

“The Man Who Lived Underground” by Richard Wright

November 19, 2021

Richard Nathaniel Wright (September 4, 1908 – November 28, 1960) was an American author of novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction. Much of his literature concerns racial themes, especially related to the plight of African Americans during the late 19th to mid-20th centuries suffering discrimination and violence. Literary critics believe his work helped change [race relations in the United States](#) in the mid-20th century.^[1]

Early life and education^[edit]

A historic marker in [Natchez, Mississippi](#), commemorating Richard Wright, who was born near the city

Childhood in the South^[edit]

Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, covers the interval in his life from 1912 until May 1936.^[2] Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4, 1908 at Rucker's Plantation, between the train town of [Roxie](#) and the larger river city of [Natchez, Mississippi](#).^[3] He was the son of Nathan Wright (c. 1880–c. 1940) who was a [sharecropper](#)^[3] and Ella (Wilson) (b. 1884 Mississippi^[4] – d. January 13, 1959 Chicago, Illinois) who was a schoolteacher.^{[3][5]} His parents were born free after the [Civil War](#); both sets of his grandparents had been born into [slavery](#) and freed as a result of the war. Each of his grandfathers had taken part in the U.S. Civil War and gained freedom through service: his paternal grandfather Nathan Wright (1842–1904) had served in the 28th [United States Colored Troops](#); his maternal grandfather Richard Wilson (1847–1921) escaped from slavery in the South to serve in the [US Navy](#) as a [Landsman](#) in April 1865.^[6]

Richard's father left the family when Richard was six years old, and he did not see Richard for 25 years. In 1911 or 1912 Ella moved to [Natchez, Mississippi](#) to be with her parents. While living in his grandparents' home, he accidentally set the house on fire. Wright's mother was so mad that she beat him until he was unconscious.^{[7][8]} In 1915 Ella put her sons in Settlement House, a [Methodist orphanage](#), for a short time.^{[7][9]} He was enrolled at [Howe Institute](#) in [Memphis](#) from 1915 to 1916.^[3] In 1916 his mother moved with Richard and his younger brother to live with her sister Maggie (Wilson) and Maggie's husband Silas Hoskins (born 1882) in [Elaine, Arkansas](#).

While many associate Wright with Chicago and New York, he didn't arrive in a northern city until late in 1927. He lived in Chicago for ten years and then moved to New York City in 1937. He'd only remain in the U.S. for less than a decade more, making the decision to relocate to Europe in response to the extreme racism he experienced in America.

After a brief trip to France in 1946, Wright made the decision to move to Paris with his wife and two daughters. He never returned to the U.S. again.

Despite Wright's decision not to return to America after leaving shortly after the end of World War II, he traveled extensively across the globe. He documented visits to various parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and his writing shifted from primarily works of fiction to nonfiction [political essays](#). He collaborated with Aimé Césaire, the notable Francophone writer and thinker from Martinique, in the late 1940s. Most significantly, perhaps, Wright traveled to Bandung, Indonesia, on the island of Java, in 1955 to observe the Bandung Conference—the first meeting of independent (postcolonial) states in Asia and Africa. He recorded his observations on [human rights](#) concerns, along with his thoughts on the significance of an Anglophone literary tradition, in *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956). Wright ultimately described the Bandung Conference as “an important juncture of history in the making.”

Wright joined the [Communist party](#) in the early 1930s soon after moving to Chicago. However, he left the party in 1942 and explained his reasons in an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled, “I Tried to Be a Communist” (1944). Readers can see some of Wright's critiques of communism and its relation to racial justice in *Native Son* through the character of Boris A. Max.

he Richard Wright Papers currently are held at the [Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library](#) at Yale University.

While Wright was living in Paris, his novel *Native Son* was adapted for the screen by Pierre Chenal. The film was Argentinian, and it didn't fare especially well in the United States. Yet those facts aren't among the most surprising pieces of information we have about the film. Most striking is that, as a 40-year-old man, Wright himself decided to play the role of the young Bigger Thomas. It's hard to find a copy of this film today, but if you can get your hands on one, you'll be very surprised to view Wright in the role of the most famous literary character he created

Wright finished “The Man Who Lived Underground” in 1942, six years after the Supreme Court decided in *Brown v. Mississippi* that police officers could not billy-club a confession out of a man, 47 years before officers in New York City coerced confessions out of a group of teenagers who would become known as the Central Park Five, and 78 years before a Minneapolis officer put a knee on the throat of George Floyd and held it there. More than any other Black writer, Richard Wright recognized that understanding Black folks' relationship to the police is central to understanding racism.

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Questions for The Man Who Lived Underground, Nov 2021

1. Why does Fred Daniels become the man who lived underground?
2. What philosophical text is alluded to in the cinema scene?
3. What is the significance of the references to the underground man's actual name?
4. How does Fred's odyssey in the sewers lead him to realize how unfairly the world above really operates?
5. What is the symbol of The Dead Baby?
6. What were some of the voyeuristic opportunities to peek into the world still going on as before, but without any recognition of his existence below ground than when he was above with them? i.e. the sight of a naked man on a white table shocked him; he hadn't experienced an undertakers lab.
7. Although Fred did not commit the murder he had confessed to in writing, his minor thefts were for survival, why did he rob the jewelry and others?
8. Why did Fred give up the safety beneath ground to talk to the cop, Lawson?
9. The issue of a confused identity is a running theme. In what ways was Fred mistaken for someone else?
10. The ironic theme of the story is that it is only by going into the darkness that Fred becomes capable of seeing the light. How did his perspective change by going underground?
11. Besides the corrupt legal system, who else contributes their share of maintaining systemic unfairness?

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Discussion answers for person leading discussion:

1. Why does Fred Daniels become the man who lived underground?

The story opens in the middle of an action scene. A man has been running from the police for long enough that he realizes he needs to find somewhere he can hide and get some rest. The only logical possibility at that particular moment in that particular place is through an open manhole and down in the sewer. Sirens ring in the distance as he peers down through the manhole into an abyss too dark to see anything, but filled with the sound of rushing water. He literally faces the worst of possible options: fear of the unknown versus fear of the known. The piercing shrill of a cop car's siren suddenly seeming almost on top of him clarifies the greater of these two fears so he takes a gamble on an angel he doesn't know rather than the devils he does know. After all, he's a black man who has just been coerced into falsely confessing to the murder of a white woman.

2. What philosophical text is alluded to in the cinema scene?

Published the same year as Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* and two years before Sartre's play *No Exit*, “The Man Who Lived Underground” has come to be regarded as one of the seminal examples of 20th century existential literature. In other words, the experience that Fred Daniels undergoes while underground is a labyrinthine search for the meaning of man's existence in a world that he comes to realize is utterly absurd. One of the earliest entries into the canon of philosophic texts which every student of the discipline must expect to study is the Plato's “Allegory of the Cave.” Boiled down to basic, the thrust of the parable is that most people spend their entire lives exploited into an existence devoid of authentic meaning because they are like people chained to the floor forced to watch images from behind projected as shadows onto a wall. When Fred's journey through the underground labyrinth brings him into the movie theater and he gazes down upon the faces laughing enormous optical illusions projected onto a silver wall he is spurred to an epiphany: “These people were laughing at their lives, he thought with amusement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves.” It is an observation that could have been lifted right from Plato himself.

3. What is the significance of the references to the underground man's actual name?

Wright makes some very precise calculations regarding the standard literary markers of identification of his protagonist in this story. His actual name is mentioned just once and even then it appears in an off-model way. The moment occurs when he comes across typewriter on a desk during his subterranean adventures and takes the time to type his name. Not really experienced with the intricacies of how to operate the machinery, not only do his first and last names come out as one word, but they are all in lower case: freddaniels. In addition to the unusual distinction of not regularly reminding readers of his character's name, Wright also goes much lighter than might be expected on descriptions affirming the race (or any immediately obvious physical indicator, for that matter) of his protagonist. In essence, this man living underground ceases to become a black man because he's not described as a black man just as he doesn't become a short man or a bearded man or a bald man. The point is that when one isn't routinely characterized through a specific reference, those specifics eventually fade away in meaning. The case of Fred ceasing to remember his own name indicates this reality isn't limited to how others see a person, but can also impact how they view themselves. If no one is around to pejoratively refer to him as “boy” or worse, then Fred will no longer ever stop to think of himself in those negative, prejudicial terms just as if no one is around to remind him of name, he can forget he was ever even call that.

4. How does Fred's odyssey in the sewers lead him to realize how unfairly the world above really operates?

Fred is young, black, and on the run from police who have beaten a false confession to murder out of him. He escapes down a manhole and spends the bulk of the story exploring the dark world of the sewer and the opportunity for furtive observation and entrances into the world situated directly above. His odyssey in the sewers is a trek that ironically leads him to social illumination of how unfairly the world above really operates.

5. What is the symbol of The Dead Baby?

Generally speaking in the grand history of literary symbolism, babies tend to represent innocence. A dead baby, therefore, is an ironic commentary upon the death of innocence. Fred—the underground man—comes across the naked, lifeless infant trapped within the darkness of the sewer after having been caught by debris—early in the story. Overcoming his anxiety at the sight, he carefully dislodges the baby so the current can carry it forward. Thus, the dead baby becomes specifically a symbol that foreshadows Fred's own loss of innocence as a result of being trapped by circumstances in the sewer.

6. What were some of the voyeuristic opportunities to peek into the world still going on as before, but without any recognition of his existence below ground than when he was above with them

One of these opportunities present another surreal and shocking sight of a naked man on a white table with a tube running from the corpse to a glass container. Further observation quickly reveals the scene is not as sinister as it first appeared: he is looking into the lab of an undertaker.

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- 7. Although Fred did not commit the murder he had confessed to in writing, his minor thefts were for survival, why did he rob the jewelry and others?**

Fred may not have committed the murder he confessed to in writing, but opportunities underground have afforded him the chance to engage in criminal activity. Most have been minor thefts for the sheer purpose of survival, but having stumbled over an opportunity to rob a jewelry store, he takes it. Later, he sees the same three cops who beat a confession out of him trying to pin the jewelry robbery on Thompson, store's night watchman. Thompson later commits suicide.

- 8. Why did Fred give up the safety beneath ground to talk to the cop, Lawson?**

Lawson is one of the three cops whose idea of law enforcement is beating confessions out of men like Fred and Thompson. When Fred attempts to serve justice by sacrificing his safety beneath ground to tell him of all the guilty acts he has witnessed, Lawson becomes judge, jury and execution, shooting the man dead and sending him back down into the darkness.

- 9. The issue of a confused identity is a running theme. In what ways was Fred mistaken for someone else?** The

identity of the protagonist of this story is in flux right from the title; doomed never to be known as [Fred Daniels](#), but always as the man who lived underground. On a narrative level his identity is also immediately put into jeopardy since the police have either mistaken him or chosen to identify him as a murderer. The issue of a confused identity is a running a theme: at various time he is mistaken for a paying cinema customer and a store employee. On the flip side, the wrong people have been identified as responsible for the crime he actually has committed while underground. Even he himself is confused by what comes outs when he tries simply to write his name using a typewriter for the first time: freddaniels. And, of course, there is the fact that he is essentially reduced to the level of an animal unworthy of living in society aboveground by the officer who shoots him, [Lawson](#)

- 10. The ironic theme of the story is that it is only by going into the darkness that Fred becomes capable of seeing the light. How did his perspective change by going underground?**

The entire perspective on everything is changed by going underground. From the sewer, Fred peers into the world existing aboveground from backdoors and by going in through the outdoors and breaking through walls and peering through tiny cracks in the windowsill. This literal change in perspective offers him access to a metaphorical change as he comes to understand how things really are and how everything is constructed to keep people from looking too closely so that they might, as Lawson puts it, “wreck things.”

- 11. Besides the corrupt legal system, who else contributes their share of maintaining systemic unfairness?**

The cops beat a confession out of Fred. After the cops fail to beat a confession out of [Thompson](#), the night watchman accused of stealing the jewelry, the man commits suicide. Fred is publicly accused in the media of being an escaped killer on the loose even though his confession should not be legally admissible, meanwhile the jewelry store employee who also stole from the same vault as Fred goes scot-free. The entire system is corrupt rather than just a few so-called bad apple. bad cops. The media and supposedly law-abiding citizens all contribute their share to maintaining the systemic unfairness and equality of the system.