

## Questions for *Uncle Tom's Children* by Richard Wright

### "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow"

1. What does the bottle-throwing episode teach Wright about who he is?
2. What lessons does he learn from his jobs?
3. Are these lessons deceitful?
4. What mistake does "Richard keep making"?

### "Big Boy Leaves Home"

1. The story opens with four black boys engaged in the banter known as "the dozens." Why does Wright begin the story with a ritual involving verbal insults?
2. How does Wright use a classic taboo regarding contact between blacks and whites to activate tragic events in the plot?
3. What are the justifications for the soldier's killing of Lester and Buck? For Big Boy's killing the soldier? What point does Wright wish to make about justice and inequality? About justice and power?
4. How does Wright use the themes of innocence and guilt in the story?
5. Note the pastoral setting in which violence initially occurs. What do other acts of violence in the story lead us to conclude about the nature of violence? About the nature of the community wherein it occurs?
6. Is Big Boy's witnessing of the lynching of Bobo a part of his education?
7. How important are issues of migration and displacement in the story? Why does Big Boy flee to Chicago rather than to another part of the United States?

### "Down by the Riverside"

1. What is the moral conundrum in this story?
2. Does the story seem to have unusual significance if we compare reactions to the Mississippi River flood of 1927 with those evidenced in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the breaking of the levees in New Orleans in 2005?
3. Why are the military officials so insensitive to Mann's grief over the death of his wife? Why is Mann addressed as "boy"?
4. Why does Mann rescue Mrs. Heartfield and her two children when he knows they will identify him as the person who murdered Mr. Heartfield?
5. Why does Mann decide to die before the agents of justice can kill him? What is the significant difference between his decision and the one Silas makes in "Long Black Song"?

### "Long Black Song"

1. What does the clock symbolize in the story? What is the importance of Sarah's telling the salesman "Mistah, we don't need no clock.... We jus don't need no time, Mistah"? How do the conflicting ideas about time symbolize conflicting ideas about what is valuable in life?
2. Do Wright's very poetic descriptions of Sarah's feelings and emotions make her actions ambiguous? What are her feelings about her husband Silas? How does she respond to the music from the graphophone? Is her act of adultery forced or consensual?
3. How does the young salesman exercise male and racial privileges in "seducing" Sarah? Why does Wright associate sex with economic exchange?
4. What kind of man is Silas? Why is his agonizing outburst about oppression and betrayal delivered over the body of the man he has killed? Is his speech one version of a "long black song"?
5. Why might female and male readers respond in radically different ways to the story? What questions are left unanswered in the story?
6. How do Sarah's ideas about World War I and killing affect our interpretation of Silas's statement "N them white folks beat up a black soljer yistiddy. He wuz jus in from France. Wuz still wearing his soljers suit. They claimed he sassed a white woman..."? How were ideas about patriotism reconciled with unwarranted mistreatment of black WWI soldiers in the South?

### "Fire and Cloud"

1. What is the importance of Christianity in the story? How do Old and New Testament allusions give shape to Reverend Taylor's thoughts? How do they serve as elements of characterization? Why must Reverend Taylor be "enlightened" by a "baptism of fire"?
2. How does the structure of the story illuminate the folk saying about being between a rock and a hard place?
3. Does Wright use situational irony by having the Communists wait for Taylor in the Bible Room and the Chief of Police wait for him in the parlor?
4. What do comments by Reverend Taylor's son Jimmy suggest about a new generation of *Uncle Tom's Children*?
5. What roles do the black church and the black minister play in social movements in the South? How should we deal with the political principle of separation of church and state in our interpretations of the story?

"Bright and Morning Star"

1. Why does Wright borrow the title from a hymn?
2. What aspects of Southern life were threatened by cooperation between black and white Communists in the 1930s?
3. What is the nature of the new faith that Aunt Sue learns from her sons Sug and Johnny-Boy?
4. "If in the early days of her life the white mountain had driven her back from the earth, then in her last days Reva's love was drawing her toward it...." How does the white mountain function as a metaphor? What does the passage reveal about Aunt Sue's conception of self?
5. Why does the sheriff not hesitate to brutalize an old black woman? What does his action reveal about racial hatred? Is Aunt Sue's reaction to her beating similar to or different from Reverend Taylor's reaction to his whipping in "Fire and Cloud"? How does gender function as a determining element in their responses? What does Aunt Sue's suffering and ultimate sacrifice for her son Johnny-Boy suggest about a woman's determination?