Part I

American Dialogues
The Chicago Renaissance, Theodore Dreiser, and Richard Wright’s Spatial Narrative

1.

As African Americans found the rural South a living hell and dreamed of escaping racial prejudice and exclusion and of living in northern cities, African American writers were at the pains of conveying the sufferings and hopes of the African American people. The mode of their writing was diametrically opposed to that of nineteenth-century American novelists who often described the mood of pastoral idyll inspired by a longing for a simpler agrarian society. This type of fiction was written largely as a reaction to the disharmony and friction that occurred among rugged individualists, strong-willed white men living in urban society. The new kind of white man was not only able to live in harmony with nature; he would also find a bosom friend in the stranger, a dark-skinned man from whom he learned the values of life he had not known. Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper’s leather-stocking novels strikes up friendship with Chingachgook and Hard-Heart, noble savages of the wilderness. Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* is ritualistically wedded to Queequeg, a pagan from the South Seas. Huck Finn discovers a father figure in Jim, a runaway slave.

In twentieth-century American literature, however, a substantial reversal of the anti-urban sentiment is found in both European American and African American writings, a new literary tradition often critical of the values expressed in earlier American literature. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, for example, Dreiser described the city as a site of freedom and individualism. A realistic modernist like Dreiser, who intimately knew the squalor and corruption brought on by city life, used the urban environment as a space in which to
dramatize individual liberty and pursuit of happiness. For both men and women, the city was envisioned as a site of confluence between the individual and society, a space that was fluid and wide enough to enable citizens and workers to interact with an industrialized culture.

Much of the important African American literature that has emerged since the Depression has also been largely urban in character. Although never hesitant to criticize the negative aspects of city life, it has only rarely suggested that pastoral alternatives to the city exist for African Americans. This large and significant body of literature, moreover, contains some surprising celebrations of city life. One way to explain this positive image of the city is to examine the historical experience of African Americans. From the very onset, African Americans were denied imaginative access to a pre-urban homeland in Africa because the institution of slavery did everything possible to stamp out the memory of that world. And the actual experience of slaves in America did not permit them the luxury of romantically imagining the nonurban settings which are so mythically prominent in nineteenth-century American fiction by such writers as Cooper, Melville, and Twain. As Huck Finn and Jim sadly discovered, the territories ahead could be truly liberating only for European Americans. In the era following the literal end of slavery, new strategies for re-enslavement were devised in the South where codes of segregation and the practice of sharecropping made it impossible for African Americans to establish a positive image of rural life which could serve as a counterbalance to the pull of urban life.

For Richard Wright, Chicago was split between wonder and terror, but it was always preferable to the southern environment he had so categorically rejected. What is remarkable about his impression of Chicago was its dichotomous vision:

Then there was the fabulous city in which Bigger lived, an indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal; a city of extremes: torrid summers and sub-zero winters, white people and black people, the English language and strange tongues, foreign born and native born, scabby poverty and gaudy luxury, high idealism and hard cynicism! A city so young that, in thinking of its short history, one’s mind, as it travels backward in time, is stopped abruptly by the barren stretches of windswept prairie! But a city old enough to have caught within the homes of its long, straight streets the symbols and images of man’s age-old destiny, of truths as old as the mountains and seas, of dramas as abiding as the soul of man itself! (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” xxvi)
Not only did Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s present itself as the center of a powerful, industrialized economy, but it was also a striking representation of a modern civilization buttressed by multiculturalism. It is no small wonder, then, that Chicago produced—besides Wright—Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and a host of American writers whose cultural legacies were other than Anglo-Saxon and mostly ethnic, such as Dreiser, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and Saul Bellow.

Farrell was one of the earliest American writers who championed Wright’s narrative as an unusual intermixture of realism and lyricism. He wrote in Partisan Review that Uncle Tom’s Children served as an exemplary refutation for those who wished to write “such fancy nonsense about fables and allegories.” In response to such reviewers as Granville Hicks and Alan Calmer, who wanted Wright to pace more steadily in his narrative and delve more deeply into his material, Farrell argued that Wright effectively used simple dialogue “as a means of carrying on his narrative, as a medium for poetic and lyrical effects, and as an instrument of characterization” (“Lynch Patterns” 57). By contrast, as if in response for Wright’s unfavorable review of her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston categorized Uncle Tom’s Children as a chronicle of hatred with no act of understanding and sympathy. As did some other critics, she opposed Wright’s politics, arguing that his stories failed to touch the fundamental truths of African American life (“Stories of Conflict” 32).

For Wright, however, what enabled his narrative to convey the truth about African American experience was not an application of literary naturalism but a creation of perspective. Almost a decade earlier than James Baldwin’s review of Native Son, Wright had posited a theory of African American narrative in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” published in New Challenge. This narrative, whether in fiction or in nonfiction, he argued, must be based on fact and history and cannot be motivated by politics or idealism. African American writing, then, does not assume the role of protest: “even if Negro writers found themselves through some ‘ism,’” he asks, “how would that influence their writing? Are they being called upon to ‘preach’? To be ‘salesmen’? To ‘prostitute’ their writing? Must they ‘sully’ themselves? Must they write ‘propaganda’?” The inquiry is “a question of awareness, of consciousness; it is, above all, a question of perspective.” This perspective, Wright defines, is “that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people.”

Substantiating perspective with “intellectual space,” Wright further posits that perspective must not be allied with “world movements” and must be established by the self. Because perspective is “something which he wins
through his living,” it is “the most difficult of achievement” (“Blueprint” 45–46). This intellectual space comprises, on the one hand, a writer’s complex consciousness deeply involved in African American experience and, on the other, the writer’s detachment from that experience. To Wright, detachment means a reflection accomplished in isolation, in a space where neither those afflicted nor those sympathetic to their plight, such as Marxists, are allowed to enter. “The conditions under which I had to work,” Wright recalls in *American Hunger*, “were what baffled them [members of the Communist party in Chicago]. Writing had to be done in loneliness” (123).

His attempt to establish perspective and provide it with intellectual space accounts for his lifelong commitment to a narrative by which he was able to convey the truths of African American life from an impersonal, objective point of view. His entire work has shown that he was a remarkably resilient thinker and writer. At the outset of his career his writing was deeply influenced by Marxism, but later, as he came to establish his own point of view, he used only the doctrine of Marxist theory on class struggle, which made sense to African American life, while rejecting much of Marxist practice, which suppressed freedom and individualism.

Although some critics have regarded Wright’s work as a product influenced by the earlier American and European literary movements, he never considered himself as belonging to any of them. In 1941 he told Edwin Seaver: “Dreiser could get his sociology from a Spencer and get his notion of realism from a Zola, but Negro writers can’t go to those sources for background. . . . In fact, I think in many cases it is good for a Negro writer to get out on his own and get his stuff first hand rather than get it through the regular educational channels” (*Conversations* 46).

Whatever philosophy Wright had come across earlier in his life, he adamantly continued to adhere to his own theory of narrative. Whether he was interested in Marxism, Zolaesque naturalism, or French existentialism, none of them taught him how to attain his perspective and intellectual space. The Marxist doctrines of class struggle against capitalism proved less relevant to African American life than they did to American life in general. Literary naturalism, based on the concepts of heredity and social environment, would not have applied to African American narrative, for such concepts had less to do with African Americans than they did with European Americans. Racism alone, ever present in American society, made the social environment of African Americans vastly different from that of European Americans. By the same token, existentialism, as originally conceived for European society, would not have provided Wright’s narrative with the perspective and intellectual space it required.
Not only did “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” published in 1935, give a clear definition, but it also provided a remarkable illustration for his theory. Perspective, Wright wrote,

means that a Negro writer must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class. It means that a Negro writer must create in his readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil. (“Blueprint” 46)

Focusing on the relationship between African American women workers in the South and European American businessmen in the North, Wright sounded as though he were giving a demonstration of American racial problems. But the perspective he urged the African American writer to achieve does not merely apply to African Americans; it signifies “the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something” (“Blueprint” 46).

2.

Conversations with Richard Wright confirms that in his reading during the Chicago period, Wright paid utmost attention to such influential American novelists in the twentieth century as Dreiser, Faulkner, and Hemingway. Of the three, Wright was least inspired by Hemingway. In a radio discussion of the New York Federal Writers’ Project broadcast in 1938, he said: “I like the work of Hemingway, of course. Who does not? But the two writers whose work I like most today are André Malraux and William Faulkner. I think both of them in their respective fields are saying important things” (Conversations 10). Despite Hemingway’s reputation, established by such novels as The Sun Also Rises, Wright realized that a Hemingway novel makes a great impression on the reader’s mind not for establishing perspective but for creating style. Wright also realized that a Hemingway novel thrives on action, a technique lacking in French novelists like Sartre and Camus. In the 1930s, Wright felt that he belonged to the latest literary generation, which included both Hemingway and Faulkner. He paid a greater tribute to Faulkner because he thought Faulkner’s fiction conveyed a judicious point of view. In particular, he recognized Faulkner’s importance in developing the
American novel, in which the “unhappiness” of the American people was realistically described (Conversations 109).

Among all the writers in English, Dreiser had the strongest influence on Wright’s mode of understanding American history and culture. “The first great American novelist I came across,” Wright said in retrospect shortly before his death, “was Theodore Dreiser. Thanks to him, I discovered a very different world in America” (Conversations 214). As early as 1941, Wright said, “I never could get into Dickens . . . He reeks with sentimentality. Theodore Dreiser . . . is the greatest writer this country has ever produced. His Jennie Gerhardt is the greatest novel” (Conversations 38). Toward the end of Black Boy he wrote:

I read Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie and they revived in me a vivid sense of my mother’s suffering; I was overwhelmed. I grew silent, wondering about the life around me. It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them. (274)

Wright’s affinity with Dreiser has conventionally been understood in terms of naturalism, but Wright never considered himself a naturalist. That Wright made no distinction between realism and naturalism in reading Dreiser’s novels suggests a predilection for the fiction that mirrors social reality, the writing that not only expresses the sentiments of the socially oppressed but also deals with the unalloyed feelings of individuals representative of the feelings of others. This objectivity on the part of the writer, which Wright deemed the most difficult to achieve, constitutes what he called “perspective” and “intellectual space,” the twin elements indispensable to his narrative.

One of the chief reasons why Jennie Gerhardt had a strong affinity for Wright is that Dreiser’s novel is not a naturalistic novel as is, for example, Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. As an American realist, Dreiser took pains to deal with young women’s search for happiness in the city. Just as the young Wright, finding the rural South a living hell, escaped to Chicago, as so poignantly portrayed in Black Boy, Jennie, suffering social ostracism in small Ohio communities, moved to a happier life in Chicago, where she faced less prejudice of class and gender. Unlike Maggie in Crane’s novel, to whom the “shutters of the tall buildings were closed like grim lips . . . the lights of the avenues glittered as if from an impossible distance,” Jennie finally finds in Chicago not only privacy and individualism but also
the gay, energetic spirit of life that frees her from oppressive social conventions. Given a slum section of the city and a self-centered family situation, on the contrary, Crane’s portrayal of Maggie’s life becomes utterly predictable. Growing up in such a family, Maggie has little desire to leave the slum life or to better herself. Although she is described as “blossomed in a mud puddle” and “a most rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, a pretty girl” (Crane 141), she is deprived of any sense of autonomy and vision.

In *Jennie Gerhardt* Dreiser achieves what Wright calls perspective by gauging the relationship between Jennie and Lester Kane, two individuals placed poles apart in society just as Wright urged his fellow novelists to envision the distance between a black woman cotton picker in the South and a white businessman in Wall Street. Even though Lester is heir to a millionaire business tycoon, he is attracted with great compassion to Jennie, a daughter of poor immigrants, who helps her mother scrub hotel floors in Columbus. Far from a victim of social environment, Lester is described as “a naturally observing mind, Rabelaisian in its strength and tendencies.” From Jennie’s vantage point, “the multiplicity of evidences of things, the vastness of the panorama of life,” which Lester is aware of, makes her quest for liberation from class oppression less painful (125). As she moves from Cleveland to Chicago, the multiple and panoramic vision of urban life intensifies. “Yes, Chicago was best,” Dreiser declares. “The very largeness and hustle of it” made the concealment of Lester’s liaison with Jennie “easy” (173).

Unlike Maggie and her family, who forever remain victims of the big city slum environment, Jennie and her family are endowed with abilities to circumvent the situation and create space for themselves. While Maggie is trapped and her movement is circular at best, Jennie, like the narrator of *Black Boy*, who went from Natchez, Mississippi, to Memphis and then to Chicago, moves from smaller cities to larger ones, from Columbus to Cleveland and then to Chicago. And just like the mature Wright, who later went to New York to broaden his horizon, Jennie is also able to visit the metropolis. Unlike Maggie’s brother Jimmie, who cares only about his own life, Jennie’s brother Bass—although early on caring very little for his family—not only becomes concerned about the family’s welfare but also develops a great sympathy for his sister. In an immigrant family, the oldest son, being young and most acculturated to the American way of life, served as the catalyst for the success of his family.

Of the literary influences Wright had, he was inspired by Dreiser’s spatial narrative, through which the city in Jennie’s ordeal becomes her savior. In Dreiser’s narrative, living in a city not only separates her from the restrictive past dominated by class and gender prejudices but also gives her the fluid,
indeterminate space in which to gain her individualism. Furthermore, the spirit of freedom that the city inspires in Jennie is also shared with Lester. Whether she succeeds in her search for liberation has a corollary in what happens to his life in Chicago. In Maggie, on the contrary, the Bowery life, which is extremely confined, does not allow for the residents’ mobility, let alone their travels.

In Jennie Gerhardt, the idea and excitement of travel is expressed throughout the novel. As the Gerhardt children walk to the railroad tracks to steal coal, they watch luxurious trains pass by. “Jennie, alone, kept silent,” Dreiser remarks, “but the suggestion of travel and comfort was the most appealing to her of all” (28). After his father’s death Lester decides to leave the wagon factory owned by his family and departs on a European tour with Jennie, as Wright, while living in exile in Paris, extended his travels to Pagan Spain, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. Jennie, Dreiser writes, “was transported by what she saw and learned”:

It is curious the effect of travel on a thinking mind. At Luxor and Karnak—places Jennie had never dreamed existed—she learned of an older civilization, powerful, complex, complete. . . . Now from this point of view—of decayed Greece, fallen Rome, forgotten Egypt, and from the notable differences of the newer civilization, she gained an idea of how pointless are our minor difficulties after all—our minor beliefs. (Jennie Gerhardt 307)

Although Lester is portrayed initially as an animalistic man, he turns out to be “a product of a combination of elements—religious, commercial, social—modified by the overruling, circumambient atmosphere of liberty in our national life which is productive of almost uncounted freedoms of thought and action” (126). Despite her lack of education and experience, Jennie is also inspired by the same spirit of freedom that Lester attains.

In contrast to Crane’s deterministic portrayal of Maggie, the fluid, spatial narrative that informs Jennie’s liberation had profound influence on Wright’s mode of understanding American history. Dreiser’s heroine is a victim of gender prejudice and social and economic oppression. At the outset of his career in Chicago, Wright himself attempted to acquire his own perspective and intellectual space through the John Reed Club. As he told Edward Aswell, he had a strong affinity for Marxism at that time: “I was a member of the Communist Party for twelve years ONLY because I was a Negro. Indeed the Communist Party had been the only road out of the Black Belt of Chicago for me. Hence Communism had not simply been a fad, a hobby; it had a
deeply functional meaning for my life” (qtd. in Fabre, Quest 542). As Wright also wrote for the Daily Worker in 1937, the aim of Marxist African American writers like him was “to render the life of their race in social and realistic terms. For the first time in Negro history, problems such as nationalism in literary perspective, the relation of the Negro writers to politics and social movements were formulated and discussed” (qtd. in Fabre, Quest 129; emphasis added).

At the very inception of his Chicago period, Wright was indeed intent upon subverting the traditional, hierarchical discourse in American writing, a hegemonic, racist mode of expression. Such a mode of understanding American history was rigid and antithetical to the spirits of freedom and democracy, the twin ideals of American culture. In place of the traditional narrative, Wright wanted to create a spatial model of amelioration. While he lived in Chicago, Marxist writing indeed served his initial purpose: his early writing, and Uncle Tom’s Children in particular, vividly demonstrated Marxist conceptions of history as the forums through which power relations are understood.

3.

“Big Boy Leaves Home,” the first story in the 1938 and 1940 editions of Uncle Tom’s Children, features a young black boy’s escape from his violent southern community. Four innocent, happy-go-lucky black boys are discovered naked by a white woman while they are swimming in a pond and later drying their bodies on a white man’s premises. When she screams, her male companion without warning begins shooting and kills two of the boys. Big Boy manages to overcome the white man and accidentally kills him. Now the two surviving boys must take flight. Bobo gets captured, but Big Boy reaches home and is told by black church leaders to hide in a kiln until dawn, when a truck will come by to take him to Chicago. While hiding, he watches Bobo lynched and burned. Witnessing such an event gives Big Boy not only a feeling of isolation, terror, and hatred but also a sense of self-awareness and maturity.

Not only is “Big Boy Leaves Home” based upon Wright’s personal experience, but the sexual taboo that precipitated this tragedy originates from a fact which both black and white people in the South knew so well and which is revealed as the story unfolds: white women are closely guarded and protected by the white world. “In that world,” as Blyden Jackson has noted, “at least when ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’ was written, all Negro males, even young and
with their clothes on, were potential rapists. And so this woman screams, and screams again, for someone named Jim, and Jim himself, a white man from her world, comes apace, with a rifle in his hands."

Instead of a comparison between what happens in “Big Boy Leaves Home” and the facts of racism in America, the story has been compared to an ancient myth. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Actaeon and Diana is told this way:

Actaeon and his companions are out hunting at midday when Actaeon calls an end to the chase since “Our nets and spears / Dip with the blood of our successful hunting.” Nearby, in a grotto pool nestled in a valley, the goddess Diana, herself tired from hunting, disrobed and disarmed, bathes with her maidens. Quite by accident, Actaeon, now alone, comes upon the idyllic scene. Finding no weapon nearby, Diana flings a handful of the pond’s water on the hapless hunter, taunting, “Tell people you have seen me, / Diana, naked! Tell them if you can!” He flees from the scene, by stages transformed into a stag, a metamorphosis he does not comprehend (though he marvels at his own speed) until he pauses to drink. Then he “finally sees, reflected, / his features in a quiet pool ‘Alas!’ / He tries to say, but has no words.” Stunned he hears his hounds approach. “The whole pack, with the lust of blood upon them / Come baying . . . Actaeon, once pursuer / Over this very ground, is now pursued . . . He would cry / ‘I am Actaeon . . .’ / But the words fail.” The hounds set upon him “And all together nip and slash and fasten? Till there is no more room for wounds.” Meanwhile, his companions arrive, call for him, and rue that he is missing the good show. “And so he died, and so Diana’s anger / Was satisfied at last.” (Atkinson 251–52)

The parallels between Wright’s story and this classical myth are indeed striking. Both tales begin with idyllic scenes before the plot focuses on an initial encounter between the opposite sexes. Big Boy, the leader of the group, and three friends, who are supposed to be at school, walk through the woods, laughing, beating vines and bushes as if they are hunting anything that interests them. As Big Boy, accompanied by his sidekicks, is pursuing his avocation in a most enjoyable environment, Actaeon, too, with his companions, is hunting in good weather. Before the unexpected appearance of a woman, both Actaeon and Big Boy are at rest, Actaeon tired from hunting and Big Boy warming his body after swimming in the cold pond. Another similarity is the hero’s fleeing the scene. Before seeing Diana, Actaeon is alone now that his companions have retired from hunting; upon seeing her, he flees the
scene. Similarly, Big Boy flees the scene alone since two of his friends have been killed, and Bobo takes a separate route and is eventually captured. Finally, both protagonists sustain serious wounds during their flight. It is, furthermore, significant that the wounding of the hero occurs in two stages. Actaeon suffers what Michael Atkinson calls “the transformative sprinkling with pondwater, which removes his humanity, and the obliterative tearing by the dogs’ teeth, which destroys the last form and vestige of life” (257). In Wright’s tale, Big Boy first suffers the loss of Buck and Lester, whose blood is sprinkled over him, and second he suffers from watching Bobo’s body being mutilated.

But the points of difference between the tales are equally striking and significant. While in the Roman myth the male protagonist alone encounters a goddess, in Wright’s story a group of young boys see an adult woman. However accidental it might be, it is Actaeon who comes upon the scene where Diana is bathing with her maidens in a secluded pond. The circumstances under which Wright’s story begins are reversed: it is the lady who comes upon the scene where Big Boy is swimming with his friends. The initial setting Wright constructs in “Big Boy Leaves Home” poses a serious question: should underage boys be judged morally wrong when they are seen naked, while swimming, by an adult woman? In the Actaeon myth, given the tradition of privacy behind it, Actaeon is deemed clearly guilty of watching a naked goddess surrounded by her maids. If Big Boy were Actaeon, he would be arrested as a Peeping Tom in any society. Even if Big Boy were Actaeon, his punishment would be only blindness, as legend tells that Peeping Tom looked at Lady Godiva riding naked through Coventry and was struck blind. But blindness, the price Peeping Tom paid for his offense, is a far cry from the psychological wounds Big Boy and all other black boys in America indeed suffered: the shooting death of Buck and Lester by an Army officer on leave and the lynching of Bobo by a white mob.

It is also significant that unlike Actaeon, none of the black boys in Wright’s story is alone when a member of the opposite sex appears on the scene. The woman in question, moreover, is fully protected by an adult male companion with a shotgun which could be legally used should she be molested and raped by the unarmed black boys. In the myth, however, the goddess is protected neither by those who can overcome a potential seducer nor by any kind of weapon save for her flinging of a few drops of magical pondwater. In terms of crime and punishment, those who are guilty in Wright’s story, the lynch mob and the woman who screams, go unpunished, whereas those who are innocent, the four black boys, are physically or psychologically destroyed. In the myth, Actaeon, the only one who is guilty, meets his death while all
the innocent—Diana, her maids, and Actaeon’s companions—survive the ordeal. If the Actaeon myth and the legend of Peeping Tom tell us anything significant about an ancient system of justice which meted out punishment for humankind, then the system of justice that Wright condemns in “Big Boy Leaves Home” is not only unjust but fundamentally corrupt.

While “Big Boy Leaves Home” and the classical myth of Actaeon and Diana are thematically different, Wright’s treatment of the sexual theme in this story has a closer resemblance to Dreiser’s “Nigger Jeff.” It is quite likely that before writing “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Wright read “Nigger Jeff.” Dreiser’s story, in which a white mob lynches a black youth, deals with the same problems of race and miscegenation in America as does Wright’s. In “Nigger Jeff,” a white cub reporter named Elmer Davies is sent out by the city editor to cover the lynching of an alleged black rapist, Jeff Ingalls. Jeff is first captured by a sheriff to await trial, but he is later taken away by a mob of white men led by the brother and father of a white woman, the supposed rape victim, and is finally hanged from a bridge over a stream. After learning the circumstances of the rape, Jeff’s behavior, his family’s grief, and above all the transcending beauty and serenity of nature against the brutality and criminality of the mob, Davies realizes that his sympathies have shifted.

At the outset of each story, the author stresses the peace and tranquility of the setting where people, black and white, are meant to enjoy their lives in harmony with nature. In Wright’s story, the four innocent, happy black youths, as mentioned earlier, roam about the woods and pasture, laughing, chanting, smelling sweet flowers. “A quartet of voices,” Wright describes, “blending in harmony, floated high above the tree tops” (Uncle Tom’s Children 17). In Dreiser’s story, a young, impressionable man comes upon the setting on a lovely spring day in the beautiful countryside of Pleasant Valley. As Big Boy and his friends are happy not only with themselves but with the world, Davies, as Dreiser describes, “was dressed in a new spring suit, a new hat and new shoes. In the lapel of his coat was a small bunch of violets . . . he was feeling exceedingly well and good-natured—quite fit, indeed. The world was going unusually well with him. It seemed worth singing about” (76). Under such circumstances no one would expect violence to intrude and destroy peace and harmony.

Both stories are told through the protagonist’s point of view. In the beginning both Big Boy and Elmer Davies are young and naive, but the violence and injustice they witness make them grow up overnight. In the end, Big Boy, though stunned and speechless, is determined to tell the world what he has learned. As Black Boy suggests, Big Boy was modeled after the young Richard Wright himself growing up in the 1920s. Dreiser’s A Book about Myself, one
of the finest autobiographies in American literature—as is *Black Boy*—also suggests that Elmer Davies was indeed the young Dreiser himself when the future novelist was a newspaper reporter in St. Louis in the early 1890s. Just as Wright fled the South for Chicago to write his early short stories, so also Dreiser left the Midwest for New York to write his.

In both stories, the plot, which does not hinge upon a conflict of social forces, is based on a progression of vision. Each story opens with pastoral idylls, moves through the visions of violence and injustice, and reaches the hero's losing his relative state of innocence. Both writers take pains to show that the point-of-view character, the protagonist, rather than society, the antagonist, is capable of vision. The climactic scene in Wright's story, where the victim is hanged and mutilated, is presented with bright firelight. The mob is situated so close to the scene of violence that they cannot see what is transpiring. By hiding in the dark in a kiln, creating space, and establishing perspective, Big Boy can see it far better than can the mob. “Big Boy,” Wright says, “shrank when he saw the first flame light the hillside. Would they see him here? Then he remembered you could not see into the dark if you were standing in the light” (*Free* 103–4). From his own perspective Dreiser, too, presents the climax for Elmer Davies rather than the mob to see, as Dreiser describes the scene: “The silent company, an articulated, mechanical and therefore terrible thing, moved on. . . . He was breathing heavily and groaning. . . . His eyes were fixed and staring, his face and hands bleeding as they had been scratched or trampled upon. . . . But Davies could stand it no longer now. He fell back, sick at heart, content to see no more. It seemed a ghastly, murderous thing to do” (*Free* 103–4). Witnessing a horrific murder makes Davies feel as though he has himself become a murderer and seems to retard the progression of the story, but the pace and the space of the revelation increase as Dreiser describes the scene.

In Wright's story, too, Big Boy remains in the kiln through the night after the mob departs and becomes the victim's sole companion. Just as morning comes for a truck to deliver Big Boy to Chicago, dawn breaks for Davies to return to his office. After the crowd departs, Davies thinks of hurrying back to a nearby post office to file a partial report. But he decides against it since he is the only reporter present, just as Big Boy is, and because “he could write a fuller, sadder, more colorful story on the morrow” (*Free* 105), just as Big Boy could have when he left for Chicago in the morning. By creating time and space, this momentary delay in Davies’s action gives his revelation perspective, as well as a heightened effect.

Moreover, Dreiser's description of dawn in “Nigger Jeff,” as that of the opening scene, is tinged with a transcendental vision: “As he still sat there the
light of morning broke, a tender lavender and gray in the east. Then came the roseate hues of dawn, all the wondrous coloring of celestial halls, to which the waters of the stream responded.” During the lynching, Davies sees the signs of evil on the struggling body, the black mass, and black body hanging limp. Images of the dark are intermingled in his mind with those of the light that suggest hope: “the weak moonlight,” “the pale light,” “the glimmering water,” “the light of morning,” “a tender lavender and gray in the east,” “the roseate hues of dawn,” “the white pebbles [shining] pinkily at the bottom” (Free 105–6). As the story ends, signifiers of hope increasingly dominate those of despair.

The same pattern of imagery is also created toward the end of Wright’s story. During the night, Big Boy has to protect himself from cold wind and rain as well as a persistent dog. Even though morning arrives with the warm sunlight andbrightened air, he is still reminded of “a puddle of rain water” and “the stiff body” of the dog lying nearby. “His knees,” Wright describes, “were stiff and a thousand needlelike pains shot from the bottom of his feet to the calves of his legs. . . . Through brackish light he saw Will’s truck standing some twenty-five yards away, the engine running. . . . On hands and knees he looked around in the semi-darkness. . . . Through two long cracks fell thin blades of daylight. . . . Once he heard the crow of a rooster. It made him think of home, of ma and pa” (Uncle Tom’s Children 51–52; emphasis added). At the final scene the nightmare that has tormented Big Boy throughout the night is now chased out of his mind and destroyed by the blades of the sun: “The truck swerved. He blinked his eyes. The blades of daylight had turned brightly golden. The sun had risen. The truck sped over the asphalt miles, sped northward, jolting him, shaking out of his bosom the crumbs of corn bread, making them dance with the splinters and sawdust in the golden blades of sunshine. He turned on his side and slept” (53).

In the ending of “Nigger Jeff” as well, Dreiser still makes the hero’s consciousness move back and forth between hope and despair as if the images of light and dark were at war. When Davies visits the room where the body is laid and sees the victim’s sister sobbing over it, he becomes painfully aware that all “corners of the room were quite dark. Only its middle was brightened by splottes of silvery light.” For Davies, another climactic scene of his experience takes place when he dares to lift the shirt covering the body. He can now see exactly where the rope tightened around the neck. The delineation of the light against the dark is, once more, focused on the dead body: “A bar of cool moonlight lay just across the face and breast” (Free 109–10). Such deliberate contrasts between the light and the dark, good and evil, suggest that human beings have failed to see “transcending beauty” and “unity of
nature,” which are merely illusions to them, and that they have imitated only the cruel and the indifferent which nature appears to signify.

At the end of the story, like Big Boy, Davies is overwhelmed not only by the remorse he feels for the victim but also by his compassion for the victim’s bereft mother he finds in the dark corner of the room:

Davies began to understand. . . . The night, the tragedy, the grief, he saw it all. But also with the cruel instinct of the budding artist that he already was, he was beginning to meditate on the character of story it would make—the color, the pathos. The knowledge now that it was not always exact justice that was meted out to all and that it was not so much the business of the writer to indict as to interpret was borne in on him with distinctness by the cruel sorrow of the mother, whose blame, if any, was infinitesimal. (Free 110–11)

The importance of such fiction is not the process of the young man’s becoming an artist—as Big Boy or the young Richard Wright is surely not trying to become merely an artist. It is the sense of urgency with which the protagonist living in American society is compelled to act as a reformer. In such a narrative, Dreiser and Wright are both able to create their space and perspective. With his final proclamation, “I'll get it all in” (Free 111), Davies’s revelation culminates in a feeling of triumph. Although, to Dreiser as well as to Wright, human beings appear necessarily limited by their natural environment and by their racial prejudice, both writers in their respective stories are asserting that human beings are still capable of reforming society.

Protest fiction, the term critics have assigned to “Big Boy Leaves Home,” becomes successful literature only if it is endowed with a universal sense of justice, and “Big Boy Leaves Home” and “Nigger Jeff” are exemplars of such literature. Such a narrative must address an actual and pressing social issue, whether it is a lynching that a European American writer witnessed in a border state in the 1890s or a problem of race and miscegenation that an African American writer encountered in the Deep South of the 1920s. As both stories show, great social fiction can be created not so much with the artistry the writer can put into it—much of which is taken for granted in these stories—as with the writer’s moral space and perspective required by the subject matter. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” this urgency does not come from Big Boy’s will—to borrow psychoanalytic terms, the ego of the subject. Nor does it have much to do with the collective will of African Americans, the concept of intersubjectivity. Rather, it comes from the conscience of humanity, the
conscious or unconscious truth of human existence. It is a revelation given to Big Boy, as it is given to Elmer Davies. And through the protagonist and with the skills of a gifted writer, it is disseminated to the modern world.

4.

Except for the obvious issues of race, Wright and Dreiser shared remarkably similar experiences before they became novelists. Since their boyhood, both had been economically hard-pressed; they were always ashamed that they had grown up on the wrong side of the tracks. As boys they witnessed struggling and suffering and felt excluded from society. They grew up hating the fanatic and stifling religion practiced at home. In each of their lives, the family suffered because of the father’s inadequacies as a breadwinner; the son inevitably rebelled against the father, and the family was somehow held together by the suffering mother. Under these circumstances, their dream of success was merely survival; they tried to hang on to one menial job after another. As a result, both had nurtured a brooding sensibility. At twelve, Wright held “a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering” (*Black Boy* 112), a statement which also echoes in *Dawn*, Dreiser’s autobiography of youth.

It would seem that both authors, being literary realists, used authentic court records in writing *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*. Dreiser drew on the Gillette murder case in upstate New York; Wright on the Leopold and Loeb kidnap-murder as well as the Robert Nixon murder trial and conviction in Chicago. Both works strongly imply that Clyde and Bigger are the products of American culture and that society, not the individuals involved in the crimes, is to blame. But doesn’t such a narrative always create tensions in the life of the hero, growing out of an environment over which he has no control and about which he understands very little and by which he is always victimized. If so, *Native Son* does not exactly fit into this genre. While Dreiser and Wright share the perspective of a disadvantaged individual, the characterization of the individual in his or her respective society differs considerably.

It is true that both novels employ crime as a thematic device. In *Native Son*, the murder of Bessie is the inevitable consequence of Mary Dalton’s accidental death; in *An American Tragedy*, Clyde’s fleeing the scene of the accident which kills a child leads to his plotting of murder later in the story. Without the presence of crime in the plot, neither author would have been able to
make significant points about his protagonist. But the focus of the author’s idea differs in the two books. Wright’s center of interest, unlike Dreiser’s, is not crime but its consequences—its psychological effect on his hero. Before committing his crime, Bigger is presented as an uneducated, uninformed youth; indeed he is portrayed as a victim of white society who grew up in the worst black ghetto of the nation. Readers are surprised to see him gain identity after the murder. The crime gives him some awareness of himself and of the world—an awareness he had never been capable of before. Readers are surprised to learn that after the murder Bigger is well versed in world affairs. “He liked to hear,” Wright tells us, “of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain” (Native Son 110). By this time he has learned to think for himself. He is even proud of Japanese, Germans, and Italians, because they “could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame that sapped at the base of his life” (109–10).

Despite a death sentence handed down by his white rulers, Bigger now proclaims his own existence. Even Max, who has taken a sympathetic attitude toward the racially oppressed, is bewildered by Bigger’s deep urges for freedom and independence. “I didn’t want to kill,” Bigger tells Max. “But what I killed for, I am!” (Native Son 391–92). Having overcome white oppression, Bigger now stands as a heroic exemplar for the members of his race. His brother Buddy, he realized, “was blind . . . went round and round in a groove and did not see things.” Bigger sees in Buddy “a certain stillness, an isolation, meaninglessness” (103). And he finds his sister and mother to be equally weak individuals. “Bigger,” says Wright, “was paralyzed with shame; he felt violated” (Native Son 280).

In both Native Son and An American Tragedy a preacher appears before the trial to console the accused. But in Native Son the black preacher is described in derogatory terms. Bigger immediately senses that the Reverend Hammond possesses only a whitewashed soul and functions merely as an advocate of white supremacy. Wright offers this explanation: “The preacher’s face was black and sad and earnest. . . . He had killed within himself the preacher’s haunting picture of life even before he had killed Mary; that had been his first murder. And now the preacher made it walk before his eyes like a ghost in the night, creating within him a sense of exclusion that was as cold as a block of ice” (Native Son 264).

During his act of liberation, Bigger is also consciously aware of his own undoing and creation. To survive, Bigger is forced to rebel, unlike Clyde, who remains a victim of the tensions between individual will and social
determinism. In rebelling, Bigger moves from determinism to freedom. He knows how to escape the confines of his environment and to gain an identity. Even before he acts, he knows exactly how Mary, and Bessie later, has forced him into a vulnerable position. No wonder he convinces himself not only that he has killed to protect himself but also that he has attacked the entire civilization. In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser molds the tragedy of Clyde Griffiths by generating pity and sympathy for the underprivileged in American society. In *Native Son*, Wright departs from the principles of pity and sympathy which white people have for black citizens. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright admits that his earlier *Uncle Tom’s Children* was “a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about” (xxvii). In *Native Son*, Wright would not allow for such complacency. He warns readers that the book “would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (xxvii).

The meaning of *Native Son* derives not from crime itself but from its result. Dreiser’s interest in *An American Tragedy* lies not in the result of crime but in its cause. While Bigger at the end of his violent and bloody life can claim his victory, Clyde at the end of his life remains a failure. *Native Son* ends on an optimistic note; *An American Tragedy* as a whole stems from and ends on the dark side of American capitalism. F. O. Matthiessen is correct in maintaining that the reason for Dreiser’s use of the word *American* in his title “was the overwhelming lure of money-values in our society, more nakedly apparent than in older and more complex social structures” (Matthiessen 203). Helen Dreiser, Dreiser’s second wife, seems to confirm Dreiser’s argument in the book that materialism is the culprit of Clyde’s tragedy. Commenting on Dreiser’s choice of the Chester Gillette murder case for fictionalization, Helen Dreiser writes:

This problem had been forced on his mind not only by the extreme American enthusiasm for wealth as contrasted with American poverty, but the determination of so many young Americans, boys and girls alike, to obtain wealth quickly by marriage. When he realized the nature of the American literature of that period and what was being offered and consumed by publishers and public, he also became aware of the fact that the most interesting American story of the day concerned not only the boy getting the girl, but more emphatically, the poor boy getting the rich girl. Also, he came to know that it was a natural outgrowth of the crude pioneering conditions of American life up to that time, based on the glorification of wealth which started with the early days of slavery and persisted throughout our history. (71–72)
Dreiser's fascination with this subject resulted in his treatment of Clyde as a victim of the American dream. Bigger, too, a product of the same culture, cherishes a dream of his own. Like anyone else, he reads the newspapers and magazines, goes to the movies, strolls the crowded streets. Bigger is intensely aware of his dreams: “to merge himself with others . . . even though he was black” (Native Son 226). Unlike Dreiser, Wright must have clearly recognized his hero's sense of alienation from the rest of the world. It is an alienation that Wright himself, not Dreiser, often experienced as a boy and as a man. But it never occurs to Bigger that he can pursue such a dream. Indeed, throughout the text Wright amply documents the prevailing social mores, economic facts, and public sentiments to prove that Bigger’s actions, attitudes, and feelings have already been determined by his place in American life. It is understandable for James Baldwin to say of Native Son that every black person has “his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull.” Given such a determined state of mind, Bigger would not be tempted to pursue his dreams. Ironically, the racial oppression and injustice in fact enhance his manhood. To Clyde Griffiths, the flame of temptation is brighter and more compelling. He is easily caught, and he thrashes about in a hopeless effort to escape the trap. Under these circumstances, “with his enormous urges and his pathetic equipment” (qtd. in Matthiessen 189), as Dreiser once characterized the plight of such an individual in America, there is no way out for Clyde but to plot murder.

The central meaning of An American Tragedy comes from the economic and social forces that overpower Clyde and finally negate his aspirations. Where a Bigger Thomas before liberation must always remain an uninformed, immature youth, a Clyde Griffiths is one whose mind is already ingrained with that glorious pattern of success: one must climb the social ladder from lower to middle to upper class. Money is necessarily the barometer of that success. At the beginning of the story Dreiser creates social space and perspective by directly showing how the family’s mission work, in which Clyde is compelled to take part, appears contrary to his dreams. Dreiser at once comments that “his parents looked foolish and less than normal—’cheap’ was the word. . . . His life should not be like this. Other boys did not have to do as he did” (American Tragedy 12). A basically sensitive and romantic boy, he cannot help noticing the “handsome automobiles that sped by, the loitering pedestrians moving off to what interests and comforts he could only surmise; the gay pairs of young people, laughing and jesting and the ‘kids’ staring, all troubled him with a sense of something different, better, more beautiful than his, or rather their life” (10). This scene functions in the story as a great contrast to a similar scene in Native Son. Near the beginning Bigger
goes to the movies and sees double features. *The Gay Woman*, portraying love and intrigue in upper-class white society, quickly loses his attention, and *Trader Horn*, in which black men and women are dancing in a wild jungle, shows him only life in a remote world. Bigger is placed in no-man’s-land; he is only vaguely aware that he is excluded from both worlds. Unlike Wright, however, Dreiser places his hero in *An American Tragedy* at the threshold of success and achievement.

The two novelists’ divergent attitudes toward the problem of guilt are reflected in the style and structure of their books. *Native Son*, swift in pace and dramatic in tone, displays considerable subjectivity, involving the reader in experiences of emotional intensity. The 1930s were hard times for both white and black people, and it was impossible to take a calm and objective view of the situation. Wright himself was a victim of the hard times, and he could speak from his heart. Wright makes Bigger Thomas a composite portrait of numerous black individuals Wright knew in his life. As shown in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” all of them defied the Jim Crow order, and all of them suffered for their insurgency (xii). As in the novel, Wright lived in a cramped and dirty flat. He visited many such dwellings as an insurance agent (“Man Who Went to Chicago” 210–50). In Chicago, while working at the South Side Boys’ Club, he saw other prototypes of Bigger Thomas—fearful, frustrated, and violent youths who struggled for survival in the worst slum conditions (Kinnaman 120).

The 1920s, the background of Dreiser’s novel, had not of course erupted into the kind of social strife witnessed a decade later. Unlike the hostile racial conflicts dramatized in *Native Son*, what is portrayed in *An American Tragedy* is Clyde Griffiths’s mind, which is deeply affected by the hopes and failures of the American dream. A later reviewer of *An American Tragedy* accused Dreiser of scanting, “as all the naturalists do, the element of moral conflict without which no great fiction can be written, for he fobbed the whole wretched business off on that scapegoat of our time, society” (Adams 2). But the depiction of such a conflict was not Dreiser’s intention for the novel in the first place. Rather, the poignancy of Clyde’s tragedy comes from his helpless attraction and attachment to the dream that society had created. Dreiser defines this essential American psyche in an essay:

> Our most outstanding phases, of course, are youth, optimism and illusion. These run through everything we do, affect our judgments and passions, our theories of life. As children we should all have had our fill of these, and yet even at this late date and after the late war, which should have taught us much, it is difficult for any of us to overcome them. Still,
no one can refuse to admire the youth and optimism of America, however much they may resent its illusion. There is always something so naïve about its method of procedure, so human and tolerant at times; so loutish, stubborn and ignorantly insistent at others, as when carpetbag government was forced on the South after the Civil War and Jefferson Davis detained in prison for years after the war was over. (“Our National Character” 24)

In contrast to Bigger’s violent life, Clyde’s state of mind can be conveyed only by a leisurely pace and undramatic tone. Dreiser’s approach is basically psychological, allowing us to sympathize with the character whose principal weaknesses are ignorance and naïveté. Consequently we become deeply involved with Clyde’s fate. Above all, the relative calmness and objectivity in which Clyde’s experience is traced stem from a mature vision of the tribulations shared by any of us who have ever dreamed.

The lack of dramatic tone in *An American Tragedy* is also due to change of setting. Dreiser’s restless protagonist begins his journey in Kansas City, flees to Chicago, and finally reaches his destination in upstate New York. In contrast, Wright achieves greater dramatic intensity by observing a strict unity of setting. All of the action in *Native Son* takes place in Chicago, a frightening symbol of disparity and oppression in American life. Wright begins to heighten the conflict and sharpen the division between Chicago’s two worlds early in the novel. In the beginning, the Thomases’ apartment is described as the most abject place imaginable, while the Dalton mansion suggests the white power structure that ravages black people and destroys their heritage. The conflict is obvious throughout, and the descriptions of the two households present ironic contrasts. Whereas everything at the Thomases’ is loud and turbulent, at the Daltons’ it is quiet and subdued. But the true nature of the racial oppressor is later revealed: Mr. Dalton, a real estate broker and philanthropist, tries to keep African American residents locked in the ghetto by refusing to lower their rent. During the trial, the prosecutor, the press, and the public equally betray the most vocal racial prejudice and hatred. The central action of Book III is for the defense to confront and demolish this wall of injustice before Bigger’s life can be spared.

The narrative pattern in *An American Tragedy* is entirely different. Although the novel is divided into three parts as is *Native Son*, Dreiser’s division is based upon change of time, space, and characters. Each part has its own complete narrative, and one part follows another with the same character dominating the central scene. Each unit is joined to the other not only by the principal character but also by the turn of events that underlies the theme
of the novel. Book I begins with Clyde’s dreams of success but ends in an accident that forebodes a disaster. This narrative pattern is repeated in Book II, beginning with a portrayal of the luxurious home of Samuel Griffiths in Lycurgus and ending with the murder. Book III opens with a depiction of Cataraqui County, where Clyde is to be tried and executed. Clyde’s defense, resting upon the most sympathetic interpretation of his character as a moral and mental coward, clearly indicates the possibility of hope but nonetheless ends on a note of despair. The death of a child caused by an automobile accident at the end of Book I does not make Clyde legally guilty, but his fleeing the scene of the accident makes him morally culpable. This pattern is also repeated at the end of Book II, where he willfully ignores Roberta’s screams for help, an act of transgression for which he is tried and punished. Such a narrative pattern is not given to the death of Mary and Bessie in Native Son, since one murder is necessarily caused by the other. Despite the fact that Bessie’s death is caused by a premeditated murder, Bigger’s crime does not raise the same moral issue as does Clyde’s.

In An American Tragedy the author’s voice is relatively absent. In contrast, Sister Carrie is noted for a lengthy philosophical commentary inserted at every significant turn of event, as well as for a strong tendency to identify with the characters, especially the heroine. But in An American Tragedy Dreiser’s comments are not only few but short. Despite Clyde’s resolution to work hard and steadily once he has reached the luxurious world of the Green-Davidson, Dreiser’s comment is devastatingly swift: “The truth was that in this crisis he was as interesting an illustration of the enormous handicaps imposed by ignorance, youth, poverty and fear as one could have found” (American Tragedy 384).

In contrast to Native Son, Dreiser in An American Tragedy also reduces the author’s omniscience by relying upon the method of indirect discourse. When Clyde is helplessly trapped between his loyalty to Roberta and his desire for Sondra, the insoluble dilemma is rendered through his dreams involving a savage black dog, snakes, and reptiles. About the possibility of Roberta’s accidental murder, Dreiser depicts how Clyde is trying to dismiss the evil thought but at the same time is being enticed to it. Clyde’s actual plot to murder, suggested by the newspaper article, now thrusts itself forward, as the narrator says, “psychologically, born of his own turbulent, eager and disappointed seeking.” This crucial point in Clyde’s life is explained in terms of a well-known myth: “there had now suddenly appeared, as the genie at the accidental rubbing of Aladdin’s lamp—as the efrit emerging as smoke from the mystic jar in the net of the fishermen” (American Tragedy 463). The immediate effect of such a passage is that the reader feels compassion for the
character whose mind is torn between the two forces with which the charac-
ner is incapable of coping. Given Clyde’s weaknesses, then, the reader is more
likely to sympathize with than despise such a soul.

On the contrary, Bigger’s manhood—which is as crucial a point in his life
as Clyde’s dilemma in his—is rendered through direct discourse. It is not the
narrator’s voice but the character’s that expresses his inner life—the newly
won freedom. His murder of a white girl makes him bold, ridding him of the
fear that has hitherto imprisoned him. In the midst of describing Bigger’s
intoxication over his personal power and pleasure, Wright shifts the tone of
the narrative to let Bigger provide a lofty voice of his own. While preparing
a ransom note, Bigger utters: “Now, about the money. How much? Yes; make
it ten thousand. Get ten thousand in 5 and 10 bills and put it in a shoe box. . . .
That’s good. . . . He wrote: Blink your headlights some. When you see a light in
a window blink three times throw the box in the snow and drive off. Do what
this letter say” (Native Son 167). Even more remarkable is Bigger’s final state-
ment to Max:

“What I killed for must’ve been good!” Bigger’s voice was full of fren-
zied anguish. “It must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for some-
thing. . . . I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things
hard enough to kill for ‘em. . . . It’s the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now,
’cause I’m going to die. I know what I’m saying real good and I know
how it sounds. But I’m all right. I feel all right when I look at it that
way. . . .” (Native Son 392)

Bigger’s utterance, in fact, startles the condescending lawyer. At this cli-
mactic moment Max, awestricken, “groped for his hat like a blind man”
(Native Son 392). Unlike Wright’s portrayal of Bigger, Dreiser’s presentation
of Clyde in the same predicament is given through indirect discourse:

He walked along the silent street—only to be compelled to pause and
lean against a tree—leafless in the winter—so bare and bleak. Clyde’s
eyes! That look as he sank limply into that terrible chair, his eyes fixed
nervously and, as he thought, appealingly and dazedly upon him and the
group surrounding him.

Had he done right? Had his decision before Governor Waltham been
truly sound, fair or merciful? Should he have said to him—that
perhaps—perhaps—there had been those other influences playing upon
him? . . . Was he never to have mental peace again, perhaps? (American
Tragedy 811)
In contrast to this characterization of Clyde, who is largely unaware of his guilt and his manhood, the final scene of *Native Son* gives the ending its dramatic impact. Despite his crimes and their judgment by white society, Bigger’s final utterance elicits from readers nothing but understanding and respect for the emerging hero.

The sense of ambiguity created by Dreiser’s use of portraits, dreams, and ironies in *An American Tragedy* is suited to the muddled mind of Clyde Griffiths. But Bigger can hardly be explained in ambivalent terms, for he has opted for the identity of a murderer. Clyde is presented as a victim of the forces over which he has no control, and Dreiser carefully shows that Roberta’s murder—the climax of the book—has inevitably resulted from these forces. The principal interest of the novel, centering on this crime, lies in Clyde’s life before the murder and the effect of the murder on him. In Book III, Clyde is depicted not merely as a victim of society but more importantly as a victim of his own illusions about life. In the end he still remains an unregenerate character as Dreiser has predicted earlier in the story.

Like Clyde, Bigger in *Native Son* is presented in the beginning as an equally naive character, and his life is largely controlled by fear and hatred. He kills Mary Dalton because he fears his own kindness will be misunderstood. He hates in turn what he fears, and his violence is an expression of this hatred. But unlike Clyde, he has learned through his murders how to exercise his will and determination. Each of the three sections of *Native Son* is built on its own climax, and Book III, “Fate,” is structured to draw together all the noble achievements of Bigger’s life. Each of the changes in Bigger’s development is also measured by his own language. The difference in characterization between the two Americans is reflected in the style and structure of the novels. Granted, both novelists deal with similar material, but their treatments of a young man’s crime and guilt in American society differ in ideology and in discourse.

In some respects, earlier American writers provided Wright with models for conveying his painful vision of American society and culture. Hawthorne and James, who dealt with women’s search for freedom and individualism, represented by such figures as Hester Prynne and Isabel Archer, focused on an older, more rigid society. But such materials were far removed from what appealed to Wright’s endeavor. Twain, who dramatized the relation of European and African Americans in *Huck Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, satirized racist society. But his assailing of American life might have sounded quite benign, as Van Wyck
Brooks thought that Twain’s seriousness about American society was “arrested” by his humor. Despite his high regard for Twain’s skills as a humorist, Dreiser, too, was critical of Twain’s fictional discourse. As Dreiser noted, Twain’s mode of writing diverts its author “almost completely from a serious, realistic, and . . . Dostoevskian presentation of the anachronisms, the cruelties, as well as the sufferings, of the individual and the world which, at bottom, seem most genuinely to have concerned him” (Dreiser, “Mark Double Twain” 621).

By “a serious, realistic, and . . . Dostoevskian presentation,” Dreiser meant, as did Mikhail Bakhtin, not only that the novel conveys the individual’s voice but that it must represent all the social and ideological voices of the world. Bakhtin’s dialogic narrative has a strong resemblance to Dreiser’s spatial narrative, for both techniques are based on the twin principles of space and perspective. From Dreiser, Wright acquired a narrative technique—the technique of merging all these voices into what Bakhtin called “a microcosm of heteroglossia” (411). The hero or heroine of the novel is not an already complete person but must be a changing, evolving, and developing one. The protagonist’s character thrives on the novelist’s dialogic imagination as it is derived from the clashing interactions between the person and the others who inhabit society. To Wright, Dreiser is the posited author who creates a worldview against the expected literary horizon. This new worldview belongs to the posited author: it is productive because it shows the object of representation in a new light to illuminate new sides and dimensions while it, in turn, reveals in a new way the conventional worldview.

The models that appealed most to Wright’s understanding of American life were Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt and “Nigger Jeff.” It is not surprising that Wright considered Dreiser the greatest writer whom American culture had produced. It is, indeed, Chicago that provided the young Richard Wright, as it did Jennie Gerhardt, with ample space in which to move about freely, interact openly with others, cherish dreams, and fulfill desires. Having recovered from the first economic depression the nation experienced, Chicago in the 1910s to Dreiser was a throbbing city with space and energy. Wright’s Chicago two decades later was similarly a volatile, fluid city, what Wright called “the fabulous city” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” xxvi). And it is also not surprising that the nexus of Wright and Dreiser was characterized by mutual admiration. Only recently has it come to light that Dreiser shortly before his death regarded Black Boy as a model of writing, “an honest forth right book.”15 American literary history will record that Black Boy is not only one of the greatest autobiographies ever written by an American author but also the greatest achievement of the Chicago Renaissance, a literary movement which would not have flourished without Dreiser’s precedence and influence.