Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison: Conflicting Masculinities

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RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON:
CONFLICTING MASCULINITIES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
H. Alexander Nejako
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to compare the treatments of African-American masculinities by two African-American authors, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. The interrelations and differences between the works of these authors, who were both friends and collaborators, are explored in light of the respective authors’ treatments of the emergence into manhood of their young male characters in Wright’s *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," and in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Throughout his works, Wright devalues the masculinity of his African-American male characters by using popular sociological viewpoints and by comparing them with definitions of ideal white masculinity. The African-American men in *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" are portrayed as negative examples of manhood for Wright’s young protagonists. These protagonists also exist under what Wright presents as the restricting and often misleading control of African-American women. The lack of models for African-American manhood and the constraints placed upon them by African-American women makes Wright’s young male characters search for models for manhood in the white world. This society often denies what it implicitly offers these young men, but its goals for manhood are privileged by Wright as the standards for productive male adult life. It is suggested that Wright privileged the white world’s standards for manhood in an attempt to appoint responsibility for ameliorating the racial problems of his time to white readers as well as to gain their acceptance.

Ralph Ellison, who spent his early writing career under Wright’s guidance and control, eventually abandoned the example of the older author. He eschewed sociological treatments of African-American manhood and life to present instead a variety of African-American masculinities. This multitude of African-American men and white men presents for *Invisible Man*’s protagonist a difficult choice among paths of manhood. The Invisible Man chooses a form of manhood that moves away from popular white notions of successful adult masculinity, and that accepts the roles of African-American history, folk traditions, and women in building the mature life of an African-American man.

Ultimately Ellison can be seen as presenting a portrait of African-American masculinity that is influenced by Wright but that is able to stand on its own. His presentation of African-American masculinities surpasses Wright’s sociological dimensions and has independent worth in its valuing of African-American men, women and communities and in its presentation of a variety of possibilities for its protagonist’s mature life.
RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON:
CONFLICTING MASCULINITIES
INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison devoted much of their writing careers to dealing with the entrance of young African-American men into manhood in the Southern and Northern United States. In three famous works, Native Son, Black Boy, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Richard Wright presents young African-American male characters who exist in communities without adequate models for African-American manhood. Wright instead privileges forms of manhood based on the ideals and goals that he presents as characteristic of white society, including literacy, independence, and economic success. Ralph Ellison, in Invisible Man, revises Wright's conception of African-American and white manhood. He portrays African-American men who are self-sufficient apart from the white world and criticizes those who define their manhood on white terms. A comparison of the works of the two authors, in light of their authorial attitudes and sociological and historical evidence about African-American manhood, reveals that Wright was presenting a vision of ideal African-American manhood based on models of white masculinity, while Ellison strived to produce the most diverse and accurate portraits of African-American manhood he could portray.

The interrelations between the texts of Wright and Ellison raise a vital issue of African-American literary criticism. The notion of intertextuality among the works of African-American literature and between African-American cultures and literature has
been discussed by numerous critics. Among the critics who have presented the theories of African-American intertextuality that are useful when applied to the works of Wright and Ellison are Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Robert B. Stepto, and Bernard W. Bell. The comprehensive discussions these critics have produced of African-American literature are grounded in African-American history, folklore, and other cultural traditions. This basis allows Gates, Stepto, and Bell to provide a useful background against which the interrelations between the texts of Ellison and Wright can be read.

In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates asserts that African-American texts continually "signify" on earlier African-American texts. In the process of "signifyin(g)," these texts repeat the themes and ideas of preceding texts, often with parodic or revisionary intent, to "together comprise the shared text of blackness" (124, 129). Gates applies this theory to many of the major works of African American fiction, including those of Wright and Ellison. Ellison, a "complex signifier...troping throughout his works," uses "signifyin(g)" to recall, to parody, and to revise many of the themes and characters of Wright's fiction (105-106). The interrelated works of Wright and Ellison, then, are central as prime examples of "signifyin(g)" to Gates' theory of African-American intertextuality.

A similar theory of African-American intertextuality appears in Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Stepto views African-American literature in light of the African-American oral tradition of call and response. To Stepto, African-American texts do not revise earlier texts as much as they respond to the ideas generated within them. The later texts modify and enrich the previous ones to a degree,
but do not erase the important role of early African-American texts in calling for responses from later ones. As Stepto states in the "Preface to the First Edition" of From Behind the Veil, "responses are not inherently 'better' than calls" (xvii). Ellison’s works, then, do not supplant those of Wright as much as they respond to specific situations and themes within them to continue the dialogue.

Bell, in The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, also does not see African-American fiction as a progressing tradition that improves with time. The body of African-American fiction constitutes a tradition with qualities that change with changing "social and cultural forces" (339). If we follow Bell’s assertions, Ellison’s works evoke many of the themes within the works of Wright but differ mainly because of the changes that took place in American society and in philosophical orientations. American attitudes toward the individual, democracy, and definitely towards African-Americans changed over the years between the late 1930s and early 1940s, when Wright was at his peak of popularity, and the 1950s, when Ellison’s Invisible Man was having its greatest critical impact. Wright’s works from the 1930s and 1940s would thus be characteristic of a period of proletarian and sociological fiction that focused on social problems, while Ellison’s works dealt more with crises in individuality and identity that were characteristic of much American fiction of the 1950s. What we can surmise from Bell’s theories of intertextuality is that the works of Wright and Ellison are not as much in competition as they exist in response to differing outside forces and authorial aspirations. Wright and Ellison, then, must be seen as authors who enjoyed their greatest popularity in different eras of the twentieth century. This understanding allows not only for insights
into Wright's influence on Ellison, but also for insights into why the ideas of their writings differ, especially on the issue of African-American manhood. By revising and criticizing Wright, Ellison may have been taking part in an ideological shift away from sociological fiction to fiction that concentrated more on the problems and possibilities of the individual.

Gates' theory of "signifyin(g)," Stepto's theory of circular connections of a "shared pregeneric myth" of African-American history in African-American literature (xvi), and Bell's assertions of changes in mimesis share a common theme with other theories of African-American intertextuality. This theme is that African-American literature represents less of a progression toward a defined goal than a continual revision and occasional parody of familiar tropes from previous works by African-American writers. Writers such as Wright and Ellison also revise and refigure motifs from outside African-American traditions in society and in Western literature. Both authors, who were avid readers of white American and European writers such as James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Feodor Dostoyevsky, and others, used the literary forms and styles of these authors and others to structure their narratives of African-American life. Wright had approached many writers through his avid independent reading. As Robert O'Meally states in The Craft of Ralph Ellison, Ellison had become acquainted with a variety of Western white works through his mother's early educational efforts, his college coursework, and his independent reading (7, 21). Ellison uses his influences and experiences to arrive at a method of writing that is similar to that of Wright, but that is unique in ways particular to his discussion of African-American manhood. In summary,
Ellison and Wright, in their works, are in less of a relationship of antagonism than one of revision and contrast.

This cumulative theory of revision and contrast can be applied to Wright’s works and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as these works regard African-American manhood. The present discussion will deal with a small part of the Wright and Ellison canon. *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" will be dealt with because the two narratives are Wright’s most widely acclaimed works and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" has been widely praised and anthologized since its publication in 1961. The discussion of Ellison will concentrate on his best-known work, *Invisible Man*, and the ways in which he has explained and defended that work in interviews and literary criticism. The popularity of these works is essential to the present discussion because the attitudes of the authors toward each other and Ellison’s attitudes toward Wright’s work will be discussed concurrently with critical attitudes toward both writers that have appeared in the last quarter century. *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *Invisible Man*, and, to a lesser degree, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," have been the focus of enough critical commentary to allow for a fruitful discussion of these works and their effects on readers and critics.

Wright and Ellison were authors who had definite effects upon each other. Robert O’Meally points out in *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* that Ellison was Wright’s friend and collaborator, who read and reviewed Wright’s works both as an early apprentice and later as a literary critic. It is not surprising, then, that Ellison’s characters and situations in *Invisible Man* evoke those of Wright’s works, especially
Native Son and Black Boy. In particular, Ellison revises Wright’s frustrated and individualistic outlook on African-American manhood by emphasizing the ways in which African-American folk traditions and African-American women help these men to survive. These elements of African-American communities help the men Ellison portrays as worthwhile examples of manhood to accept themselves and to endure in a confusing, hostile and racist society. Ellison’s viewpoints about African-American men, women, and communities were thus very different from those of Wright.
Throughout *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Wright stresses the negative and "backward" aspects of the African-American men and women in the communities of his protagonists. He contrasts these African-Americans with the more rational, economically viable, and independent ideals of manhood and adult life embodied and offered by northern white society. To grow into manhood, Wright's protagonists must abandon African-American models of manhood and their communities to seek alternatives influenced by or based in white society.

There are reasons for the presentation of the dichotomy between a "backward" African-American community and a "progressive" northern white society as it relates to manhood in Wright's works. These reasons lie in Wright's sources for his ideas about African-American and white manhood and in his depictions of these different forms of masculinity as reflected in his fiction and nonfiction. Wright was an avid reader of many different types of works, especially anthropological, psychological, and sociological writings. It is quite possible that Wright was influenced by sociological and psychological works popular during his era that discussed white and African-American gender roles, and that he transferred the attitudes of these works into his fiction and nonfiction.

Peter N. Stearns explains in *Be A Man! Males in Modern Society* that manhood
has long been less of a given reality for African-American and white American men than a status that has had to be achieved by conforming to gender roles and norms varying with periods of history and societal conditions (2). Gender as a social construct was not under the same form of discussion from the Great Depression through the Second World War as it has been in recent years. At the present time, an explosion of works about gender and its social construction have emerged.¹ These works scrutinize the facts and circumstances of American history and society to challenge traditional attitudes about gender roles for both white and African-American people. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, gender was under a much different form of discussion.

There was much scholarship and popular written discussion produced during the 1930s and 1940s that emphasized the importance of gender socialization for white and African-American young men. As stated previously, Wright often read psychological and sociological works, as well as newspapers and other periodicals. He must have been at least aware of the written discussions of manhood and families that were taking place during the Great Depression.

The idea of African-American manhood and its relation to the "Negro problem" were popular subjects of discussion during the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War, when Wright composed Native Son, Black Boy, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." One discipline that contained much of the research on African-American manhood during this time was the field of sociology. As noted above, Wright was fascinated by the theories and research of sociologists and psychologists and included their theories in his works. Carla Cappetti maintains in "Sociology of an Existence:
Wright and the Chicago School" that Wright used these theories to structure his works and to "anchor his creative effort to the depths of social life" (264).

Support for this assertion comes from Black Metropolis, the 1945 study of African-Americans in Chicago by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton. This study contains an introduction in which Wright praises Drake and Cayton's theories, as well as those of Robert Park. The following passage from the introduction encapsulates the importance of their theories to his writing:

> It was from the scientific findings of men like the late Robert E. Park... that I drew the meanings for my... novel, Native Son.... Black Metropolis. Drake’s and Cayton’s scientific statement about the urban Negro, pictures the environment out of which the Bigger Thomases of our nation come.... If in reading Native Son, you doubt the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book; if in reading Black Boy, you doubted the picture of family life shown there, then study the figures on family disorganization given here. (xviii, xx)

The theories of sociologists such as Cayton, Drake, and Park, then, were vital to the construction of Wright’s fiction and nonfiction. Cayton and Drake present a contrast in Black Metropolis between the upper and middle-class citizens of Chicago’s Black Belt and the lower class African-Americans living there. The contrast clearly favors the upper and middle-classes, with their "general American belief in the ultimate triumph of individual initiative," while spotlighting what Drake and Cayton criticized as the criminality, religiosity, and laziness of the urban African-American lower class (717,
The theories of Robert Park are along much the same lines. As Bell suggests, one of the main thrusts in Park's research was revealing the "social disorganization" of African-American communities (151). V.P. Franklin suggests in "From Integration to Black Self-Determination" that Park's followers worked from this opinion of African-American communities as debased locations, and "generally had few positive statements about Afro-American culture" (22).

It is hardly surprising that in subsequent years the theories of Drake, Cayton, and Park have been exposed as inaccurate and often racist in their treatment of the lives of African-Americans. Not only do the works of Park, Cayton, and others of their time treat African-Americans as a group with little individual variation, but the work of Park in particular describes African-Americans as the "lady of the races" (O'Meally 23). Furthermore, Cayton and Drake emphasize a high degree of dominance of lower-class African-American women over their families in Black Metropolis as a problem facing African-American men (583-584). Putative female control is used by Cayton and Drake as an example of the disorganization of the "disordered milieu" of lower-class urban African-American families. Theories similar to those of Cayton and Drake, which detail the injurious effects of so-called "black matriarchies" on the growth of African-American young men, have been dispelled in recent years by numerous African-American sociologists and feminist critics, including bell hooks and Robert Staples.

Emphasis was widespread during the 1930s and 1940s on the deleterious effects of the "black matriarchy" and other negative features over the positive characteristics of African-American life. Wright's support of Black Metropolis, a sociological work with
racially and economically biased conclusions, is mirrored in his own depictions of African-American manhood and African-American families. Wright presents a portrait of the African-American urban and rural lower classes as either appetitive or inactive. In *Native Son*, the only character who seems willing or capable of protesting against the awful living conditions of the Black Belt is Bigger, who is only a young criminal. It is apparent that Wright, Drake and Cayton give a portrait of life in Chicago’s Black Belt as life in an inescapable morass of poverty and depravity. Wright extends the theories of sociologists and his own attitudes about African-American family life to apply to southern African-Americans as well. Since Wright is working from the writings of sociologists who deprecate the survival values and diversity of African-American communities, it is not surprising to find similar attitudes mirrored in his works.

Works on African-American social structures and gender roles were complemented during the late 1930s and early 1940s by many writings on white gender roles and white masculinity. White masculinity and the threats to it from the increasing political and economic power of white American women had been controversial topics for some time before the Great Depression. The massive white male unemployment during the Depression spurred further discussion of the effects the economic crisis was having on white families and their gender roles.

A strong criticism of fatherhood in middle-class white America came from many sources. as Joe L. Dubbert explains in *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition*. Alice Kelly and Floyd Dell were among popular writers who insisted that white middle-class men, although unemployed, still needed to assert their fatherly authority in the family.
Peter G. Filene explains in *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* that dominance of white middle-class families by mothers had been portrayed by advice columnists before the Depression as detrimental to the independence and manliness of sons (127). As many writers during the Depression asserted, fathers, by "helping sons develop courage and acquire a sense of power," could counter emasculating female dominance and produce a stronger, more independently assertive group of young middle-class white men (Dubbart 209-211, 216-217). Joseph H. Pleck states in "The Theory of Male Sex-Role Identity: Its Rise and Fall, 1936 to the Present," that the writings of sociologists and psychologists were an essential part of the movement to reinstate traditional gender roles, even in the face of changes in women's rights which had begun before the Depression (27). The debilitating economic effects and gender role changes of the Depression influenced a strong movement toward reaffirming and continuing traditional patriarchal ideas of masculinity that was supported by commentators from both popular and academic literature. Wright would have been aware of this movement and its proponents through his wide reading and his contacts with sociologists and other writers during the Great Depression. Wright's works themselves evoke the concerns about white masculinity and masculinity in general that were popularly discussed during his time. The struggles of his protagonists would have been relevant to white readers concerned by dilemmas of masculinity. The author most probably used or was influenced by ideas from popular and sociological works on African-American and white masculinity to help display the discontinuities between the experiences of his protagonists and the troubled white middle-class ideals of manhood. These discontinuities in models for manhood,
opportunities for growth and economic success, and in personal independence are emphasized by Wright in *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man."

The African-American fathers and father figures in Wright's fiction are shown to be particularly wanting regarding accepted white middle-class ideals of fatherhood. These ideals emphasized above all that men, especially fathers, should be "confident, strong and in control" and indeed "someone to look up to as an authority figure" (Dubbert 217). The African-American fathers, male relatives, and father figures in Wright's works are neither sources of this type of manly authority nor of ideal manhood on white terms. These men hold little economic power, are often irrational and illiterate, and are trapped in the myriad folkways and community traditions of African-Americans in the South and in the North. Living too deeply within traditional African-American folkways is, for Wright, living in a past that is out of touch with modern American realities. The African-American men are also not examples of an assertive or economically successful form of manhood. These men are relics, or objects for ridicule, rather than guides to manhood.

One particularly weak father-figure in Wright's fiction is Bob Saunders, Dave's sharecropper father in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." As John E. Loftis states in "Domestic Prey: Richard Wright's Parody of the Hunt Tradition in 'The Man Who Was Almost a Man,'" Mr. Saunders is only a "phantom figure' in the story who does not understand his son's aspirations and needs (440). Loftis' assertion is supported by Wright's depiction of Saunders in the short story.
Saunders’ relationship with his son is hardly one of love and trust. Dave’s gruff father is concerned with the quality of his son’s work but is not considerate enough to reward his son’s obvious ability. Mr. Saunders asks how well his son’s work with Mr. Hawkins is going, and Dave replies that he "plows more lan than anybody over there." Instead of congratulating his son for his outstanding individual effort, Saunders tells Dave to "keep you mind on what yuh doin’" (15). Mr. Saunders does not reward his son’s individual achievement and thus fails to support Dave’s ability to distinguish himself from other workers.

Mr. Saunders fails a standard of white middle-class fatherhood in not complimenting his son. Success in economic competition and in other forms of competition with other men was considered a mark of manhood during the 1930s and 1940s. E. Anthony Rotundo, in American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era, states that manly competition was an "obsession of male writing about manhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" (253). By failing to notice his son’s achievement, Saunders does not drive him on to further competition. The avenue of proving one’s manhood by displaying how one is better than others is unfamiliar to Mr. Saunders.

Dave’s father also falters in his fatherly role because he is not the source of economic support for his family. His wife keeps the family’s money, for the most part earned by Dave, in her stocking and makes the decisions about how to use it. Mr. Saunders is consequently dislocated from the dominant position in his family and from control over the family’s money. This status conflicts with common attitudes during the
Depression that fathers should be the primary wage-earners in their families. In 1940, Mirra Komarovsky, in The Unemployed Man and His Family: The Effect of Unemployment Upon the Status of the Man in Fifty-Nine Families reported that the dominant feeling among the families in her study and in American society in general was that "it is the man's duty to provide for his family," even during harsh conditions such as the Depression (74). In light of these attitudes, a father such as Mr. Saunders would be viewed by these types of readers as negligent in his duty of providing for his family. This negligence would be viewed as indicative of Saunders' lack of manly power and responsibility.

Although he is not economically in command of his family, Mr. Saunders does have power of discipline over Dave. After it is discovered that the young man has shot Mr. Hawkins' mule with his newly bought pistol, Bob tells his son that he will "lam you black bottom good for this" (Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" 24). Bob's power of discipline is undermined when the sharecropper defers to Mr. Hawkins to settle the matter instead of standing up for his son's reckless deed (Loftis 440).

Saunders' deference to his landlord is also historically located. In The Politics of Racial Inequality, J. Owens Smith notes that as part of encroachments on African-American rights in the South after the Civil War, southern landlords gained the power to "levy penalties for disobedience" on their African-American employees (110-11). This power tied many African-American workers to the farms on which they worked and made obedience often mandatory. Mr. Saunders, as an African-American male sharecropper, must defer to the white landlord if he has any concern for his own safety.
and for the safety of his family. His humility before Hawkins should not be surprising.

It is precisely because Mr. Saunders is so humble that he is not a figure of authority or an ideal of manhood for his son. By refusing to stand up for Dave, Mr. Saunders fails a test of allegiance to his son and also allows another man to take his place as father. When Mr. Saunders lets Mr. Hawkins determine the form of his son’s punishment, he has effectively ceded his fatherly power of discipline to a figure of white authority. Mr. Saunders is thus a weak father figure and model for manhood who allows others to usurp his power. Although his deference and lack of control in his family and community may be quite understandable in light of historical evidence about sharecroppers, in the terms of white middle-class manhood in the 1930s and 1940s he is a failure.

Models of African-American male adulthood and authority are also scarce for Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Bigger’s father has been dead for many years, having been killed in a riot in Mississippi. Bigger has had to take his father’s place in his family while still being considered a child by his mother. When Bigger is able to obtain work, his money is used to directly support his family, but he is still under his mother’s domination.

This confusing role frustrates Bigger and probably contributes to his desire to hang out with his gang of friends on the streets and in the pool halls of Chicago’s Black Belt. In spite of his rebellious and often criminal habits, the young man still feels responsible for his family. Late in the novel, Bigger’s mother, brother, and sister come to visit him in prison before his trial for the murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears.
Bigger feels he has to talk to them and "stop the tears of his mother and sister, to quiet and soothe the anger of his brother" as the white people gathered in the cell look on (275).

Since Bigger has no father, to a great degree he must be both his own father and the father-provider for his family. The absence of Bigger's father places the young man in a dangerous situation in the terms of the sociological scholarship of Wright's time. Without strong father figures, urban children were thought to be easily led into lives of crime and deviance (Dubbert 221, Drake and Cayton 583, 589). Hence Bigger's life of crime would not seem surprising to white readers who agreed with the theories of popular sociologists.

Not only does Bigger have no one in his family to use as a pattern for male adulthood, but there are also no African-American men in his community whose examples of manhood he can follow. There are few adult African-American men in the Black Belt with whom Bigger comes into contact other than his fellow gang members. Doc, the owner of a pool hall at which Bigger and his friends spend their time, is hardly a paragon of authority or manhood to Bigger. The pool hall owner stands behind his counter as Bigger and his friends talk about their plan to rob the grocery store of Blum, a white man. Doc tells them only to "cut out that racket back there," assuming only the authority of the proprietor of the pool hall (29).

After Bigger has almost knifed his friend Gus, the young man further defies Doc's authority. As Doc tells him to "watch what you're doing, now" and readies his concealed gun, Bigger cuts a pool table to ribbons with his knife. Bigger notes as he
goes outside that during the confrontation he had "felt the equal of Doc" (42-43). Doc
does not have the ability to control Bigger's behavior in any way. The pool hall owner
responds to Bigger with fear and lets the bullying young man conquer him. Doc has no
authority over Bigger and thus would not be viewed by white readers as a guiding figure
for the young protagonist.

The other notable adult African-American male figure in Native Son is Reverend
Hammond, the pastor at the church Bigger's mother attends. Because Hammond is
associated with Mrs. Thomas, Bigger lets the preacher into his prison cell to talk
before his trial. As the preacher exhorts him to repent, the young man is almost
overcome with distant feelings of religion he has left far behind in his childhood. These
sentiments make him long for the security and closeness to his mother of that time, but
they also make him feel "as condemned and guilty as the voice of those who hated him"
(263).

These guilty feelings change to anger when the preacher urges Bigger to bow to
the State's punishment, much as the preacher bows to Jan Erlone, a young white
Communist who also enters the jail cell. Bigger literally casts away the preacher's
religion, hurling away the preacher's cross and shouting "If you come in here, I'll kill
you!" He knocks Hammond to the concrete floor, casting the Reverend and the guilt
he had made Bigger feel out of his mind (314). The Reverend cannot help Bigger in any
way that is connected with the real world. Hammond can only offer hope for salvation
in the afterworld. Thus Bigger views Hammond as an effeminate, misguided, and
powerless old man whose example he cannot follow.
It is clear, then, that markedly few African-American men live in Bigger's world, none of whom can serve as an example of manhood. The absence of models for African-American masculinity in Native Son is surprising in light of historical and sociological evidence about African-American communities. Robert Staples, in "The Myth of the Impotent Black Male," states that even with the existence of households headed by women in urban African-American neighborhoods, "there is seldom one where adult males are totally absent." Furthermore, he asserts that African-American women are just as capable of socializing young men into roles of manhood accepted by their communities as their male counterparts are (Staples 138). Evidence about urban African-American community masculine roles conflicts with Wright's portrait of the absence of active and supportive adult men in Chicago's Black Belt.

But Staples' social realities are characteristic of an actual urban African-American world. Many white readers of the 1930's or 1940's would probably either be unaware of these facts or fail to understand them because of their physical distance from African-American communities. This distance was enforced through the kinds of discriminatory housing practices Wright criticizes in Native Son that kept African-Americans in shoddy housing far away from upper and middle-class whites. The distance between white and African-American communities could often be bridged only by sociologists and by novelists such as Wright. The rendering Wright gives of the African-American community in Native Son is that of a group barren of men and characterized by stagnation and poverty. There are virtually no men in Chicago's
Black Belt to earn money to support their families, to guide the lives of young men, or to agitate for a change in the conditions of their area. Without the adult male factor, this African-American community would definitely seem deficient to white readers in comparison with their family and community structures.

Hence, Bigger’s social world conflicts with the gender and family mores of the middle-class white world, where fathers or father figures are supposed to guide their sons into healthy manhood. The world of Bigger in Native Son also conflicts with the actualities of African-American societies which have been revealed through the recent revisionary scholarship of Staples and other sociologists and critics. Wright thus gives an incomplete picture of African-American urban manhood by leaving out the importance of African-American men to urban communities. With no men after whom to pattern himself, Bigger must find his own way of achieving adulthood.

Bigger is in effect the only male capable of achieving manhood in this novel, and his growth is blocked and threatened from all sides. The protagonist’s existence as the solitary example of African-American manhood in Native Son devalues the masculinity of African-American men in general. If Doc and the Reverend Hammond are the only adult African-American males who affect Bigger’s life, then Bigger’s prospects for being guided into manhood within his community are dim. The absence of viable African-American male patterns for manhood helps to justify Bigger’s self-isolation from his community and his seeking ideals of adult masculinity in the white world.

Black Boy also presents an isolated protagonist without models for manhood in his “backward” and constricting southern African-American community. There
certainly are few healthy, ambitious, or responsible African-American men presented in *Black Boy*. As John M. Reilly asserts in "Self-Portraits by Richard Wright," young Richard's family dynamics conflict with "everything American middle-class civilization idealizes in childhood and home" (34). This conflict is most apparent in the portrayal of Nathan Wright, Richard's father.

During Wright's early childhood, as Michel Fabré recounts in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, his father left the family to be with a Memphis mistress (14). As Wright chronicles in *Black Boy*, after Richard's father goes away, he refuses to support his family and successfully evades their legal attempts to make him do so. Young Richard effectively loses his father and comes to hate him "with a deep biological bitterness," associating Nathan with the hunger he suffers because of the family's poverty (22).

Wright later cannot see his father as a symbol of manhood because the older man eventually becomes a sharecropper and thus symbolizes agrarian life in the South. Nathan has settled in his late life for the subservient work of sharecropper farming. Richard sees his father's acceptance of this "primitive" state as indicative of his father's low aspirations and abilities. The author's feeling of the inferiority of his father comes out in the last paragraphs of the first chapter of *Black Boy*:

A quarter of a century was to elapse between the time when I saw my father sitting with the strange woman and the time when I was to see him again, standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled,
veined hands... I realized that, though ties of blood made us kin... we were forever strangers.... I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons... how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past...(42-43)

There is a clear contrast made in these paragraphs between Richard and Nathan, between the cultured writer of the autobiography and his peasant father. Wright knows that if he had remained in the South, he might have become forever ensnared, like his father, in Southern agrarian culture. In From Behind the Veil, Robert Stepto maintains that Wright, by rejecting his father and his father's form of work, confines him "to a well-bounded time frame and geography... shelved in the space he has created for him" (158). The gap between Wright and his father is readily apparent, especially regarding the merit of certain kinds of employment.

In light of what bell hooks states in "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," Wright's opinion of his sharecropper father's manhood and worth contrasts with the opinions of many other African-Americans who had grown up in the South. hooks holds that African American sharecroppers and farmers during the early twentieth century, despite frequent poverty, were often more secure in their income and in their sense of masculinity than men who migrated north (91). Wright does not allow any self-assurance his father might have to come through unmediated in Black Boy. Instead the differences between the modern Wright and his anachronistic father are emphasized and serve to exemplify Wright's distance from the values of the African-American South.
However much hooks’ assertions may be true for writers similar to her, in *Black Boy* Nathan Wright is presented as no model for manhood. Lazy, illiterate, irresponsible, and bound to the land, he exists in contrast to his son, who is industrious, literate, responsible and able to go to the industrial North. Wright often envisioned the experiences of African-American on southern farms as a primitive state of being that would soon be supplanted by the unstoppable force of modernization, as he asserts in his 1937 article "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Consequently, Wright’s father is an emblem of this "savage" and anachronistic state and thus cannot serve as an adequate model for his progressive son (47).

Some of the men whom Wright remembers fondly, such as the coal man who teaches him how to count, or his Uncle Hoskins who provides Richard with as much food as he can eat, are either taken away by the flow of the narrative or by the violence of the whites. These men are not around long enough to give Wright any sustained guidance into manhood. The African-American men whose presence is more lasting in the world of *Black Boy* are clearly not paragons for manhood in the young boy’s terms nor in the terms of the white middle class.

Wright’s Uncle Tom, who comes to live with Richard’s family, is an example of a tyrannical African-American man revealed to be powerless by the author. Uncle Tom is displayed as an angry man who is jealous of the young man’s intelligence. Tom nags Richard night and day about every detail of his life as well as for his impudent attitude toward adults. In a fight between them, Tom shows himself to be ultimately afraid of and inferior to his nephew.
Richard holds his uncle at bay with two razor blades, grasping the "points of steel" in his hands (176). He demands that he not be beaten for the crime of making an intelligent reply to Uncle Tom's question about the time of day. Uncle Tom then tells him that "somebody will yet break your spirit" (177). Richard's reply to this assertion evokes the young man's attitudes toward the African-American men of his home community. The narrator negates Tom as an example of masculine power, insulting his uncle because of his job as a furniture repairman. Richard tells Tom that his "life isn't so hot that you can tell me what to do" (176). Uncle Tom can hardly speak of how Richard should behave when his own efforts have brought him nothing but lower-class employment.

To Wright, then, Uncle Tom is not only unable to be a male role model because of his jealousy and violent temper but also because of his low economic class level. As a defeated and unemployed teacher who works with his hands stuffing chairs, Tom is placed in opposition to Richard, who wants to gain economic independence by utilizing his academic abilities. Richard is continually attempting to improve his economic status by looking for work. These efforts would speak to white readers who valued the long-standing myth that Dubbert notes of the independent, self-starting, and successful young businessman (27). The determined Richard is then favored by the narrative over the defeated Uncle Tom, both in the outcome of their physical battle and in their economic prospects. In all, Uncle Tom's economic status and his other weaknesses keep him from being an ideal of manhood both in Wright's terms and in those of white readers.
The only African-American male character treated with some viability as a pattern for manhood is Richard’s grandfather Richard Wilson. He is in a number of ways a hero to his community. Grandpa Wilson was wounded fighting for the Union in the Civil War and later protected ballot boxes for the African-Americans in Mississippi getting their first chance to vote after their emancipation. He is portrayed at first as a powerful and fierce war hero, a figure of terror to the very young Richard. In his later old age and infirmity, he is confined to his chair on the front porch or to his room. Grandpa Wilson then becomes a figure of pity for Wright, who views him as a "sick old man" who is uninvolved in the important decisions of the family (121).

Wright holds his grandfather up for particular pity because of Wilson’s illiteracy and his delusions that another Civil War is about to begin, causing him to keep his rifle "in his room... loaded in a corner" (121). Richard’s grandfather struggles persistently to receive his pension for his war wounds from the Department of War. Wilson’s determination and his ability to recall the names of "persons long dead, citing their ages and descriptions" make him someone young Richard can admire. But Grandpa Wilson is unable to trust the letters back from the War Department since he cannot read them. Richard and other men in the neighborhood must read these letters to Wilson, which he memorizes. However determined he is, Grandpa Wilson is ill, aged, full of delusions, and, worst of all, illiterate.

Richard’s illiterate grandfather can be viewed as a symbol of the failure of
orality in the face of the power of the written word. However much Grandpa Wilson can remember significant details about the past, he can neither communicate beyond his community nor possess the amount of knowledge that the literate Richard possesses. Grandpa Wilson cannot communicate with the War Department, which is representative of the power of the white world, because he cannot read. His memory and oral ways of learning, grounded in African-American folk traditions, fail him in what Jay Mechling terms as "the intercultural encounter." Mechling posits this failure as representative of Wright's generally negative attitude toward folklore in his article "The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright's Black Boy" (288). Grandpa Wilson, in summary, is another figure of the Southern African-American past who cannot survive in the literate present that Wright depicts. Richard must then abandon even his grandfather's defiant example of manhood.

Dave, Bigger, and the young Richard all reject the examples of African-American manhood that exist in their respective communities because of various forms of weakness. The men who are supposed to give the protagonists guidance are either irrationally violent, crazy, or submissive. They are also either economically unsuccessful or they fail to use their earnings to support their families. In all, they are stuck in the seemingly unproductive past with their stories and their manual labor. In many ways these male figures are not just inadequate for the young protagonists as symbols of masculinity, but are also inadequate in the terms white readers of Wright's time would have had for
manhood. The adult African-American men Wright presents cannot guide the independent and ambitious protagonists to maturity because of their many faults.

Because of the weaknesses of African-American men in Wright’s works, the mothers or female relatives of the author’s protagonists often take an inordinate amount of control over the young men’s lives. The authority and power of these mother figures, along with the influence of other women in Wright’s fiction, effectively threaten the young men’s growth into independent forms of manhood. To Wright, African-American women symbolize stagnation and an over-reliance on pragmatic concerns. Their concerns conflict with the urges of Dave, Bigger, and Richard to move forward and achieve their goals outside of their constricting African-American communities.

Wright’s African-American female characters have come under much criticism in recent years. The advances in feminist criticism influenced by the white and African-American feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s influenced a stream of attacks on what many critics have viewed as a misogynist outlook in Wright’s fiction. These critics suggest that Wright recurrently presents African-American men as symbols of freedom while African-American women are symbols of "backwardness" and constriction.

The issue of female dominance and the constriction of young men that has been assumed to result from it has been a subject of great debate for many years. One of the major efforts of recent African-American sociologists and feminist critics has been to dispel the notion of a universal Southern matriarchy thwarting the efforts of
male children in that society to attain manhood. bell hooks recently pointed out that although Southern African-American women did have significant power within their families both before and after the Civil War, this social reality was not always viewed by African-American men as something negative (93). Furthermore, female control of households did not signal family disorganization, as Herbert G. Gutman systematically argues throughout The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925. The leadership role African-American women often took in their families and communities in the South was less a social pathology than an adaptation to the social and economic needs and pressures that faced Southern African-Americans.

The beneficent role of African-American mothers in Northern and Southern communities has continued to this day. In "Black Mothers and Daughters," Jill Lewis highlights the sustaining and educational force that African-American mothers supply in their homes and neighborhoods. She notes that a "fatherless home does not automatically signal disorganization of the family." (82) African-American mothers, even when their families are fatherless, have played integral roles over time in the survival of their families and communities.

Wright instead stresses the ways in which African-American mothers and mother figures hold power over his protagonists' lives and bar their entrance into manhood. To attain manhood, Wright's male characters distance themselves from the women in their lives, often by moving away from their homes. The home is a part of the "limited geography" that Houston A. Baker, Jr., in "Richard
Wright and the Dynamics of Place in Afro-American Literature," posits as belonging to Wright's African-American female characters (101). These women's lives are bounded by limited and confining spaces in which they attempt to trap the protagonists. They utilize their control and the protagonists' feelings for them to mire the young male characters in the home environment and in other African-American community spaces.

In "The Man Who Was Almost a Man, Mrs. Saunders is an overly powerful and limiting force blocking the seventeen-year-old Dave's desires to be more than "almost a man." As previously mentioned, Dave's mother makes the primary economic decisions for her family and dominates the space of the Saunders home. Mrs. Saunders also treats her adolescent son as a child, as Loftis points out (439). For example, Mrs. Saunders orders Dave about and threatens to destroy his Sears, Roebuck catalog if he does not stop stumbling around the kitchen. Her threat is enough to stop her son from reading the catalog and to make him plead for her to give it back. Dave's mother wants to keep her son within the confines of childishness and of submission to her will. She may also have the goal of confining Dave to the physical space of the Saunders home since this is the locale of her greatest authority. Mrs. Saunders is thus an infantilizing and confining force for her rapidly maturing son.

Mrs. Saunders' restrictive influence on Dave's life very probably contributes to his final decision to run away to the North. As Dave jumps the northbound train, he has neither thoughts of his mother nor any consideration for how
distraught she will be at the loss of one of her sons. These concerns are subordinated to Dave's will to run away to become a man on his own terms. Dave covertly and overtly works against the will of his powerful mother by running away from home and frees himself to achieve manhood in the North.

It is important to note that Dave is leaving a family headed by a matriarch. This flight from home would be viewed as a necessary step for growth by white readers who saw matriarchal families as confining to the growth of independent young men. As Peter Filene suggests, this was a common feeling among the writers of self-help books and advice columns during the early twentieth century (127). Dave's escape, though disruptive to his family, would be seen as justified by those readers who shared Wright's attitudes about manhood.

A family situation that would jar with white middle-class notions of gender and family relations during the Great Depression and afterward would be Bigger Thomas's family. In this family, as previously mentioned, Bigger's mother treats her son alternately as a child and as a man. Thus he is at once her husband and son. As Trudier Harris aptly states in "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters," as Mrs. Thomas alternates between nagging Bigger for his childish escapades with his gang and urging him to become a better breadwinner, she drives him out of the home and away from the family (65). With the apparent imbalance in gender relations existing in Bigger's family, it would not be shocking to white readers that the family would be falling apart or that Bigger would want to escape.

Mrs. Thomas is also mistaken when she suggests that, when Bigger makes
enough money from his job, he may be able to settle down and get married. It is unrealistic for Mrs. Thomas to assume that Bigger will make enough money as a chauffeur for the Dalton family to support a wife as well as his mother, sister, and brother, in the face of the harsh poverty of their world (Harris 72). The women Mrs. Thomas would want Bigger to marry would come from their Black Belt community. The last thing Bigger wants to do is to stay in the restrictive Black Belt with an African-American wife. The white women he sees in the movies he loves to watch appeal to him more than African-American women because of the freedom white women seem to offer. As Harris asserts, since black women "do not inspire elevation to pedestals, they can never evoke the respect or distanced admiration that white women can" (81). Because Mrs. Thomas nags her son about his failures and sets goals for him that he cannot achieve or does not desire, she acts as an obstacle to Bigger's aspirations that he feels he must avoid.

The mother figures in Black Boy perform a similarly restricting and misleading function for young Richard. Ella Wright, as portrayed in Black Boy, is a much more sympathetic character than Mrs. Saunders or Mrs. Thomas. Richard's mother is, however, strictly religious and often punishes her son brutally. Nevertheless, Stepto emphasizes in From Behind the Veil that she is responsible for much of Richard's early education, especially in strategies of survival in the South (150).

The costs of Ella's presence in young Richard's life clearly outweigh the benefits of their relationship. Richard has to support his often ailing mother and his grandmother with the money he earns as an insurance agent's assistant, along with
the money from his other jobs. As Wright reports, after working hard in the "bare, bleak pool of black life in the South," he would come home "with a pocketful of money that melted into the bottomless hunger of the household" (151). This economic situation is reminiscent of Dave's in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," and the recurrence of this motif stresses the notion of African-American women as an economic burden.

Although Richard does not hate his mother for her sickness and her frequent inability to work, Wright ultimately presents her as one more hindrance to the growth of a young man already heavily oppressed by white racial prejudice. The dutiful Richard, however, remains loyal to his mother in what is not only biographical fact, as is evident from Fabré's biography, but is also a possible play for reader sympathy (Fabré, Unfinished Quest 44). Richard cannot make plans for his adult life without providing for his mother (226). She tells him before he finally leaves Mississippi to "send for me quickly," ensuring that Richard will not only have to work for his own survival in the North but also for that of his mother. Although Wright's love for his mother is clear throughout Black Boy, she blocks his efforts to earn enough money to leave the South by continually requiring his financial support.

Another way in which Ella Wright is a barrier to the growth of her son is in her desire to make Richard part of the Black Methodist Church to which she belongs. At a mass conversion ceremony in Ella's church, Richard grudgingly agrees to join the "tribe" of church members (Wright, Black Boy 170). Wright displays the church as
a locus of models for African-American manhood and community, which makes it logical that young men and women would want to join the church. Many male and female African-Americans in Richard’s area belong to his mother’s church, from "black boys and girls emerging self-consciously from adolescence" to "black janitors and porters who sang loudly in the choir" (166). Even the extremely independent Richard cannot resist the pull of this group, but upon his supposed conversion he feels only "sullen anger and a crushing sense of shame" (170). The extremely rational Richard cannot accept an institution that has faith in spiritual beings and an abstract afterworld when he is concerned with the problems of actual life. His internal conflicts with the church’s ideas lead to his rebellion against its authority. When Richard cuts Sunday school with his friends, he is rebelling against the church’s attitudes and its constriction of his freedom, as well as against his mother’s will.

Although Richard attempts to obey his mother’s wishes to join the church, which has often been one of the most supportive elements of African-American community life, as James S. Tinney points out in "The Religious Experience of Black Men" (271), Richard’s secularity and need for independence push him to abandon his mother’s church.

Another religious but less favorably portrayed mother figure in Black Boy is Richard’s Grandma Wilson. Mrs. Wilson takes Richard’s mother’s place as head of the family during Ella’s chronic illnesses and uses every bit of her influence to restrict Richard’s growth. She is a harsh disciplinarian who holds everyone in the family to the doctrines of her church. It is because of her strict religious beliefs and
her power over the family that Richard is not allowed to work on Saturdays, even though his friends work on that day. The relationship between Richard and his grandmother further represents the opposition between the traditional religious and disciplinarian beliefs of southern African-American women and the more modern, self-reliant, entrepreneurial and secular goals of young Richard. To become a man, Richard must leave behind the mother figures in his life and the constriction they represent.

Wright's dichotomous portrayal of restrictive mothers and mother figures and enterprising and rebellious young men has been viewed by many critics as an attack on women in general, and African-American women in particular. Trudier Harris, Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Margaret Walker, and other critics have all explored Wright's seeming hatred of African-American women. Any ability female characters, especially the mother figures, might possess to resist white domination or to work for the survival of their communities, has been removed by the author. These women, as Maria K. Mootry insists "exist in a state of prehistory," and continue in their misguided and outdated ways of thinking and acting while attempting to indoctrinate Wright's young protagonists in their ways ("Bitches, Whores, and Woman-Haters" 122). As these women represent African-American communal values, they have no place in the adult lives of Wright's male characters.

The rejection of African-American mothers by Wright's male protagonists is compounded by the portrayals of younger African-American women in these works. Dave's faceless community contains no realized female characters of his age. Bigger and
Richard, though, become romantically involved with African-American women who feel for them but who want these young men to take on patterns of adulthood that concentrate on remaining in African-American communities. This desire makes their goals similar to those of the older African-American women Wright presents.

Bessie Mears in Native Son is a prime example of an African-American woman who is short-sighted and ultimately detrimental to a young man’s attempt to define his masculinity. She is initially of use to Bigger as an object of varying value. Bigger uses sex with Bessie as a way of releasing the tensions his environment presses on him, to calm the "restless tossing of his spirit" (Wright, Native Son 128). Harris and Alan W. France use Bigger’s behavior toward Bessie as evidence of a possessor-possession relationship between them (Harris 74). In "Misogyny and Appropriation in Native Son," France makes particular note of Bessie’s "disposable" nature as an object of possession and trade that overwhelms her treatment as a human being (157).

If Bessie is indeed a possession, she eventually becomes quite a burdensome one for Bigger. She makes Bigger feel guilty for his indifferent treatment and also doubts the viability of his plans. By making the protagonist feel conscious of the possibility of his extortion plan’s failure, Bessie is dooming herself. Harris describes the ransom plot as "a situation in which a black man’s quest for freedom is pitted against a black woman’s seeming…desire for his defeat" (79). Bigger feels he has to remove the burden she constitutes. Bigger coldly beats her to death with a brick while she is sleeping and throws her body down an airshaft. The protagonist has at last rid himself of the nagging, questioning, and obstructing presence of African-American women; now he can face the
white male world on his own.3

Young Richard less violently removes a female obstacle to his path to northern manhood in Black Boy. He is temporarily delayed by Bess Moss and her mother. The narrator is taken in by Bess’s mother when he first arrives in Memphis on his way North. Almost at once Mrs. Moss throws her daughter at Richard with the clear intent of their getting married. Bess says she loves Richard even though she does not know him very well. She wants to marry the young man, who almost takes advantage of the "childish, pliable" girl (239). Richard knows he cannot stay with Bess, since to do so would be to tie himself to her and to the South.

However much Bess loves and trusts the narrator, Richard despises the old-fashioned idea of arranged marriages. Furthermore, he does not understand the "terrible simplicity" of Bess’s love and trust (239). His feelings about love are revealed when he tells Bess that "people… find their own way to each other" (247). Bess’s feelings for Richard seem real enough. She symbolizes the "peasant mentality" that Richard feels he must abandon, and so he is determined not to marry her. In fact, his stay with Bess and her mother in their boarding house serves to further remind him of "the full degree to which my life at home had cut me off, not only from white people but Negroes as well" (235).

Bess Moss, her mother, and the other African-American women in Wright’s works, thus have little power to bring young men into manhood. Margaret Walker, in Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius, implies that the reason Wright directs so much hatred toward African-American women is that he was personally plagued by feelings of racial
inferiority and "self-hatred" that tainted his characterizations of these women (163). Walker declares that "there is not one whole black woman in Wright's fiction whom he feels deserves respect" (179). Respect can hardly be given to characters whose main functions are to drain Wright's young men of the resources needed for their independence and to lead them astray from their paths of individualistic manhood.

The dismissal of African-American female love, assistance, and authority in Wright's works represents a denial of the value of African-American culture. The women in Wright's works attempt to shape the growth of young African-American men according to outdated or unrealistic traditional standards or by attempting to trap them. Miriam DeCosta Willis, in "Avenging Angels and Mute Mothers: Black Southern Women in Wright's Fictional World," aptly states that Wright's female characters "are dull, mindless creatures whose single-sentence comments... serve primarily to remind men and boys of their duties and obligations" (545). The entrapment these types of women cause effectively makes African-American areas oppressive and stagnant prisons for Wright's young male protagonists. These protagonists hate the locales of their bondage, and, implicitly, the parts of themselves that come from their origins. Dave, Bigger, and Richard must leave their unprogressive, restrictive environments and seek manhood elsewhere.

The male protagonists in Wright's works reject the ideals and models of male adulthood offered to them by the African-American communities in which they live. They deny the role of women in their growth and perceive them as obstacles to the
paths of their lives. African-American father and mother figures, along with the romantic interests, represent the weaknesses Wright sees in African-Americans in general. These people are petty, illiterate, and overly pragmatic. They have no vision of the future and acquiesce to domination by whites. Wright’s both inadvertently and avowedly rebellious protagonists are often the very opposites of their communities in their attitudes and aspirations. These young men must distance themselves from almost everything and everyone from their former lives to achieve what they believe to be individual manhood.

There are beacons to which these young men feel they can look for patterns of behavior or ideals of manhood outside African-American culture. The alternatives to the African-American masculinities Wright presents are representative of or disseminated by white society. In white society, Dave, Bigger, and young Richard see industrial power, freedom of action and opportunity, and the potential for personal happiness. These ideals are not available to them in their homes and neighborhoods, but these characters still feel that the attainment of these goals is essential to their growth and self-realization. There is often a disjunction between what white society offers them and what these characters achieve, but ideals represented by white middle-class and at times upper-class attitudes and cultural artifacts are still the objects of these characters’ dreams. These ideals are often presented as the goals that should reasonably be available to African-American males.

The most obvious intrusion by models of white manhood, especially upper-class white manhood, into the aspirations of a young African-American male is
found in *Native Son*. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," a lecture about the novel that in editions after 1940 became the introduction to the book (Fabré, *Unfinished Quest* 180), Wright describes Bigger as "trying to react to and answer the calls of the dominant civilization whose glitter comes to him through the newspapers, magazine[s]" and "radios" as well as through the movies he watches (Wright xiii).

Ross Pudaloff, in "Celebrity as Identity: Native Son and Mass Culture," supports Wright's contention. He maintains that to a great degree Bigger Thomas's goals for life are located "solely within... mass produced fantasies" such as the movies he watches avidly and the detective stories he enjoys reading (Pudaloff 94). Many of Bigger's fantasies, inspired by the mass media, are about the kind of man he could become if given the opportunity to be with rich people like those in the movies. The following thoughts are in his mind while he watches a double feature with his friend Jack:

> Was what he had heard about rich white people really true? Was he going to work for people like you saw in the movies? If he were, then he’d see things from the inside; he’d get the dope, the low-down.... they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it.... He remembered hearing somebody tell a story of a Negro chauffeur who married a rich white girl and the girl’s family had shipped the couple out of the country and had supplied them with money (35-36).

This quotation is a particularly good example of how Bigger's goals for the future and
his conception of manhood are shaped by the movies. The young man clearly equates ideal growth and ideal success with economic success, however legally or illegally that success might be obtained. Although Bigger is "just a black guy with nothing," as he later describes himself to his lawyer (331), he believes that if he can become part of the world of the Daltons, he can become rich and possibly involved with a white woman. Mr. Dalton, who provides ping pong tables and jobs to African-American young men in Chicago, could well be viewed as a rich benefactor by Bigger. This viewpoint would make Dalton a father figure for Bigger, one who is initially viewed as being able to grant the fatherless young man the opportunities he has so long been denied. The vision of Dalton as a provider figure is conditioned by the rich white men Bigger has seen in the movies and found out about from his friends.

The images of the white upper class in the movies Bigger watches shape his ambitions for a form of real-world manhood characterized by adventure, wealth, romance, and successful crime. The movies are not the only source for Bigger's conceptions of perfect manhood. Detective stories also provide him with an ideal of masculinity.

Pudaloff explains that Bigger forms the ideal image of himself as a "tough guy" character from one of these stories (96). Dubbert states that the detective stories of Dashiell Hammett and other tough-guy mass media, of the Depression and afterward, including movie serials and comic books, depicted heroes who were "etched in absolute terms, unabashed and uncompromised" in their manly ideals. These heroes
and anti-heroes were self-sufficient, extremely attractive to women, and more often than not white, as in the case of Tarzan and Dick Tracy (222).

The discussion of absolute characteristics sheds a new light on the way in which Bigger sticks firmly to his plan to extort money from the Dalton family after accidentally murdering their daughter. The protagonist will stick to this plan, which is like a script, no matter what risks it may involve. Pudaloff supports this argument by referring to Bigger's thoughts, in reference to Bessie, that "a woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away" (Wright 135). This line is similar to the interior monologue of tough and independent male characters who are on the run in detective stories (Pudaloff 96). As Bigger gets ready to put his plan into action, he feels that he is "moving toward that same sense of fullness he had so often but inadequately felt in magazines and movies" (141). Bigger has a script now, a plan to rebel against white authority, which is ironically supplied by white-controlled mass media.

Perhaps the most frustrating element of Bigger's contact with the white world is that it will not allow him to obtain the kind of manhood that it offers to him. In a 1940 letter to the literary critic David L. Cohn, Wright asserts that "a man, bereft of a culture and unanchored by property, can travel but one path if he reacts positively but unthinkingly to the prizes and goals of civilization; and that one path is emotionally blind rebellion" (65). Bigger, who is "bereft of culture," does not base his ideals of manhood on any of the African-American men in his neighborhood nor on the forms of male adulthood advocated by the African-American women he
knows. The young man chooses a form of manhood which is determined by the "prizes and goals" offered to him by a mass media culture filled with predominantly white models of masculinity.

Because of the racism of whites in Chicago and also because of his skin color, Bigger is denied the rewards he sees in white society. In essence, white society, symbolized by Mr. Dalton, does not effectively provide for the growth of its "native son." This relationship makes whites responsible for both defining and providing for the aspirations of African-American young men like Bigger, and leaves out any goals or support African-American communities could provide them. The white world does not deliver the promises it disseminates through its media; thus Wright charges that it is partly at fault for Bigger's crimes.

White society in Native Son also uses its media to exploit the fear potential of Bigger's murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears and to deny Bigger's humanity. The Chicago newspapers blow the crimes out of proportion by portraying Bigger as a sexually ravenous beast, and by condemning him as a "Negro sex-slayer" before he has been convicted for any crimes (Wright, Native Son 260). As Boris Max, Bigger's attorney, points out in his defense of the young man, even the government itself, through its police force and through the racist State's Attorney David Buckley, has "inflamed the public mind to the point where they could not keep the peace without martial law" just to get back at Bigger for his crimes (356). The media and other social structures of white society are involved in a massive denial of Bigger's very humanity after his crimes are discovered. This denial could well be
a disavowal of paternity and a denial of Bigger's membership in a larger society to which he actually does belong. White society is failing in its paternal duties to Bigger as its "native son" by denying his existence as a human being and by denying its own creation of the conditions that stunted Bigger's growth and brought him to a life of crime.

There is a more hopeful relationship put forth in *Black Boy* between white culture and the goals of African-American young men. The young Richard in *Black Boy* chooses his ideals for male adulthood from more sophisticated forms of mass culture, the newspapers and books that he avidly reads. Once Richard begins to read widely, he is given glimpses of people and ideas coming from outside the South. Many of these ideas, with the exception of those of a Ku Klux Klan newspaper from Chicago which he is duped into selling counter the agrarian, religious, and social mores of the African-Americans he has lived with, as well as the predominantly racist ideals of the whites he has encountered.

Richard's education about what northern white society can offer him comes in part from H.L. Mencken's *Book of Prefaces*, a book he obtains with the aid of a kind Catholic white man at a Memphis eyeglass factory. When the narrator reads Mencken's prefaces, he finds someone who educates him about Western white writers. Furthermore, Mencken is able to tell the truth about southern racism and other American problems by "fighting with words," in a way which Richard feels he can write about his experiences in the South (272). Thus the young man finds a vocation and a path to male adulthood with the help of a white northern writer.
The narrator cannot pursue this vocation while living in the South. The lack of understanding that white people in Black Boy show for Richard's desire to be a writer is exemplified by the white woman who denies his ability to even conceive of the goal (162). African-Americans are not supposed to think independently, let alone write fiction, in the oppressive South Wright depicts.

The opinions of the white woman toward Wright's literary aspirations are matched by the ignorance a number of the African-Americans in the narrative show toward Richard's writing talent. Richard's grandmother, upon the publication of his first story in the Southern Register, tells him that stories are the "Devil's work," thus depriving him of the gratification needed to boost the career of a budding writer (185). Wright says, in summary, that "from no quarter... had there come a single encouraging word" for his writing career (186).

With these pressures and denials mounted against him, Richard knows that he will not be able to pursue a literary career in the South and thus will not be able to express his ideas. Richard cannot form his identity through writing if no one will read his work or even give him the credit for being able to write. He may believe he will find someone like Mencken in the North who will guide the development of his talent. The frustration of his desire to write in the South, then, is essential to Richard's determination to set out for the North so he will be able to write the truth about the problems he sees in the South and in the rest of the United States.

So far we have been dealing with passports into predominantly white culture
that come from books, magazines, and movies. "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," however, contains an even subtler depiction of the definition of manhood on white terms affecting an African-American adolescent. Particularly important in this story is a Sears, Roebuck catalog Dave finds at the store of Joe, a white man. This catalog fascinates Dave with its pictures of many different kinds of guns.

The catalog as a symbol represents the promises that white industrial culture offers to young African-American males who come into contact with that culture's manifestations. There is little doubt that the catalog also contains pictures of all sorts of products unattainable in Dave's rural sharecropping community without the catalog. Dave's parents do not understand the significance of the catalog: his mother thinks, upon first seeing it, that it might be good for their outhouse. Any of these items from Sears, Roebuck, for a price, can be ordered and brought to Dave's farming community. The catalog is an emblem of the distant promises of success offered by the industrial North and the abundance and power this white industrial culture has to offer young men like Dave, possibilities that his parents fail to notice.

The gun Dave eventually gets is also symbolic of white industrial power. Dave is fascinated with the gun he gets from Joe because, however battered and old it is, it is a representation of the powerful revolvers he sees in the catalog. The gun is thus indirectly an artifact of power from a distant culture of plenty. It is an object elevated in status by the young man's ability to pretend that "if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him" (18). Because of the distribution of ideal guns by Sears, Roebuck, the old gun Dave buys is an
emblem of white industrial manufacturing power, as well as a means for Dave to protect himself and his family from harm. Possessing and being able to control an object of white manufacturing might makes Dave feel very manly and equal to his employer, Mr. Hawkins. The young man feels secure in his masculinity as he keeps his hand on the gun while jumping the northbound train, headed off to a place where, with his gun, "he could be a man" (26).

The young male characters in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Black Boy, and Native Son, all aspire to forms of manhood that involve either the values of northern white culture or the intrusion of the products of this culture. These values include literacy, monetary power, physical freedom, and most importantly individual self-determination. The goals and freedom the white northern world offers Wright’s protagonists are much better than what their current circumstances and communities offer, especially regarding possibilities for personal growth.

Repeatedly, in Wright’s works, white culture, especially white middle and upper-class culture and white industrialized culture, is shown to have more influence on the construction of the protagonists’ ideals of manhood than the examples or direction of African-American men and women in the communities where the characters live. The African-American societies offer outdated models of servility, accommodation, stagnation and religiosity, while the white world offers action, economic opportunity, and possibility to these characters. Hence white models of manhood, often represented through mass culture, are overwhelmingly attractive to Wright’s protagonists. The African-American cultures, in comparison, are often
literally left behind.

Wright's protagonists are African-Americans, but they seek the goals of their adult lives away from other African-Americans. The author continually asserts in his fiction and non-fiction that racial equality will result when African-American men are accepted by whites as equals and have the same rights and possessions as whites. African-American men, in Wright's opinion, want primarily to become "men like everyone else," as the author maintains in the 1946 interview "There's No Black Problem in the U.S.A. But A White Problem, the Black Writer Richard Wright Tells Us" (88). This attitude clearly favors the traditions and opportunities offered by white society over those of African-American societies. African-American communities and the folk traditions that bind these communities together are simply not viable in the face of the modernization the white world offers.

The tendency in Wright's works to have his young male protagonists aspire to white forms of masculinity is based more on a direct appeal to his readership than in his own attitudes. Wright mentions in a 1960 interview that he has a white image of the audience in mind when he writes. This statement, compounded with Wright's contention during the interview that "the publishers are white, the editors are white, the readership is white" may, with the help of the writings of Richard Yarborough and Robert Stepto, explain why the author attempts to appeal to white readers and white middle-class readers in particular (Wright, "Richard Wright, For Whom Do You Write?" 225).

Yarborough, in "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" states that nineteenth-century African-American authors
such as Frederick Douglass "understandably sought to shape their portrayal of black male heroes in accord with middle-class definitions of masculinity" in order to appeal to a readership that doubted the humanity of African-American men in general (168-69). If Douglass and Wright both wrote to defend their humanity, as Stepto postulates, Wright may have been shaping his young male characters to conform to what he saw as white ideals. If white readers viewed Wright as similar to them in viewpoints, abilities, and aspirations, they would be more receptive to the social messages he was putting forth in his fiction and non-fiction.

The support and interest of white readers was very important to Wright. The responsibility for change in racial relations lay mainly with whites in his opinion. Racism and its effects, for the most part, were for Wright a disease that whites had the responsibility to cure (Wright, "Richard Wright, For Whom Do You Write?" 226). The author felt that it was up to white Americans to read his works to help change their racist ways and to realize that African-American men were men.

The titles of the stories of Wright's posthumous collection Eight Men are illuminating here. The titles of the collected stories, such as "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," "Man of All Work," and "The Man Who Lived Underground," along with the collection's title, make an implicit assertion. This assertion is that the reader should see the main characters as "men," with the gender of these characters placed in the foreground. Except for "Big Black Good Man," none of the titles contains a reference to race. These stories were first published at different times and in different publications, but taken together they suggest how Wright wanted readers to feel about
his protagonists. Wright wants readers to accept his men as men, with the concomitant
dependent on their skin color.

Wright thought that whites were responsible for providing African-Americans with
equal rights and opportunities: the same opportunities for monetary success, educational
opportunities, and civil rights. The novelist's works may well have been the first
exposure to these kinds of issues of race for many American whites and others during
his era, and thus these works may have been important in spreading a consciousness of
American racial prejudice and the need for equal rights for African-Americans.

However, Wright is working "mostly for whites" by presenting white readers
ultimately with views of African-American manhood and communities that do not diverge
very far from attitudes of African-American pathology and "backwardness" espoused by
white sociologists, white writers, and their supporters (Wright, "Richard Wright, For
Whom Do You Write" 225). Although his white readers may have been initially shocked
by the poverty and racial violence Wright depicted, he was essentially telling them what
he thought they already knew and felt about African-American men, women, and
communities. Manhood in the terms of African-American communities simply does not
exist for Wright's young men; they must seek their goals of masculinity in the white
world.
A writer was soon to emerge who would both evoke Wright’s depictions of African-American and white manhood and revise them, while still achieving great popular success with his fiction. Ralph Ellison had once been Wright’s literary apprentice, and had written a number of favorable reviews of Wright’s works. Robert O’Meally notes that the younger writer was introduced to Wright in New York in 1937 by Langston Hughes, who was a mutual friend of both writers (30). Ellison had come to New York to study sculpture and to make enough money to return to Tuskegee, where he was attending college. Through his conversations with Ellison, Wright became impressed with the younger author’s wide reading and his ideas about literature. Wright pushed Ellison to write his first published book review and his first short stories (O’Meally 23-26, 30; Fabré, Unfinished Quest 145).

Among the reviews Ellison wrote during his friendship with Wright were discussions of Wright’s works. One of Ellison’s most famous reviews is "Richard Wright’s Blues," a discussion of Black Boy and Richard Wright’s life that examines the autobiography in the context of the sociology of African-Americans in Mississippi. In "Richard Wright’s Blues" Ellison’s writing style is very similar to Wright’s as Ellison puts forth the notion of southern African-Americans living in a "pre-individualistic" state (100). Ellison privileges Black Boy in this review as an example of a blues-tinged
narrative in which Wright, unafraid of retelling the struggles of his early life in the South, "evaluate[s] his experience honestly and throw[s] his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America" (104). Throughout "Richard Wright’s Blues" Ellison clearly shows his influences from and support of Wright.

Ellison’s early reviews were not his only works greatly influenced by Wright. Ellison also began his fiction writing career under Richard Wright’s direction and inspiration. The short stories Ellison wrote for the older author, "Hymie’s Bull" and another story, were never published. New Challenge, the magazine on which Ellison and Wright collaborated, folded soon after their acquaintance due to financial problems, as Ellison notes in "Remembering Richard Wright" (205). Both stories displayed Wright’s influence clearly in their terse style and subject matter.

It was through his first readings of Ellison’s stories that Wright became aware that Ellison was copying him. Wright was distressed because he wanted Ellison to develop an independent style. Constance Webb notes, in her biography of Wright, that when the older author read Ellison’s second short story, he declared that "this is my story, my style." Wright told Ellison that he had "copied my ideas, my words and my structure," and admonished the younger writer to discover his own symbols and ideas by looking into his own "unconscious" (146). Ellison told Wright that he had deliberately copied his style, attempting, as Webb maintains, to learn how to write well by composing in his mentor’s manner (146-47).

The arguments of Robert O’Meally, Constance Webb, and Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., make clear that it was difficult for any African-American writer to emerge from Wright’s
shadow. Skerrett states in "The Wright Interpretation: Ellison and the Anxiety of Influence" that after the enormous critical and financial success of Native Son, "whatever place a young black writer might make for himself in the critical public attention would be a place won, to some degree and in some fashion, from Richard Wright" (219). As Ellison wrote, he must have been aware of a white reading public that viewed Wright as the primary literary articulator of the lives of African-Americans, a public that might view his own work as "irrelevant" (223).

Yet despite the popularity of Wright's vision of African-American life and manhood and despite the older author's influence on his early writing and opinions, Ellison was able to articulate his own vision in Invisible Man. Ellison's vision moved away from one-dimensional sociological portraits of African-Americans to portrayals of a diversity of African-American men and women.4

These men and women, along with the protagonist of Invisible Man, are controlled less by social forces than by their own wise and foolish choices. Sociological points of view, when applied to the diversity inherent in African-American cultures, were too limited and negative to allow Ellison to give a realistic treatment of African-Americans in fiction. Treatments of African-American life in sociological terms such as those in Wright's fiction and non-fiction initially appealed to Ellison, but eventually seemed overly limited to the younger author. In discussing Wright's sociological view of African-American life, Ellison regrets, in his essay "The World and the Jug," that Wright cut himself off early in his career "from the complexity of his background" (126). In presenting a pathological view of African-American communities, Wright failed to
notice or present the endurance potential and creativity present in many African-Americans. As Henry Louis Gates points out, "for Ellison, Wright’s notion of the self and its relation to black culture seemed unduly costly," and thus it needed to be complemented by a more affirmative depiction (182). There is a definite difference due to ideological agendas between the writings of Wright and Ellison.

The ideological separation between Wright and Ellison and their early friendship have been analyzed using the theories of Harold Bloom. Both Skerrett and O’Meally maintain, following Bloom, that Ellison felt the anxiety of Wright’s literary influence as he wrote. Ellison would have been trying to deny Wright as a precursor and to replace him while ultimately failing to escape the older author’s influence. The fact that Ellison was a lasting friend of Wright’s despite their differences weakens these assertions. As Michel Fabré points out in "From Native Son to Invisible Man: Some Notes on Ralph Ellison’s Evolution in the 1950’s," their relationship never reached the hatred between literary fathers and jealous sons posited by critics such as Irving Howe in his essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" (Fabré "From Native Son" 208). Ellison and Wright never felt the mutual animosity that would have made them battle as Bloom posits the battle between strong poets and their father-precursors in The Anxiety of Influence.

It is more probable that Ellison sought not to destroy Wright’s popular vision of African-American life and manhood but to enrich it. In his essays and interviews, Ellison values Wright’s contributions to African-American literature. In "The World and the Jug" Ellison admits that he "recognized Native Son as an achievement" and that he was "proud to have known Wright and happy for the impact he had made upon our
apathy" with works such as Native Son (124). However, Ellison recurrently maintained in his essays and lectures that he felt he had to redress the mistakes Wright made in ignoring the diversity of African-American life. The author of Invisible Man took pride in his ability to present a "tragicomic" vision of African-American life, one that presents characters under the pressures of racism but still able to find hope to endure, in contrast to Wright's dark viewpoint ("The World and the Jug" 137). Wright and Ellison are less the literary father battling with his son for prominence than two coexistent authors with divergent approaches toward exploring African-American life. Ellison's vision of African-American life is much more positive than Wright's, and emphasizes the survival of African-Americans independent of white influence or direction.

Ellison works from a variety of personal experiences and interests in his writings, as Wright did. In Invisible Man, Ellison synthesizes his experiences in both the North and South with African-American folklore and motifs from Western white works to create a rich depiction of life in the United States. The novelist obtained much of his background information about African-American men, women, communities, and traditions from extensive personal observation. He observed the diversity and endurance of African-American cultural traditions throughout his life. From his jobs in stores and hotels in Oklahoma where he listened to the stories of elder African-Americans, to his jobs in New York City, where with the Depression-era "Living Lore" project he studied traditional African-American folk tales, Ellison was gathering information to enrich his writing (O'Meally 8, 33-35).

In his composition of Invisible Man, Ellison also added themes and techniques
from his favorite white authors, such as the works of James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, to help construct a narrative with folklore and literary references that would ring familiar to white readers and that would constitute a work of fiction that ranked among Ellison's influences (Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 72). The fictional autobiographical form of *Invisible Man* would also be familiar to readers acquainted with the actual biographies of American writers such as Benjamin Franklin. Other literary references abound throughout Ellison's novel that would catch the eye of a well-versed reader in Western literature.

What results from this mixture of African-American personalities, folk traditions, and borrowings from Western white literature is a vivid portrayal of African-American life and African-American masculinities. Ellison, as Gates suggests, both evokes and revises Wright's vision of the "essential bleakness of black life in America" (Gates 182; Wright, *Black Boy* 45). The resulting richness of Ellison's novel contrasts greatly with the bleakness of Wright's fiction.

Wright's grim vision of African-American manhood repeatedly involves an alienated protagonist fighting the forces that attempt to restrict him, kill him, or hold him down. Nina Kressner Cobb, in "Richard Wright: Individualism Reconsidered," argues that this attitude of alienation from African-Americans and whites, qualified by a degree of ambivalence, characterized both Wright's works and his life (342). *Invisible Man* likewise concentrates on an initially aloof African-American male's struggle to define himself and to survive in a hostile and often cruel world. The Invisible Man is hardly the only rounded male character in Ellison's novel, though.
Ellison presents a variety of white and African-American male characters in his novel. In particular, the novelist privileges those African-American men who are self-assured and who maintain a sense of their being part of their communities. African-American men who try to accommodate whites, or who attack others to further their own interests, are displayed as working against the survival of African-Americans as a group. In *Invisible Man* we do not see one individualistic young man fighting African-Americans and whites alike, but rather a young man who learns from African-American men with varied characteristics how to accept himself and how to endure in an often inhospitable world.

The *Invisible Man* does seek his own form of manhood, but he does so with positive, negative, and ambivalent reference points in the African-American communities in which he lives. *Invisible Man* is essentially about a young man who lets other people define his identity, and who follows the examples of other white and African-American men faithfully before he realizes that he is the only one who can define who he is and what he believes. The white and African-American men the *Invisible Man* meets and models himself upon have their problems. The presentation of these characters and the narrator's attitude toward them change over the course of the novel.

Some of these examples are whites from the North or African-American men who depend on northern whites for their survival. Norton, a white contributor to the *Invisible Man*’s southern college, is initially viewed by the protagonist as a provider figure. The first description of Norton in *Invisible Man* shows him with "a face pink like St. Nicholas’, topped with a shock of silk white hair" and with "aristocratic" mannerisms
These refined characteristics connote generosity and the possibility of reward to the Invisible Man, who is very materialistic at that time.

The Invisible Man's first impression of Norton is soon to be undermined. Norton is shown to have an unnatural attraction to his deceased daughter. His guilt about their relationship shows most clearly when Norton becomes ill after seeing its mirror-image in Jim Trueblood, an African-American sharecropper living near the college who has committed incest with his daughter Matty Lou (Stepto 181).

In his love of his daughter and in other ways, as Stepto has observed, Norton is a parody of Wright's character Mr. Dalton. Dalton is the rich real estate owner in Native Son who is Bigger's employer, a philanthropist who idealizes his own daughter, Mary. Furthermore, the Communist lawyer Boris Max points out Dalton's hypocrisy in providing ping pong tables for African-American adolescents while owning a real estate company that restricts them to dilapidated tenements in Chicago's Black Belt. Ellison criticizes the duplicity of his own Dalton figure, the more powerful Norton, by placing him in the chaotic and comic Golden Day episode (Stepto 182).

Norton arrives at the Golden Day seeking only a "stimulant." He is assaulted verbally and physically by African-American men who have lost their jobs and their minds due to the hypocrisy of white business and political leaders. It is at the Golden Day that both Norton and the Invisible Man are confronted with the results of the promises of prosperity and guidance Norton and other whites have held out for African-American men and women. The Invisible Man for a great part of the novel negates his ties with other African-Americans to impress white people like Norton. The protagonist,
like many of the inmates at the Golden Day, has controlled his bodily functions, dress, and habits to conform to what he sees as white norms. Through this self-effacement the Invisible Man becomes, as the veteran doctor at the Golden Day tells Norton, "the most perfect achievement of your dreams... the mechanical man (86). The "mechanical" Invisible Man and the mentally ill African-American men at the Golden Day are thus the products of the negligence and misguidance of businessmen such as Norton.

With the character of Norton, then, Ellison evokes Wright's Dalton and expands him beyond the older author's boundaries, making Norton more dangerous to African-Americans than Wright's character. Norton and Dalton are both rich philanthropists, but Norton gives to an influences a college that bright young African-American men attend. To impress whites such as Norton and to maintain their support, these young students seek to act according to white norms, to rid from themselves any vestiges of their southern African-American identities. While Dalton gives ping pong tables and jobs to young African-Americans in Chicago with little knowledge of how his efforts are affecting them, Norton has a greater role in shaping the futures and aspirations of educated African-American young men. Norton tells the Invisible Man early in their acquaintance that more than any financial venture, his chief energies have been devoted to his "first-hand organizing" of the futures of young African-Americans, so much so that the philanthropist sees their fate as connected to his own (43). The Invisible Man and his fellow college students are "bound to a great dream" directed and supported by Norton and to the white philanthropist's memories of his deceased daughter (44).

Norton is definitely more active in forming the adult lives of African-Americans
than Wright's Mr. Dalton. As is clear from the Golden Day episode, Norton is active in ruining these lives as well. Norton and others like him make young African-Americans deny their skin color and the traditions passed down to them from their ancestors. One of the conclusions the Invisible Man comes to reach is that this hurtful denial of self turns out to have little reward from the white establishment. When Norton reappears at the end of the novel in a New York subway station, the protagonist confronts the old man, asking him if he is not "ashamed" of what he has done to the dreams of the Invisible Man and of other African-Americans. The "thinner and wrinkled" Norton can only run away from the protagonist in alarm, as the Invisible Man tells him to "take any train; they all go to the Golden D-" (500). The protagonist is certain that Norton will someday be confronted again with the full knowledge of what he has done to the dreams of African-Americans, as he was at the Golden Day. Norton is at first like Saint Nicholas, a father figure of plenty whom the Invisible Man treats obsequiously in hope of financial reward. The northern white businessman is eventually revealed as an uncaring paternalistic figure who misleads the aspirations for adulthood of African-American young men.

The Invisible Man also eventually confronts and distances himself from Brother Jack, another northern white man who manipulates and attempts to define the protagonist. Jack is the leader of the Brotherhood, a political group working for radical social change in Harlem. He takes on the Invisible Man as a protégé. The Invisible Man initially sees the Brotherhood and Jack as providing him with a speaking career and a profitable adult role. He tells himself that he "would learn in the process of working with them" and
thus forgets what he has learned about the value of African-American identity and community. The Invisible Man thinks it more important to "leave the old behind" to please to the Brotherhood than to maintain the connections he has made in Harlem (274).

The Brotherhood and Jack use the Invisible Man for their own ends, and ultimately treat him more as a token representative of his ethnic group than as an independent, intelligent man. Jack's continual manipulation of the protagonist, the cutthroat maneuvering required to succeed and survive in the Brotherhood, and the group's misunderstanding of the African-American people it purports to serve eventually lead the Invisible Man to leave Jack and the group. The Brotherhood orders its operatives around in a manner that makes the Invisible Man feel that he is nothing more than a representative of "a receptive mass ever willing to accept their every scheme" (445). Since the Brotherhood cannot see beyond its scientific theories of history and society, it will not accept the capability of African-Americans like the Invisible Man to think and act individually. The protagonist must then abandon the career and the form of manhood that the group offers. The Invisible Man can no longer be the mouthpiece for the Brotherhood's views on African-Americans, nor will he continue to repeat back to the Brotherhood the group's limited viewpoints on African-American life.

Jack's Brotherhood is a refiguring of the Communist Party as presented in Native Son, and as it figured in Ellison's own life. Ellison never joined the Communist Party, but came into contact with Marxism through his friendships with Wright, Langston Hughes, and other writers and intellectuals. His early fiction and reviews have a definite Marxist tone (O'Meally 32). Ellison eventually abandoned this orientation in part
because of its inability to accept individual differences or positive portrayals of the lives of African-Americans (38). The "pattern of black betrayal," exemplified by the Party's support of a segregated United States Army in World War II, only helped seal Ellison's break with the Communist Party (54). These differences and Wright's own close affiliation with the Party influenced Ellison's distance from Communism and Marxism.

Ellison insisted in his speech "On Initiation Rites and Power" that he "did not want to describe an existing Socialist or Communist or Marxist political group" in his novel (59). The Brotherhood's use of the Invisible Man, however, is very similar to the Communists' use of Bigger in Native Son. In Native Son Bigger comes into contact with the Party through Jan Erlone, who is Mary Dalton's boyfriend, and through Boris Max. Wright seems sympathetic towards these white characters, who listen to Bigger's story and who attempt to treat him as a human. Max hears Bigger's most lengthy explanations of his aspirations and problems. In their conversations, the lawyer places the responsibility for self-definition upon Bigger, and the reader gets a glimpse of the young man's most cherished dreams and his deepest frustrations. Bigger also is finally able to tell the reasons why he killed Mary and Bessie and why he sees these acts as crucial to his independent identity. But Max does not truly listen to what Bigger is saying.

When Max describes Bigger as an example of the class oppression of African-Americans in his courtroom speech, he has clearly not listened to Bigger, whom he turns into a stereotype. In "Wright's Invisible Native Son," Donald Gibson asserts that Max is ultimately unable to see Bigger as an individual man with a personality (736). Bigger is not so much an individual or a man to the Communists as he is an effective political
symbol of the class oppression of African-Americans.

Because Jack and the Brotherhood are blind to the Invisible Man’s humanity and manhood, they echo the behavior of the Communists in Native Son. The Invisible Man and Bigger are thus both used by white-controlled political organizations that deny their individuality and manhood. Ellison’s protagonist is able to distance himself from Jack and the Brotherhood, thus becoming free to work toward self-definition. Bigger’s humanity, in comparison, remains intertwined with the tenets of Marxist and sociological theory that Max uses to explain the young man’s life.

Whatever their economic orientation, the white male characters who attempt to shape the Invisible Man’s life are shown to be racist, manipulative and corrupt. Even though they seem, almost in a fatherly way, to provide guidance, economic support, and opportunities, their flaws become apparent and the Invisible Man learns to seek his models elsewhere. The protagonist is able, unlike Bigger, to abandon the control and approval of whites to choose a different form of male adulthood.

Ellison’s unfavorable portraits of white manhood are complemented by the influence of the African-American men and women in the novel on the development of the protagonist. Although some of these men lead the Invisible Man astray, they testify by their roles in the novel to a diversity of northern and southern African-American communities. Unlike Black Boy, Native Son, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," in Invisible Man there exist not just one African-American protagonist and a near-faceless community that opposes him. Ellison portrays instead a myriad group of African-American men and women who have varying attitudes toward their culture and toward
relations with whites. Their presence in the novel helps to make *Invisible Man* a richer portrait of African-American life than anything Wright presents.

Some of Ellison’s African-American male characters will do anything to please white men. The Invisible Man, as previously stated, at first ascribes to their belief that, by being appealing to white people, they can gain economic success and freedom. The personal weaknesses of these men eventually subvert his allegiance to this philosophy.

One model for an accommodational form of manhood is the Reverend A. Herbert Bledsoe, the president of the Invisible Man’s college. Bledsoe will humble himself to any degree to please the white businessmen who support him. He obsequiously greets a group of visiting group of white businessmen "with the decorum of a portly head waiter" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 103). While discussing the Invisible Man’s punishment for taking Norton out to the Golden Day, Bledsoe reminds the young man that "the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie" (124). The Reverend is admittedly servile to whites, but he asserts that his true manhood lies in his physical prowess and close associations with "rich white folk’s power" (127).

Bledsoe’s declarations of his economic, deceptive, and manly power are undermined by his servility and his manipulation and destruction of the aspirations of other African-Americans. The Reverend "confuses the shadow for the substance of power," as Bernard Bell maintains, by accepting servility and humility before whites as the price of economic success (198). Bledsoe will do anything to further his avarice and his associations with white benefactors. The selfish personality of Bledsoe is most evident when he tells the protagonist that he will "have every Negro in the country hanging on
tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am" (128). Reverend Bledsoe can be best summed up as a "self-advancing conspirator in the myth of white supremacy" (Bell 198). He enjoys the fruits of subservience to the wealth of white power, and the attitude of inferiority to whites he must assume while around them is worth what he obtains. Although Bledsoe is at first the Invisible Man’s benefactor and model of manhood, the protagonist decides early in his northern days that he will not follow the Reverend’s deceptive and megalomaniacal example. He fantasizes about confronting Bledsoe and actually dumps a spittoon on the head of a preacher who resembles the Reverend. There must surely be another way to manhood and to a career than Bledsoe’s greediness and shameful subservience.

Bledsoe’s example of defining manhood by association with white industrial power is mirrored in Lucius Brockway, the maintenance man whom the Invisible Man meets at Liberty Paints. Lucius has an integral role in keeping the factory working by maintaining the correct pressure levels for the furnaces there. Brockway is proud of working for Liberty Paints and of his friendly relationship with the white Old Man Sparland who founded the company. Brockway seems to have a mutually beneficial relationship with Liberty Paints.

However important he is to the company, Brockway’s jealousy and suspicion of the Invisible Man undermine him as a figure of African-American manhood. On the suspicion that the Invisible Man is thinking of joining a union and thus endangering Brockway’s job, the maintenance man picks a fight with the protagonist. Brockway almost loses his teeth and the Invisible Man is hospitalized because of their quarrel. The
maintenance man can cling to the white-run company, thinking himself "inexpendable," as Bell suggests, but he is actually old, weak, and destructive and thus no example of male adulthood for the protagonist (210). This misguided old man belongs in his basement away from the world outside, where he will not be bothered by other African-American men who may threaten his allegiance to white industrial power.

Lucius Brockway and the Reverend A. Herbert Bledsoe are two of the numerous African-American men in *Invisible Man* who ally themselves with white power in its many forms. These men cannot serve as examples for manhood because of their servility and because of their willingness to hurt other African-Americans to maintain their relationship with whites and to get ahead in the white world. The rewards and power Brockway and Bledsoe obtain from their alliance with whites do not justify their divisive actions against other African-Americans.

There are other kinds of African-American men in *Invisible Man*, however. Ellison’s novel derives some of its uniqueness, and its difference from Wright’s visions of manhood, from its representation of African-American men who define their masculinity and identities independent from or in spite of the attitudes of whites. These men, including Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer, Tod Clifton, Jim Trueblood, and others, are portrayed as fully developed characters: they have characteristics that make them at once shocking and sympathetic. Together these men represent the variety of masculinities and possibilities depicted throughout Ellison’s novel, as well as the endurance of African-Americans and their traditions in the face of white racism and oppression.

Two of these men are clearly heroic in their resistance to whites, although the
Invisible Man does not entirely agree with their actions or motives. Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer is a West Indian nationalist leader in Harlem with whom the Invisible Man comes into conflict. The nationalist is attempting to guide the African-Americans of Harlem away from white culture by celebrating their "blackness," or the characteristics of culture and personality Ras views as being unique to Americans of African origins. Ras and his followers also advocate rejecting anything having to do with whites. This method could allow the citizens of Harlem to stand up for their traditions and culture, but the effectiveness of this separatism is marred by Ras's racial attitudes and his methods of political action.

Ras achieves his political goals through violent and divisive means, and he is revealed to be racially discriminating against certain African-Americans. He judges the Invisible Man as unworthy of his cause because the young man's skin is "contahminated" and not "blahk" enough (323). The Invisible Man is almost lynched by Ras and his supporters during the riot that closes the novel. That Ras would choose a form of execution so emotionally charged for southern African-Americans testifies to his blindness to the destruction he is causing.

Despite Ras's actions and attitude, as Robert E. Fleming suggests in "Ellison's Black Archetypes: The Founder, Bledsoe, Ras, and Rinehart," there is something heroic about the Exhorter/Destroyer's resistance to white domination (429). During the riot that closes the novel, when he battles the white policemen Ras rides in the uniform of an "Abyssinian chieftain," armed with spear and shield, and "upon a great black horse" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 481). The Exhorter/Destroyer is a self-motivated and powerful
character who defines his masculinity by fighting white domination and racism and by encouraging African-Americans to live independent of the pervasive white elements of society. Ras may be leading the people of Harlem in the wrong direction, but he is leading them decisively to what he believes is self-determination.

However decisive and powerful Ras is, the Invisible Man opposes his definition of African-American masculinity and his political methods. The protagonist's opposition to Ras's ideology is best summed up in his thoughts as the Destroyer's supporters attempt to lynch him. The Invisible Man states "that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd (484). Ras and the white men he opposes are equally blind in each being subject to acting out the stereotypes of the other. Even though Ras is brave and powerful, his egotism, his paranoia and his bullying overuse of violence as is evident in the preceding passage, conflict with the ideas of leadership and manhood that the Invisible Man develops. The divisiveness between African-Americans in Harlem that the Exhorter/Destroyer causes weakens their efforts toward equality. For all of his rhetoric, Ras is just one more destructive and racist element in Harlem and is just as responsible for the chaotic riot as the white policemen who resist him.

The Invisible Man has to spear Ras through the mouth, not only to escape lynching, but also to mark the final dichotomy between Ras's violent form of manhood and his own. As Jane Campbell maintains in Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History, the "invisible man's spearing of Ras represents to him the murder of his own
violent impulses" (96). The spearing of Ras also means the final quieting of the Exhorter who has led so many African-Americans astray with his potent words. Ras may be powerful and independent, but he ultimately lets his egotism and thirst for power blind him to the destruction and divisiveness he causes and to his manipulation by whites.

Ras’ physical power and charisma are rivaled by Tod Clifton. Tod is a tragically heroic character in the novel who befriends the Invisible Man. Clifton, the leader of the youth corps of the Brotherhood, is physically the very model of what whites and African-americans in Ellison’s novels see as African-American manhood. The "chiseled, black-marbled features" of Clifton and his other qualities symbolic of African strength and physical beauty force even Ras to call him "the real black mahn" (323). Although Tod appears very similar to the Invisible Man, and seems to be a double of the protagonist, Tod is much more physically active than the Invisible Man and willing and able to take action against Ras and his supporters in ways the Invisible Man cannot.

Clifton drops out of sight, however, and reappears as a street vendor of "Sambo dolls." These frilled paper dolls are caricatures of black men that respond to the possessor’s every whim. As Tod shouts to a gathered crowd in his spiel, Sambo "lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile" and lives to keep his owners entertained (374). The Invisible Man hates Clifton for selling these dolls, but he later understands Tod’s motives, and likens the dolls to Clifton’s manipulation by the white Brotherhood. Tod’s satire of his and the Invisible Man’s puppet relation to the white world is interrupted by his battle with a white policeman. Tod is shot and killed while fighting off a representative of white authority in a last defense of himself.
The death of Tod Clifton deeply shakes the African-American community of Harlem. His death in a quarrel over being harassed by a policeman seems meaningless to the Invisible Man, but it is actually quite significant. When Tod, the physically and heroically ideal African-American young man, dies, the hope for African-American equality and civil rights as obtained by violence or by aesthetic appeal dies as well. One of the signs the African-American marchers in Tod’s funeral parade carry reads "BROTHER TOD CLIFTON--OUR HOPE SHOT DOWN" (389). Tod may be the very embodiment of African-American manhood in his physical form and in his heroic determination not to be humiliated, but his friend the Invisible Man is not able to follow his example uncritically. The oppressive forces of the white world have too much power on their side for African-Americans, divided as they are, to defeat them in physical battle. As the Invisible Man pleads to the assembled crowd at Tod Clifton’s funeral, "beware of the triggers; go home, keep cool, stay safe away from the sun" (397). Although Tod’s death is instrumental in beginning the riot that closes the novel, the Invisible Man remains aware that the struggle for his own manhood and for the humanity of the African-Americans in Harlem must take place in a different arena and with different allies.

The characters who offer hope for the Invisible Man for finding ways to achieve manhood are ironically the ones he first denies. The Invisible Man’s grandfather, Jim Trueblood, Peter Wheatstraw, and Brother Tarp all symbolize the African-American folk traditions Ellison has carefully woven into his novel. These men are capable of reminding the Invisible Man of his southern African-American identity by showing how
much they accept themselves and their "blackness." All in all, they evoke the fullness of African-American history and folk traditions that the Invisible Man learns to accept.

Before the Invisible Man can accept their examples, he must first close his self-imposed distance from the African-American culture and traditions these men represent. The way in which the protagonist's relationship with his grandfather changes is indicative of the changes in the Invisible Man's ideas about African-American manhood. Their relationship is at first very similar to that of Wright and his father in Black Boy. The young man ignores the deathbed advice his grandfather has given to the Invisible Man's own father. The grandfather tells the Invisible Man's father to "learn... to the younguns" the way he subverted white authority. The children should "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins" and "agree 'em to death and destruction," making the whites "swoller" their duplicity until "they vomit or bust wide open." This is controversial advice: the Invisible Man is warned "emphatically to forget what he had said" by his parents (Ellison, Invisible Man 20).

But the grandfather's last words remain with the Invisible Man, although he fails to understand their true meaning for quite some time. The protagonist believes, as Mark Busby argues, that he will make his own way to success through playing by the rules of "hard, honest work" (50). These rules have been dictated by the examples of successful northern white men and those who have spread their example to African-American young men.

The attempt by the Invisible Man to separate himself from the legacy of his grandfather by following these rules is ultimately unsuccessful, which makes him
different from Richard in *Black Boy*. Unlike Richard, the Invisible Man cannot separate himself from the man he calls a "black peasant," since his grandfather’s image keeps appearing to him (34). As Robert Stepto notes, this reappearance keeps the Invisible Man from marginalizing his grandfather. Wright mentions his father’s misdeeds and fate in the first chapter of his autobiography and effectively shelves him in his memory (178). The Invisible Man is incapable of doing this, much to his eventual benefit.

The grandfather’s advice presents a recurring puzzle that the main character must solve if he will become a man. The Invisible Man cannot work through the enigma as it relates to his growth until many of his illusions have been dashed. As he writes from his underground retreat, he notes a connection between his failures and the "curse" of his grandfather’s last words:

> Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong. Why should an old slave use such a phrase as "This and this or this has made me more human"... hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity-- that was left to his "free" offspring. He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle. It was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and absurd diversity. (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 502)

The preceding passage exemplifies the connections that are rebuilt throughout the novel between the Invisible Man and his grandfather. The bond reconstructed between the ancestor and the descendant symbolizes the emerging link between the Invisible Man’s yearning for identity and the painful yet supportive past symbolized by his grandfather.
The Invisible Man learns to accept both his failures and his southern origins. He effectively adopts for himself his grandfather's drive to work for the "principle" of equality between African-Americans and whites. The Invisible Man at last believes that he can use the "mother wit" that he has received from the agrarian South to survive in the chaotic world of the industrial North and to lead other African-Americans.

There is at the last no dichotomy between the attitudes of the Invisible Man and his grandfather like that between Wright and his father. A circular connection between the grandfather's past and the protagonist's present and future exists instead. The past is always present and if it is forgotten it will sneak back into consciousness when least expected, in a manner similar to the boomerang effect the narrator uses to describe his own life. The bond between grandfather and grandson, slowly and carefully constructed throughout *Invisible Man*, is the converse of the chasm Wright continually posits between older African-American men and those of subsequent generations. The grandfather becomes a model for manhood for his grandson.

In keeping with the multiplicity of African-American masculinities in Ellison's novel, the grandfather's example of manhood is mirrored by other characters. Peter Wheatstraw meets the Invisible Man on the streets of New York. Wheatstraw, who wears "Charlie Chaplin pants," pushes a cart full of blueprints and tries to communicate with the protagonist using folk expressions he feels the young man ought to know (154). Peter knows the Invisible Man is "from down home" even though the protagonist feigns forgetfulness (153). In spite of his distance from African-American folkways, the main character cannot help but be impressed by Wheatstraw's ability to play the dozens and
his grandiloquent folkloric boasts. Wheatstraw proudly calls himself the "Devil's only son-in-law" as well as "a piano player and a rounder, a whiskey drinker and a pavement pounder" (155).

Wheatstraw is an embodiment of African-American folk traditions, such as the ritual of playing the dozens and the blues song he sings, as well as the reference to white popular culture in his "Charlie Chaplin pants." Robert N. List, in Dedalus in Harlem, asserts that Wheatstraw is a comical Chaplin-style figure (61). However, Ellison's tramp is one who is more vocal and more self-assured than Chaplin's motion picture characters.

Peter reminds the Invisible Man primarily of his Southern past, but as the Invisible Man moves on his way, he is still determined to conform to what he thinks are white expectations for how he should act and who he should be so that he can earn enough money to return to his college. Although Wheatstraw is an important example of the survival of folk traditions and self-acceptance in a Northern urban African-American male, the Invisible Man is not ready to follow his example when they meet. The main character in his early days in the North is too deeply involved in his plan of becoming a successful worker to recognize the value of the traditions Wheatstraw represents.

The Invisible Man shuns Jim Trueblood earlier in his life for similar reasons. Trueblood is a sharecropper who lives in the cabins close to the protagonist's southern college. This sharecropper and his family, along with the others of his village, are shunned by the Invisible Man and other college students because of the relativecrudeness and backwardness of the sharecroppers' lives and habits. However, the Invisible Man
and Trueblood come into close contact. Norton has the Invisible Man stop while on their drive near the college so they can talk to Trueblood. At the philanthropist’s request Trueblood tells his tale of accidental incest with his daughter Matty Lou and the problems that resulted from his inadvertent act. As Trueblood tells the tale of the dream that caused his crime and Norton and the Invisible Man listen with fascinated disgust, it is quite apparent to the reader that he is more than just a "backward" farmer (53-66).

Jim Trueblood is an excellent storyteller who gives a dream narrative evocative in imagery and detailed in the explanation of the motives and the circumstances of his crime. He has repeatedly told the story of his dream so well that he is not only back with his family, but he also receives money from the college and from Mr. Norton. Houston A. Baker notes in "To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison’s Trueblood Episode" that the sharecropper is able to make money from his story, even though his actions are unacceptable in the terms of white society. Thus, as Susan L. Blake states in "Ritual and Rationalization," Trueblood’s success negates the assertion of "emancipation through accommodation" because Jim is able to survive economically and to feel he is a man by accepting himself independent of white opinions and by existing in opposition to what whites purport to be their ideals (127). Even though Trueblood has committed a shocking crime in the eyes of the African-American college students, he is able to defend his actions well enough to maintain his self-esteem and to support his family.

The creativity of southern African-American men and the value of African-American oral traditions are also symbolized by Trueblood. In contrast to Ellison,
Wright faults these traditions in *Black Boy*. Where the feeble Grandpa Wilson has only a selective memory to work from, Ellison’s Jim Trueblood can use his voice and memory to move anyone who listens to his tales. The sharecropper’s ability to defend his incestuous actions by telling his own story gives inspiration to the Invisible Man as he tells the blues-filled narrative that makes up the novel. The Invisible Man can use Trueblood’s creative manhood as the basis for his own efforts at self-explanation.

Another African-American man who inspires the Invisible Man, and who symbolizes the folk past, is Brother Tarp. He is an old member of the Brotherhood who evokes in the narrator a feeling of his Southern past, as the Invisible Man notes that "my grandfather seemed to look from his eyes" (332). When he first appears in the novel, Tarp seems a humble and rather unimportant character. Tarp reveals, though, that he is a former prisoner and chain gang worker who was arrested and has suffered for saying "no to a man who wanted to take something from me" (335). The older man also gives the Invisible Man three important gifts.

The first of these gifts is a picture of Frederick Douglass. Tarp puts the picture up in the Invisible Man’s office as the protagonist is starting his work with the Brotherhood. The Invisible Man does not know very much about the African-American leader, and Tarp tells him to "take a look at him once in a while." To Tarp, Douglass "belongs to all of us" as a symbol of what African-Americans have struggled through and achieved in the past (328). If we can take Douglass’s life story as an indication, the African-American leader also represents an African-American man who independently strived for and reached freedom and self-determination. Tarp must see the beginnings
of a Douglass-style leader in the Invisible Man, and thus he very appropriately gives the protagonist the inspiring portrait.

The second gift Tarp gives the Invisible Man is the narrative of his escape from his white captors. He tells the Invisible Man of how he worked on a chain gang for nineteen years, as well as of how he "made friends with them dogs and...waited" until the right moment to make his escape (336). Tarp enjoys telling the story to the protagonist, and the protagonist begins to feel a deep sense of respect for the older man.

Tarp gives the Invisible Man a third gift, the filed chain link he has kept from his escape. This reminder of Tarp's past has, as the older man states, "a heap of signifying wrapped up in it" (336). This link is symbolic in a number of ways that are evoked from its description in Invisible Man:

I took it in my hand, a thick dark, oily piece of filed steel that had been twisted open and forced partly back into place, on which I saw marks that might have been made by the blade of a hatchet. It was such a link as I had seen on Bledsoe's desk, only while that one had been smooth, Tarp's bore the marks of haste and violence, looking as though it had been attacked and conquered before it stubbornly yielded. (337)

The chain link is symbolic of Tarp's difficult life. Unlike Bledsoe, whose own symbol of slavery seems as if it had been newly cast, Brother Tarp has a chain link that he has had to hack off in secret and with dedicated effort. Tarp gives the link to the Invisible Man because, as he tells the protagonist, "it might help you remember what we're really fighting against" (336).
This chain link fulfills its intended function. It is a true bond to the past for both Brother Tarp and the Invisible Man. The links reminds Tarp of his imprisonment and escape, while it evokes in the Invisible Man a sense of connection with Tarp and with the older man's Southern experiences. This connection implies that whatever he may do, the Invisible Man cannot free himself from his roots in the South. Being rooted to the South turns out to be a not entirely unfavorable situation, since the North gives the Invisible Man little he can connect with or understand.

In summary, Brother Tarp is similar to Trueblood and Peter Wheatstraw. He is able to tell a convincing story that privileges his courage and that depicts his experience vividly. Tarp's story is one of three gifts he passes to the Invisible Man, which together give the young man both the hope for future success and knowledge of his debt to and connection with the past.

Brother Tarp, Jim Trueblood, Peter Wheatstraw, and the Invisible Man's grandfather all serve as links for the protagonist to his past. These men, who act as father figures, cumulatively inspire the protagonist to tell his story of the troubled journey toward manhood. Each of these "folk" men accepts himself as he is, along with a sense of his ancestry and community with other African-Americans. These men are not at a high level of economic power in white society, nor do they aspire to such a position. They seek primarily to tell their own stories of pain and triumph and to pass on the value of their own and other African-Americans' personal experiences.

There are numerous examples of African-American manhood offered to the Invisible Man. The chaos these possibilities cause is symbolized in Rinehart, the man
of all trades whom the Invisible Man inadvertently becomes when he puts on a pair of
dark glasses to hide from Ras's supporters. Rinehart is all things good and bad to
everyone in Harlem in a way that mirrors the Invisible Man's own ever-shifting
conception of his identity. However, Rinehart, who is at once preacher and pimp among
other things, has used his fluid identity for corrupt personal gain. The Invisible Man is
tempted to retain this guise because Rinehart's "world was possibility and he knew it";
the narrator can have anything he desires as long as he plays Rinehart convincingly
(430). The role of Rinehart involves the deception of other African-Americans,
however. Confused as the Invisible Man is, he knows that he does not want to exploit
the members of his adopted and adoptive community. The role of Rinehart is therefore
not only a chaotic but also a misleading guise, and so the narrator abandons it.

The chaos embodied in Rinehart also characterizes the tumult of masculinities that
offer themselves to the narrator throughout the novel. Thomas A. Vogler indicates in
"Somebody's Protest Novel" that an internal miscellany of identities is characteristic of
many white American literary characters, "from the legendary versatility of Benjamin
Franklin, through innumerable characters in Irving, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and
Twain" (138). The Invisible Man must work through his own chaos of masculinities and
through the examples he has encountered outside of himself to discover what he will
become. The protagonist's final descent into his underground refuge is not merely an
escape from his political enemies but also an attempt to isolate himself to figure out
which of the examples of manhood he will adopt and which he will ignore. Invisible
Man can then be seen as the narrator's attempt to justify his choice of a form of
masculinity which affirms the diversity, creativity and survival value of African-American experiences, past and present. Although his quest for identity in a maelstrom of masculinities is an often-used theme in white American literature, Ellison's narrator chooses a form of African-American manhood over forms of manhood made from goals constructed by whites.

Ellison revises Wright's limited and sociological vision of manhood, supplanting it with a multitude of possibilities, both destructive and nurturing, emerging from African-American communities. These possibilities are offered to the narrator by both African-American and white men of differing ages and social levels. The Invisible Man eventually chooses to follow the example of lower-class African-American men with Southern origins. These men accept themselves, their origins, and their actions. Brother Tarp, Jim Trueblood, Peter Wheatstraw, and the Invisible Man's grandfather are not high in social class, nor do they resort primarily to violence to resist the effects of white racism. They can be viewed as criminals or as somewhat morally deficient in the terms of many members of white society and their African-American allies in Invisible Man. However, these African-American men not only represent the existence of worthwhile African-American traditions, but they also nurture the continuance of these traditions through their stories, rituals, and objects.

These African-American men do not work alone for acceptance and survival. They are nurtured and often equalled by the African-American women who take active roles in shaping their lives and in supporting the communities to which they belong. These women are also very independent and capable of acting on their own while
preserving their communities.

Ellison particularly affirms the nurturing qualities of African-American women through Mary Rambo, who is aptly viewed by many critics, such as Donald Petesch and Claudia Tate, as a figure reminiscent of African-American folk traditions (Petesch 29; Tate 168). She is a caring and kind woman who takes in the dizzy Invisible Man after the protagonist is dismissed from the hospital.\(^5\) In her nurturing yet independent aspects she directly contradicts the emasculating, limiting mother figures of Wright’s works.

Mary, in the words of a man who helps her bring the Invisible Man to her boarding house, is "always helping somebody" (220). She does assume an amount of control over the protagonist, but this is only because he cannot take care of himself when she finds him wandering out of the subway into Harlem. Mary does not harass the Invisible Man as Mrs. Thomas harasses Bigger; one of the first things she tells him is that she does not want "to git in your business" (220). Even though she pushes the Invisible Man to lead the African-Americans of Harlem, this is more of a presented possibility for the young man than an imperative he must follow for her approval or survival.

Independence is also one of Mary’s chief characteristics. She is able to kill the vermin that live in her apartment herself, unlike Mrs. Thomas, who needs Bigger to slay the rats in their apartment. She is quite politically aware, with all her "talk about leadership and responsibility" (Ellison, Invisible Man 225). Mary is at once a nurturer and an activist and is a powerful counterexample to Wright’s possessive, nagging, and inactive mother figures. She is working for change in the African-American community
while supporting those in it who need help. Mary is an important nurturing and supporting figure both for the protagonist and for her Harlem community.

A number of critics have belittled Mary as a stereotypical African-American Mammy, including Barbara Christian in "Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature" and Carolyn W. Sylvander, in "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Female Stereotypes" (Christian 15; Sylvander 79). Ann Folwell Stanford, in "He Speaks for Whom?", states that Mary "fulfills a classic stereotype of black women" in her community orientation and in her nurturing ways (25). But although Mary is almost archetypally compassionate and caring, she gives the Invisible Man impetus to work for the African-Americans in Harlem. Her most inspirational speech to the narrator is clear evidence of her activist outlook. She tells the Invisible Man that "it's you young folks what's going to make the changes." Mary declares that the protagonist and other African-American young men like him have to "lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher" (222). In light of statements like these, Kerry McSweeney, in Invisible Man: Race and Identity, is correct in suggesting that Mary has an activist spirit (94). Because of her ability to live independently and the sense of community support and activism she evokes, Mary is more than just a stereotype.

Mary Rambo is complemented by other African-American female characters who take active roles in Invisible Man. These women will not stand for exploitation or injury from African-American men or from whites. Kate, Trueblood's wife, takes revenge on her incestuous husband by smashing his face with a "ten pound sledge," and later assembles a group of women to keep her husband away from Matty Lou (Ellison,
Moreover, the women of Harlem are just as active in the riot as their male counterparts. These women take advantage of the rebellious atmosphere and revenge themselves upon the whites who have held them down, and on these whites' property. One of the rumors about the riot's origin is that it has been caused by an African-American mother's attack on a policeman who has corralled her son for stealing. The women in Ellison's novel are both beneficent parts of their communities and independent within them. They defend the interests of their families, their communities, and the rights of African-Americans in general.

These women are a far cry from Wright's inactive and restrictive female characters, although their active role in Ellison's novel is often overlooked by critics who concentrate more on their seemingly stereotypical nature. There is a claim furthered in the novel that African-American men cannot survive without women. Mary Rambo, Kate, the slave woman who appears at the beginning of the novel, and other women are essential to the growth and survival of African-American men. As Trueblood says to his wife when he returns home, "I'm a man and a man don't leave his family" (64). He knows that he belongs with his wife despite the pain he has caused for Kate and Matty Lou. Love and loyalty between African-American men and women are emphasized in Invisible Man while in Wright's works these kinds of relationships appear infrequently.

African-American women, in Ellison's opinion, do not hold their male counterparts back from growth and self-realization. These women provide both nurturance and models for endurance for African-American men, especially the Invisible Man. Furthermore, both men and women can equally work against racism and its
injurious effects. Ellison’s African-American men, unlike Wright’s protagonists and supporting characters, cannot survive away from the influence and support of women. African-American women and men, as presented in Ellison’s novel, need each other and their communities to be happy, to survive, and to fight off the onslaught of racism and discrimination.

The cumulative weight of Ellison’s emphasis on community clearly echoes and revises the dichotomy between young African-American men and their families in Wright’s works. Mary Rambo and the other characters who value African-American folk culture and African-American history in *Invisible Man* share a common space with the blues songs, rituals, and other folklore traditions used in the novel. Together these characters and traditions provide a rich contrast to and a revision of Wright’s individualistic view of African-American manhood and his pessimistic portrayals of African-American life. While Wright shows Bigger Thomas, Richard, and Dave leaving their African-American communities both externally and internally, Ellison displays his protagonists at first trying to move away but eventually moving back to a form of manhood and life that is creative, supportive, and enduring.

Robert Stepto defines this kind of movement as typical of *Invisible Man*, a narrative of immersion. In this type of narrative, an African-American narrator goes on "a ritualized journey into a symbolic South" to help ease the pain of solitude (167). While the Invisible Man’s narrative stems from his underground contemplations of his life and his southern African-American roots, the positions of Wright’s protagonists, to Stepto, are quite different.
For Stepto, Wright's works are instead narratives of ascent. *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" all involve the separation of their protagonists from African-American people and traditions for the prizes of literacy and/or individuality, at the cost of what Stepto terms as "familial or communal postures" (167-68). Dave, Richard, and Bigger all move away from their families and their African-American communities. They ascend from the morass of their pasts into an isolation which is shown to be better than suffocation in what Wright depicts as stagnant and frustrating African-American community life.

As Ellison presents it, ascent into manhood away from the African-American community works neither for the Invisible Man nor for other African-American men his age. Ellison's novel shows that moving into the white world on its terms does not work for young African-American men, no matter how hard they may try to achieve the white world's goals or to cover those characteristics which identify them as African-Americans. The Invisible Man realizes that the goals pursued by white men hold little value for African-Americans. However, many African-American young men continue to pursue these goals. The effects of their efforts are apparent when the Invisible Man returns to Men's House after having his illusions of success in the North dispelled:

The moment I entered the bright, buzzing lobby of Men's House I was overcome by a sense of alienation and hostility. My overalls were causing stares and I knew that I could live there no longer, that that phase of my life was past. The lobby was the meeting place for various groups still caught up in the illusions that had just been boomeranged out of my head:
college boys working to return to school down South... the younger crowd for whom I now felt a contempt such as only a disillusioned dreamer feels for those still unaware that they dream-- the business students from southern colleges, for whom business was a vague, abstract game with rules as obsolete as Noah's Ark but who yet were drunk on finance. (223)

The previous passage evokes the numerous African-American men who, like the young Invisible Man, believe that they can make adult careers for themselves by conforming to the wishes and the mannerisms of whites. The ability to achieve the dreams these young men pursue, which are very similar to the fabled American dream of success, is offered half-heartedly by the white American establishments they try to please. The Invisible Man comes to realize that the price of obtaining the rewards of white progress is detachment from African-American culture and from other African-Americans. Furthermore, some of the "alienation and hostility" at Men's House may arise from the fact that it is occupied solely by competitive African-American men who are away from women and from folk culture. Ellison cumulatively makes it clear in *Invisible Man* that the price of success within the terms of northern whites is not worth its scanty rewards.

In the place of working for dreams that are not his own, the Invisible Man finally realizes his common bond with the African-Americans of Harlem and of his Southern past. Throughout the novel, African-Americans representing Southern folk traditions attempt to bring the Invisible Man to an awareness of his membership in their community. He eventually reaches an awareness of this bond and an acceptance of his shared folk past and the failures of his recent past. This realization places him in
contrast to Wright’s protagonists, such as Bigger Thomas.

Bigger is alienated from other African-Americans at first and then is condemned to death because of his violent contact with a white world that denies both his expectations and its own promises. The whites in Native Son will not accept the humanity of Bigger nor of other African-Americans, and thus his alienation is partly their fault. Furthermore, no African-American man exists for Bigger Thomas who can be a father figure or a model for manhood. The African-Americans in Wright’s novel do not offer him any useful guidance after his imprisonment. Bigger is hopelessly alienated from both African-Americans and whites and thus must ultimately accept himself on his own before he is executed.

The Invisible Man, in contrast, is able to surpass his alienation without the help of whites and with the help of African-Americans. While Richard, Bigger, and Dave uproot themselves from the South and from African-American communities in general, the Invisible Man does not run away from his past. The narrator of Ellison’s novel goes within his hole to cultivate his awareness of his being and of the collective history he has inherited from his relatives and from his adopted fathers and mothers. This history, although mentioned and used by Wright within his works, does not support the existence of his characters. In contrast, African-American history is an integral part of the Invisible Man’s narrative act of self-construction through which he is able to survive and to plan his re-emergence.

Even as the narrator of Ellison’s novel sits in meditation within his underground hideout, he knows that he will soon return to the surface world to attempt again to lead
the common African-Americans of Harlem. He is aware that "there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (503). Houston Baker and Claudia Tate have denied the Invisible Man’s assertion that he will return, insisting that the protagonist will never leave his isolated hole (Baker, "Richard Wright and the Dynamics of Place" 106; Tate 171). Ellison, in an interview with John O’Brien, denies claims such as these. The author maintains that the primary reason why the narrative is available to the reader is because the Invisible Man emerged and mailed it off to a publisher (73). Thus the Invisible Man, who is already communicating with the outside world, is intended by the author to rise to the surface, having accepted himself as an admittedly "invisible" African-American man and as a part of his community.

Although the Invisible Man is finally presented as being able to work through his self-definition in the terms of African-American history and African-American male examples, Ellison is not attempting to distance himself from his white readers. In his presentations of African-American manhood and masculinities, Ellison uses themes derived from Western white culture and literature. These references, especially the young protagonist’s early dream of moving from his Southern lower-class roots to Northern riches, serve to make Ellison’s ideas relevant to white readers. The author does present African-American male characters who have beneficial characteristics specific to African-American culture, but there are echoes in these characters and their surroundings of familiar Western literature and culture forms and themes. These echoes not only place these characters in an intermingled African-American and white context but also make them more accessible to readers not previously acquainted with African-
American culture. References to Western literature and culture help Ellison to define his ideals of African-American manhood, embodied in the Invisible Man's grandfather, Jim Trueblood, Peter Wheatstraw, Brother Tarp, and ultimately, the Invisible Man. These men are dedicated to their families and accept both their pasts and themselves. They are determined not to acquiesce to domination by whites and African-Americans who would define them narrowly or negate their worth. These men consider themselves men on terms that are meant to appeal to both African-American and white readers. Ellison's portraits of positive African-American manhood are thus intended to be understood and valued by white and African-American readers.

All in all, Ellison recalls many of the themes of self-reliant manhood and separation from African-American communities which Wright uses. Ellison uses these themes, not with the intention of insulting or negating Wright, but rather with the motive of revising, parodying, and enriching the older author's portraits of angry and individualistic manhood with positive aspects of African-American community life. In Ellison's opinion, an African-American cannot survive, let alone define what kind of man he will become, without affirming the importance of his past, his community, and the role of African-American men and women in his development.
CONCLUSION

Ellison, while influenced by his one-time mentor and collaborator Richard Wright, expanded the definition of African-American manhood beyond Wright's determined and often negative boundaries both for his African-American and his white readers. His efforts have been complemented by the works of recent historians, sociologists, and other writers. Wright had used as resources works written by researchers, such as Robert Park and Horace Cayton, who have since been revealed to be limited and racist in their conceptions of African-American life. The works of Park, Cayton, and others have been supplanted in recent years by a renaissance in African-American gender and sociological scholarship that has replaced the works of previous sociologists with more varied and positive depictions of the lives of African-Americans. Scholars such as bell hooks, Herbert Gutman, Robert Staples, and others have challenged longtime assumptions about black masculinity and African-American families. In essence, they have also challenged Wright's perceptions of pathological African-American families, perceptions that ally him with Parkian theories of sociology and to popular white perceptions of African-American life. As the past theories of Park, Cayton, and others are being challenged, so are Wright's attitudes toward and presentations of African-American men, women, and families.

The vision of African-American life Wright presents does have definite value in its depiction of the sufferings and struggles of some African-Americans and in its detailed
presentation of the deepness of racial prejudice in America. Ultimately, however, Wright's vision of African-American masculinities as inferior to what the white world can offer is incomplete and misleading to his white and African-American readers. This vision, however appealing or accurate it may have seemed to white readers, leaves out the contributions of African-American men, women, and the communities composed of these people to the growth and survival of young African-American men.

In contrast to Wright's limited and incomplete visions of African-American manhood, Ellison uses his own experience with and knowledge of African-American people and traditions to reassert the intrinsic values of his community. The variety of African-American men and women Ellison presents provide guidance and sustenance to the Invisible Man's quest for manhood. The Invisible Man's ultimate attitude that "diversity is the word" exemplifies Ellison's idea of the existence of a multitude of African-American identities, attitudes, and masculinities that characterize and that help to support thriving African-American communities (Ellison, Invisible Man 499). Perhaps Ellison's lifelong efforts to explicate this philosophy through his fiction and criticism to African-Americans and whites broke the ground for the more affirming portraits of African-American masculinity and femininity that have appeared in African-American fiction since Invisible Man. Wright's examples of the frustrations and struggles of African-American manhood can be viewed as detailed and brave criticisms of racial injustice and the effects this injustice has had on African-Americans. The portraits of African-American manhood that emerge in Wright's works, however, are severely limited. To provide a fuller picture of African-American communities, they must be
complemented by the writings of Ralph Ellison.
NOTES

1. For discussions of the socially constructed nature of gender, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Judith Lorber, Paradoxes of Gender (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

2. bell hooks, in "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992) singles out Staples for overemphasis on the importance of African-American men in their communities and for a refusal to "deconstruct normative thinking" about gender roles (97). Despite a male bias that appears occasionally in his works, Staples repeatedly conveys information about African-American men and their roles in communities that could have otherwise remained submerged.

3. The portrayal of Bessie’s death has long been considered one of the most negative aspects of Native Son. When Wright first decided to have Bigger kill his girlfriend, his collaborator Jane Newton considered the murder both "unnecessary for the development of the plot and insufficiently motivated." Wright demanded that Bessie be killed just the same (Fabré 171).

4. It has been posited by Mark Busby in Ralph Ellison that the "surface similarities ... are obvious" between The Man Who Lived Underground, a 1944 novella of Wright’s, and Invisible Man. However, both Busby and William Goede, in "On Lower Frequencies: The Buried Men in Wright and Ellison," Modern Fiction Studies 15 (1969) assert that Ellison’s protagonist is more heroic than Wright’s. They also point out that Ellison moves away from the "static world" depicted in Wright’s novella, enriching it with the African-American history that pervades Invisible Man (92, 490).

5. Mary Rambo was to have a greater role in Invisible Man than she has in the published version novel. In her article "Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man," Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington: Howard University Press, 1987) 163-172, Claudia Tate describes the rejected chapter "Out of the Hospital, and Under the Bar." This chapter introduces Mary, who works at the hospital where the Invisible Man is staying and who frees him from the machine in which he is trapped. She brings him back to folk consciousness through feeding him both food and images from African-American folklore. This chapter was later published in Soon One Morning: New Writing By American Negroes, 1940-1962, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) 242-90.
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