The Boy Who Was Almost a Man: Richard Wright's *Rite of Passage*Jeraldine R. Kraver, University of Northern Colorado

Rite of Passage is lesser-known among the works of Richard Wright. Although much of the story was written between 1944 and 1945, the novella was not published until 1994.1 At that time, the publisher, HarperCollins, designated the work "young adult," in part, perhaps, because the protagonist is a "young adult" or because the editors sought to tap the growing and lucrative market of adolescent literature, a "genre" nascent in the 1950s and flourishing for publishers since the 1960s and 1970s. Issues of how to characterize the novel might explain why a work so eminently teachable has not found its way into more classrooms and why scholars have paid scant attention to a narrative that is, as Arnold Rampersad explains in his Afterword to the HarperCollins edition, "from the heart of Wright's consciousness and creativity" (117). A close look at the novella, which possesses all the craftsmanship and skill of Wright's longer and more daunting novels, will reveal just how suitable an option it is for the post-secondary classroom.

Rite of Passage is significantly shorter and less complex than Wright's other character studies, most notably Native Son and Black Boy. Regardless, the thematic connections to such works are obvious. Not only is Rite of Passage more accessible than Wright's longer novels, it is perhaps more contemporary and relevant. The spareness of the narrative and the lack of Wright's often intrusive polemical rhetoric spotlight the power of Wright's prose. Here, he argues without preaching, and the novella offers lessons

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¹ The hardcover version of the novella appeared in 1994 published by HarperTrophy, an imprint of HarperCollins. The address for information directs inquiries to "HarperCollins Children's Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers."

critical to students' lives within and beyond the classroom. The story of Johnny Gibbs, with its intimations about social responsibility and individual agency, prepares readers to meet Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* or Cross Damon in *The Outsider*. Meanwhile, because the notion of the novella's very title is at issue in the lives of students, the book almost palpably informs the classroom.

Of course, instructors can approach *Rite of Passage* armed for rigorous analysis: if a literary device is in *Holman's Handbook*, it can be applied to the novella. On a generic level, the book is a *bildungsroman*, with all the qualities associated with coming-of-age stories. In terms of plot, the story fits neatly into the pattern associated with Freytag's Pyramid with exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement. There are heroes and villains and symbols driving themes. These qualities make it an ideal text for literary study. Further, in its focus on issues of race identity, the novella well suits curricula that seek to incorporate multicultural texts.

For college students, this young adult work challenges a familiar pattern in American literature, for *Rite of Passage* neatly subverts the naïve optimism of the American myth that industry and honesty pave the way from poverty to respectability. In fact, Wright widely read Horatio Alger and, while completing *Rite of Passage*, he was also reviewing Alger's complete works (Butler xxv). The novella also offers, Robert J. Butler notes, Wright's only significant female presence in featuring "a sensitive and revealing treatment of important gender issues" (316). Thus, *Rite of Passage* examines how "'feminine' values can play an enormously positive role in Johnny's development, while aggressively 'masculine' values lead to his destruction."2

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² Here, it is not my intention to agree with or dispute Butler's appraisal of the novella; rather, I want to reveal the multiple approaches available to instructors when considering the work.

Clearly, there are a variety of entrances into the text, one for students of all ages and ability levels. There are very few single texts that can so aptly serve so many purposes.

The Boy Who Preceded the Men

Regardless of how one chooses to engage the text, it is useful to understand the genesis of *Rite of Passage* and its place within Wright's oeuvre. Because the narrative of *Rite of Passage* might be unfamiliar, an overview is in order. Rite of Passage tells the story of a pivotal day in the life of 15-year-old Johnny Gibbs. On this day, Johnny, an A-student and dutiful son, learns not only that he is a foster child but that anonymous forces in the city's Welfare Department are moving him to a new family. He runs from the news, commits a petty larceny to survive the first few hours on the streets of New York City, and is introduced to the "Moochers," a gang of boys who have escaped the foster-care system. The gang survives through muggings and robberies. They have a surrogate parent in the form of a Fagin-like fence, Gink. After inadvertently insulting the leader of the gang, Johnny is forced to fight for his survival against the murderous "Baldy." His brutal defeat of Baldy earns Johnny the moniker "Jackal" and the role of the gang's new leader. Although the boys now defer to Johnny, it is they who educate him on the ways of street crime. Alongside his fellow Moochers, Johnny mugs a man who walks through Morningside Park. With their loot, the gang retires to Gink's to wait out the day before beginning their next night of crime. There the story ends.

Rite of Passage, at over 100 pages, accosts the reader by being told entirely from Johnny's point of view. Compared with Wright's other protagonists, Johnny has lived a protected and even privileged life. The feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness that trouble Johnny's literary

brothers do not disturb him. In the first chapter, Johnny sits in school while the "white woman teacher's silver voice caressed his ears" and a "flood of sun washed the classroom." Like any 15-year-old boy, he longs to be on the streets, "his nostrils yearned for fresh air, his legs for movement, his voice for shouting"; however, what he thinks about most is the "bowl of steaming beef stew waiting for him upon the kitchen table" (1). Despite these distractions, Johnny is a proud and serious student. The teacher's approval on handing him his report card of straight A's makes him "glow with pleasure" (3). His life, he thinks to himself, is "peaches and cream[. . .]. The world was rosy and he was happy" (3). Clearly, when *Rite of Passage* opens, Johnny's consciousness is a million miles away from that of the angry Bigger or the tortured Cross. However, he is about to learn how quickly his world can fragment and disappear.

Johnny's world is not defined by the poverty and misery that define Bigger's. In the opening pages of *Native Son*, Bigger understands little more than the visceral feelings of powerlessness and despair: "He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (13). If Bigger consciously avoids recognizing the meaninglessness of his life, it is meaninglessness that drives and defines Cross Damon and fuels his "Dread." Early in *The Outsider*, he ponders,

Why were some people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be? Why did some hearts feel insulted at being alive, humiliated at the terms of existence?[...] It was as though one was angry, but did not know toward whom or what the anger should be directed; it was as though one felt

betrayed, but could never determine the manner of the betrayal. (24)

Bigger's suffering and Cross's introspection are absent in Wright's characterization of Johnny. However, despite these differences, the line separating Wright's older protagonists and the adolescent Johnny is fragile: Bigger is a more worldly Johnny and Cross a grown-up Bigger. Both Bigger and Cross feel trapped by degrading images of themselves—Images constructed by others. The violence that directs the actions of each character is the result of the feelings of powerless that define their worlds. To act, Wright suggests, is to seize power, and both Cross and Bigger act without considering others.

By story's end, Johnny Gibbs has begun as well to sense, even if he cannot articulate, the extent of his powerlessness. Suddenly, the world that had seemed "so solid" appears like a "sick dream" (16). Wright describes Johnny's rejection of that world, "As he stared at [his mother and sister] he felt a new sense of distance; they were rejecting him; he could not look into their eyes and see himself reflected there anymore. At the same time there was rising in his heart a counterproductive feeling that said: I too reject you. I'll reject you before you reject me[...]" (20). Unlike Bigger and Cross, who were defined by images constructed by others that devalued and demeaned them, Johnny has seen only eyes of approval at home and school. Now, angry and feeling unwanted, he "scanned the white and black faces around him, feeling for the first time in his life a certain fear of them" (27). The new world into which Johnny is thrust is described as "threatening," "less dependable," and "unstable." This is a world all too familiar to men like Bigger and Cross in Wright's "adult" novels.

As a young adult novel, Rite of Passage fits the broad criteria of a work written for and marketed to young adults. Like many works of this genre, Wright's novella has fewer characters, with any adult characters playing a minor role. Events are compressed; there are no sub-plots; and the story is compact in length. In addition, although Johnny's world is 1940s Harlem, there is a sense of immediacy to the story rather than any appeal to historical setting. In its rapid pacing, direct dialogue, and spare language, the narrative reflects the tempo of the world of young adults (Nilsen and Donelson 27). Thus, the various features that keep the story spare, combined with the lack of a resolution, suggest that Wright wanted nothing to stand between readers and their recognition how society shapes individuals. However, what the novella does not offer in its young-adult generic appeal is a tidy resolution. For the most, young adult literature is optimistic or at least hopeful (England and Mertz, 123). Even those works that challenge protagonists with brutal and stark realities conclude by equipping adolescent protagonists with new values and a deeper understanding of self, prepared now to weather any future challenges. Describing the classic conditions of the young adult novel, Marc Aronson addresses "the innocent passion of adolescence, when children sense the layers of human existence, experience the desires, and work out the ideals that will add depth to their character and provide them with a road map on their journey" (21). Wright's narrative offers no pat answers, and Johnny Gibbs seems, if anything, directionless at the conclusion of *Rite of Passage*. In this inconclusiveness, Wright's novella speaks directly to a more adult audience.

Rite of Passage's resistance to generic categorization has meant that it has likewise resisted sustained scrutiny. Those scholars who do address it tend to assign to Johnny notions more sophisticated than expected from a sheltered 15-year-old boy whose biggest concern is lunch. For example,

Butler, in "Richard Wright: *Rite of Passage*," summarizes Johnny's dilemma: "Should he accept an identity arbitrarily constructed and imposed upon him by a social world which is unable to perceive him as a human being, or should he rebel absolutely, completely rejecting the standards of conventional society, and begin the task of building a radically isolated self?" (315-16). Butler is not alone in this view. E. Lale Demirturk, in "The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness: Richard Wright's Rite of Passage," examines the identity imposed on Johnny in terms of "the social markers of whiteness," in particular, classroom success: "Johnny's identity is secured by school and home, the social institutions of the dominant white culture [. . .]."3 Readers like Butler and Demirturk thus focus, reasonably and legitimately, on ideological issues of whiteness as a signifier of power and control, a source of privilege, and the estimate against which blackness is measured. Demirturk posits that, in joining the Moochers, Johnny is rejecting an identity defined in part by his educational achievement, a convention reflecting "the tenets of white supremacy, the "ideology of whiteness," and "the social institutions of the dominant white culture." However, given Wright's work with Harlem youth and advocacy for programs providing for domestic stability and educational opportunity (not to mention Johnny's longing, throughout this terrible day, for intervention from family and, perhaps even, his white teacher), Demirturk's assessment seems ideological at the expense of the pragmatic. Both Demirturk and Butler envision an intentionality in Johnny's actions that we see in older and later of Wright's protagonists, an intentionality atypical of adolescents. The introspection and reflection we see in *Native Son* or *The Outsider* or *Black Boy* can swirl and muddy the waters.

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³ Demirturk, Lale. "The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness: Richard Wright's *Rite Of Passage*," appeared in MELUS (Summer 2001). Accessed on-line at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi m2278/is 2 26/ai 80852619

In *Rite of Passage*, Wright sticks to the surface so readers can see their reflections in the form of their complicity in Johnny's story.

The Writer in His Work

Brought to the classroom, *Rite of Passage* is a text compact enough for us to juggle complementary biographical and historical information. Similar works in these terms are few and far between (The Red Badge of Courage springs to mind). And, the "back-story" tells us much about the compositional process. Four years after *Native Son*, Wright began his novella, tentatively titling it The Jackal. During this time, he had become increasingly involved in issues of juvenile justice. He raised funds for the Wiltwyck School in New York, a school for delinquent children whose most famous graduate, Claude Brown, celebrated the school in his autobiographical Manchild in the Promised Land. Wright praised Wiltwyck in his journal: "Wiltwyck is a damn good cause [. . .] because it is trying to rehabilitate broken boys, emotionally smashed boys who need a chance" (qtd. by Rampersad 136). As well, Wright attended juvenile court with a welfare officer attached to the Wiltwyck School. He interviewed young men, and the story of one of these boys provided the basis for the story of Johnny Gibbs.

By January 1945, Wright had written 100 pages of a story of a gang of boys who abduct a woman and are afraid to release her because she can identify them. Wright's goal, according to biographer Michel Fabre, was to study "the pathological behavior resulting from fear and anger" (271). *The Jackal* was never published. Instead, in 1959, Wright reworked the story into a novella titled *Leader Man*, later *Rite of Passage*. Wright's agent, Paul Reynolds, suggested that he develop the story of the gang's violent exploits further, but Wright demurred. Rather than offer a broad study of juvenile

delinquency, Wright wanted to examine the psychology of the nascent criminal. As Wright explains in his journal, he wanted to turn his attention to the study of youth violence and the origin of antisocial behavior. In a letter to Edward Aswell, Wright describes his rationale for character development while offering a glimpse into the writer's process of crafting a plot:

Treetop [the leader of the gang] will become the pre-schizoid.4 I'll make some event happen to him that will leave a great emotional mark; he'll run away from home and fall in with a Harlem gang, join up; but he'll always be withdrawn when the opportunity presents itself. And, he'll be able to react brilliantly when something comes up that presents a way for him to feel that he is acting out his drama, which is primarily emotional. (qtd. in Fabre 585, n.35)

Researching the story was an opportunity for Wright to read widely in sociology and psychology and to study and discuss clinical cases with his friends, psychiatrists Ben Karpman and Frederic Wertham. It was with Wertham, who shared Wright's concern for the mental conditions of the youth in Harlem, that Wright founded LaFargue, a free psychiatric clinic. In support of the clinic, Wright penned "Psychiatry Comes to Harlem" and "Juvenile Delinquency in Harlem," articles which combine the history of the clinic's establishment with a denunciation of American complacency towards racism and the situation of inner-city youth. *Rite of Passage* became a fictional rendering of what Wright encountered among the troubled youth in Harlem.

Beyond the general context to Wright's composing *Rite of Passage* is

⁴ In the final version of the novella, Treetop is not the leader of the gang. He is a follower in the gang led by Baldy.

a kind of emotional connection often not demonstrable between authors and their works. Assessing *Rite of Passage*, Rampersad describes the novel's world as "an almost surreal and macabre representation of ghetto youth who have lost hope." It seems, he adds, that Wright himself was losing hope as his "vision of urban black culture [became] more sour with the passing of years" (128). As evidence, Rampersad notes that the fight for dominance between Johnny and gang leader Baldy is "perhaps the single most protracted violent struggle in all of Wright, with a knife and a broken bottle and a savage kick to the head" (129). Paradoxically, for other of Wright's more violent protagonists, the acts that signal their separation from society occur in a split second; however, the emotions that lead to these acts have been building all their lives. In Rite of Passage, the "protracted violent struggle" does not result from mounting anger; rather, it is orchestrated by the Moochers and Johnny is merely caught in a moment dictated by the gang. Through Johnny's story, Wright examines the conditions that separate individuals from the mainstream and lead to the violence that is frequently part and parcel of larger rituals.

Our Students and Their Rite[s] of Passage

When I teach the novella, to students in a general education Introduction to Literature course, a literature survey course, or a Twentieth Century American Literature course for English majors, I begin from the notion of "rites of passage." The ritual of passing into adulthood offers an accessible heuristic for entering into Wright's novels; after all, most of the students in these classes are, at 18, 19, or 20, in the midst of passing through a multitude of rites. Rarely in our classrooms do we have such an occasion: teachers and students learning from each other *and* about themselves. To say rites of passage, though, is one thing; to plumb what is at

issue psychologically and socially is another.

My attention to rites of passage (although not a huge leap given the novella's title) was inspired, in part, by Houston Baker's essay, "Reassessing (W)right: A Meditation on the Black (W)hole." Baker, seeking an appropriate trope for understanding Wright's works, selects the "black hole." definition, a black hole is the site of a once-luminescent star that appears totally black because the force of gravity allows no light to escape. Although invisible, astronomers can locate these sites from the energy fields emitted from cosmic particles. Surrounding the black hole is an "event horizon," a membrane that, Baker explains, "prevents the unaltered escape of anything that passes through" while, at the center, space and time disappear and all objects are "squeezed to zero volume" (133). As Baker summarizes, "The black hole as trope presents [. . .] a massive concentration of energy that draws all objects to its center" (134). Of course, I am simplifying Baker's artful, linguistic use of the black hole trope (in particular the homonymic hole and whole). Here, I want to address the locus of this black hole--a place Baker conceives as "a subcultural (underground, marginal, or liminal) region in which a dominant, white culture's representations are squeezed to zero volume, producing a new expressive order" (140). In his focus on the inevitable "life-crisis" of black identity, Wright captures, Baker argues, the "pattern of rites" marking this underground or liminal experience.

To help us understand these moments of crisis and the pattern of rites associated with them, Baker alludes briefly to the work of Belgian folklorist Charles-Arnold Van Gennep and his seminal 1909 text, *The Rites of Passage*. This reference to Van Gennep's anthropological work, with a title almost exactly that of Wright's novella, is, of course, irresistible. And,

although it is unclear whether Wright ever read Van Gennep,5 what we do know is that *The Rites of Passage* was reprinted in 1960. We also know that Van Gennep's theories about the tripartite structure of rites of passage were central to the work of University of Chicago anthropologist Victor Turner, who was writing during the early years of the 1960s while Wright was working actively with doctors and social scientists on the subject of youth violence and revising *Rite of Passage*. Ultimately, whether we can locate the "six degrees" that separate Wright and Van Gennep or Wright and Turner is irrelevant. That Wright is addressing both the idea of rites of passage and the notion of liminality is apparent, not merely in the title but in the structure and events of the novella itself.

Van Gennep postulates a tripartite schema defining all rites of passage. Throughout their lives, he explains, individuals pass from one social position to another. These times of critical transformation are moments of instability. They are, in Van Gennep's term, "life crises" marked by rituals, activities, and/or symbols designed to smooth one's passage to the next position. As noted above, this attention to transition and transformation is why *Rite of Passage* works well with secondary and post-secondary students alike: they, like Johnny Gibbs, are in a state of flux, on the limen between adolescence and adulthood. As a result, although the stages of Van Gennep's schema manifest in vastly different ways, the notion and the process of transformation are remarkably familiar to students after they read Wright's novella. In *separation*, the first stage of Van Gennep's schema, initiates are separated from the normative social structure composed of everyday and familiar references. At this stage, rituals are designed to strip

⁵ In my correspondence with Houston Baker, Professor Baker indicated there was no evidence to suggest whether or not Wright was familiar with Van Gennep's work.

initiates of their identities through physical relocation or by erasing aspects of a previous identity. Other rituals involve ordeals that redefine the initiates' social standing. During the second stage, *transition*, initiates progress towards a new social status. They inhabit a transitional marginality that resembles neither their past nor the coming state. This "liminal" stage is marked by social ambiguity; it is a period during which the initiates are at once vulnerable and dangerous. In the final stage, *reincorporation*, initiates are reincorporated into society with newly defined identities and changed social status. Van Gennep calls this process "aggregation."

Anyone familiar with Wright's canon will immediately recognize aspects of Van Gennep's schema. Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon pass through periods of separation and marginality. In these long and complex novels, critical transformations take place over a period of time—months, in the case of Cross Damon, and days, in the case of Bigger Thomas. In Rite of Passage, Johnny Gibbs crosses the threshold from one social position to another in fewer than 24 hours. Central to these and nearly all the works in Wright's canon is this liminal period in his protagonists' lives, and at issue is whether the protagonists can achieve reincorporation. Bigger, figuratively, and Cross, both figuratively and literally, have separated from a normative social structure defined by the dominant white culture. Both men recognize that adherence to the roles prescribed for blacks by white society are no longer tenable while, at the same time, American society is unprepared to address issues of racism. Reincorporation for either Bigger or Cross is impossible: Bigger is fated to die, and, similarly, Cross' status as an outsider makes "the kind of life he felt he wanted" (504) impossible. As a result, Cross chooses to live outside the social structure, one that he finds stifling, even dehumanizing:

If he was to be loyal, to love, to show pity, mercy, forgiveness; if he was to abstain from cruelty, to be mindful of the rights of others, to live and let live, to believe in such resounding words as glory, culture, civilization, and progress, then let them demonstrate how it was to be done so that the carrying out of these duties in the modern world would not reduce a healthy, hungry man to a creature of nervous dread and paint that man's look of the world in the bleak hues of meaninglessness. (504)

Both Bigger and Cross live nearly the entirety of their very long stories on the margins of a society, never moving beyond their marginalized state and crossing the threshold back into society.

The threshold Johnny Gibbs seemingly crosses at the close of *Rite of Passage* does not afford him any kind of authentic understanding. As he falls into a troubled sleep, Johnny recalls the (perhaps imagined) cries of the woman who witnessed his first public act of violence as a Moocher: "'YOU BOYS! YOU BOYS!" (107). Thinking to himself, Johnny identifies with the woman, especially with her horror at what he has done. He wants nothing more than to be discovered by her and returned to the home he once knew. It is not to be, for we have been warned by Wright earlier in the story that Johnny's fate is sealed: "The feeling of estrangement that had set in when his mother and sister had told him that he was to go to a new home now draped him like a black cowl; it was a feeling that was to remain with him all his life, a feeling out of which he was to act and live [. . .]" (52). Johnny is separated from the normative social structure he knew. And, although he does not quite understand fully why it is so, he knows that any return to the world he knew—that is, any aggregation—is impossible.

For Johnny, like so many of Wright's protagonists, at issue is the apparent impossibility of reincorporation. If they are to survive, they must locate a new place, a new community. When Johnny meets the members of the Moochers and shares fragments of his story, Baldy advises him, "we're the Moochers, see? You're a Moocher too. Billy sent you to the right *hole*, all right" (67, emphasis added). Here, Baldy refers to the gang's underground hideout in the basement of the local school as "the right *hole*"; however, he could just as easily be referring to Baker's metaphoric "black hole" that "subcultural (underground, marginal, or liminal) region in which a dominant, white culture's representations are squeezed to zero volume, producing a new expressive order" (140).

In exploring the life crisis of black identity, Baker builds from Van Gennep's schema by beginning with the individual's awareness that he represents "a zero image"; he is "an alien [...] in the white world's structures of perception" (141). The response to this realization is separation and withdrawal. In *Rite of Passage*, Johnny Gibbs' crisis begins when he arrives home from school to discover that the world he has known all his life is based on a lie. As we have seen, his feelings of rejection are immediate and violent, resulting in what Wright describes as the "counterproductive feeling that said: I too reject you" (20). Johnny runs from the news and into a world that suddenly seems "dark, alien, and unreal" (28). During the hours that follow, he is torn between the desire to return to the protection of the world he had known, the normative social structure, and feelings of anger and rejection.

As Wright's narrative reveals, the social structure that defined Johnny's world did not ultimately embrace him because it did not accept him as fully human. Cast out, "He felt the world he had known had forgotten him and was moving on as though he had never existed" (36). As he wanders the

city streets, Johnny imagines himself not running from his world. He considers seeking help from his teacher, whose approval earlier that day "made him glow with pleasure." but he concludes "she was white and she lived somewhere far away [...] [so] she'd only call the police" (3, 33). Johnny is trapped between the good boy he was and the violent young man he is in danger of becoming. In his fight with Baldy, Johnny's actions are disturbing and atavistic: he feels "triumphant" as he "sink[s] his teeth [into Baldy's arm] until they hit the bone" (78). Wright describes Johnny as "wild" in his effort to "blot out [Baldy] once and for all" (79). Assured of his victory, Johnny "snap[s] out of his mood," horrified at what he has done. Baldy, however, accepts Johnny's victory and relinguishes leadership of the gang. Here, Johnny learns the first of many lessons about life on the street: "[He] realized that Baldy accepted no mercy and gave none, that he lived a life that was as hard on himself as it was on others [. . .]" (82). Although he does not feel "hard and brutal enough" to become the "Leader Man" of the Moochers, Johnny understands that he has no choice. The acts of petty larceny, his decision to join the Moochers, and his assumption of leadership solidify Johnny's separation from the normative social structure he knew.

At the second, liminal stage, when the initiate realizes the impossibility of reintegration into white society, the notion of the black hole is pivotal. Baker's "black initiand" has passed the event horizon into the black hole, and he is permanently altered. There can be no aggregation; rather, Baker posits, "an enduring *Black Difference* is the only world available.[. . .] The achievement of *Black (W)holeness* means that accepted and acceptable roles meted out for blacks by a dominantly white society are no longer feasible" (143).

Thus, the initiand enters into the center of the black (w)hole, an expressive black community that has defined its own sense of black

wholeness and created a new order of existence. For Johnny Gibbs, the Moochers become his new community. He is introduced to their secret hideouts. The letter of introduction, prepared by his friend Billy, is marked with the gang's secret symbols and codes. To Johnny, it feels like a "passport to his new life" (57). Billy is envious as he hands Johnny the letter of introduction, advising him, "'Gee, Johnny, you're a man now'" (51). While awaiting the arrival of the gang that will become his new community, Johnny recognizes that he must create a new life for himself. Although he is "filled with a strange sense of void," at the same time, there rises in him "out of the debacle of his former feelings, a new self [. . .]" (57). This liminal phase is key to Johnny's future. His violent act seemingly bars him from reincorporation into the community he knew; however, in the community that defines his new existence it is violence that seals his membership.

In the 1960s, Turner, in studying rites of passage, directed his focus to the second stage of Van Gennep's schema, this transition or liminal phase (Secular Ritual 36). Turner extends and expands Van Gennep's notions, asserting that some individuals fail to move beyond this stage: it might, he explains, "cease to be a mere transition and become a set way of life" (Secular Ritual 37). He identifies a category of those who remain in a state of liminality, "neither-this-nor-that, here-nor-there, one-thing-not-the-other" (Secular Ritual 37). They are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention [. . .]" (Ritual Process 95). Johnny Gibbs and his fellow Moochers typify Turner's liminaries. They embody the properties characterizing liminal figures. For example, liminaries achieve a kind of structural invisibility. They are, Turner explains, secluded "from men's eyes" and might be required to speak in whispers, if at all. The Moochers are, in fact, invisible from society. Runaways from the welfare system, they do not go to school. Billy explains to Johnny, "They sleep days and hunt at

night" (53). Invisibility, Johnny learns, is key to survival on the street: "'The one thing to remember in this game,' Baldy reveal[s], 'is the problem of hiding, to keep off the streets in the daylight hours. [. . .] Don't let folks learn your face'" (98).

Turner also explains that liminal figures may be treated as embryos in a womb or as infants being born. They lose their preliminal name in a process of being "ground down into a sort of homogenous social matter [...] [a] process accomplished by ordeals" (*Secular Ritual* 37). As an inexperienced member of the gang, the laws of life on the street are revealed to the neophyte Johnny in a brutal fashion. "'Wrong moves,'" he is told, "'have cost dopes their lives'" (70). The boys offer detailed lessons in the art of mugging, from selecting victims to incapacitating them to avoiding the police. Johnny's most significant act, his defeat of Baldy, earns him his new name, "Jackal." It is a victory that both frees and frightens him: "In assuming the role of the leader man of the gang, Johnny was both scared and glad: glad because he at last had crossed the frontier of childhood and had become a man, and scared because he feared failing his friends, scared because he did not feel hard and brutal enough" (92).

Despite his fears, Johnny leads as the gang scouts its victim. But he realizes, Wright tells us, "If he did this, he would be forever cut off from the people he had known" (95). Even as the gang stalks their victim, Johnny is reticent. Although he "[yearns] to acquit himself well in the strange dark world he had bargained to enter," deep inside him "a protest yelled [. . .]" (96). Wright explains, "Had there been a way for him to have returned to his old home, he would have done so, but since he had to choose a new home, we wanted to make the choice himself" (96). Even in the minutes before the attack, Johnny longs for a home, "[he] wanted to flee to the shelter of one of those dark looming houses and knock on the door and be admitted into the

warmth of a home where people lived with smiles and trust and faith; he yearned to sink to his knees to some to some kind old black woman and say: "Help me . . . I can't go through with this! (102). But it is too late for Johnny, and he concludes, "He was even a fool to think of finding a home again" (102). There is no family outside the Moochers.

Clearly, during this liminal period, the nature of human interrelatedness changes. The Moochers typify liminal beings who, living outside the "structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical systems" of normative society, develop a sense of solidarity or oneness with others of their ilk (Turner 90). Paradoxically, within this "structureless" place, a unity emerges. This liminal social system is described by Turner as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured *communitas*:

the small groups which nourish communitas, do so by withdrawing voluntarily from the mainstream not only of economic but also of domestic familial life. [. . .] People who are similar in one important characteristic [. . .] withdraw symbolically, even actually, from the total system, from which they may in various degrees feel themselves "alienated"[. . .]. (Secular Ritual 47)

The members of the communitas are represented symbolically as "a kind of *tabula rasa*, pure, undetermined possibility" (Meyerhoff 382). Onto the neophyte the group inscribes its wisdom. Street gangs are one example of such a communitas, but so are more mainstream groups, including civic organizations, fraternities, or social clubs. The Moochers reflect the kind of communitas Turner describes down to their "hole," their wisdom about life on the street, and the rituals and symbols that serve to consolidate their identity.

Although Van Gennep envisioned the second stage of his tripartite schema as a transition--thus, the notion of "limen" or threshold--Turner

observes that increasingly this "twixt-and-tween state has become in itself an institutionalized state" and transition has become a permanent condition (107). Those who fail to proceed beyond the liminal stage are considered outsiders who threaten the order of society. Turner explains, "from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of 'structure,' all sustained manifestations of communitas must appear as dangerous and anarchical [. . .]" (*Ritual Process* 109). Liminal figures and members of such "out-groups" inhabit the fringes of society and work against the normative systems of the social structure defined by the "in-groups," who see the liminal individual or the communitas as a threat to their way of life. The in-group seeks to preserve its identity against the real or perceived threats posed by such out-groups. There emerges a renewed will to maintain the norms and behavior on which its social life depends (*Ritual Process* 111).

Yet, Turner suggests, although they are situated on the margins and reticent towards normative social structures, liminal beings may nonetheless be a source of renewal, innovation, and creativity. The cultural forms, rituals, symbols, myths, and philosophies created by liminal individuals or societies offer models for re-visioning reality and "man's relationship to society, nature, and culture" (*Ritual Process* 129). According to Turner, the members of communitas—or the denizens of Baker's black hole—offer "a kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments or societal change" (*Secular Ritual* 45).

For Wright, the fact that a good boy like Johnny Gibbs can go so horribly bad or that children on the margin are compelled to become predators suggests that society is developing in a dangerous way and clearly signals a need for societal change. In *Rite of Passage*, as in *Native Son*, Wright sought to depict what he called "the environmental factors which [make] for [. . .] the extreme conduct of inner-city youth" ("How Bigger Was

Born" xv). This assertion about the role of environment applies as much to the story of Johnny Gibbs as it does to that of Bigger Thomas: "the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction" (xvi). In other words, environment determines whether an individual will cross the threshold into an "out-group" or aggregate into the "in-group."

Recounting the circumstances that finally compelled him to tell the story of Bigger Thomas, Wright describes his experiences at the South Side Boys Club in Chicago: "Here I felt for the first time that the rich folk who were paying my wages did not really give a good goddamn about Bigger, that their kindness was prompted by at bottom a selfish motive" ("How Bigger Was Born" xxvii). Rather than reflect a real commitment to improving the lot of boys in the city's Black Belt (who compose an "out-group"), such clubs offered distractions to keep boys off the street and protect the property of the white community nearby (the "in-group"). Deep down, Wright recalls, he hoped such clubs would fail, their charges then crossing the Black Belt into the white community and showing their benefactors "that life is stronger than ping pong [. . ,] that full-blooded life is harder and hotter than they suspect" (xvii). Wright's sense of the specious sincerity of the Samaritans he encountered and his "fantasy" of retribution are played out in *Rite of Passage*.

First, when officials from "The City" (not unlike Boys and Girls clubs, charged with supporting youth) who upset Johnny's world seem unaware or unwilling to recognize the devastating effects of their actions. Johnny's sister laments, "'What's happened isn't our fault'" (15). His mother explains that keeping from Johnny his status as an orphan was not her choice, "'The City

folks told me not to tell you [...]" (15). The Gibbs family is powerless in the face of bureaucracy: "'the City folks came and told me that you had to leave us. They didn't say why.[...] I begged 'em, prayed to 'em, but they said that was the rule. And there was nothing I could do'" (16). By rejecting his new foster family, Johnny, like Bigger and Cross, rejects the authorities that present themselves as benefactors yet deny him agency. Such are the forces that create a Bigger or a Cross from a Johnny Gibbs.

Later in the story, as Wright secretly hoped, Johnny and the Moochers do select whites who venture into Harlem as their victims. Describing his murder of a white man, Baldy expresses his amazement that whites would even travel to Harlem: "'How come whites trust us so when they know damn well what they've done to us? If I was white, I'd never trust a nigger sonofabitch [. . .]" (100). Likewise, the gang explains why they favor white victims: "'But I'd rather jump a white man,' Treetop said. 'Yeah. Somehow it feels better,' Skinkie said" (104). If the Moochers represent a communitas, then Wright warns his readers that the identity they assert is a dangerous one. They pose a threat to normative society, and that society must recognize its complicity in the creation of the Moochers and of the boys who inhabit the liminal place outside society.

Adolescents, Adults, and Social Agency

Johnny's impulsive acts and the choices that result offer important lessons for readers of all ages. However, Wright's passion and concern was both for the fate of boys like Johnny and the failures of society--mostly white society--to protect and support kids lost in the system or falling through the cracks. *Rite of Passage* depicts the fate of the adolescent compelled to make choices for which he is emotionally and intellectually unprepared. And Johnny is a smart kid with a loving family, living in a supportive environment. When threatened, however, even he responds impulsively and viscerally,

without reflection or introspection, rejecting what he has known. Without guidance and support, Johnny, like his fellow Moochers, is not simply in danger of falling through the cracks, he is in full flight. There is, Wright depicts, no safety net for such boys, no path for reintegration--and not just for Johnny, but for Baldy and Treetop and Skinkie and Bigger and Cross.

Wright's message, then, is directed to those with power to make change. All of which brings us back to the question of genre and speculation both about Wright's intent and that of HarperCollins in classifying the work as young adult. Although I am reluctant to differ, I would suggest that the genius of Wright as an artist is that, regardless of his intention, Rite of Passage speaks equally and with equal power both to adolescent and adult audiences. Rite of Passage is not simply an adolescent novel; it is a portrait of adolescence, a time on the cusp of solidifying one's destiny. We recognize that the self-protection that guides the actions of a Bigger or a Cross will henceforth guide those of Johnny Gibbs. There is no human reconciliation, no recovery or [re]establishment of self at the end of Rite of Passage. That is not necessarily a bad thing; after all, Bigger and Cross achieve their epiphanies and die. Whatever recognitions of "humanness" "intersubjectivity" (Cooke 160) they achieve comes too late. Our fear, at the end of Rite of Passage, is that it may be too late for Johnny Gibbs as well. If Native Son ends with Bigger's "accepting what life had made him" ("How Bigger Was Born" xxxiii), Rite of Passage asks the reader to consider what life is making of boys like Johnny Gibbs. We know, Wright suggests, what must be done. He confronts us--as adults, as members of the in-group, as those outside the black hole--with our responsibility and guilt until the words of the anonymous woman, "YOU BOYS! YOU BOYS!," trouble the readers' sleep in the same way it does that of Johnny Gibbs.

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