited version of *Black Boy*.

Wright's portrayal of a South with no redeeming qualities continues in the conclusion to the edited edition of *Black Boy*. He writes, "In the main, my hope was merely a kind of self-defense, a conviction that if I did not leave I would perish, either

because of possible violence of others against me, or because of my possible violence against them” (413). In Wright's mind, life in the South revolved around violence. Others would inflict violence on him, or he would inflict violence on others.

Wright then begins to explain how he came to know about the good that existed in the North. He recalls, “It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities” (413). Here he discusses the fiction he read, suggesting that the fiction led to his notions of a place that possessed good-natured people who respected one another regardless of their differences. Wright goes on to explain the books he read and the men who wrote them:

Of course, I had never seen or met the men who wrote the books I read, and the kind of world in which they lived was as alien to me as the moon. But what had enabled me to overcome my chronic distrust was that these books—written by men like Dreiser, Masters, Mencken, Anderson, and Lewis—seemed defensively critical of the straitened American environment. And it was out of these novels and stories and articles, out of the emotional impact of imaginative constructions of heroic or tragic deeds that I felt touching my face a tinge of warmth from an unseen light.

(413)

Wright admits that he has no tangible knowledge of these men, only the information he read about them in books. The men listed above were all born and raised in the North: Theodore Dreiser, born in Indiana, Edgar Lee Masters, born in Kansas, H.L. Mencken, born in Baltimore, Maryland, Sherwood Anderson, born in Camden, Ohio, and Sinclair Lewis, born in Minnesota. Listing their names signifies yet another separation between

the cruel and unthinking South and the literate and knowledgeable North. In his new ending, Wright was forced by the Book-of-the-Month Club to create an illusion at the end of his memoir that the Northern states were offered a refuge from the South.

At this point in the new conclusion to *Black Boy*, Wright begins a harsh criticism against the White South and the way they treated him:

The white South said that it knew ‘niggers,’ and I was what the white South called a ‘nigger.’ Well, the white South had never known me— never known what I thought, what I felt. The white South said that I had a ‘place’ in life. Well, I had never felt my ‘place’; or, rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the ‘place’ to which the white South had assigned me. (414)

His criticism of the White Southerners makes it seem as if all of Wright’s problems in the South were related only to the Whites. He does not distinguish between the White people who were good to him and the Whites who inflicted grief upon him. Instead, he includes all White Southerners, proclaiming that they are all evil. This inconsistency further demonstrates the impact the Book-of-the-Month Club had in persuading Wright to change his autobiography. One instance of a White southerner who aided him was a Mr. Falk who gave Richard his own library card in order to further Wright’s thirst for knowledge (Wright 246). It isn’t much, but this simple act of kindness shows that there were other White men with whom Wright came in contact that did him good rather than harm. In the revised edition, Wright places all of the blame for his problems on the White South and holds no one else accountable.

There were other reasons behind his decision to move north that aren't addressed in the conclusion of the 1945 edition of *Black Boy*. Many of Wright's problems in the South arose from issues with family members. He explains, "My position in the household was a delicate one; I was a minor, an uninvited dependent, a blood relative, who professed no salvation and whose soul stood in moral peril. She interpreted my mother's long illness as the result of my faithlessness" (103). Wright's home life left much to be desired. He had to contend with both verbal and physical abuse at every turn. At one point in the book, Richard explains that he and his uncle have an altercation. The uncle threatens to beat Richard, but Richard escapes to the front yard. The uncle tells Richard "somebody will yet break your spirit" (160). Instances like this kept Richard unnerved and paranoid about the violence that surrounded him, even in his own home.

Another instance with a family member occurs when Richard's aunt falsely accuses him of eating walnuts in the classroom. The aunt beats Richard for his assumed transgressions and promises to beat him once more upon their return home. Richard vows to never be beaten again and writes that:

I stood fighting, fighting as I never fought in my life, fighting with myself. Perhaps my uneasy childhood, perhaps my shifting from town to town, perhaps the violence I had already seen and felt took hold of me, and I was trying to stifle the impulse to go to the drawer of the kitchen and get a knife and defend myself. But this woman who stood before me was my aunt, my mother's sister, Granny's daughter; in her veins my own blood flowed; in many of her actions I could see some elusive part of my own self; and in her speech I could catch echoes of my own speech. I did not

want to be violent with her, and yet I did not want to be beaten for a wrong I had not committed. (107)

These problems are downplayed in the revised ending of *Black Boy* placing responsibility solely upon the shoulders of the White Southerners. Throughout the last six pages of the revised ending, Wright targets the South as the cause for all the strife he dealt with growing up. But in the previous pages of his original manuscript, Wright cites other sources that make his life difficult in the South and cause him to want to leave. For Wright, escape was the ultimate answer to his long-standing family issues.

Wright continues his tirade against Whites in the next paragraph of his edited autobiography, saying, “Not only had the southern whites not known me, but, more important still, as I had lived in the South I had not had the chance to learn who I was. The pressure of southern living kept me from being the kind of person that I might have been” (414). No longer does the ending of his book focus on him; instead, he focuses on the South and how the South is to blame for all the problems that have happened to him during his childhood. The word “South” occurs, in some form, twenty-five times during the final three pages of the 1945 edition of *Black Boy*. Repetition can be used for a number of reasons: here, it is used to emphasize the word “South,” while at the same time causing the reader to remember only a single cause for Wright’s pain.

Holding the South accountable for all the transgressions against Wright in the final pages of the 1945 edition are countered, however, by an earlier passage in the book. This passage shows the double standard Whites had for Blacks and holds Blacks accountable for their problems in the South. Wright, a man of honesty and integrity, sees himself as an outcast based ironically on his decision to act as a law-abiding citizen:

But I, who stole nothing, who wanted to look them straight in the face, who wanted to talk and act like a man, inspired fear in them. The southern whites would rather have had Negroes who stole, work for them than Negroes who knew, however dimly, the worth of their own humanity. Hence, whites placed a premium upon black deceit; they encouraged irresponsibility; and their rewards were bestowed upon us blacks in the degree that we could make them feel safe and superior (200).

Wright wants to assert himself as a man, but this is not possible due to the pressures imposed upon Blacks by Whites. Blacks were to blame in Wright's eyes because they would not stand up against the Whites. They continued to behave exactly way that the Whites wanted. For Wright, this was a problem.

Wright also places the blame on the Black community as well. He sees Blacks as buying into what the Whites say about them. Even his fellow African Americans could not understand why Richard would not steal. Wright recalls, "Yet, all about me, Negroes were stealing. More than once I had been called a 'dumb nigger' by Black boys who discovered that I had not availed myself of a chance to snatch some petty piece of White property that had been carelessly left within reach" (199). Wright touches on other problems leading to his retreat to the North, but these are left out of the closing remarks of *Black Boy*, as is the entire second half of the book, which exposes the truth about the abhorrent conditions Blacks faced in the North.

The following quotation ends the first edition of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, a vastly different ending from Wright's original manuscript:

With ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront men without fear or shame, that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars. (415)

The final sentence attempts to convey some sort of ultimate meaning from a book that was never intended to draw any conclusions. By taking this ambiguity away, the audience is robbed of what is truly at stake, empathy and understanding.

In his book, *My Father's Shadow*, David Dudley comments on the 1945 edition's ending by noting “with this ending to *Black Boy*, readers disturbed by the bleakness of almost all that has gone before may take some slight comfort. In one way, such an ending seems jarring at the end of a book as pessimistic as *Black Boy*, almost a “happy-ever-after” conclusion to a *Grand Guignol*” (127). (The *Grand Guignol* refers to a theatre in Paris that created a dramatically entertaining ending from something of a horrific or sensational nature.) According to Dudley, the exuberantly optimistic ending of the first edition leaves the reader with a sense of hope and completion.

After being altered and published in 1945, the revised edition provides just such a sense. The emphasis on the South obscures both the responsibilities of African Americans and also the limitations of the North. In the second half of the original manuscript, Wright asserts this about White Northerners: “Their constant outward-looking, their mania for radios, cars, and a thousand other trinkets made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of life, made it impossible for them to learn a language

which could have taught them to speak of what was in their or others' hearts" (273). Dismayed by what he finds, Wright cannot relate to such a need for worldly possessions. Wright's disillusionment with the North begins to unravel the preconceived notions he had about the North. Omitting the second half of the book also eliminated a closer look at Wright's childhood. Removed was a life of ongoing hunger that he had described in the original manuscript. Instead, childhood hunger was reduced to a quick recap of lessons learned in life. Jeff Karem states that "As a writer who had experienced these 'contradictory circumstances' firsthand, Wright could offer multiple perspectives on America's regional and racial divides, but it was just such insight into those polarities that was crippled by abbreviating his autobiography and confining his comments to the South" (708). When Wright's autobiography was shortened, the representation of Wright's life changed as well.

The closing sentences to Wright's "Southern Nights" find him taking care of last-minute errands as he readies himself to leave the South and head north. His last conversation is with a Black man he knows. The man is envious of Wright's departure, and Wright tells him that he can leave as well. The man responds by saying: "'I'll never leave this goddamn South,' he railed. 'I'm always saying I am, but I won't . . . I'm lazy. I like to sleep too goddamn much. I'll die here. Or maybe they'll kill me'" (257). Wright gives a final commentary on the Southern Black man's version of the South. In Wright's opinion, a significant number of the problems occurring in the South have to do with the Black man's lack of motivation. He holds his own people accountable, to some degree, for the unchanging racial bigotry plaguing the South. Wright also mentions the physical dangers Blacks encounter from Whites to counterbalance his disapproval of the Black

man's apathy. Wright tries to show that although apathy is a problem, the road to equality will not be easy. The complexity of this message is missing in the 1945 edition, and it isn't until 1991 that readers are able to see and appreciate it.

Wright says in the original edition, "I stepped from the elevator into the street, half expecting someone to call me back and tell me that it was all a dream, that I was not leaving. This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (257). Wright knew from an early age that he did not belong in the South, and that the people around him could not understand his ideas about equality. Throughout his youth, Wright began to imagine notions of a kinder and gentler place where men could be equals and people respected one another's personal views. For Wright, the North represented this magical place that he had dreamed of all his life. The North seemed to be the answer to the struggles he endured day after day, and it would redeem him and level out all the injustices he had dealt with during his adolescence. The final sentence of the unedited first half of *Black Boy* supports no such illusions about the North being an answer to all racism. Wright explains, "This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (257). Wright had come to accept the fact that the South would not change; therefore he must search somewhere else for the justice he so rightly deserved. He was running *from* something, and not particularly *towards* anything. Just getting out of the South represented the initial step towards the much-needed change he desired. The South had shaped him into the person he had become, and he recognized this. He did not agree with or support the ideology of the South, but he knew that his own moral compass had been created from the atrocities he endured while living in the South.

Ralph Ellison writes about Wright's autobiography "while it is true that *Black Boy* presents an almost unrelieved picture of a personality corrupted by brutal environment, it also presents those fresh human responses brought to its world by the sensitive child" (266). Ellison's reading penetrates deeply into what Wright had been trying to say in his work. Ellison cites the critical need to explore the childhood as a means of showing the overall exploitive nature involved of Black Southern life. In the original edition, Wright's childhood is vividly set before us in a way that can be approached from various angles to bear witness to the destruction inflicted on African Americans in the South during the early 20th century. This enables Wright's autobiography to combine overall themes of childhood trauma and development into the understanding of race relations in the South. Because of the attention paid to Wright's Southern past, the reader is given a clear picture as to what constituted a life in the South during the early twentieth century. In the original manuscript, no apologies are given for the cruel ending to each section of the autobiography. But once the new ending had been created, the tone of the book moves towards a completion approach in which a resolution is given and opportunity and potential prosperity await Wright in the North.

A more accurate understanding of the injustices inflicted on Blacks in America is gained from reading Wright's uncut autobiography. All the angst and frustration depicted in Wright's early life necessarily lead up to a harrowing ending to Part One. In it, Wright realistically depicts how Black children, and Wright in particular, saw the path ahead of them. For Wright and the children he attempted to represent, childhood did not end on a happy note. Theirs was a life of turmoil and despair. Robert Stepto explains, "Since the world of *Black Boy* is so relentlessly hostile, we should not be surprised to discover that

most of young Richard's learning situations are pockets of fear and misery" (Bloom 95). If it wasn't the White man's continual oppression and suppression, then it was the horrendous living conditions or the lack of food that created the constant fear inside of them. And it was this fear that Wright wrote about and so carefully left looming over young Richard's head at the end of "Southern Nights" that makes *Black Boy* the profound and important text that it is.

With the addition of part two, titled "The Horror and the Glory" in the restored edition, readers see the dramatic results of Wright's flight to the North. David Dudley insists that "if we read it as Wright originally intended, *American Hunger* does . . . change the reader's view of the first part of the work" (128). Having the second part of the book is critical in understanding Wright's message about the nominally integrated North. Still considered an adolescent, Wright is able to escape from the South, from everything that had struck fear into his life. But the idea of escape is short lived as we are immediately introduced to Wright's first impression of the North. Dudley writes, "The second part of the work begins with 'My glimpse of the flat Black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies.' From that first sentence, we know that what Richard finds in the North is not really freedom, but something as bad as what he fled, if not worse" (129). Through "The Horror and the Glory" we are able to see more of Wright's movement toward disillusionment. What he thought he could escape from proved inescapable. Wright looked for a civilization and not a culture; he wanted to live freely and be accepted as a human being. He longed for a society of equality where men were judged based on truth and not social order. These ideals continued to grow during his childhood and into his adolescence.

The final sentence of Wright's restored autobiography reveals a man dismayed with what he has found throughout his life: "I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human" (385). Wright saw little hope around him, and yet he chose not to give up. He also reveals a sense of hope that there are ideas worth believing in. His life has been filled with horror and terror, but he will continue his search for decent human values. With the original ending of Wright's autobiography in place, we begin to understand the full scope of his search.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Richard Wright's books forged a path to a new America, an America that could treat all races with equal respect. Rowley remarks, "From the time he put pen to paper, Richard Wright became a signifier for race. No issue is more emotionally charged. What he wrote about, and what Wright himself symbolizes, generates so much passion that it is scarcely possible to see him or his work through the steam. His art has been consistently reduced to statements. The man himself has been stripped of his ambiguity and complexity" (625). Rowley recognizes Wright's force as a voice for the African American. Wright possessed the knowledge that provided his readers with the understanding of a society on the brink of disaster. His words are the connection between the domineering Whites and the oppressed Blacks. Because of the potentially revelatory power of his works, Wright needed to reach as large of an audience as possible. He felt that if he couldn't get his works published as written then he would at least get what he could out to the world in order to shed some light on the subject of racial equality.

With the passage of time, Wright's works have been relegated to academia where fewer people will read them. Had they been first distributed in their entirety, an enormous number of readers would have seen the real story of Richard Wright and those African Americans who were living lives of quiet desperation. Wright once described himself as "a Black everyman," and he wanted all those around him to see what he saw far too often in his life.

Jeff Karem notes that "on the radio interview program 'The Author Meets the Critics,' Wright described himself as writing for a Black Everyman in composing *Black*

Boy: ‘I wanted to lend, give my tongue, to voiceless Negro boys’” (710). Richard Wright’s intentions all along in writing *Black Boy* stemmed from a desire to represent young boys whose voices had been silenced. Karem quotes Wright:

There is no doubt that the majority opinion seems to reflect the feeling that *Black Boy* is the best thing that I have done. But one thing is missing; the American mind finds it hard to ally itself with my vision. In no review does anyone link me with what is being done in writing in the world. They look upon it in a moral light; how bad this life was; how did he learn to write; we must do something, they all say. But no one says, yes, this is life how it is lived, and here we have a sort of meaning in it; here the Negro states the theme of modern living. (710-11)

Wright wanted his readers to understand the circumstances surrounding life in the South for African American children, but his vision does come to fruition until 1991 with the publication of his original manuscript.

The original version of *Black Boy* portrays a truer understanding of the experiences of an ordinary Black boy. According to Robert Butler:

Black Boy is a book which crystallizes a problem which goes to the core of Wright’s vision—how to achieve a human self while inhabiting a deterministic environment which systematically denies your status as a human being. Growing up in a wide variety of locations in the Deep South and urban North, Wright envisioned both worlds as prisons which blocked his attempts to develop himself as a person” (46).

Butler reveals the essence of Wright's autobiography, which is to expose what it meant to be a Black man in America. The goal of the book relied upon showing both the South and the North as places unfit for Blacks to live in. In an interview about writing the original manuscript of *Black Boy* Richard Wright states,

If you try it, you will find at times sweat will break out upon you. You will find that even if you succeed in discounting the attitudes of others to you and your life, you must wrestle with yourself most of all, fight with yourself; for there will surge up in you a strong desire to alter facts, to dress up your feelings. You'll find that there are many things that you don't want to admit about yourself or others. As your record shapes itself up, an awed wonder haunts you. And yet there is no more exciting an adventure than trying to be honest in this way. The clean, strong feeling that sweeps you when you've done it, makes you know that . . . Well, it's quite inexplicable. (B6)

Here Wright shows his fervor for truth-- about oneself and the message one tries to convey.

Black Boy was never meant to have a happy ending and never meant to reach a point of closure. Wright had moved on from the South to escape the terror; his escape was an escape from terror to horror. Wright intended for this book to serve as an example of the Black boy's life, and during this era, Black boys lives did not have happy endings. *Black Boy* was the last work Richard Wright published while living on American soil, and according to the biographical information in the newest edition of *Black Boy*, it was the text with which Wright was cremated. The culmination of years of suffering, *Black*

Boy represents the life of Wright and so many others growing up impoverished in the South. Dudley states, “Richard Wright’s relationship with the Black America of his youth—alienation partially tempered by a desire and need to belong—also figures in his attitude toward the black autobiographical tradition” (124). Wright’s is a unique story, but it also helps to illuminate the struggles of many of his fellow African Americans and it is through his personal story that both Blacks and Whites can gain a clear sense of our fraught history and come to understand what is to be a part of the human race.

NOTES

¹ Although Wright's book is considered an autobiography, many scholars consider it highly fictionalized. There are even sections in the book than have been found to be borrowed from other texts.

² Throughout this paper I will use the term "original" version to refer to the manuscript that Wright originally submitted to his editor and the term "edited" version will represent the one that was actually published in 1945.

³ The changes made to *Native Son* were due in large part to sensitivity for the audience concerning sexual desires between Blacks and Whites that were deemed inappropriate by the Book-of-the Month Club.

⁴ Achieving Book-of-the-Month Club monthly main selection status insured that members would receive this book, guaranteeing higher sales.

⁵ Dorothy Canfield Fisher is adamantly opposed to racial prejudice as can be seen in a collection of her selected letters entitled *Keeping Fires Night and Day*, although she seems to turn a blind eye towards equally oppressive actions towards African Americans in the North.

REFERENCES

- Bloom, Harold. *Richard Wright*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. Print.
- Butler, Robert. "Seeking Salvation in a Naturalistic Universe: Richard Wright's Use of His Southern Religious Background in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*." *Southern Quarterly* 46.2 (2009): 46-60. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Web. 24 Apr. 2010.
- and Ward, Jerry. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing. Google Books. Web. 25 June 2011.
- Dudley, David L. *My Father's Shadow: Intergenerational Conflict in African American Men's Autobiography*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. "Richard Wright's Blues." *Antioch Review* 57.3 (1999): 263. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Web. 20 Apr. 2010.
- Fisher, Dorothy C. *Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher*. Ed. Mark J. Madigan. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1993. Print.
- Felgar, Robert. *Student Companion to Richard Wright*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. Print.
- , *Understanding Richard Wright's Black Boy: a Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1998. Print.
- Karem, Jeff. "'I Could Never Really Leave the South': Regionalism and the Transformation of Richard Wright's *American Hunger*." *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 694-715. Project Muse. Web. 24 Apr. 2010.
- Lee, Charles. *The Hidden Public: The Story of the Book-of-the-Month Club*. New York: Doubleday, 1958. Print.

Mintz, Steven. *Huck's Raft: a History of American Childhood*. Cambridge MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2004. Print.

Radway, Janice A. *A Feeling for Books: the Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-class Desire*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997. Print.

Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001. Print.

Thaddeus, Janice "The Metamorphosis of Black Boy." *American Literature* 57.2 (1985): 212-223. JSTOR. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.

Webb, Constance. *Richard Wright: a Biography*. New York: Putnam, 1968. Print.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: (American Hunger): a Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.

----- "Richard Wright Describes the Birth of *Black Boy*," *New York Post*, 30 November 1944, B6. Web. 24 Apr. 2011.

----- *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. Print.