Native Son Study Guide

Native Son by Richard Wright

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Introduction

Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son,* was the first book by an African-American writer to enjoy widespread success. In fact, Wright's novel generated much popular and critical interest before it was even published. Three hours after the book hit the shelves, the first print run sold out. Soon a school of black American writers—the "Wright School"— began modeling itself after the author in the belief that candid art about the black American would lead to positive political change. Wright suddenly became the most recognized black author in America. Today, the novel is essential to an understanding of twentieth-century American literature.

Native Son introduces a figure familiar to midtwentieth- century America, the lone man backed into a corner by discrimination and misunderstanding. Frustrated by racism and the limited opportunities afforded black men in society, Bigger strikes out in a futile attempt to transgress the boundaries and limits of his position. He murders Mary Dalton, the only child of a wealthy real estate magnate, by accident. Yet the act of murder gives his life meaning, and the consequent trial and execution are incidental. Bigger Thomas remains a seminal figure in American literature.

Overview

Native Son was the first novel by an American writer to deeply explore the black struggle for identity and the anger blacks have felt because of their exclusion from society. Many black American voices would echo Wright—James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, to name a few—in telling the story of an alienated protagonist whose search for self-identity and the freedom it brings must be achieved at all costs. Violence, drugs, and even religion serve as escape mechanisms for blacks who cannot face the fact that society considers them nonbeings.

Native Son's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is searching for the power that will enable him to break free of the trap society has set for him. In the first section of this three-part novel, Bigger is forced to work for a rich family, the Daltons. Mr. Dalton earns his wealth as a slum lord for black real estate; Mrs.

Dalton is blind. Their daughter, Mary, is a member of the Communist party, a fact she conceals from her parents by pretending that the meetings she. attends with her lover, Jan Erlone, are university classes. Bigger not only chauffeurs Mary and Jan to the meetings but is required to escort them into black ghettos where Wright satirizes their supposed liberal attitudes toward blacks. After one such foray into the ghetto, Bigger helps an intoxicated Mary to bed, thinks momentarily of taking sexual advantage of her, decides against it, but is interrupted by Mrs. Dalton, who cannot see what is happening. Bigger accidentally suffocates Mary in an attempt to silence her and keep his presence secret. Bigger, who often wanted to kill whites, has become a victim of chance. He responds by putting Mary's body in the furnace, but the smoke gives him away and he is forced to flee with his girlfriend, Bessie Mears.

When Bessie becomes a burden he cannot bear, he kills her as well. Bigger is arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death in a trial that turns into a political farce.

In the novel's last section, while Bigger is waiting execution, Wright works out his themes: that both Bigger and his white captors must understand and take responsibility for the conditions of black life; that Bigger's execution must spark recognition in the legal system that there is no justice for blacks; and that self-identity is the most important element in the search for meaning in life.

Author Biography

Richard Nathaniel Wright came from a family of slaves still living at Rucker's Plantation in Roxie, Mississippi. His father, Nathan Wright, was a sharecropper and his mother, Ella Wilson, had left the teaching profession to farm with him. Richard was born on September 4, 1908, the first of two boys. Three years later, the family moved to Ella's parents' house in Natchez.

The family moved to the city of Memphis, Tennessee, in 1913 but were soon deserted by Richard's father. For the next few years, Ella did her best to feed and clothe the boys, but her first of a series of paralytic strokes ended their independence. They moved a number of times. First, Ella and her boys went to the prosperous home of her sister Maggie and brother-in-law Silas Hoskins in Elaine, Arkansas. Unfortunately, Hoskins was murdered by a white mob, and Maggie, Ella, and the boys fled to West Helena.

Over the next few years, Ella's illness forced the extended family to care for Richard while she lay abed at her mother's. Richard eventually went there to be near her. In 1920, Richard attended the Seventh-Day Adventist school taught by his Aunt Addie. He later transferred to the Jim Hill School where he skipped the fifth grade. His last stint of formal schooling was at Smith-Robertson Junior High. While there, he published his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," in the *Jackson Southern Register.*

After finishing junior high, Wright moved several times until, in 1928, he settled in Chicago. Over the next decade, he wrote poetry, published various stories in magazines, supervised a youth program, and wrote for Communist newspapers. Wright started his first novel in 1935, but "Cesspool" (posthumously published as *Lawd Today* was not successful. By 1938, with a $500 prize for *Fire and Cloud,* Wright had embarked on a career as an author. That year, *Uncle Tom's Children* appeared to good reviews.

In 1940 Wright became a best-selling author when *Native Son* was carried by the Book-of-the- Month Club. Personally, however, reconciliation with his father failed, and his first marriage, to Dhima Rose Meadman, ended. Almost immediately, he married Ellen Poplar and had two daughters —Julia in 1942 and Rachel in 1949.

After *Native Son,* Wright published some articles and left the Communist party. In 1945, *Black Boy* was published and received excellent reviews while topping best-seller charts. In 1947, Wright expatriated to France.

Wright refused to return to America, partly because the FBI had been attempting to charge him with sedition since 1942. He published the first American existentialist novel, *The Outsider,* in 1952. He continued to write until he died of a heart attack in Paris, France, on November 28, 1960. *Native Son* gained new importance as the "Black Power" movement of the 1960s adopted Wright as a source of their inspiration. Wright's work continues to be controversial, widely read, and heavily examined.

About the Author

The image that emerges from Richard Wright's autobiographical short stories, Uncle Tom's Children, is that of a lonely and troubled childhood. Born September 4, 1908, near Natchez, Mississippi, Wright was the unwanted son of sharecroppers. His father deserted the family when Wright was five years old, after his mother suffered a stroke.

Wright's mother became totally paralyzed when he was ten, and his domineering grandmother attempted to force her religious fanaticism on the boy, who rebelled. At fifteen, he left home for Memphis, Tennessee, and at nineteen moved to Chicago, where he began to write seriously. There, in 1931, he published the story "Superstition" in Abbot's Monthly Magazine and became involved with the John Reed Club and the Communist party. Soon his poetry began to appear in leftist literary magazines such as the Anvil, Left Front, New Masses, and International Literature. While working for the Illinois Federal Writer's Project, he wrote his first novel, Lawd Today, but did not try to publish it in deference to the potential objections of the Communist party. Some of the stories later collected in Uncle Tom's Children and Eight Men (1961) did appear at this time: "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936) in the New Caravan, "Silt" (1937) in New Masses, and "Fire and Cloud" (1938) in Story.

Wright moved to New York City in 1937, where he wrote a guidebook to Harlem for the New York Writer's Project and reported for the Daily Worker. The successful publication of Uncle Tom's Children and a Guggenheim fellowship allowed him to work on Native Son, which on its publication in 1940 immediately made Wright more widely read than any previous black novelist.

Wright's dramatization of the novel, which he coauthored with Paul Green, soon appeared on Broadway, and within a year Wright published the folk history 12 Million Voices (1941) in collaboration with photographer Edwin Rosskin.

At the suggestion of his publisher, Wright turned to autobiography. Black Boy, an account of the author's first seventeen years, was another critical success for him; but embittered by the racism and materialism of American society and encouraged by a trip to Europe in 1946, Wright left the United States and established permanent residence in France in 1947. His next novel, The Outsider, grew out of Wright's involvement with the Temps Modern.es group gathered around Jean-Paul Sartre and demonstrated the influence of existential thinking. During the remaining years of his life, Wright published two more novels, Savage Holiday (1954) and The Long Dream (1958); a collection of essays and lectures entitled White Man, Listen! (1957); and three books of travel and sociopolitical commentary, Black Power (1954), The Color Curtain (1956), and Pagan Spain (1957). He died of a heart attack in Paris on November 28, 1960. Eight Men (1961), his unpublished first novel Lawd Today (1963), and American Hunger (1977), a continuation of his autobiography, were published posthumously.

Plot Summary

Book I: Fear

Bigger Thomas lives in a one room ghetto apartment with his brother, Buddy, his sister, Vera, and their mother. One morning, a rat appears. After a violent chase, Bigger kills the animal with an iron skillet and terrorizes Vera with the dark body. Vera faints and his mother scolds Bigger, who hates his family because they suffer, and he cannot do anything about it.

That same morning, Bigger has an appointment to see Mr. Dalton for a new job. Feeling trapped, he walks to the poolroom and meets his friend Gus. Bigger tells him that every time he thinks about whites, he feels something terrible will happen to him. They meet other friends, G. H. and Doc, and plan a robbery. They are afraid of attacking a white man, but none of them wants to say so. Before the robbery, Bigger and Jack, another friend, go to the movies. They are attracted to the world of wealthy whites in the newsreel and feel strangely moved by the tom-toms and the primitive black people in the film. But they feel they do not belong to either of those worlds. After the cinema, Bigger attacks Gus violently. The fight ends any chance of the robbery occurring. Bigger realizes that he has done this on purpose, hoping to get out of the robbery scheme.

When he finally goes to see Mr. Dalton at his home. Bigger is intimidated and angry. He does not know how to behave in front of Mr. Dalton. Mr. Dalton and his blind wife use strange words. They try to be kind to Bigger but they make him very uncomfortable because Bigger does not know what they expect of him. They hire him as a chauffeur. Then their daughter, Mary, enters the room, asks Bigger why he does not belong to a union and calls her father a "capitalist." Bigger does not know that word and is even more confused. After the conversation, Peggy, the cook, takes Bigger to his room and tells him that the Daltons are a nice family but that he must avoid Mary's communist friends. Bigger has never had a room for himself before.

That night, he drives Mary to meet her boyfriend, Jan. Jan and Mary infuriate Bigger because they try to be friends with him, ask him to take them to the poolroom where his friends are, invite him to sit at their table, and tell him to call them by their first names. Then Jan and Mary part, but Mary is so drunk that Bigger has to carry her to her bedroom when they arrive home. He is terrified someone will see him with her in his arms, but he cannot resist the temptation of the forbidden, and he kisses her.

Just then, the bedroom door opens. It is Mrs. Dalton. Bigger knows she is blind but is terrified she will sense him there. He tries to make Mary still by putting the pillow over her head. Mrs. Dalton approaches the bed, smells whiskey in the air, scolds her daughter, and leaves. Just then, Bigger notices that Mary is not breathing anymore. She has suffocated. Bigger starts thinking frantically. He decides he will tell everyone that Jan took Mary into the house. Then he thinks it will be better if Mary disappears and everyone thinks she has gone for a visit. In desperation, he decides to burn her body in

the house's big stove. He has to cut her head off but finally manages to put the body inside. He leaves it there to burn and goes home.

Book Two: Flight

After the murder and disposal of the body, Bigger has irrevocably changed. The crime gives meaning to his life. When he goes back to the Daltons, Mr. Dalton notices his daughter's disappearance and asks Bigger about the night before. Bigger blames Jan. Mr. Dalton sends Bigger home for the day, and Bigger decides to visit his girlfriend, Bessie. Bessie mentions a famous case in which the kidnappers of a child first killed him and then asked for ransom money. Bigger decides to do the same. He tells Bessie that he knows Mary has disappeared and will use that knowledge to get money from the Daltons, but in the conversation he realizes Bessie suspects him of having done something to Mary. Bigger goes back to work. Mr. Dalton has called a private detective, Mr. Britten. Sensing Britten's racism, Bigger accuses Jan on the grounds of his race (he is Jewish), his political beliefs (communist), and his friendly attitude towards black people. When Britten finds Jan, he puts the boy and Bigger in the same room and confronts them with their conflicting stories. Jan is surprised by Bigger's story but offers him help.

Bigger storms away from the Dalton's house. He decides to write the false ransom note when he discovers that the owner of the rat-infested flat his family rents is Mr. Dalton. Bigger slips the note under the Dalton's front door, then returns to his room. When the Daltons receive the note, they contact the police, who take over the investigation from Britten, and journalists soon arrive at the house. Bigger is afraid, but he does not want to leave. In the afternoon, he is ordered to take the ashes out of the stove and make a new fire. He is so terrified that he starts poking the ashes with the shovel until the whole room is full of smoke. Furious, one of the journalists takes the shovel and pushes Bigger aside. He immediately finds the remains of Mary's bones and an earring in the stove. Bigger flees.

Bigger goes directly to Bessie and tells her the whole story. Bessie realizes that everyone will think he raped the girl before killing her. They leave together, but Bigger has to drag Bessie around because she is paralyzed by fear. When they lie down together in an abandoned building, Bigger rapes her, and he realizes he will have to kill her. He hits Bessie with a brick and then throws her through a window, but he forgets that the only money he had was in her pocket, a symbol of her value to him.

Bigger runs through the city. He sees newspaper headlines concerning the crime and overhears different conversations about it. Whites call him "ape." Blacks hate him because he has given the whites an excuse for racism. But now he is someone; he feels he has an identity. He will not say the crime was an accident. After a wild chase over the rooftops of the city, the police catch him.

Book Three: Fate

During his first few days in prison, Bigger does not eat, drink, or talk to anyone. Then Jan comes to see him. He says Bigger has taught him a lot about black-white relationships and offers him the help of a communist lawyer, Max. In the long hours Max and Bigger pass together, Max learns about the sufferings and feelings of black people and Bigger learns about himself. He starts understanding his relationships with his family and with the world. He acknowledges his fury, his need for a future, and his wish for a meaningful life. He reconsiders his attitudes about white people, whether they are prejudiced, like Britten, or liberal, like Jan.

At Bigger's trial, Max tells the jury that Bigger killed because he was cornered by society from the moment he was born. He tells them that a way to stop the evil sequence of abuse and murder is to sentence Bigger to life in prison and not to death. But the jury does not listen to him. In the last scene, while he waits for death, Bigger tells Max,"I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em." Bigger then tells him to say "hello" to Jan. For the first time, he calls him "Jan," not "Mister," just as Jan had wanted. Then Max leaves, and Bigger is alone.

Book 1

Book 1 Summary

On the surface, *Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young man shackled by poverty and racism in 1930s Chicago, whose unintentional murder of a white woman and subsequent actions touch off a city-wide manhunt that leads to capture, conviction and the death sentence. Yet, the undercurrents deliver the real tale. The novel is more than a lurid action tale of murder and mayhem; it is a clarion call for a deeper understanding of how the failure to address the problems caused by years of systematic oppression can lead to bitter rebellion and desperate violence.

The first third of the novel begins in a squalid one-room apartment in the "Black Belt" of Chicago, a rat terrorizes where the family of four sharing cramped quarters. Bigger Thomas corners the creature behind a trunk, where it cowers briefly before hurtling from its hiding place and latching onto his leg. After running in circles looking for escape, the rat faces Bigger and rears up in defiance before once more running for cover. Bigger kills the beast with a skillet, then crushes the rat's head by pounding it with a shoe. When he taunts his sister Vera with the corpse and frightens her into a faint, his mother berates Bigger. She points out that if he had a job, they could afford better living conditions and warns him that if he doesn't mend his ways, he will end up on the gallows. She reminds him that he has a job interview with Mr. Dalton at 5:30, then tends to Vera, who worries that she will be late for the sewing classes she has been taking at the YWCA.

With an entire day before his meeting with his prospective employer, Bigger occupies himself first with thoughts about a plan that he and his friends have occasionally discussed - the idea of robbing Blum's Delicatessen. To him, the plan seems simple and foolproof, yet they have always demurred, since never before have they used a gun while stealing, nor have they ever robbed a white man. He and his friend, Gus, watch a plane skywriting an advertisement. Bigger reveals that, given a chance, he could fly a plane. The friends laugh bitterly, remarking that no white people would ever give Bigger such a chance. They play a game they call "white," in which they imagine conversations between haughty, privileged white people. Bigger angrily comments that white people don't live in the fancy part of town, but inside of him and every black person.

Gus, Bigger and two other friends, Jack and G.H., discuss the plan to rob Blum. Bigger calls Gus a coward for expressing doubts, but Gus says it is Bigger who is afraid - afraid that Gus will say "yes." Only Jack's intervention prevents Bigger from attacking Gus. Bigger and Jack go to the cinema, where first they watch a movie in which a rich, white woman takes a lover. The two are enthralled by the scenes of cocktail parties, golfing, swimming and exclusive nightclubs. In the movie, when Communists try to kill the millionaire husband, the wife returns to his side. Bigger and Jack discuss exactly what a "Red" is, finally deciding that Reds seem to be a violent race living in Russia. The second movie takes place in tribal Africa, with naked black men and women dancing to

the wild beat of drums. Bigger stops paying attention, lost in a daydream, imagining that once he is working for the Daltons and surrounded by people of wealth, he can learn the secret to "getting hold of money."

Bigger realizes that he does not want to rob Blum's now that he is likely to get a job that could lead to money and success. When the friends meet in the pool hall, he attacks Gus without provocation, threatening him with a knife and humiliating him in front of the others. The owner, Doc, warns him to stop, so Bigger slashes the felt cover of the pool table. When the scuffle is over, Bigger announces that it is now too late to rob Blum's, as he has to go see about a job. Still carrying the gun he has retrieved from home to use in the robbery, he travels to the white neighborhood, where all his bravado and the images inspired by the movie dissipate, as he agonizes over whether he should knock on the back door or the front.

A white housekeeper admits him, and Bigger finds himself in an alien environment with welcoming chairs, indirect lighting and fine artwork on smooth white walls. Though angry and uncomfortable, when the white-haired Mr. Dalton greets him, he responds with excessive deference. He meets Mrs. Dalton, a blind woman who uses long words Bigger does not understand to explain to her husband why, according to the Relief Agency's report, Bigger should move in and begin work at once. Mr. Dalton asks about Bigger's past and his home life - we learn that Mr. Dalton's company owns the slums in which Bigger and his family live - then explains Bigger's duties as a chauffeur. Mary Dalton interrupts them. He hates the girl for her easy familiarity, thinking her talk of capitalists and trade unions will cost him his job. Mr. Dalton, however, takes Mary's inquisition in stride and explains to Bigger that he will hire him, even though Bigger has a reputation as a troublemaker, because Mr. Dalton supports the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The housekeeper, Peggy, feeds him supper and explains that an additional duty of Bigger's will be to attend the furnace. On his way to get the car to drive Mary to the university, Bigger meets Mrs. Dalton in the kitchen; she expresses disappointment that Bigger shows no interest in furthering his education. He is startled by her apparent ability to "see" exactly where he is and what he is doing by the sounds he makes.

Mary has no intention of going to the university on this last night before she is to take an extended trip to Detroit. She asks Bigger to pick up her friend, Jan Erlone. As does Mary, Erlone addresses Bigger as an equal, asking to be called by his first name and shaking Bigger's hand. Rather than putting him at ease, this makes Bigger feel his blackness as a badge of shame. He forms a "dumb, cold, inarticulate hate" toward the white couple for their presumptions. Erlone and Mary get into the front seat of the car rather than the back, with the former driving, and Mary pressed up against Bigger. When they ask him to eat with them at Ernie's Kitchen Shack - "a place where colored people eat" - he considers stalking off, leaving the job behind, but he does not. At Ernie's, he encounters not only his friend Jack, but his own quasi-girlfriend, Bessie Mears.

The three drink beer and share a bottle of rum, while driving around the park as Erlone and Mary talk about Communism. Erlone hands Bigger some pamphlets before weaving drunkenly off to catch a train. When Bigger and Mary reach her home, she stumbles at the front steps. Realizing that she is unable to get to her room without waking the entire house, Bigger tries to guide her, but is reduced to carrying her up the stairs and laying her on her bed. There, he kisses her lightly and considers doing more. Just as he feels her body begin to respond, he hears a creak at the door.

Mrs. Dalton enters the room, calling Mary's name softly. Mary is mumbling incoherently and, afraid she will give his presence away, Bigger presses a pillow to her face to silence her for a moment. Mrs. Dalton smells liquor in the room and steps away, remonstrating her daughter for being "dead drunk" and leaving the room. Bigger realizes how narrowly he has escaped being caught in a white woman's bedroom. If Mary's father had been the one to enter, or if Mrs. Dalton were not blind, Bigger would surely have been caught. His relief is short-lived, however, when he discovers that in his attempt to keep Mary quiet, he accidentally suffocated her. She is dead.

The direness of his situation creeps over Bigger. First, he decides that he must disavow having been the last person to see her alive, and resolves to cast suspicion on Erlone. Recalling that he was to have carried Mary's traveling trunk to the station the next day, he sees a chance to both explain a reason for any fingerprints he may have left and a way to implicate Erlone. He realizes that by using the trunk to remove the body from the bedroom, he can make it appear that Mary has run off to Detroit as planned. He forces the body to fit in the small space and carries the trunk to the basement, where he is inspired to burn her body in the furnace and remove any proof that she is dead and not simply vanished. Under the accusing glare of the Daltons' ever-present white cat, Bigger shoves Mary's body into the furnace, only to find that it does not fit entirely inside. Using his knife and a nearby hatchet, he cuts off her head, shoves everything into the furnace, and sends a fresh load of coal into the fire. Finding Mary's purse on the ground near the car, he removes a wad of bills from inside and hurries home to the slums to sleep in the tiny, crowded room.

Book 1 Analysis

Richard Wright broke *Native Son* into three parts: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." Using this deceptively simple structure, he clearly underlines three of the central themes of the novel, each of which plays out to varying degrees in each section. Boiled down to the bare bones of the plot, the headings form the skeleton on the story: a man commits a crime and, fearing the consequences, flees, only to discover that he cannot escape his fate. If *Native Son* were a simple crime thriller - which is, ironically, how it was presented to early audiences - that narrative would be enough to compel us to Bigger's seemingly inevitable capture and sentence. Wright, however, was never interested in a simple action story. His focus was on the internal - on the psychological crime, attempted escape, and the price paid in the end. Already a successful writer when he published this book in 1940, Wright deliberately created a shocking and unsympathetic protagonist to address many of the same issues he tried to tackle in *Uncle Tom's Sons*, but without

the pathos of that work. He called his collection of short stories a "napve mistake...a book that even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about." He did not want *Native Son* to inspire weeping, but change.

We learn early on what it is that Bigger truly fears: that he will somehow start to feel alive, and thus have to endure the depth of his own pain. He hates his family, because they are suffering, and he is powerless to help. He tries to distance himself from the shame and misery of their lives, lest he be "swept out of himself with fear and despair." He keeps them, and a large part of himself, behind a figurative curtain, numbing himself. He knows he is not fully "alive," and prefers it that way, so great is his fear that if he completely embraces his own circumstances, he will kill himself - or someone else. When we see him with his "friends," for whom he holds as little real affection as he does for his family, we get a sense of Bigger's overarching pessimism that life can ever or will ever improve. He may want to fly, but knows that as a black man, he will never be given the chance. Gus tells Bigger that he will fly when God gives him wings in Heaven, but Bigger takes no refuge in religion; he wants no part of his mother's excessive piety and emphasis on the afterlife.

That Bigger mutes his own existence, while at the same time rejecting the notion of a reward in his post-mortem future, shows the keenness of his fear. Bigger lives in a place and time where white people dictate everything for black people: where they will live, what work they can do, how they must behave, and even what training they receive in schools and in the military. As bad as it is for them in reality, it feels many times worse, for Bigger and his friends have been steeped in Hollywood's vision of what white people have, do, want and enjoy. This ultra-sophisticated, stylized - and for the most part false - image of white society both draws and repels them. Wright, as a Communist and devoted activist for social reform, condemned the "money-grubbing, industrial civilization" of his times, but clearly did not share the same sense of predestination and permanence, or he would have written an entirely different book.

Bigger's tendency to resort to violence is evident from the very beginning. His first murder is of the rat in his room, a symbol of all that is wrong with his life and clear foreshadowing of things to come. The rat intrudes on his family's existence, scavenging from their already meager existence and menacing them with vicious teeth and threats of disease. When Bigger tries to kill the rat, it first circles in fear and tries to hide, then faces its attacker full on, mindless of the odds. Bigger feels no compunction about killing the vermin, and goes so far as to mutilate the body after the animal is no longer a threat. He even dangles its body at his younger sister. The movie he watches with his friend, Jack, fills him with visions of a life without rats and poverty and limitations.

In taking the job with the Daltons, he is fleeing his harsh reality for the softer one he imagines, only to replay a metaphorical version of the rat attack. He knows that he could be hanged just for being found in the bedroom of a white girl, let alone one he has murdered. He first panics, then faces the situation with relative calm, then chooses to fight back. He disposes of her body without hesitation, and although he is momentarily reluctant to cut off Mary's head to fit her body into the furnace, it is not out of remorse or

tenderness but out of a fear that there will be blood. Like the rat whose rebellion stands little chance of succeeding, Bigger believes his best chance is to take a stand.

A large part of the power behind Wright's description of the murder and disposal of Mary Dalton lies in the tone, which the author uses to remind us not only of Bigger's fatalism, but to depict his actions as perfectly logical, even inevitable, given the circumstances. One can imagine many ways in which someone who has accidentally killed someone might react - stark terror, paralyzing remorse, desperation - but almost as soon as Bigger realizes Mary is dead, his mind clicks from panic into a sort of auto-pilot. He assesses the situation, acts, adapts, improvises and even improves on his plans in a methodical, matter-of-fact manner that makes what he does all the more chilling. He needs to move the body, so he uses use the trunk; she doesn't fit easily, so he forces her legs to fold up; he wants to destroy the evidence, so he shoves her body into the furnace; she again doesn't fit easily, so he cuts off her head. At each step, Bigger acts as though he has no other choices than the ones he is making. He has to toss her in the furnace. He has to cut off her head. He is a black man, who has killed a white woman in her own bedroom. Unless he does these things, he will be hanged.

The story would not hold together without its overriding theme: oppression. Bigger and his family live as they do, because the Jim Crow laws and prevailing attitudes of white society offer them few choices and chances to live otherwise. Blacks are forced to live in the ghettoes, then pay exorbitant rents for their miserable hovels. Even the liberals who "support the NAACP" don't fraternize with or substantially aid the poor black people they claim to want to help. Yet there are other prejudices at work: Bigger hates all white people on principle; Peggy the Irish housekeeper identifies with the situation of "the colored," yet resolutely lumps herself in with the Daltons, not the other hired help; everyone considers Communists as the lowest rung on the social ladder. At the Daltons' home, Bigger is surround by whiteness. The elderly couple have white hair and white skin. The house has white walls and a white kitchen, Mrs. Dalton's flowing robes are white. Following Bigger everywhere - even witnessing the crime and the scene in the furnace room - is a large white cat whose green eyes stare accusingly. The omnipresence of the cat, clearly a metaphor for the greater society, tells us that even when he is by himself, Bigger is not truly free.

Throughout the novel, Wright uses a restricted third-person narration, limiting actions and thoughts to Bigger's perspective. We read his thoughts, and occasionally are treated to his interpretations - or misinterpretations - of someone else's point of view, but we never step away from Bigger. Due to this deliberate lack of unbiased reportage, we feel a certain horrified empathy for Bigger, coming to share his sense of futility and social claustrophobia, even as we find ourselves disliking and censuring him. One has to assume that Wright wanted both black and white readers to come away with that subtle feeling to self-loathing. By being forced to follow Bigger lock-step through the book, we are less likely to be moved not to tears than to action of some sort.

Book 2

Book 2 Summary

Bigger awakens back in the bed he shares with his brother Buddy, for a few minutes not focused on the events of the past night. Then, he remembers what he has done and, further, that he has to return to the Dalton house to take Mary's trunk to the station. He is horrified to discover that he has brought Mary's purse home and left it in plain sight, and wonders what else he might have forgotten. He finds the bloody knife in his pocket, along with the pamphlets that Erlone gave him to read. He disposes of the knife and purse in a garbage can, and then packs his clothes to move into to the Dalton house, resentful that even in this small thing, he is hampered by the presence of others - in this case, the sleeping forms of his mother, brother and sister. His mother wakes and asks why he didn't come in until 4 o'clock. Bigger insists it was only 2 o'clock, although his mother swears otherwise. Bigger's younger brother Buddy also noted the time when Bigger arrived, but he doesn't press. Buddy tells Bigger that Bessie stopped by the night before, and that she even mentioned the possibility of marriage now that Bigger has a job.

Struck by the meanness of his surroundings, Bigger wonders what his family has done to deserve such a bleak life, and considers that it may be not what they have done, but what they have not done. He see his family as shrinking, afraid of its own very existence, compared with the confident grace of Mary Dalton. He realizes that the murder has changed his life, and for once, he feels that his life has some meaning. He has committed an act - he refuses to call it an accident - that somehow defines him, and no one can take that from him. He looks at his family and wonders at their blindness. After squabbling with his sister and mother, Bigger leaves the apartment, only to be called back by Buddy, who offers to help Bigger out of trouble. When Bigger asks how his brother knows there's anything wrong, Buddy hands him the roll of money, which fell from his pocket. Bigger makes Buddy swear not to mention the money, but does not reveal its source.

This new sense of himself drives Bigger to visit the poolroom, where only the day before, he attacked his friend Gus. He gives everyone a dollar and a pack of cigarettes, and is amazed at how for the first time he feels no fear, only excitement and a heightened awareness. He wishes briefly that somehow that black people could all band together to make their lives better, and then his old pessimism resurfaces, and he hates them anew. This time, though, in the back of his mind he feels some hope that someday some black man will bring his people together.

At the Dalton house, Peggy asks Bigger to tend the furnace, pointing out that it seemed to have been burning very hotly the night before. He worries that she suspects something, and is afraid to turn on the lights of the basement. Telling himself that he will have to kill Peggy if she learns about Mary, he steps toward the shovel to use as a weapon just in case, but Peggy is clearly more worried about her own modesty - she

clutches her kimono tightly closed - and has little interest in the furnace beyond making sure Bigger tends it. She asks if Mary has come downstairs yet, and wonders why the car is in the driveway rather than the garage. When she retreats to the kitchen, Bigger investigates the basement to see what evidence he may have missed and sees that a small piece of bloody newsprint lies on the floor in front of the furnace. Furtively, though he is alone, he checks the coals to see if Mary's body is evident and believes he can see the shape of Mary's body under the coals; he imagines that if the coals were to fall away she would be revealed there, unburned. He is afraid to poke the coals. He dumps more coal into the furnace, then goes to his room to place the pamphlets from Erlone into the dresser there, stacking them neatly so as to make them appear unread. Feeling certain he has forgotten something important, he returns to the furnace and realizes that he needs to shake the ashes down so the fire will not go out, but as he reaches to do so he is overwhelmed by a vision of Mary's face from the night before, and recoils in horror from the apparition.

Still trying to maintain the charade that Mary has run off to Detroit with Erlone, Bigger loads the trunk into the car. He goes through an elaborate pantomime of waiting, ringing the doorbell for Mary and asking Peggy what he should do. Peggy discovers that Mary is not there, and quizzes Bigger about the events of the night before. He lets "slip" that the car was still in the driveway, because "the gentleman" was in it, presumably planning to drive himself home. The housekeeper states that Mary has probably gone off early without telling anyone, as it seems to her to be in character with Mary's pranks. Bigger delivers the trunk to the station and returns to the Dalton home. He and Peggy chat briefly, and then she takes a phone call from Erlone. To Bigger, she denounces Erlone and his anarchist ways. As she prattles on Bigger wonders whether or not he should engage in the conversation or simply let her talk; he is trying so hard to act and speak normally that he can barely eat or pay attention.

Bigger checks the fire, then goes to his room. He overhears Mrs. Dalton talking worriedly about Mary's leaving without writing a note, and about her associating with those "awful people." Peggy reveals that Mary's bed has not been slept in, and Mrs. Dalton adds that her daughter had not even finished packing the things bought especially for the trip. At this, Bigger's mind races with possible lies and embellishments that he can use to deflect suspicion, and drifts into a restless sleep, in which he recalls his having dragged the trunk so noisily down the stairs in the night. He is startled awake by a knock on his door, which he opens to find Mrs. Dalton dressed in white and looking very pale. She tentatively questions him about the car, the trunk, and Erlone, but pride will not allow her to question too deeply as that would mean discussing her daughter's drunken condition, and admitting to her own unease.

Mrs. Dalton dismisses Bigger for the day, and he resolves to visit Bessie. On the streetcar, he looks around at the white faces and has the urge to stand and shout that he had killed a rich, white woman. This knowledge makes him feel powerful, although he is beginning to regret that it was accidental; he senses that if he had planned such a murder, he may have come away with more money, and felt more successful. At Bessie's, Bigger is surprised when she rebuffs his initial advances after having seen him eating with his "white friends"; she says he must be ashamed of her since he had not

even spoken to her at the diner. He shows her the roll of bills stolen from Mary's pocketbook, thinking it will warm her chilly attitude toward him. Instead, she is immediately suspicious about the $125. At last, she relents. They engage in fast and forceful sex; afterward, he feels calm and peaceful. Bessie questions him about his job. When she notes that he is working near the site of the Leopold and Loeb kidnapping case, the idea of a ransom fills Bigger's mind. He daydreams about leveraging the murder into a financial windfall. Bessie's clinginess irritates him, and it occurs to him that she is just as blind to the meaningless of her existence as his family. He concocts a story about Mary having run away with her Communist boyfriend, says he stole the money from her room after she'd gone, and explains his new idea of asking the Daltons for a ransom. Bessie is frightened by Bigger's certainty that Mary will not return. He wants to enlist her in his plan, so he can use her to pick up the money he imagines the Daltons will pay. However, she tries to talk him into leaving. He lets her hold the roll of bills. She only agrees to help him when he threatens to leave her.

Returning to the Dalton home, Bigger goes immediately to check the furnace. He adds still more coal, promising himself that he will clean out the ashes in the morning. Peggy tells him to return to the station to pick up the trunk, as the Daltons have learned that no one ever claimed the trunk and that Mary never arrived in Detroit. Bigger again fears Peggy may spot some evidence in the basement and resolves to grab the iron shovel and "let her have it straight across her head" should she suspect, but again she pays no attention to the furnace. Mrs. Dalton tells Peggy to send "the boy" to the kitchen, where Bigger gives monosyllabic answers to her cautious interrogation. Mr. Dalton joins them and asks more pointed and personal questions. Mr. Dalton reassures his wife that Mary is just up to one of her "foolish pranks," and has come to no harm. Bigger, meanwhile, congratulates himself that any suspicion the Daltons might harbor have been directed at Erlone.

Bigger devises his plan for writing the ransom note and handling the money drop, in which Bessie will be the one to actually recover the shoebox filled with the ten thousand dollars. As he fastens the trunk to the running board, he realizes that it does seem unrealistically light and tries to fix his story firmly in his mind so that, upon close questioning, he will be able to repeat his words a thousand times if necessary. He is glad he gave Bessie the money to hold, fearing that in the event of a search it would weigh heavily against him. Again, he goes straight to the furnace to check its progress, and is startled by Mr. Dalton calling his name. He wheels in fear to find "an army of white men" advancing on him, and forces himself to act calm before the "white discs of danger" their faces present in the glow of the fire.

The cold, impersonal man with Mr. Dalton strikes fear in Bigger. Britten, a private investigator from Mr. Dalton's company, has been asked to look into Mary's disappearance. He asks if Bigger has the key to the locked trunk; and Bigger wonders if the casual question is a trap. Mr. Dalton asks Bigger to bring the hatchet so to break the lock, a request that paralyzes Bigger with dread and indecision, since he knows he has disposed of the hatchet. He forces himself to walk to the spot where the hatchet had been before he picked it up to cut off Mary's head, and feigns surprise that it is missing. As Britten questions him yet again about how and when he came to carry the trunk to

the basement, beginning a close interrogation about the night before. Bigger answers cautiously, trying to make his answers appear casual and unimportant, and to refrain from elaborating while still trying to direct any growing suspicions toward Erlone. Britten seizes upon the information that the address to which Mary directed Bigger is the Labor Defender office, since it implicates Erlone as a "Red." As he traces the nights events for his listeners, Bigger is pleased to be the one "drawing the picture," rather than having the picture drawn for him by white people.

The picture Bigger draws depicts a drunken Erlone, carrying an equally drunken Mary up to her bedroom, then telling Bigger to carry the trunk down the stairs and to leave the car out so he can drive it home. Bigger covers up this inconsistency - he had previously claimed that Mary told him to leave the car outside - by pretending to be honoring Mary's request to keep her secrets. Britten paces near the furnace. When he demands to know what Erlone said about the Party, Bigger stammers that it was not a party, just the three of them, although it finally dawns on him that the detective wants to discover whether Bigger has any connection to the Communists. Britten backs him up against the wall, grabs his collar and shoves the pamphlets from Erlone in his face. Mr. Dalton reassures Britten that Bigger knows nothing and, in all likelihood, has nothing to do with Erlone.

Bigger is shocked that Britten suspects him of being partners with a white man, Erlone, although not that the detective would him guilty of something, simply, because he is black. He imagines splitting Britten's skull with the iron shovel and tries to gain control of the situation by speaking directly to Mr. Dalton, reminding him that he hadn't wanted to work there, but that the relief agency "made him." Back in his room, Bigger eavesdrops and hears Britten declare that "a nigger's a nigger"; Mr. Dalton counters that Bigger was only doing the bidding of his crazy daughter and deserves a chance, saying that as long as the black boys do their work, white people should let them be. Britten offers to have Erlone picked up, but the idea of publicity horrifies Mr. Dalton. They decide to have Erlone brought around quietly to the house.

Bigger contemplates fleeing, but enjoys the sense of power he feels from having the choice at all, and from having taken charge of his destiny: "a power born of a latent capacity to live." The knowledge of what he has done, and what he has taken from the white people, makes him feel equal to them. He feels confident about taking Britten on, as he is used to dealing with police and believes he can handle anything the investigator might ask. Dozing and thinking about the ransom plan and the probability that Erlone will be considered the prime suspect, Bigger drifts off to sleep, only to be awakened from a dream. In the dream, a church bell changes to a warning bell urging him to hide himself and his package - his own bloody, severed head wrapped in paper. As he tries to run from the blood and the coal and the nagging white faces, he finds that the bell not just part of the dream, but an actual summons from the house. Britten demands to speak with Bigger. He is accompanied by Erlone, and Bigger prepares "all the forces of his body for a showdown," Erlone stares at him steadily.

Erlone does not deny his political affiliation, and demands to know why he has been brought to the Dalton home. Britten asks Bigger if Erlone is the man who brought Mary

to her room the night before. The young Communist is shocked by the question. He asks Bigger why he has said something untrue, but Bigger resolves to speak only to Brittten and Mr. Dalton. Erlone demands to know why the two men are making Bigger lie. In a clumsy attempt to protect Bigger and Mary, Erlone becomes trapped by Britten's questions, and finally admits that he and she had been together, that he gave pamphlets to Bigger, and that they had all been drinking. He still denies having gone to the house. Erlone's instinct to protect Bigger from Mr. Dalton's reaction to the idea of an inebriated Mary alone in the car with a strange black chauffeur - an instinct that makes his answers seem hesitant and insincere - works in Bigger's favor. When Mr. Dalton offers to pay Erlone to give up his daughter, the offer infuriates Erlone. He walks out.

When everyone has gone, Bigger goes to check the furnace, and tries again to shake the ashes down to keep the fire from dying; once again he cannot bring himself to do so. He imagines bits of bone falling into the ash bin. He leaves to visit Bessie and write the ransom note, and is shocked when Erlone stops him on the street and offers to help him if the white men are pressuring or frightening Bigger into lying. This unexpected offer makes Bigger feel guilty. When Erlone steps forward, inviting Bigger out for coffee to talk things over, Bigger draws his gun, and a shocked Erlone backs away.

Bigger chooses one of the many empty buildings as a vantage point from which Bessie can watch Mr. Dalton throw the money from the car. He selects a tall, white, silent structure on a corner. As he walks, he contemplates the South Side Real Estate Company, Mr. Dalton's company, to which Bigger pays eight dollars a week for his family's rat-infested room. Although Southside owns houses throughout the city, it only rents houses to black people in the area "over the line" in the Black Belt. Bigger hopes his ransom note will somehow jar them out of their senses.

He finds Bessie tired and hung over from a night of revelry, which makes him doubt her reliability and her usefulness to him. She tries again to talk him out of his ransom plan and declares she won't help him. However, he reminds her that, as a housecleaner, she has already helped him steal enough to land her in jail. When she picks up the wrapper he has discarded, he again sees her blindness. He is about to write a kidnap note, while she is worried about keeping her room clean. He asks for a knife to sharpen the pencil. When she demands to know why he doesn't use the one he always carries, he is reminded of his bloody knife gleaming in the firelight; he threatens to slap her.

Wearing gloves, he writes the note, disguising his handwriting, with a crude set of instructions for Mr. Dalton. With a final flourish, he signs it "Red," with a drawing of a hammer and sickle. Bessie asks if he has killed Mary. She reminds him that he had once promised never to kill, and predicts that if he has killed Mary, he will kill her next. Bigger shrugs. He tells Bessie that it is pointless for her to think that she can stay uninvolved. If the police come after him, they will certainly come to her.

Bigger finally admits that he has killed Mary, but adds that Bessie is already complicit, since she has spent some of the money. She sobs miserably that she doesn't deserve to be embroiled in such a mess. Bigger knows what she says is true, but tells her that her blind obedience won't get her anywhere. She begs him to run away, but he

threatens to kill her, so she won't be left behind to snitch. Finally he takes her to the building he has selected to show her where she will wait during the money drop. They walk up to a room that clearly once belonged to rich white people, with its wide doorways and large windows. Bessie's sobbing reluctance to even step toward her lookout spot, and her assertion that she'd rather have him just kill her now, moves Bigger to slap her. He then drags her to the window and tells her the details of the plan for the money drop. He demands to know if she is with him. She declares, resignedly, that it won't make any difference. He walks her to her train.

When he returns to the Daltons, he walks up the front steps: he is so conscious that this alone is a serious violation of social norms that he waits for some supernatural voice to warn him off. He slips the ransom note under the door, and returns to the furnace, staring in, but still unable to touch it. He pulls the lever to draw down more coal, then goes to his room. There, he has a momentary panic, and returns to the furnace to burn his gloves, the paper and the pencil. He is enveloped in a staggering sense of dread that brings him near collapse, and he tells himself he needs food and sleep so he can maintain his composure. In the kitchen, he finds a sumptuous meal spread out with white linen napkins, but he hesitates to touch it, not knowing if it is for him. Then, he is struck by the absurdity of his fear in light of the fact that he has killed a rich white girl, cut off her head, burned her body and sent a ransom note. Peggy walks in and chides him for the food having sat there uneaten since five. She holds the unopened kidnap note as she moves about the kitchen, offering to heat up his steak and coffee. His dizziness and sweating brow move her to ask if he isn't feeling well. He struggles to keep up appearances, forcing his food down. Peggy reminds Bigger to clean the ashes from the furnace.

A wild-eyed Mr. Dalton bursts into the kitchen, followed by Mrs. Dalton, who feels her way in with trembling white hands and cries out for him to tell her what is wrong. His announcement that "they got her.... They kidnapped her" reduces Peggy and Mrs. Dalton to sobs. Mr. Dalton helps his shocked wife from the room, which reminds Bigger of carrying Mary's lifeless body through the house only the night before. He returns to his room and takes up his position at his eavesdropping post, where he hears Britten asking Peggy about the note, whether she thinks Bigger might be more intelligent than he acts, and if anything has gone missing since Bigger's arrival in the household. She describes him as a quiet, polite colored boy. In all, she says, he does not act like someone who was comfortable being around white people.

Bigger hears Britten telling several other men that Mary is probably already dead, and that the whole scheme is probably the Reds trying to raise money. Britten hesitates to instruct Mr. Dalton to contact the police since the resulting publicity would add even more strain, but one of the other men points out that when Erlone is arrested, the story will leak out anyway. Bigger checks the window for an escape route, just in case. A strange white man comes to his room and directs him downstairs, where he sees Britten standing near the furnace with three other white men who ask if Bigger believes Erlone to be behind the kidnapping. They go over the details about the trunk yet again. Bigger repeats everything Erlone told him about Communism, emphasizing the details that he knows will provoke anger at the Reds, such as class and racial equality. Britten asks if

Erlone ever tried to lure Bigger into the Party by promising he would meet white women. When the men want to know if Erlone and Mary had sex in the back of the car, Bigger speaks deferentially, knowing that they believe that all black men lust after white women, and that to seem at all interested in the behavior of the couple would be a mistake.

The questioning continues until approaching voices interrupts it. The press has learned of the story and is demanding to speak with Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Bigger and Britten. The reporters pace the basement, circling like sharks, but Bigger has eyes only for the newspaper that shows a huge headline about Mary Dalton. The men try to get Bigger to talk - one tries to slip money to him, but Bigger refuses it. They press Britten for details, but he gives them only the barest of information: Erlone has been picked up for questioning and continues to claim that Bigger's story about the night's events is a lie. Mr. Dalton appears, clutching the kidnap note. The reporters say that Erlone claims someone is paying Bigger to lie. Mr. Dalton begins to make a statement, but halts when his wife comes into the doorway. The flashbulbs light up her white eyes, white lips, white hands, white hair and white dress, making her appear ghostlike. The white cat follows her, then suddenly leaps onto Bigger's shoulder; he feels that cat has given him away. The reporters photograph him again and again, capturing the image of him with the white cat perched on his shoulder, then on the floor swirling around his legs.

Astonishingly, Mr. Dalton announces that he has ordered Erlone to be released without charges, and that he wants to publicly apologize for his arrest and inconvenience. Then, he hesitantly adds that his daughter has been kidnapped. He begs the papers to print the words he has said, to tell the kidnappers that he will pay the money and do whatever they ask if they will return Mary. He reveals that the note is signed "Red," and with a hammer and sickle, but will not display the contents. He poses for a photo with the letter held out, beseechingly. The reporters take more photos, and some go off to use the Daltons' phone. Others wander about the basement, idly inspecting the trunk and the shovel - one even opens the furnace and peers in. The exhausted Bigger feels hysteria creeping in, and fights to control himself. Finally, the men troop out to photograph Mary's room, and Bigger is left alone in the basement. He snatches up the newspaper and sees a photo of Mary, and again the image of her severed head floats into Bigger's mind. He drops the newspaper at the approach of footsteps. Britten allows the newsmen to question Bigger, but they are disappointed by the paucity of new information. Bigger feels a chill: the fire is dying down, and he knows if does not clean the ashes at once, it will go out altogether.

One of the reporters bursts back into the basement to announce that Erlone has refused to leave the jail, and that he has a dozen witnesses who can swear he did not go to the Dalton home the previous night. They confront Bigger; he stands by his story. The newsmen are suspicious, but Britten tells them that he still believes Erlone is behind the kidnapping. Peggy offers coffee. The reporters decide that Bigger is just a "dumb cluck" and turn to discussing how to present the story. The newsmen decide to frame the story as "the Negroes wanting to be left alone and the Communists forcing them to live with them," knowing the story will be very popular. They take more photos of Bigger. Meanwhile, the furnace has fallen silent.

Peggy brings cream and sugar for the coffee and admonishes Bigger to clean out the ashes, saying it has become cold upstairs, but Bigger is terrified to do so with the men in the room. Yet, because she has given him instructions in front of the white men, he knows he must do something. He walks to the furnace, opens the door, and inspects the coals. Hoping he can get away with simply shaking down the ashes rather than cleaning out the bin while everyone stands nearby, he tries, but the fire does not heat up. He decides to add more coal, which only results in smothering what little flame exists. It begins to smolder until huge black clouds of smoke fills the basement. The men yell at him to clear out the ashes right away. Bigger can't move. Someone grabs the shovel from his hands and begins clearing out the ashes while another opens a door to the icy outside. The air begins to clear. Bigger wants to take the shovel back and hit the man with it, or at least assure him that he can take over, but finds himself still rooted in place. Finally, he hears the draft of the furnace once more sucking air and the fire building to a roar. The men, relieved, stand drinking coffee. They order Bigger to close the outside door against the cold, but he cannot even make himself do that.

The man who had shoveled the ashes stares intently at the bucket of ashes, poking at it with a shovel. Bigger pictures Mary's bloody head lying completely unburned in the bin. The reporter reaches down and examines the ashes more closely, calling the others over. Bigger tiptoes up behind them and peers down. One man says, "It's bone," and although the others demur at first, one identifies it positively as having come from a body. They find an earring in the pile, then the hatchet blade. While the reporters continue to paw through the ashes, speculating, Bigger slips away. He leaps out the second-story window into the snow below. Too tired to run, he walks as fast as he can out of the white neighborhood. Fleeing feels oddly familiar to him, as though he had expected it all his life. He hurries toward Bessie's house, hoping to get to her before she goes to the drop-off spot. He keeps his hands exposed to the freezing air, unwilling to put them in pockets for fear that he will not be able to defend himself quickly if the police catch him unawares.

Bigger buys a newspaper, aware that, although he has lived twenty years already carrying these same feelings of repressed anger, it is only now that he has acted on them that the newspapers believe they have something about him worth printing. He hops onto a nearly deserted streetcar and, hiding behind the paper, reads the now-outdated story about the kidnapping and ransom. He arrives at Bessie's, cold and wet, and tells her the plan is off. At first, she is thrilled at no longer having to participate, but then she demands to know what has happened. Bigger wonders how to explain without losing her loyalty. When she learns that the body has been found and the ransom note already sent, she sees at once that the police will shortly be at her door. He threatens to leave her, which frightens her into cooperating.

Exhausted, Bigger sinks into a chair, and as Bessie makes him a glass of warm milk, he tells her the story of what happened. He assures her that he didn't plan to kill Mary, but notes that it does not matter since no one will believe his story. Bessie seizes upon the root of the problem, which is that since Bigger was in Mary's room, the white people will accuse him of having raped her. Bigger realizes that every time he relives the moment, the feeling he had when he discovered that he had killed Mary, it feels like rape. Further,

he feels as though he has raped every day of his life with his deep hatred. Bigger instructs Bessie to gather up quilts and blankets, so they can hide out in the old building. She sees running as futile, and does not want to be left there alone. Again, she bemoans her predicament, wishing she had never met Bigger, and sees for the first time how she has been fooling herself into thinking she is happy and in love. She knows that he does not care what happens to her. She is right as, at that moment, Bigger is realizing that he will have to kill her, too.

They return to the cold, empty building, with its rot and spiders and invisible scurrying creatures. At Bigger's command, Bessie spreads the blankets on the floor, but remains standing and crying in the dark, lit only by the streetlamps. Bigger begins to feel the warmth of the alcohol he drank at Bessie's and is filled with a feverish desire, though he knows Bessie will not feel the same under the circumstances. Nevertheless, as they shiver under the blankets, he kisses her. The more she resists, the more passionate he feels. Ultimately, he rapes her, as she cries out again and again for him to stop. Only then does he completely relax. Bigger finds himself waiting for Bessie to go to sleep. When she does, with only a split second of indecision, he smashes her face repeatedly with a brick, then tosses her body and the bloody pillow down into the airshaft. Too late, he realizes that the ninety dollars, all the money he had, was in her pocket.

After a sleepless night, he steals a paper and ducks into an empty building to read about the massive actions afoot to find and catch him: five thousand police officers, three thousand volunteers, cordons, house-to-house searches, and armed vigilantes, all acting under a blanket warrant from the mayor. Already there are reports of whites retaliating against black people: beatings, windows smashed, innocent men and women fired from their jobs. Erlone remains a suspect, with the police still considering that he must be behind it since the planning and execution of such a plan would naturally be beyond the ability of a Negro mind. Maps show the areas that have been and will be searched, confirming that Bigger is trapped. From the rooftop, he watches a group of black men huddled around a newspaper; he imagines that all blacks in the city are talking about him. In the next building, he spies a couple making love in full view of their three children, and finds it ironic that they are all cramped together, while he has a building all to himself.

Bigger looks for a new, unoccupied hideout to break into. There aren't many to be found, and Bigger ponders the thought that if he were to actually rent something, he would have to pay twice the amount charged to a white man. He wanders from street to street looking for shelter and food, then takes a chance and buys a loaf of bread. At last, he finds an empty apartment. Once he breaks in, he listens to the sound of an argument coming from another flat, where two men are discuss whether or not they would turn Bigger in if they saw him. One says that he must be guilty since he ran away, and the other says that he is probably only guilty of being black. The first man hates Bigger for turning white people against black people, and making him lose his job. The second maintains that the white people have hated black people since long before Bigger murdered Mary Dalton, and that at some point, it is important to fight back.

Bigger's sleep is disturbed by sounds wafting up from a church filled with singing black men and women. He views them with disdain, half-wishing he was a believer like his mother, since it would bring comfort. However, he knows that to believe would be to give up what little sense of self he has. Knowing he needs to keep moving, he searches another vacant apartment. He steals a newspaper, and reads that he is now known as "the rapist;" the paper reports riots among blacks and raids on the Communist headquarters.

The thought of eight thousand armed, angry white men marching through the night in search of him leads Bigger to climb to the attic. From there, he hears a voice on the street announcing that the search party is nearby, and slips through the trapdoor to the roof, staring down from the snow-covered perch as spotlights fill the sky. He knows it is a matter of time until the glare of the beam catches him and reveals his hiding place. He spots a man on a nearby roof, and understands the futility of running from one roof to another; he wonders if he could jump and kill himself if cornered.

A white policeman pokes his head through the trapdoor to search the roof. Bigger strikes him with the butt of his gun, knocking the man unconscious. Soon, another officer comes looking for his partner. Bigger, hiding behind the chimney, is afraid to cross the roof to silence him as well, since yet another man is searching the neighboring rooftop. The second officer spies his partner lying face down in the snow. While Bigger debates what he should do, a third man comes through the trapdoor, and then another. The fallen man's partner calls to the men below to seal off the block, shouting that he believes Bigger is nearby. A cheer goes up from the unseen crowds below. Trying to avoid the circling searchlight beams, Bigger works his way to another ledge and manages to hoist himself farther from reach, but the officers spot him as he crawls through the snow.

Bigger runs, they shoot, and in his haste, he nearly slips off the roof into the "ocean of boiling hate" below. When there is no more roof to run to, Bigger climbs the water tank, and shoots back at the advancing men. His frozen hands and exhaustion cause all the shots to go wild. The police toss canisters of tear gas toward him, and he knocks them away. When one of the men climbs the tower, Bigger strikes him rather than shooting, even though at such close range he knows he would not miss; he only has three bullets left, and wants to save one for himself. Finally, the police train a fire hose on Bigger, and in the frigid air the force and frigidity of the water are enough to bring him down. He is too cold to fire the remaining shots in his gun, and soon the men are upon him. They drag Bigger feet-first down the stairs, and the cries of the crowd calling for him to be lynched are the last things he hears before he loses consciousness.

Book 2 Analysis

The second section of *Native Son* opens with Bigger awakening in the confined space of his family's room, and ends with him lapsing into unconsciousness after being dragged, frozen and defeated, down the stairs of similar quarters. These "bookends" give the second section the feeling of a waking dream, a day-long nightmare in which

Bigger's situation goes from bad to worse with every choice he makes. In fact, Bigger is plagued with dreamlike visions of Mary's severed head haunting him at every turn, stopping his actions and befuddling his thoughts. This sense that his life his not quite real parallels Bigger's feeling that until the murder he had not been living a complete existence. Ironically, while the act of murder brings him closer to achieving a freeing sense self-realization, it has also led him to capture and confinement.

While Wright, for the most part, affects a naturalistic writing style that seeks to convey the grittiness and unpleasantness of Bigger's everyday reality, he mixes it with heavy doses of symbolism, as in his frequent use of the word white, his creation of the omnipresent white with eyes like "pools of accusation and guilt," and by drawing the rat as a metaphor for Bigger's life. Like the rat, Bigger finds that, although he is in theory free to move about, the actual boundaries of his life have been determined by societal roles - the whites' proscriptions regarding black people. Just as Bigger's actions from the moment he carries Mary up the stairs seem to happen in the matter-of-fact manner of foregone conclusions, so do his actions and the results, as he attempts first to capitalize on his crime by faking a kidnapping, and then by trying to escape detection and capture.

As the book's title suggests, Wright sees Bigger as a creation of his surroundings, a product of the racist and plutocratic society - a similar path that the rat must follow: an unremarkable birth into a homely scavenger's existence, the resigned acceptance of a monotonous life given over to survival, and the apparently inevitable confrontation between those in control and those relegated to the invisible space behind the walls. At every new development, Bigger seems to have many possible options for how to act and react, but Wright's point, which will be driven home in the final section, is foreshadowed here by Bigger's inexorable march toward self-destruction, as we see that the "options" are illusory. As a black man in a white man's world, Bigger's life - his fear, flight, and fate - have been his destiny from the very beginning.

In this second section, Wright delves into the complex caste system of American society. The Dalton family, as the rich, respected white family with a clear sense of entitlement, represents the white world at large, although it is worth noting that they hardly mirror the idealized image Bigger and his friends have learned about from their cinematic education: these are not high-living, party-going socialites, but what we so often today scorn as "limousine liberals," people whose motivations may be pure, but whose methods and effectiveness are severely limited by their own narrow exposure to any world but their own, and by their skewed sense of what is "good" for others.

Working for the Daltons is Peggy, an Irish immigrant who believes she can identify with black people since her own people have been oppressed, but who naturally aligns herself with the Daltons as "part of the family." Although she takes orders from the Daltons, she signals her subservience in her constant deference to all the white men who enter her domain - offering coffee, delivering messages. She places herself on a higher rung of the social ladder than the blacks, who are higher up than Communists. Bigger, interestingly, considers himself more credible than the Communists, despite the fact that he can barely grasp what the "Reds" are all about: He has a vague idea that

they are a race of people living in Russia. Britten, who is little more than a male, professional version of Peggy since he is on the Dalton payroll, makes no distinction between blacks and Communists, placing them both at the bottom rung. However, as a white male, he considers himself automatically part of the elite, deserving few and Mr. Dalton's equal. In Bigger's presence, he speaks deprecatingly of the Reds, as if reassuring Bigger of his preferred status, but when he believes he is out of earshot he makes clear that a "nigger's a nigger." He also manages to exhibit his aversion to Jewish people. Erlone - a name so close to "alone," is (until the appearance in Book Three of Boris Max), the only character who pays no attention to class structure.

In Book One, Bigger reveals an interest in flight, regretfully pointing out that as a black man, he can never really have the chance to learn to fly. Metaphorically, however, Bigger gets his wish in Book Two, "Flight." That he initially tries to remain in the Dalton household and simply cover his tracks can be attributed to both fear and hubris. He fears discovery, of course, and takes steps at every turn to try to keep secret the crime he has committed. This is itself an act of hubris - to think that he can stay and not eventually be caught. Yet, just as he is convinced that he could fly a plane if given a chance, Bigger believes that if he can just stay one step ahead of everyone else, he can hold onto the new life he has planned for himself. He'll learn from the white people the secret of "getting hold of money."

Ironically, he does learn thing way from white people: Tthe kidnap plot is inspired by the Leopold and Loeb case, a true story from the 1920s. (Some of Clarence Darrow's arguments during that kidnap trial are quite similar to those offered by Bigger's attorney later in the book.) Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were two wealthy white university students who fancied themselves over men in the Nietzschean sense - "judge and avenger and victim of one's own law" - capable of committing the perfect crime. After murdering Bobby Franks and trying to frame it as a kidnapping, Leopold and Loeb found that their perfect crime was in fact fraught with mistakes that eventually led to their being caught. Bigger's mistakes likewise surface faster than he can cover them up.

Continuing the rat metaphor, Bigger finds himself cornered by his mother and brother's assertions that Bigger came in after four in the morning. Like the rat, Bigger turns on his "attackers," belligerently maintaining that it was only two in the morning. He similarly relies on almost "animal" instincts, trying to act "normal" and solicitous when in fact normal for him is impossible. This means that any attempt to act normal would truly require acting. The native son, the product of his environment, must behave as he has been conditioned to behave. It is while he is trapped in an uncomfortable domestic scene with his family that Bigger first begins to feel the stirrings of a new sense of himself, a new confidence inspired by the realization that he has done something in which he can take a perverse sort of pride. He feels bigger for having committed murder, and refuses to think of it as an accident, since he believes that because he has committed similar crimes in his heart and imagination many times before; it was inevitable that he would one day follow through on his impulses. Just as the rat rears up to fight against something many times larger and stronger, Bigger begins to believe that he can use his own newfound inner strength to survive the trouble he has caused himself.

It is ironic that Bessie, in Book Two, is the one to point out to Bigger that the white accusers are very likely to fixate not on his having murdered a white woman so much as the possibility that he has raped a white woman - an event that did not happen - considering that before Bigger matter-of-factly crushes Bessie's skull with a brick, he does rape her. Bigger barely remembers this act, let alone feels any remorse, in contrast to his treatment of Mary Dalton, which he replays again and again in his mind.

Bigger's refusal to think of the murder as an accident somewhat suggests Wright's own thinking: The author created Bigger Thomas from an amalgam of real-life characters in his own life, each responding to conditions and circumstances with resistance ranging from passive-aggressiveness to violent action. His character struggles to be the overman figure proposed by German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. The overman, or superman, is one who can overcome oppressive forces such that he can free himself from convention and the "herd instinct" and act on his own. Bigger, of course, struggles not only against himself, but against society. Wright's premise is that Bigger's fate has been determined almost from birth by the pressures of poverty, racism, economic disparity, differential opportunity and the class system, and that because of white society must be held as accomplices, if not as the real murderers. "The environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism makes consciousness," he wrote in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born."

Bigger is indeed a "native" son - a natural product of his environment. When Bigger murders Mary and in doing so finds himself controlling rather than being controlled, he begins to free himself from the forces - societal pressures and restrictions - and follow his own rules. The suggestion is that it is possible to overcome oppression through conscious resistance. The call for violence may not be so much a literal message, as a general belief that revolution is required to inspire true social change. Many critics of Wright's book, including James Baldwin, criticized the book for this reason. Not surprisingly, at the time he wrote *Native Son*, Wright still believed that the Communist Party could manage just such a social revolution. Both Wright's and Bigger's implication that violence and rebellion are natural and justified in circumstances of systematic oppression foreshadow the defense that Boris Max uses at the trial in Book Three. (Its failure to prevent the maximum sentence for Bigger similarly foreshadows Wright's disillusionment with the Communist Party at a later date, although it is doubtful that this was in the author's mind at the time.)

An inanimate object plays a starring role in Book Two. Bigger chooses the furnace, the heart of the house, as a means of destroying evidence. However, he finds that like Poe's telltale heart, its glowing coals are a constant reminder of what he has done. Whenever he returns to the Dalton house, his first act is to check the furnace. He worries constantly that the body has not burned. Although he tells himself he feels no remorse, his revulsion at touching or even approaching the furnace belies at least a subconscious knowledge of the horribleness of what he has done. In the end, it is the furnace that betrays him - or, rather, his delinquency in his furnace-tending duties. Unable to properly tend the fire, since his attempts cause disabling visions of Mary's burning corpse, Bigger exposes himself to suspicion and discovery. Bigger's inability to take care of the furnace duplicates his larger failures in life; he has never been good at

doing what's expected of him in life, such as holding down a regular job or continuing in school.

It is beyond Bigger's ability to comprehend Erlone's reaction to being the prime suspect. Erlone's immediate response, after protesting his innocence, is to claim that Bigger must be being coerced by the white men into lying. He asks Bigger to meet with him as an equal and "talk things over," which attempt to flout the rules of black-white society Bigger sees as "unkind." The Communist's lack of anger with Bigger testifies to his devotion to his political and socio-economic beliefs, but his accepting response has the opposite effect on Bigger, who becomes so confused and enraged by Erlone's behavior that he pulls a gun. Wright shows Erlone's fear by saying "his face whitened"; given the limited third-person point of view, this reinforces our understanding that Bigger considers Erlone one of "them," not as an equal. Yet, even after Erlone is arrested, he refuses to leave the jail, protesting Bigger's innocence and blaming the whole incident on the parents as a "stunt" to discredit the Reds.

Interestingly, it's the news reporters - a nameless, faceless, pack of interchangeable jackals - and their frenzied quest for a story with the proper slant that leads to the discovery of the crime. Their delight in the angle that "the Negroes just want to be left alone and these Reds are forcing 'em to live with 'em," resonates with sadness. The notion so closely echoes the truth. Another slant - "primitive Negro...doesn't want to be disturbed by white civilization," hints at exactly the kind of treatment Bigger can expect if he is caught by the "civilized" white people. While their questioning leads them no closer to the truth, their continued presence despite the lack of new information and change in circumstances, testifies to their survival instincts. They must write news stories to keep their working lives secure. It is natural, then, that when their physical lives are threatened by suffocation from the coal smoke, one of them leaps in to clear the ashes and discovers the shards of bone that set Bigger into literal flight.

Book 3

Book 3 Summary

In the early days following his capture, Bigger remains lost in a sort of trance, not speaking, not eating, barely moving. He is shuttled from one police station to another for questioning, but he gives no answers and rarely thinks about the murders at all. Instead, he gives himself over to a state of philosophical, poetical introspection, not about his past but about his future. He has long since renounced the trappings of formal faith, and disdains those who believe in God for their weakness and lack of vision, but he ponders the forces from within and considers that it might be best to kill the one who failed him: himself, and his own instincts and actions. He longs for another chance at living a life "with pride and dignity," but recognizes that such a chance is probably impossible for him.

After several days in jail, Bigger is taken to a small, bright room in the Cook County Morgue. As in the Dalton's basement not long before, he endures a near-constant flashing of camera bulbs. He senses that he is more than a captured criminal to those assembled; he is a symbol of all that they fear and hate, and someone whose death they want to use to send a message to the black world, a reminder of the white people's power. This realization awakens Bigger from his stupor and revitalizes him. He sees the Daltons among the sea of white faces, as well as Erlone. As Bigger's becomes more aware of his surroundings, he also begins to feel his emotions more acutely, and finds that he is not only exhausted, but in pain. No longer shackled to the chair, he falls to the floor in a faint. When he revives, he is back in his cell, where he is given food and a cigarette. He asks for newspapers, and he reads about himself: "Rapist Faints at Inquest." The stories all depict Bigger as a ferocious, depraved, primitive beast. They also repeat the importance of keeping such people in their proper place through segregation and, when crimes are committed, through public and dramatic execution. Bigger considers retreating once more behind his wall of silent disassociation, but believes he cannot.

A pastor from Bigger's mother's church visits him, arousing both hate and confusion. Reverend Hammond does not bother to question Bigger's guilt, and begins sermonizing about the better life that awaits those who repent their sins and reach the afterlife. Mesmerized not by the words, but by the memories they evoke from an early childhood spent listening to his mother spin the same tales, Bigger feels a deep sense of guilt for having killed in himself any belief and hope. It angers him that the visions can stir him so and yet still ring so falsely. He feels the pain of life with no hope of release in death. The preacher hangs a small wooden cross around Bigger's neck.

Erlone comes to the cell, and Bigger girds himself for accusations and angry words. Instead, Erlone essentially apologizes for being white, saying that although he is different from most other white men, he knows that because of his skin color, he has the power to make Bigger feel guilty. Erlone offers to help Bigger, not by accepting the

blame for what one hundred million people have done to the black race, but by being the one to stop the cycle of hating and wanting to kill another man for his wrongs - and specifically by introducing Bigger to his lawyer friend from the Labor Defenders office. Bigger sees Erlone for the first time as a "man," not a "white man." Reverend Hammond counsels Bigger to refuse the help of Communists, and leave the matter in God's hands.

Erlone introduces the lawyer, Boris Max. Max immediately counsels Bigger not to speak at the inquest. Another man enters the cell, the State's Attorney, Buckley. He has faced Max in court before, and belittles him for "taking up with scum like this," and not defending decent people who might appreciate the effort. Max points out that it is people like Buckley who have made Bigger into what he is, and even giving him the idea of signing the ransom note with the Communist symbol. Bigger wonders how Max and Erlone could ever stand up against a man with real power like Buckley, who tells Max that there is no point in defending Bigger, since the Daltons will make sure Bigger gets the death penalty. He brings the Daltons into the cell.

Mr. Dalton continues to believe that someone must have been partnered with Bigger, and announces that his heart is not bitter. He offers up as his continued determination to help black people the fact that just that morning, he sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boy's Club. Max is confounded by what he sees as the Daltons' inability to truly view black people as people with "as much life-feeling" as they have, and by their belief that ping-pong tables, rather than fundamental changes in society, could help the millions of Bigger Thomases in the world.

More people enter the cell: Bigger's mother, sister and brother, and his friends Gus, G.H., and Jack. Bigger feels his family's shame in the presence of the white people, particularly the Daltons. He is puzzled by the disbelief in his friends' faces, and wants to tell them they should be glad that he has "taken fully upon himself the crime of being black," washing their shame away. Buddy offers to defend Bigger's innocence by shooting four or five white people. To calm his mother and sister's tears and his brother's anger, Bigger tries to reassure his family that he will be fine, an empty promise that startles his mother and amuses Buckley. No one believes his words except Buddy. When his mother asks what she can do for him, he is ashamed of himself for having lied moments before, for letting himself appear foolish in front of his white accusers.

Bigger's mother encircles her children with her arms and prays aloud while Reverend Hammond adds his refrain. When Buckley moves to usher them out, she tells Bigger she is leaving him in God's hands. When Buckley apologizes to Mrs. Dalton for making her stand so long, Bigger's mother turns to the blind woman and begs for Bigger's life. Erlone and Max try to lift her to her feet and help her out, as she crawls from wife to husband beseeching them for their help, offering to work for them for the rest of her life in return. Bigger hates his mother for this. Mr. Dalton promises that his company will not evict her family, but says that beyond that, there is nothing he can or should do, as people must protect themselves. Max leads her out. Erlone guides Vera and offers to drive G.H., Gus and Jack to the South Side.

Buckley shows Bigger the angry mob outside the jail agitating to lynch him. He demands a confession, and tries several times to get Bigger to place the blame on Erlone as the instigator of the crime. Finally, Buckley asks about Bessie, and reveals that they found her body - she survived the brick attack and the fall, but froze to death in the airshaft - as well as evidence of Bigger's fake kidnap plot in the form of an unsent letter from her. He says he knows that Bigger raped Bessie, and tries to get him to confess to a string of other rapes and murders over the course of the year. Buckley continues to add more crimes to the list of accusations and to badger Bigger into naming Erlone and the Communist Party as the masterminds. He abruptly tries another tactic, assuring Bigger that he understands that Bigger believes that, since he is black, he has never had a fair chance. He offers to have Bigger declared mentally incompetent, if only he will confess to all the rapes and murders he's mentioned. Bigger refuses.

Buckley brings in a stenographer to write out Bigger's confession. Part of Bigger is eager to tell the real story of what he was feeling at every moment, but although he goes over the details step by step, he finds he is merely reciting facts and not in any way capturing what really happened. Bigger signs the statement, which Buckley folds into his pocket. He heads off to his club, indicating that he has no plans to even bother to attend the rest of the inquest. Bigger breaks down in anguish: by trying to make his feelings known he has sealed his fate.

The policemen come to take him back to the inquest, leading him through a gauntlet of angry onlookers, one of whom strikes Bigger in the temple and knocks him to the ground. In the inquest room, surrounded by a phalanx of red-faced police officers and various evidence exhibits - the trunk, a pile of bones, the ransom note, his confession - Bigger finds Max, who smiles. Mrs. Dalton testifies to the facts of Mary's life. The Deputy Coroner asks her to identify, by feel, one of her grandmother's earrings, which Mary had been wearing on the night of her murder. Mrs. Dalton also confirms that she and her family have donated over five million dollars to Negro educational institutions.

When the coroner calls Erlone to the stand, Bigger feels sure Erlone will turn on him. He does not. He merely affirms that he believes in social equality for Negroes, and that he is a member of the Communist Party. The coroner tries to make Erlone confess that he had sexual relations with Mary in the back seat and then lifted her, incapacitated, to the front seat where he left her - "an unprotected white girl alone in a car with a drunken Negro" - and that he has in the past used Mary Dalton as "bait," presumably to lure black men into the Communist Party.

When Max tries to steer the coroner back to more relevant lines of questioning, his requests are denied. The coroner further insists that Erlone's familiarity with blacks is itself suspect, and that the contents of the pamphlets he gave to Bigger all but suggest that it is perfectly fine for a black man to have sexual relations with white women, moving Bigger to feel justified in raping Mary Dalton. Erlone argues that the coroner is trying to indict the entire black race and all of the Communist Party. With a succession of highly leading questions, the coroner attempts to make the case that Erlone deliberately got Mary Dalton and Bigger drunk, then left them together with the intention

that they would have sex, as part of a deliberate plan to recruit Bigger into the Party. Max's objections are dismissed. When Mr. Dalton comes to the stand, Max questions him on his company's policy of charging black families a higher rent than white families for the same houses, and for refusing to rent to black families if the houses are not in the "Black Belt" of the South Side. He further points out that, in giving millions in donations to blacks, Dalton is merely returning the money he has consistently overcharged them.

The courtroom explodes in shouts and screams, as the coroner orders two attendants to produce, as evidence, the body of Bessie Mears. Though Max protests that presenting the corpse does nothing but inflame an already hostile crowd, the coroner nevertheless displays it for the courtroom. Bigger understands this move as an effort to show that he is nothing more than an animal, and feels more sympathy for Bessie dead than when she was alive. He knows that she would be angry at being used this way. The jurors announce that there is clearly enough evidence to hold Bigger for trial.

Instead of taking Bigger directly to jail, the police officers drive Bigger to the Dalton home to force him to reenact the events of the night of the murder. For once, he refuses a direct order from white men, saying "You can't make me do nothing but die!" He hopes they will shoot him for this insolence, so he can be free of them. They drag him back to the squad cars through a jeering, spitting crowd that holds aloft a burning cross. When Bigger is placed in his cell, he tears the wooden cross from his neck and throws it to the floor, shocking the officers, who ask him to reconsider. When Reverend Hammond tries to enter the cell soon after, Bigger slams the barred door in his face, knocking him flat. Bigger picks up the cross; after a moment, he flings it from the cell.

A guard brings Bigger a tray of food, which he says is from Max. When Bigger asks for a newspaper, the guard hands over his own copy. When he leaves, Bigger reflects on how friendly and normal the man acted, and how Bigger had not for once felt cornered. The paper quotes Buckley as saying he wishes he could clear the Communists out of the city "lock, stock and barrel," and that doing so would solve the crime problem in Chicago. Meanhile, a group of white officers drags a light-skinned black man down the corridor and deposits him in Bigger's cell. The man screams and shakes the bars, claming he has been wrongly accused and demanding to see the President, and swearing that someone has stolen all his research. A white guard tells Bigger that the man is writing a book about how black people live and plans to take the evidence to the President. Although the man is in a crazed frenzy, Bigger listens as the new prisoner rants about how the black people are taxed, but get no benefits for it, and how the Black Belt gets the discards of white society in terms of food, jobs, schools and services. Men in white coats come and remove the new prisoner from the cell.

Max comes to see Bigger, who tells the lawyer that he should just forget about trying the case. Max answers that if Bigger doesn't fight, the system will never change. He tells Bigger that although he understands that as a white man his words and motives are automatically suspect, he wants Bigger to trust him. This causes in Bigger the same color-conscious discomfort that he felt when Erlone shook his hand. However, he does believe that Max wants to help him, even though he knows it is a lost cause. Max sees

commuting the death sentence to life in prison as a realistic and desirable "success"; Bigger believes that as a black man on trial for the death of a white woman, he is destined no matter what to be executed.

Max and Bigger discuss the atmosphere of hate between the whites and blacks, and between certain white people and trade unions, organizers, Communists, and Jews. Max points out that many people are exploited, but it is easier for the whites to mistreat all black people, because they are easily identified by their skin color. They discuss the night of the murder, going over Bigger's confession to the state's attorney, and Bigger admits that it is possible that if Mrs. Dalton had not come into the room, he might well have ended up raping Mary as he was "feeling that way." When Max asks if Bigger liked Mary, Bigger reacts as though struck.

Bigger admits that he hated Mary, because she presumed to enter his world, the world of all Negroes, when he knows social conventions and the law make that dangerous for a black man. He finds he cannot quite explain to Max that Mary's actions were not "kind" but hurtful, since they provoked strong feelings of anger, unease, and awareness of the gulf between black and white society. Asked how he could have considered having sex with someone he hated, Bigger allows that since whites expect such behavior from black men, he might as well behave that way. He adds that he hated Mary not as a person, but as a white person. He associated her with the millions of people who never let black people "do what other people do." Max asks what it is that Bigger wishes he could do that the white people won't let him do, and he confesses that he once wanted to be an aviator or a businessman, or to go into the military and actually be allowed to fight, not just wash dishes or dig ditches.

Bigger says that he hates being told to stay in one little spot, and avers that by doing what he did, he at least moved from that prescribed role. He was free. When Max leaves, Bigger puzzles over the lawyer's questions, wondering why Max asked him about his feelings and his thoughts on religion, voting and politics. He realizes that he, too, has been blind - blinded by hatred. Wanting to explore this new concept further he breaks down, no longer eager to die, but wanting to be part of the larger battle for justice.

Max escorts Bigger to the courtroom and warns him that he will need to speak just a few words before the judge: He needs to plead guilty. Bigger protests. He does not want anyone he knows to watch the trial, but Max has clearly packed the courtroom with as many of Bigger's supporters as he can, including G.H., Gus, Jack and Doc, as well as other school mates and several teachers. Bigger's only thought is that, because he once boasted and acted tough in front of them, they will see the trial as a fitting comeuppance. A commotion arises when Max announces that Bigger unexpectedly pleads guilty. News reporters rush from the courtroom, and all eyes are on Bigger. Buckley protests that Bigger cannot please both guilty and insane; Max assures him that he is not claiming insanity, but something more. When asked, Bigger affirms the guilty plea.

Buckley delivers a "brief" statement, using his oratorical skills to rile the courtroom into shouts for lynching and execution. He scoffs at the idea that the act of entering a guilty plea itself should in any way affect the severity of the sentence handed down, and reiterates his position that to plead insanity is not contradictory to a guilty plea, but also an "insult to the Court and to the intelligent people of [the] state. After a short recess, Buckley parades sixty witnesses one after the other to the stand to tell the same story over and over. When Max protests that fourteen news reporters saying the same thing is pointless, Buckley stubbornly repeats his intention to prove Bigger's sanity. The parade begins again in the morning, when Erlone takes the stand. He's followed by Bigger's friends, Doc, teachers, police officers and waitresses from Ernie's Kitchen Shack. Nearly every witness makes sure to use the word "sane" when describing Bigger. Buckley even has the furnace rebuilt in the Courtroom, and has a girl the size of Mary Dalton crawl inside.

At last, Buckley rests his case and Court adjourns overnight. Max delivers his statement, beginning by explaining that he could not leave Bigger's fate in the hands of a jury predisposed by prejudice and publicity against his client. He says that Bigger's fate is not just his own but important to the destiny of the nation. Max's goal is not to engender sympathy for Bigger or to claim that some injustice has been done to him in particular. Rather he aims to show how the nation's history of social injustices toward minorities, the poor, and the unpopular led to circumstances, where a crime such as this not justifiable but inevitable. Bigger was merely someone who acted on the rage that has been building up in an oppressed people over the centuries. Max says that, when the crowds call for lynching, it is not Bigger they want to kill but their own guilt over having perpetrated such large-scale injustice. They want the racial tension to just disappear, and seek to bury the problem like a rotting corpse that, unfortunately, returns like some gothic monster, insentient and unstoppable, that cannot be deflected by isolated acts of kindness. The whole nation is responsible for Mary Dalton's murder, says Max, and though Bigger may have accidentally killed her, it did not happen because of who she was but because of what she represented. In a world where a black man in a white woman's bedroom would be crime enough, what choice did Bigger have but to follow his instincts to prevent being discovered there? Bigger does not feel sorrow because he felt then and still feels as though he was only doing what he had to do, much as a soldier might feel. Max asks that the Court consider that the larger problem must be solved, and that the place to start is by sparing Bigger's life, asking if the mobs fear one black man, how will they feel when millions finally stand up?

Following Max's summation, he and Bigger retreat to a small room for a short recess. Bigger feels a warm sense of pride that Max has tried so hard to save his life, though he does not feel worthy nor does he fully understand Max's points. When they return to the courtroom, Buckley again calls for the death penalty. He apologizes to the courtroom for Max having brought up the "viperous issues of race and class hate," thereby insulting American sensibilities. He again recites the entire litany of Bigger's action, emphasizing the lurid details and claiming that only by executing Bigger will good citizens - and by his implication he means white, wealthy citizens - feel safe again. The judge declares that he will pronounce the sentence in one hour; Max protests in vain that surely that does

not allow enough time for proper consideration. An hour later, the judge announces his sentence: execution.

While the days pass before the sentence is to be carried out, Bigger tries to come to terms with why, if he really believed himself to be nothing, he should fear death so much, and loses himself in wrestling with the meaning of life itself, feeling the weight of the questions burning like a fever. At last the day arrives. Max's hopes for the Governor to intercede have come to nothing. Bigger wants to talk with Max about all that is in his mind, but cannot find the words. When he tries to make Max understand how good it felt to be asked important questions about himself, to be treated as a man and equal, Max at first does not comprehend the depth of Bigger's message, which is that now that he is just steps away from death, he has finally learned to feel alive. He wonders how he can die, when he never truly lived.

Max tries to explain to Bigger that the world holds together on the strength of men's belief in themselves, and that if Bigger can only hold onto the feeling of life, he is doing something with his life after all. Knowing the Max still does not understand what he is trying to say, Bigger tells him that though he did not want to kill, and agrees it may have been unfair, it led to his finally understanding his place in the world, and his own worth. Max goes to leave, teary-eyed and fumbling. Bigger calls to him with a final message for the outside world: "Tell...Mister...tell Jan hello."

Book 3 Analysis

After two sections in which Wright relies almost exclusively on the main character's highly wrought interior monologues to tell the story, Book Three abruptly moves outside Bigger's thoughts with long passages of labored exposition delivered by not one, but several newly introduced characters. The Communist attorney Boris Max appears on the scene like a *deus ex machina*, promising to help Bigger solve the insoluble. Unlike the traditional "god in a machine," however, Max fails. Max does not promise to save Bigger in the actual sense, as the guilty verdict is a foregone conclusion, but he says that by making the case that the murder was inevitable, a product of the constantly building pressures of the country's social, racial and economic inequities, he may be able to spare Bigger from execution.

Max's arguments are as lofty and esoteric as the prosecutor's are base and inflammatory. They, ultimately, have no effect whatsoever on the legal proceedings, nor on anyone's attitude - including Bigger's own. In part, this stems from Max's co-opting Bigger as a symbol of the oppressed rather than truly acknowledging him as a man. In this blindness toward Bigger's personal struggle for identity and "self"-consciousness, Max is as guilty as the world at large. He does not treat Bigger as an inferior, as do most white men - as Bigger often treats himself - but in trying to paint him as a "native son," a hapless and helpless victim of his environment, Max does Bigger the ultimate injustice by denying him his identity as a man.

In "playing God," Max tries to turn Bigger into a doomed, Christlike figure; he asserts that the frightened white people mistakenly believe that putting Bigger to death will quell the almost religious fervor of growing discontent among the oppressed - and likewise silence the unrest in their own guilty hearts. Similarly, Bigger wants his friends to know that he has taken upon himself the sin of being black, and that this should wash their shame away. Prosecutor Buckley also sees the death sentence as a metaphorical crucifixion in which Bigger must be made to pay for the sins of all black men. Even the Reverend Hammond, another newly introduced character in Book Three, sees Bigger not as a man who has committed a crime, but as just another sinner who will be rewarded for his faith when his physical life is over.

Bigger's reaction to Reverend Hammond is not surprising. Throughout the novel, we see Bigger rejecting religion as the refuge of the weak. Even with the end of his life just days away, Bigger cannot bring himself to believe the pastor's platitudes and promises, and thus, he must face his own death without the calming effect that such beliefs would lend. At first, he wears the cross Hammond gives him with studied indifference. However, when he is confronted by the large burning cross held aloft by the angry white mob, he rejects the one around his neck as well, concluding that religion is nothing more than another weapon to be used to subjugate the poor.

For all Bigger's respect for Max, he is not a willing martyr: he throws the wooden cross from his cell. Max's close and personal questioning awakens in Bigger a new need to exist and be part of something greater than himself - something bigger - and he is despondent, not because he is going to die, but because he is going to die now, of all times, when he has just begun to understand what it means to live. He tries to explain this new awareness to Max, only to find that the lawyer does not comprehend how his perceptions of reality and his place in reality have changed, and what role Max has played in that change. Whereas people like the Daltons and even Buckley cannot see Bigger for the individual he is, because they are blinded by prejudice and conceit, Max fails to grant uniqueness to anyone, confusing equality with interchangeability. When it is clear that Bigger will be executed, Max must fight back tears, but it is not Bigger's impending death that saddens him, but another failure in his fight for social justice. He genuinely likes Bigger, but it is the symbolic loss that pains him most.

In his eagerness to contrast the various reactions to Bigger's capture and probable fate, Wright deviates from his previous determination to show life in naturalistic style with all its gritty reality: he creates an unlikely scenario in which all the still-living characters of the book assemble in a tiny room during the inquest. Improbable as even Wright admitted it was, the scene is important for several reasons. It provides an opportunity for readers to witness the caste system at work as opposite members of society are forced into proximity: blacks, whites, Communists, capitalists, religious leaders, non-believers, elders, youths, officers of the court, murderers, parents, children, rich, poor, free, incarcerated, educated, nearly illiterate, sophists, slow-witted, user, used. The overlap among these groups emphasizes the reality that society too often oversimplifies issues by taking a polar view, and that people exist not as an easily identified "us" or "them," but as points in a constellation. Max hints at this when he points out that black

people bear the brunt of obvious racism, because they are so easily singled out, but that oppression cuts across all such boundaries.

Richard Wright came to regret the tone of his earlier book, *Uncle Tom's Children*. He felt that those characters and stories were so dispiriting, that readers awash in pity and sympathy would never move beyond the inertia of self-absolution to push for any real change. For this reason, he deliberately created in Bigger Thomas a character whose crimes could not be easily forgiven nor justified, whose understanding of himself and others was rudimentary at best, and whose treatment of friends, families and strangers was uniformly self-serving and thoughtless. In this way, Wright hoped to focus the reader's attention on the larger story of the inevitable effects of systematic oppression. While attorney Max's arguments fail to sway the judge and jury, and while they were heavily edited in the original editions of the book, they do raise questions in the minds of modern-day readers. The most telling proof of the pervasiveness and depth of the racism that helped "create" Bigger is the issue of rape: the crowd and the courts are more incensed by the mistaken idea that Bigger raped a white woman than by the actual murder.

Yet, they care nothing for Bessie Mears, the woman he did in fact rape and then murder, except as "evidence" that Bigger is a rapist. By using her body as an exhibit, they demote her from her rightful role as victim to that of object - from human to thing. In his attempts to incite still further ill will toward Bigger, the prosecutor tries to link him with the worst crimes he can imagine: sexual attacks against white women.

Richard Wright did not have to exaggerate the rabid excesses of the media and society at large when race relations were linked to any crime, and particularly when black men were accused of murdering white women. Far from resorting to hyperbole when writing the news articles Bigger reads in his cell, Wright was in, at least one case, only loosely adapting an actual article about two black men accused of murdering a woman with a brick and, completely without evidence, of raping her. Many of the words and phrases were extracted from the May 27, 1938, edition of the Chicago *Tribune*, as quoted by critic Keneth Kinnamon: "dangling arms," "jungle beast," "an earlier missing link in the human species." The Chicago police attempted to link the two men with many other murders and sex crimes, also without evidence. As an aside, the defendants' lawyer was a white man from the International Labor Defense offices.

Some critics have likened Native Son to Dostoevsky's work, the closer parallel would probably be Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* in which the main character, caught in a fantasy, accidentally commits murder and is sentenced to death. The tale may have its similarities, but the tone and social philosophizing belong uniquely to Wright.

Bigger's final words show that he has, against all odds, achieved what he feared most - and needed most: to feel himself fully in the world. A big part of that is his new ability to look beyond the caste system that led him to the cell. Wright named the misguided philanthropists the Daltons, because he knew from a stint working as an orderly that there was a form of colorblindness called *daltonism*. The white couple, for all their

benevolent intentions, is as prejudiced as the screaming mobs, right down to their insistence that black people live in segregated neighborhoods, because they want to live that way. In the end, though, Bigger tells Max to give a message to Erlone, and stops himself from calling him "Mister." Only because he has come to understand what "life" is, can he now consider someone of another race to be not his superior or inferior but his equal, a fact he signals clearly by using the name "Jan."

Characters

Mary Dalton

An only child, Mary is a wealthy girl who has far leftist leanings. She is filmed frolicking with Jan, a known communist party organizer. Consequently, she is trying to abide, for a time, by her parents' wishes and go to Detroit. She is to leave the morning after Bigger is hired as the family chauffeur. Under the ruse of a University meeting, she has Bigger take her to meet Jan. When they return to the house, she is too drunk to make it to her room unassisted, and Bigger thus helps her. Mrs. Dalton comes upon them in the room, and Bigger smothers Mary for fear that Mrs. Dalton will discover him. Mary, as a symbol of white America, is destroyed by Bigger, who symbolizes what America hates and fears.

Mr. Dalton

Father of Mary, Mr. Dalton owns a controlling amount of stock in a real estate firm. This firm manages the black ghetto in town. Blacks in the ghetto pay too much for rat-infested flats. As Max points out at the inquest, Mr. Dalton refuses to rent flats to black people outside of the designated ghetto area. He does this while donating money to the NAACP and buying ping-pong tables for the local black youth outreach program. Mr. Dalton's philanthropy, however, only assuages his guilt but does not change his shady and oppressive business practices.

Mrs. Dalton

Mary Dalton's mother is blind, and this condition accentuates the motif of racial blindness throughout the story. Both Bigger and Max comment on how people are blind to the reality of race in America. Mrs. Dalton betrays her metaphorical blindness when she meets Mrs. Thomas. Mrs. Dalton hides behind her philanthropy and claims there is nothing she can do for Bigger. She cannot prevent his death nor can she admit to her family's direct involvement in the creation of the ghetto that created him.

Jan Erlone

A communist, Jan is the boyfriend of the very rich Mary Dalton. Bigger attempts to frame him for the murder of Mary. Jan sees the murder as an opportunity to examine the issue of racism. Jan had already been seeking a way to understand the 'negroes' so as to organize them along communist lines against bourgeois people like Mr. Dalton. He is able to put aside his personal trauma and persuade Max to help Bigger. He represents the idealistic young Marxist who hopes to save the world through revolution.

Gus

Gus is a member of Bigger's gang, but he has an uneasy relationship with Bigger.

Jack Harding

Jack is Bigger's friend. Bigger views him as a true friend.

Mr. Boris Max

A lawyer from the Communist Party, Mr. Max represents Bigger after the murders. As a Jewish American, he is in a better position to understand Bigger. It is through his speech during the trial that Wright reveals the greater moral and political implications of Bigger Thomas's life. Even though Mr. Max is the only one who understands Bigger, Bigger still horrifies him by displaying just how damaged white society has made him. When Mr. Max finally leaves Bigger, he is aghast at the extent of the brutality of racism in America.

Bessie Mears

Bessie is Bigger's girlfriend. He murders her because he fears she might speak against him. She is representative of all the women in the ghetto, like Bigger's mother and sister. All these women have the same tired look about their eyes and the same dreary occupations of washing clothes or working in kitchens. Bessie is so tired and depressed by the drudgery of her life that she only wants to drink when not working. Bigger provides drink, and she has sex with him, yet there seems to be no love between them. Still, as oppressed as she is, she cannot acquiesce to the murder of Mary. Fearing her inability to sanction the crime, Bigger brings her out with him to hide. He rapes her, bashes her head, and tosses her body into an airshaft.

Peggy

Peggy is the Irish-American housekeeper for the Daltons and, like Max, can empathize with Bigger's status as an "outsider." However, she is more typical of poor whites who are sure to invest in racism if only to keep someone below themselves. Like everyone in the Dalton family, Peggy hides her dislike for blacks and treats Bigger nicely.

Bigger Thomas

The protagonist of the story, Bigger commits two ghastly murders and is put on trial for his life. He is convicted and sentenced to the electric chair. His act gives the novel action, but the real plot involves Bigger's reactions to his environment and his crime. Bigger struggles to discuss his feelings, but he cannot find the words or the time to fully express himself. The voice of the narrator relates that Bigger—typical of the "outsider"

archetype— has finally discovered the only important and real thing: his life. His realization that he is alive—and able to choose to befriend Mr. Max—creates some hope that men like him might be reached earlier.

Even though Bigger seems to be developing as a person, Bigger is never anything but a failed human. He represents the black man who feels he has few options in life and, as a result, turns to crime. As he says to Gus, "They don't let us do nothing □ [and] I can't get used to it." He even admits to wanting to be an aviator and later, to Max, he admits to wanting to be a great number of things. He can do nothing but be one of many blacks in the ghetto and maybe get a job serving whites; crime seems preferable. Not surprisingly, then, he already has a criminal history, and he has even been to reform school. Ultimately, the greatest thing he can do is transgress the boundary the white world has set for him.

Buddy Thomas

Buddy, Bigger's younger brother, idolizes Bigger as a male role model. He defends him to the rest of the family and consistently asks if he can help Bigger.

Mrs. Thomas

Mrs. Thomas is Bigger's mother. She struggles to keep her family alive on the meager wages she earns by taking in other people's laundry. She is a religious woman who believes she will be rewarded in an "afterlife," but as a black woman accepts that nothing can be done to improve her people's situation. Moreover, she knows that Bigger will end up hanging from the "gallows" for his crime, but this is just another fact of life.

Vera Thomas

Vera is Bigger's sister, and in her, Bigger sees his mother. Bigger knows that Vera will inevitably have the same tired look in her eyes and bear the continual strain of a family. The other option for Vera is to become a drunkard like Bessie.

Setting

Native Son is set in late 1930s Chicago. Wright uses the setting to help point out the sharp contrasts between the black slum world and the affluent world of the Daltons, which has been built at the blacks' expense.

Wright sets the particular hardships of black residents of South Side Chicago against the background of the Great Depression, political and economic corruption, and urban blight. Native Son explores the social unrest created by the hard economic times and the attendant interest in radical political solutions represented by Marxists such as Jan Erlone and Boris Max.

In creating Native Son Wright drew upon his memories of nearly ten years' residence in South Side Chicago, sociological studies of Chicago compiled by Louis Wirth, and material taken directly from the highly publicized trial of a Chicago black man named Robert Nixon. Eventually convicted and electrocuted for murdering a white woman with a brick, Nixon was at one point defended by the leftist International Labor Defense. Wright made considerable use of the sensational racist media coverage of the Nixon trial.

Social Concerns

In Native Son Wright shifted his focus from the South to the problems of urban blacks in the North, but his picture of a two-tiered society based on racial discrimination and the protection of property rights remained the same.

Although the racist thugs of Uncle Tom's Children are replaced by avaricious landlords, irresponsible journalists, and brutal police in Native Son, the slums of South Side Chicago, like the rural South portrayed in Uncle Tom's Children (1938), are places in which the dreams of success are available to all but the means to achieve them are restricted to the few.

The particular hardships of black residents of South Side Chicago are set against the background of the Great Depression, political corruption, wealthy capitalists, and urban blight.

Native Son explores the social unrest created by the hard economic times, particularly the interest in radical political solutions represented by Marxists such as Jan Erlone and Boris Max.

In creating Native Son, Wright was able to use his personal experience of nearly ten years' residence in South Side Chicago, sociological studies of Chicago compiled by Louis Wirth, and considerable material taken directly from the highly publicized trial of a Chicago black man named Robert Nixon. Nixon was eventually convicted and electrocuted for murdering a woman with a brick, and at one point, he was defended by the leftist International Labor Defense, but Wright made most use of the sensational, racist media coverage of the Nixon trial.

Social Sensitivity

Native Son depicts a world that is psychologically and physically brutal.

Wright graphically portrays the emotional trauma that his black characters suffer because of white dominance, and he describes in gruesome detail the violence that accompanies Bigger's anger. Bigger saws off Mary's head; he smashes Bessie's face with a brick; he contemplates rape; he has no guilt for retribution against whites, no sympathy for religion or kindness. He is, as many critics have noted, one of the most despicable protagonists in literature. But Wright's defenders also note that the absence of morality provides a vehicle for looking at the raw reality of Bigger's world—a world that, for a part of his life, was Wright's own reality. In the tradition of naturalistic fiction, Native Son examines the cruelty of nature's indifference, and the evil that occurs because of humankind's intervention. In spite of its positive ending, in which the reader understands that Bigger can die fulfilled because he has found his identity, the novel will offend everyone, which is its purpose.

Techniques

In Native Son, Wright uses the same combination of direct, naturalistic prose and symbolism that he employed in Uncle Tom's Children. He carefully reconstructs the physical reality of South Side Chicago, using material gathered from sociological studies as well as his own experience. He then skillfully invests objects with symbolic significance, a technique that helps him overcome the linguistic limitations of his inarticulate protagonist.

But the most striking characteristic of Wright's method in Native Son is the stylistic shift in the last third of the novel. "Fear" and "Flight" are driven by violent, fast-paced action and terse, concrete prose that has been called some of the best suspense writing in American literature, but "Fate" is static, and Wright's prose moves toward the formality of exposition. This final section is often openly propagandistic, as Wright uses Boris Max to articulate the theoretical basis for Bigger's rebellion. In effect, "Fate" is as much an explication of what has preceded it as it is a conclusion to the narrative.

Thematic Overview

The central theme of Native Son is the central theme of most black American writing, the duality of black existence in the United States. In particular the novel explores the stifling limitations imposed on blacks. Bigger expresses his sense of exclusion as he and his buddies stand idly on a street comer watching a plane fly overhead:

"They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail." As in Uncle Tom's Children, the central movement of Native Son is toward the development of self-awareness. Bigger's development is perverted by environmental pressures that make him feel that violence is his only way to self-realization.

Native Son is a psychological as well as a sociological novel, and Bigger's development is outlined by the three sections of the novel: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." "Fear" documents Bigger's condition, living a life of poverty and hopelessness with his mother and sister. His entire existence is based on fear and his greatest fear is to let this fear show. "Flight" shows Bigger's sense of self increase as his personal danger increases. He enjoys the independence and power of confusing the white authorities, and his brutal murder of his girlfriend Bessie Mears exhilarates him because, unlike his accidental suffocation of Mary Dalton, it is a consciously willed action that earns him the freedom to "live out the consequences of his actions." In "Fate," the novel becomes more expository. In his lengthy summation, Bigger's lawyer Boris Max argues that all of society shares the guilt for Bigger's crimes, and Max's efforts awaken a desire for human trust in Bigger.

But Native Son is not a simple rejection of white America, for the novel shows that behind Bigger's violence is a desire for acceptance. The real trag edy of Native Son is that Bigger can find no other way to express his potentially healthy desire "to merge himself with others and be part of this world, to lose himself so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black."

Themes

Race and Racism

The central event in the novel is the murder of Mary Dalton, a white woman. Ironically, whites are more infuriated by the idea that Bigger presumably raped her than the fact that he killed her. But he did not rape her. The woman he did rape and murder —his girlfriend Bessie Mears—is forgotten by white courts and white society. With this stark contrast, Wright suggests the great racial chasm that exists between blacks and whites. It is the image of Mary in a newsreel that inspired Bigger to take the job so that he might be closer to whites. He decides that by proximity he might learn how they make all their money. The film encourages him to pursue the American dream even though he is already excluded from it.

Naturalism

The theme of naturalism—how a character's environment influences the character and his or her actions—allowed Wright to create an explanation for the economic and social condition of African Americans. In other words, Wright sought to demonstrate the "making" of Bigger. In doing so, he unveiled how a black individual's choice to pursue the ideals of freedom within American society (represented in the newsreel featuring Mary Dalton) leads him to destruction. Wright's theory of naturalism is often seen as an early form of existentialism, but it had this important difference— existentialism presents a character who realizes that only his choices give his life meaning. Naturalism posits that a character is formed and makes choices in response to the environment in which he lives.

The theme of naturalism is further strengthened by Wright's use of irony throughout the novel. An example is in the very title of the work, *Native Son.* Bigger longs to live the American dream. Yet when he admits his desires, someone is always on hand, like Gus, to remind him of the impossibility of doing so. Bigger cannot possibly reconcile his exclusion from the dream and his longing to be a "native son."

Violence and Cruelty

Native Son is a violent novel that includes a rape, two murders, fights, and a manhunt. There are also allusions to Bigger's thoughts of violence: "He felt suddenly that he wanted something in his hand, something solid and heavy: his gun, a knife, a brick." Such pervasive violence has disturbed many readers. Wright conveyed, in "How Bigger was Born," his belief that placing a group of oppressed people in a savage environment, like the ghetto, is an invitation for more Bigger Thomases. Wright prophesied that if society and government fail to address the horrendous living conditions of black Americans, then society would be responsible for the resulting violence.

Style

Point of View

An important technique employed in *Native Son* is a third-person-limited narrative structure. This technique reveals all the action in the novel but limits it to the perspective of the central character. The narrative voice, then, takes on the vantage point of—but does not become—Bigger Thomas. Consequently, other characters appear flat because they are visible only through this limiting filter.

One advantage of this technique is that the reader becomes close to the protagonist. In other words, since the point of the novel is to reveal the mind of a dehumanized black man cornered in the ghetto, the reader must identify with Bigger. Wright wanted readers to understand how hostile the American environment is to those who have already been excluded based on skin color.

Setting

In *Native Son,* Wright suggests that environmental conditions play a role in Bigger's psychodrama. Bigger sees the Dalton's neighborhood as "a cold and distant world." He learns that Mr. Dalton owns the South Side Real Estate Company, which in turn owns the decrepit house in which his family lives. During the trial, Max confronts Mr. Dalton, charging that the inadequate housing he rents to blacks contributes to their oppression.

A sense of claustrophobia pervades the work. Bigger's family is crowded into a rat-infested room. His hangouts include the street, where he feels like a rat. At one point, Bigger admits to feeling "bottled up" in the city like a "wild animal." He also feels that the "white world sprawled and towered" above him. The murder occurs when Bigger is trapped in Mary's room. As Bigger flees the police manhunt, a record-breaking snowfall hits, blocking all roads in and out of Chicago and trapping Bigger in the city. The novel ends with Bigger alone in a small prison cell.

Symbolism

The drama of Bigger Thomas plays out in much the same way as the opening drama of the rat's death. Both Bigger and the rat find themselves trapped, leaving them little choice but to fight for survival. The rat is closely associated with the decrepit environment that constitutes ghetto life. The novel consistently reveals the psychology of Bigger as being similar to the rat, caught in the confines of a "narrow circle, looking for a place to hide." Conversely, the white cat at the Dalton house symbolizes the justice system of the whites. Bigger does not like this cat because of the attention it draws to him when it lands on his shoulder. When the cat will not easily go away, the reader senses Bigger's eventual capture.

Bigger himself reflects on the degree to which those around him see the predicament of blacks and whites. Mrs. Dalton is blind, literally and metaphor- ically. She cannot see that her desire for Bigger to further his education is not what he wants from life. The rest of the family is blind to its own biases. The family's claim of having liberal politics is undercut by Max's charge that Mr. Dalton perpetuates the "black belt." The name Dalton ironically recalls daltonism—color blindness.

Historical Context

The Great Migration

Blacks had been leaving the South since the Emancipation Proclamation, but the numbers coming north increased dramatically over time. In 1910, blacks in America were overwhelmingly rural, with nine out of ten living in former Confederate states. From 1915 to 1930, one million blacks moved north. Richard Wright was part of this exodus from poverty and racism. By 1960, 75% of blacks in America lived in northern cities. This incredible alteration in the demographics of the United States had a profound effect on blacks as well as the political makeup of the nation as a whole. There are many reasons for this, the most important being the tremendous disappointment that met the individual migrants when they reached the North. The rapid infusion of people into the northern cities produced the ghettos described in *Native Son.* In addition, little effort was made to integrate the new arrivals with the rest of society. Instead, as Max argues with Mr. Dalton in *Native Son,* concerted efforts were made to keep them in the ghetto.

The Great Depression

The stock market crash of 1929 and the following years of high unemployment hit blacks even harder than whites. Nationwide, the unemployment rate jumped from 15% in 1929 to 25% in 1933. Between 25 and 40% of all blacks in major cities of the country were on public assistance. By 1934, 38% of blacks could not find wage earnings higher than the subsistence provided by public relief. As with Bigger Thomas, most blacks—if they could find employment—worked menial, low-paying jobs. In response to these conditions, artists and intellectuals took on radical politics and openly questioned American political institutions and values.

Political Freedom

Although the country had still not entered World War II, the United States Congress passed the Smith Act. This extended the prohibitions of the Espionage Act of 1917. The Smith Act made it a crime to advocate the overthrow of the government. Whether in publication or in membership of a political group—such as the Communist Party— it was illegal to challenge the legitimacy of the United States government. The act indicated an increased atmosphere of intolerance for alternative political ideas, which would eventually culminate in the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s.

Critical Overview

In *Native Son,* Richard Wright aimed to present the complex and disturbing status of racial politics in America. The great quantity of criticism that the work has generated and its popularity over more than fifty years indicate that Wright succeeded. The work has undergone several periods of critical assessment. Early reviewers, especially African American critics, recognized the book's significance. In the decade that followed its publication, the novel's stature was diminished by harsh criticism from James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Later critics, examining the ability of art to wage battle in the social war for greater equality, once again praised the novel. This phase coincided with the "black power" movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, the novel was faulted by feminist critics for its misogynist tone.

Early reviewers of the novel acknowledged its significance. Charles Poore, in the *New York Times,* declared that "few other recent novels have been preceded by more advance critical acclamation." *Native Son* was seen as a novel of social protest, typical of works from the 1930s, when writers who lived through the Great Depression created works critical of the American dream. Thus, Wright was easily subsumed in the category of "protest novelist" along with John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, and others.

After World War II, writers like James Baldwin, in the *Partisan Review,* and Ralph Ellison, in the *New Leader,* soundly criticized Wright for being too harsh and impatient. They felt that his picture of the black man in America was too negative. Baldwin went further to say that the protest novel did not advance the cause of equality but instead worsened relations between the races. Ellison, meanwhile, declared the novel artistically crude and its perspective excessively committed to Marxism.

In his 1963 article, "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe defended Wright as a representative of the protest tradition in black literature.

The "black power" movement took inspiration from *Native Son* with many of its members declaring an emphatic identification with Bigger. Theodore Solotaroff stated in his *The Red Hot Vacuum & Other Pieces on the Writings of the Sixties:* "we came to our own yearly confrontation with the algebra of hatred and guilt, alienation and violence, freedom and self-integration and in the struggle for what is called today 'civil rights' the meaning of Bigger Thomas and of Richard Wright continue to reveal itself."

By the 1980s Wright's reputation was firmly established in American literature, and *Native Son* became required reading in high schools and colleges. New questions were being posed about his work. For example, an aspect of the novel previously unexamined was Wright's attitude towards women. Marie Mootry discussed this in her 1984 article, "Bitches, Whores, and Woman Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright." She was not alone in taking to task Wright's novel for its view of women, although she was more direct than some. She found that Bigger's inability to see women as human beings, with the same rights to expression that he claimed for

himself, restricted his view of humankind and made his self-destruction a foregone conclusion.

David Bradley, a *New York Times* critic, admitted to hating the novel on his first reading, finding Bigger to be sociopathic. However, when reading it for the fourth time years later, he believed the book to be "a valuable document—not of sociology but of history. It reminds us of a time in this land when a man of freedom could have this bleak and frightening vision of his people."

In *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero,* Robert Butler offered a contemporary interpretation of Wright's work: "The novel is □ much more than the 'powerful' but artistically flawed piece of crude naturalism that many early reviewers and some later critics mistakenly saw. It is a masterwork because its formal artistry and its revolutionary new content are solidly integrated to produce a complex and resonant vision of modern American reality."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Averbach, a writer and translator with a doctorate from the University of Buenos Aires, illuminates Wright's motivations for writing the novel and discusses the strategies the author uses to express his themes.

In 1940, when *Native Son* was published, African Americans already had an impressive tradition of poetry and essay writing, but Richard Wright's work was the first critically significant novel by a black author in the United States. The subject of Native Son was quite a shock for many critics and writers. Some black critics protested because, according to them, the book was doing exactly what should not be done: showing white people that their prejudices against black men were true. Those critics believed black writers should only write about cultured, refined black people, so as to show the white world that blacks could be trusted, that they were capable of achieving the same things white middle class people could achieve. Wright wanted to do just the opposite: he wanted to show white America what black life was about, and that most black persons in America were not middle class. As he wrote in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright was interested in the lives of people who told him: "I wish I didn't have to live this way, I feel like I want to burst."

Now, if we say *Native Son* was written to prove or show something, we are talking about a very special class of literature: "literature engage" or "politically committed literature." Literature has many definitions. To consider literature as a means to change the world around us is one way to define it. Richard Wright defined literature this way; therefore he wanted his ideas to be clear to his audience. He devised a form that would allow him to explain himself. The reader should try to understand that form before he or she passes on to the details of the novel.

The novel is divided into three sections: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." The first two sections tell the story of Bigger Thomas's crime and his arrest. If the novel were a thriller (and it has some elements of a thriller: the crime and the investigation are only two of them), this would be the end of the story. But for Richard Wright's purpose, the most important part of the novel is still missing. In "Fate" Wright introduces a lawyer named Max. Max's role is to explain the meaning of "Fear" and "Flight," not only to the reader but also to Bigger himself. A critic who despises politically committed literature would say that such explanations should be left to the mind of the reader. But if one wants to transmit certain ideas to the world in a novel, sometimes it is necessary to put those ideas into words.

The presentation of ideas makes this part of the novel very essay-like, but Wright manages to make it fiction through two devices. The first one is the use of the trial itself. Trials are important in American fiction: they impose a form of narration. They can be used as a means of manipulating the reader's emotions. One goes on reading because one wants to know whether the jury will say "guilty" or "not guilty." A writer can also use a lawyer as his spokesman. In the story the lawyer explains and analyzes his client's actions. He is required to do so within what we call a "realistic" presentation of fiction

(that is, a narrative in which the writer tries to convince the reader that the actions taking place could really happen). The lawyer's analysis and explanations are, as we say, "justified." Richard Wright wanted to explain Bigger Thomas' actions from his point of view, and a lawyer was a good device to voice those explanations.

The second device has to do with the "psychological" presentation of fiction. In "Fate," Wright is interested in the mental changes undergone by Bigger. Max's explanations help Bigger understand himself. In the first two parts of the novel, Bigger does not know who he is. At the end of "Fate," he still does not know, but he has begun to think deeply about it. He is beginning to understand himself, and the explanations are part of this change; they are "justified" also in that sense.

When he wrote the novel, Wright was a communist. He thus analyzes Bigger's case and the role of society in it from a Marxist point of view. Yet he adds an ethnical dimension to Marxist ideas; that is why the Communist Party did not like the book, in spite of the fact that the communists (Jan and Max) play a very positive role in the novel.

Before leaving aside the general form of the novel, the character of Max should be looked at once more. In general, important characters are at least mentioned in the first pages of a novel. Yet Wright introduces Max only in the last third of his book. Max's character is what the Greeks called a *deus ex machina.* In Greek comedy, if situations became complicated, the author introduced a magical character who could solve everything at the end. The device of the deus ex machina has been rejected by the novel as genre, especially in the twentieth century. That is why Max's role in the novel may seem awkward to contemporary readers.

In "Fear" and "Flight," the story is told by an omniscient narrator. That is essential here because if Bigger Thomas does not understand himself, he cannot tell his story. Bigger is dominated by two forces: one is fear and the other is flight, the impulse to avoid problems. Before he kills, Bigger is a cornered animal, and as a cornered animal, he is violent and cruel. That is why the novel's opening scene (Bigger killing a rat in his apartment) is so important. As Wright himself says in "How 'Bigger' Was Born", he wrote that first scene after he had finished the rest of the novel because he felt he needed a strong, powerful introduction to the story. The scene is a symbolic summary of the rest of the novel: the rat is a cornered animal, as Bigger and his family are. The rat and Bigger are violent with each other, as white and black people are. Psychologically, the scene shows Bigger's tendency toward violence.

Bigger kills out of fear. After putting a drunken Mary Dalton to bed, he is about to be discovered in a very bad situation: alone with a helpless white girl in her bedroom. One of the stereotypes applied to black men is that they are attracted to white women and want to rape them. Bigger is so afraid of this image and its consequences that he kills Mary. But after the murder, he discovers he has finally accomplished something. He is in a way proud of the murder. This is an important point: society has forbidden Bigger to do almost everything. Now the horrid thing he has done gives meaning to his life because it is the only thing he could do. As he tells Max in the last book: "For a little while I was free. I was doing something. It was wrong, but I was feeling all right □ I killed

'em 'cause I was scared and mad but I been scared and mad all my life and after I killed that first woman, I wasn't scared no more for a little while."

Wright shows the reaction of several black characters to the pressure of white society. Like Bigger, these characters do not know what they want out of life. The most dramatic expression of this lack of dreams appears in "Fate." When Max asks Bigger what happiness would have been for him, Bigger answers: "I don't know. It wouldn't be like this." Bigger, his family, Bessie, and the men at the poolroom want something different from life, but they cannot imagine what it would be. Society does not even allow them to dream. They deal with this situation in different ways: Bigger, Gus, and Doc through violence; Bigger's mother through religion; Bessie through alcohol. There seem to be no good choices for black people (religion is not shown as a positive force in this book). This is what makes Max cry in the last scene. Before he is sentenced, Bigger does not have time to learn how to dream something for himself. In that sense, the novel is deeply pessimistic.

If Wright wanted to show the conditions of blacks in the United States, he also had to describe whites' ideas and attitudes towards the blacks. He presents a whole catalog of white people's reactions to black reality. Britten, the racist, is the most predictable character, but the most interesting are the liberals, the Daltons and Jan.

There is one important metaphor of the condition of white people in *Native Son:* blindness. Whites are blind, literally (Mrs. Dalton) and symbolically (Mr. Dalton and Jan are blind because they do not understand blacks, much less their own reactions to them). Blindness here means not seeing another person, or seeing only what you yourself want to see in another. Mrs. Dalton wants Bigger to go to school. School is not Bigger's goal; it is Mrs. Dalton's goal for Bigger. Mr. Dalton thinks he helps blacks, but he charges outrageous rents for rat-infested rooms. Mary and Jan believe they are kind to Bigger, but in "Fate," when Max tells Bigger that Mary was being kind to him, Bigger answers: "What you say is kind ain't kind at all□. Maybe she was trying to be kind but she didn't act like it." For black people like Bigger, whites are like the blind wall Bigger sees in his future: something that crushes them. Kindness does not change that.

Now, what is Wright's diagnosis of this situation? As I said before, the ending seems pessimistic: "He (Bigger) heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut." The sound symbolizes Bigger's lost life. He will not have the opportunity to finish the process of selfunderstanding he has started. Yet there is a ray of hope, an indication of the difference between the early Bigger, the one who kills the rat, and the later one. In the last scene, Bigger says something important to Max: "Tell□. Tell Mister□. Tell Jan hello□." Jan has tried to make Bigger call him by his first name from Bigger's first day at the Dalton's. Bigger hated him for that. The fact that now he can call a white man "Jan" is a big step, from Wright's point of view. That does not mean society recognizes this change and profits from it. On the contrary, society sentences Bigger to death. When one reads *Native Son,* one must reflect on these contradictions: they are part of the depth of a great novel about the black experience in America.

Source: Margara Averbach, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Hynes discusses how Bigger could have no dreams of his own, only unobtainable aspirations fed to him by white America.

Richard Wright's novel appeared in 1940, just over half a century ago. One of his greatest problems at that time was akin to that of the other more recent black writers [Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin] I have mentioned: how to address both black and white readers while remaining true to his vision and hoping to effect a moral and social change. The faith of any serious writer (or teacher) must be that the emotional-intellectual wallop that follows upon seeing will shove readers out of ignorance and complacency, a little closer to union with other human beings.

Any artist in any medium wants to communicate with some audience, of course. My point at the moment is that black writers have had special difficulty in this regard. In order to touch on the enormity of an audience problem that was much graver in 1940 than it is today, one has only to imagine Wright's straining for a way to attack and appeal to white America, through a white publishing house, even as he sought to attract a potentially much smaller black readership. My own conviction is that his success has contributed a great deal to the gradual evolution of an American readership that now takes minority writers both seriously and in relative stride. He has made his mark, moreover, despite the fact that his reading of American culture was communist. In short, he could hardly have found a tougher task. How did he set about doing it?

For one thing, he focused on Bigger Thomas as his point-of-view character. As a comparatively uneducated eighteen-year-old black on Chicago's South Side in the late nineteen-thirties, Bigger is not up to narrating the story Wright wants to tell. Wright can, however, tell us what Bigger sees, feels, and wants, even if Bigger cannot, and Wright can thereby enable us to see Bigger as emblematic of the racial situation. In short, Bigger's name implies his extension to cover black status in this nation in 1940. We must eventually decide whether things have changed today.

Narrative point of view is not resolved, however, by Wright's showing and telling us Bigger's thoughts and feelings. Wright obviously wanted to put into his book, in addition, a white spokesman for Wright's own views. To this end he created Max, a Jewish communist lawyer affected by the viciousness of Bigger's behavior even as he believes his own communist reading of our society explains such behavior and ought to induce us to overhaul that society. In other words, Wright strives to make this a novel of and for both races by rooting it in a moral, economic, and political ground that the eloquent white, Jewish, communist lawyer—another outsider—tries to explain to an enraged judge and jury as well as to his friend, Bigger Thomas.

Max's effort is not to deny Bigger has killed a white woman and then a black woman, and that he has dismembered the white woman's body to stuff it into a furnace and be rid of it, but is instead to elucidate his own vision of how Bigger became who he is and of how he therefore did what he did. Max is Bigger's white lawyer and Wright's as well.

Max tries to explain to whites—judge, jury, read- ers—what Wright's narrator has tried to show us in the character of Bigger. Max gives intellectual shape to what Bigger has experienced and what we know to be the truth of Bigger's life. We buy Max's rationale because we co-readers know he reads Bigger accurately.

Inevitably, in this heavily naturalistic fiction, the jury will have no part of Max's argument and decides to execute Bigger rather than imprison him. This sentence is virtually anticlimactic in its predictability. Indeed, it serves merely to reinforce Bigger's awareness of the black-white split and Max's explanation of that split. Neither the book nor the reader's experience ends with Bigger's being sentenced to death. However, before discussing the ending, I think it profitable to detail something of Bigger's history, to rehearse the experience Max summarizes in vain for the jury. Some such particularizing seems essential if we hope to convey an idea of Richard Wright's America, as well as to reflect on our own national situation more than fifty years later.

Early on, Bigger and his friend Gus speak:

"You know where the white folks live?""Yeah," Gus said, pointing eastward. "Over across the 'line' over there on Cottage Grove Avenue.""Naw; they don't," Bigger said."What you mean?" Gus asked, puzzled. "Then, where do they live?"Bigger doubled his fist and struck his Solar plexus."Right down here in my stomach," he said.

While it is true that Cottage Grove Avenue separates black and white neighborhoods in this novel, Bigger's point is Wright's larger one. Bigger—who represents frustrated, aspiring American blacks in Wright's view—feels white values and expectations right were he lives. He would like to fly an airplane, go to college, have a good job, but is conditioned to see things literally in black and white. In fact the book's symbols reinforce Bigger's view. In the Thomas tenement rooms, Bigger corners an enormous black rat and crushes it to death—a useful sign not only of the way Bigger himself sees a black maniac, but also of the way black turns against black, and of the fate that lies in store for the eventually cornered Bigger.

Fighting breaks out among the black youths. They are afraid to rob a white merchant but not necessarily a black one. Night and coal and darkness figure prominently, especially in contrast to the prosperous white Dalton family "across the 'line,'" who are associated with sun, snow, white hair and clothing, and even a white cat. Nearly everyone is unable to see the world they live in, and Mrs. Dalton, for all her philanthropic spirit, is literally blind. Max, Jan Erlone (another communist), and Bigger feel and know accurately. The rest operate in the dark and *foster* the refusal to perceive.

As I have mentioned, the terms of this book are basically naturalistic, meaning that any struggle to change things by appealing to people's freedom to choose must conquer what comes across as a decidedly deterministic culture. The whites own the property and know how to keep and augment it. They rent slums to blacks at absurd rates and resist making such dwellings livable. To ease their consciences, in those instances where consciences act up, the whites behave philanthropically by being kind to their

black domestics and contributing generously to beneficent societies or scholarship funds for aspiring blacks they regard as deserving of a boost.

But no basic change is contemplated, and any suggestion of genuine human proximity between the races is shunned and feared. The city-wide search for Bigger is presented as a struggle between this escaped "nigger" and "ape" who has dared to violate a white woman and the collectively outraged white social forces—police, courts, press—determined to blot out this intruder and preserve white territorial claims. The hunters care about white values, not about the value of human life. The press plays up Bigger's fatal encounter with Mary Dalton, which we know to have been accidental homicide, but never expresses interest in Bigger's having murdered Bessie, his black girlfriend. Obviously, Bessie does not interest the whites. As long as blacks stay in their psychological place, carry out their chores, and go back across Cottage Grove Avenue after a day's work, all is well. But any alteration of this pattern is threatening.

As for the blacks, they are acutely conscious of the need to maintain an undeclared *apartheid.* Bigger's mother prays for heavenly consolation in the next life and pleads with her children to show respect to the whites, who own everything, and for whom blacks work. Her son Bigger's psychology, the basis for Wright's novel, shows him torn between hatred and envy felt for whites, on one hand, and contempt for himself for being the black man whom he sees the whites judging and putting in his place. When Jan and Mary attempt to befriend him and enter into his world by asking him to join them in a restaurant on *his* side of Cottage Grove Avenue, Bigger knows the humiliation of being laughed at by his friends for presuming to bring these white folks on a slumming tour. As a result he hates both himself and these whites even more intensely. He is conditioned to want what whites have, but because he is acutely aware of how he is evaluated by them, he is ashamed of wanting a "white" life and loathes himself even more profoundly.

This psychology emerges with an almost wrenching irony when Bigger and his friend Jack attend a neighborhood double feature. The first movie, called *The Gay Woman,* portrays a rich young white woman abandoning a career of adventurous infidelity with her lover in order to return contritely to her business-driven, mill-owning husband when she realizes his life is threatened by a bomb-throwing communist. Bigger is so smitten with the woman's beauty, with the glamour and ornate trappings of her existence, that he is thoroughly sympathetic to what he supposes her life to offer and is accordingly opposed to the young communist. All he sees is that if he takes the Dalton job he may meet some such beautiful white woman and come in for sexual adventure and economic opportunity. He is swayed completely by this Hollywood version of good white capitalism and bad "red" communism.

So involved is he in his daydreaming, in fact, that he misses out on *Trader Horn,* the second feature, which of course is at least marginally about black African "roots," as distinct from black history, the development of the slave trade. The narrator of the novel describes men and women freely and happily dancing in Africa, and the movie shows Horn's belatedly coming to love Africa and its people. What happened after that we

know because we are reading Wright's novel—even if we somehow failed to notice the American black's condition before we read this book.

The point is that Bigger misses this second film completely because he is so blinded by the Hollywood propaganda of the first movie. Instinctively, he accepts the white producer's simple-minded political and social reading of good and evil, a version imbibed as automatically by this black man as by the mass audience of whites. Wright is obviously interested in having us think about *why* the communist might want to kill the capitalist, but all Bigger sees is the silk-and-satin erotic fantasy conjured by capitalistic white society.

When Bigger subsequently picks a fight with Gus, he does so because he is afraid of failing if the black group goes through with their plan to rob a white merchant, but also because he feels robbery and other violence are just that behavior of which whites always accuse blacks, and because he doesn't want to ruin his chances of winning the Dalton job now that *The Gay Woman* has infatuated him with the possibilities that might flow from his involvement with whites. Thus, Wright does a grimly beautiful job of showing that the only values to be seen as worthwhile and good are white values.

Not to want what whites have renders one unworthy and subhuman (a "gorilla" is Jack's word). Yet to dare to reach across that "line" is tantamount to suicide. This is the psychological bind Bigger experiences. It is demonstrated vividly by his surrealistic dream, in which he sees himself trapped by his pursuers. To repel them he decapitates himself and throws his head at them. Bigger has no words for this nightmare, but Wright is making manifest Bigger's impossible simultaneous needs to fight off the whites and to express his selfloathing death wish.

Let us return to the courtroom at this point, to Max's appeal before the jury, now that we have briefly examined Bigger's psychology. What this white lawyer tells the white jury is that Bigger is the creature of white America, that he represented a whole category of human beings nurtured from literal slavery to virtual slavery, that he is one of us, the native son of Wright's title. Max works to persuade the courtroom that Bigger and his fellow blacks cannot be expected to live by the code now being broadcast, printed, and ambiguously touted as virtuous, civilized, decent American. Rather, Max asserts, Bigger has been so conditioned to regard himself and his race as inferior and subservient that it took his acts of violence to instill in him a feeling of life, creativity, and freedom—as if for the first time he had taken control of his actions and done something on his own, irrespective of what the dominant whites might expect or condone.

Max's argument we know to be true, for we are privy to that feeling of exhilaration he is talking about. Bigger does experience a sense of release and personal worthiness after taking Mary's life—however unintentionally—and disposing of her body. Max is perfectly ready to agree that according to white values such an attitude is perverse, but he wants his listeners (and Wright's readers) to understand that such an attitude is quite understandable in the kind of native son white society has shaped. Max emphasizes that a careful reading of black and white psychologies will clarify Bigger's behavior and should lead to a sentence of imprisonment rather that execution.

In developing his argument Max hangs psychology on the terms of guilt, fear, and hate. He points out that the Daltons, for all their goodheartedness, and indeed because of it, typify white guilt at the way whites keep blacks down and build fortunes by employing blacks and shunting them off to white-owned slums at the end of the working day. By corollary, his thesis holds that whites therefore hate themselves for this behavior and likewise hate and fear the oppressed persons whose existence sustains white guilt and who may sometime rebel against such treatment and thereby overturn the social arrangement that both supports and punishes whites.

Looking to the blacks, Max then argues that guilt fills them because they are trained to see themselves as inherently less than white, which means less than human. Guilt intensifies, then, when they contemplate improving their lot by approaching whiteness. Yet they are simultaneously conditioned to believe whiteness holds all worth, at least on earth. Blacks are accordingly filled with hatred for their unworthy selves and for their white enemy. Finally, blacks fear whites but also fear their own potential for turning violent.

Such are the American scene and psyche as Max reads things. As readers, we must accept his argument as valid for Bigger, whom we have lived with throughout the narrative. The very condition Max describes obviously assures a white jury's refusal to attend to his words, and guarantees Bigger's execution. He cannot be imprisoned as a permanent reminder of white involvement in creating him and the racial *schema* Max outlines. Bigger must be obliterated to prove Max is wrong and white authority is right and good.

However, the book does not end in the courtroom. Rather, it ends with discussion between Max and Bigger in a jail cell on the eve of Bigger's execution. Bigger, who has not understood Max's public presentation, asks him to put the matter more clearly. Bigger wants to know himself before he dies. Max at first dodges this appeal, seeing it as futile, and would prefer simply to carry any last messages Bigger may want to convey. But when Bigger persists, Max takes him to the window and points to the buildings in the Loop. Max explains that the people who own the buildings may have doubts about the rightness of the dream that impelled them to build those properties, but they will do whatever is necessary to retain their property and acquire more. Max's meaning is that the capitalistic system created Bigger and will kill him for threatening it.

Bigger, however, thinks Max is assuring him that whites kill to get and create what they want, just as he killed to protect himself and create for himself the only experience of freedom he had ever known. For Bigger, then, his communist friend's parting lesson has the effect of making Bigger think he is just like the whites, at least in possessing an acquisitive drive and the determination to protect his gains from all competition. Thus Max fails to reach the jury and likewise fails to reach his client and friend. Bigger dies with a smile having felt that in the end he, too, is in some sense white and that all humans are one in following the capitalistic spirit. Max is crushed; Bigger is as happy as such a situation enables him to be.□

My modest advice is to read *Native Son,* make political decisions based not exclusively on the "me" principle, think about what makes for a good life, as distinct from a fat one, for all people.□ Readers who derive sane conclusions from a study of Richard Wright will have taken a large human stride and will indirectly honor a powerful book after half a century and millions of lifetimes.

Source: Joseph Hynes, "Native Son Fifty Years Later," in *Cimarron Review,* January, 1993, pp. 91-97.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Holladay dissects the motivations behind Max and his faulty defense of Bigger Thomas.

Boris Max's speech defending Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* has been called [by James Baldwin in "Many Thousands Gone," *Notes of a Native Son,* Dial, 1963] "one of the most desperate performances in American fiction." By the time Max arrives on the scene late in Richard Wright's novel, Bigger has already been sentenced to death by the white mobs who hate and fear him for killing Mary Dalton. We have little reason to expect that Max's oratory will reverse Bigger's apparent fate. Max, however, seems to feel otherwise. Brought into the case by Jan Erlone, Mary's fantastically forgiving boyfriend, Max sees Bigger not as the brutal, apelike murderer portrayed by the prosecutor but as a living symbol of black oppression. His closing speech is a long, impassioned appeal to the judge. But it is not a sound argument. Not only is the speech "desperate"; it is riddled with flaws. Max, in effect, is verbally propelling Bigger toward the electric chair.

Though critics [such as John Reilly in his "Afterword" to *Native Son,* 1966] often see Max as Wright's two-dimensional attempt to "assimilate the dogma" of the Communist Party into his novel, I view him differently. He is not simply, as Keneth Kinnamon believes [in his book *The Emergence of Richard Wright,* 1972] an "authorial mouthpiece" espousing communist ideology. Nor can we say definitively [as Dorothy Redden does in her essay "Richard Wright and *Native Son:* Not Guilty," *Bigger Thomas,* edited by Harold Bloom, 1990] that he is "clearly intended to be the most intelligent and humane person in the book." On close inspection, Max emerges as a troubling character, more complex than a cardboard communist but much less heroic than the exalted tone of his speech suggests.

Max is suspect from the beginning. Wright describes him in almost the same terms he uses to describe Mary Dalton's father, who is "a tall, lean, white-haired man." Similarly, Max has "a head strange and white, with silver hair and a lean white face," and he, too, is tall. Max's whiteness does not bode well: White-haired white men, blind white women in white clothes, white cats, white buildings, and white snow invariably presage discomfiture and desperation for Bigger. Max's name, furthermore, implies that he may not be Bigger's best advocate. His last name is one letter removed from "Marx," and, as Max tells the prosecutor, Buckley, "If you had not dragged the name of the Communist Party into this murder, I'd not be here." He comes to the case, then, as an ideologue. He embodies a doctrine disliked and rejected by most of his courtroom audience, and he is Jewish. The prejudices the audience feels toward Max will not aid Bigger's cause.

Max's first name provides another clue to his personality:"Boris Max" may be recast as "Bore is Max." He is almost always referred to as Max or Mr. Max, but his full name, with its punning revelation, often seems more apt during his seventeenpage speech, which is part secular sermon and part filibuster. If the pun seems unlikely, consider the wordplay in the other characters' names. "Bigger Thomas" harks back to Harriet

Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom and Wright's own Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home"; it also [remarks Kinnamon] evokes "nigger" and "big nigger." And when Bigger says he is not worth the effort being put into his trial. Max brings him up short: "Well, this thing's bigger than you, son." Max himself is "bigger" or more powerful than his client if his name is read as an abbreviation for "maximum." "Dalton" also has ironic resonance; Daltonism is a form of color blindness [as noted by Kinnamon]. Suffice it to say that Wright probably did not select the name "Boris" at random.

The prosecutor, however, far from boring his audience, knows just how to fuel the fires of outrage. He has rounded up sixty witnesses, including fifteen newspaper reporters and virtually all of Bigger's acquaintances. Because the Dalton murder case centers around the ghastly fate of a beautiful young woman, the trial cannot be drawn out long enough for the perversely fascinated spectators and newspaper readers. Buckley gives the people exactly what they crave: all the key players in a horrifying spectacle. Max, for his part, would do well to bolster his defense by bringing in psychiatrists, social workers, and character witnesses. But he complains that the time he had to prepare his case was "pitifully brief " and declines to call any witnesses. Without reliable authorities to back him up, he must depend on his own rhetorical skills to carry his argument. These skills are not good enough.

Max's speech is often evasive. He spends an inordinate amount of time talking about himself, perhaps because he feels the need to justify the guilty plea he has entered on Bigger's behalf. Sometimes his argument sounds like a sleepless man's late-night soliloquy. After stating that he is "not insensible" to the burden the guilty plea places on the judge, Max pontificates:

But, under the circumstances, what else could I have done? Night after night, I have lain without sleep, trying to think of a way to picture to you and to the world the causes and reasons why this Negro boy sits here a self-confessed murderer. How can I, I asked myself, make the picture of what has happened to this boy show plain and powerful upon a screen of sober reason, when a thousand newspaper and magazine artists have already drawn it in lurid ink upon a million sheets of public print? Dare I, deeply mindful of this boy's background and race, put his fate in the hands of a jury (not of his peers, but of an alien and hostile race!) whose minds are already conditioned by the press of the nation; a press which has already reached a decision as to his guilt, and in countless editorials suggested the measure of his punishment?

Far from garnering sympathy for Bigger or Max, this aside suggests, first of all, that Max has deep-seated doubts about his ability to defend Bigger. He feels that the odds are against him, and he does not expect to win the case. This excerpt also reveals Max's condescending attitude toward his audience. The judge, a member of the "alien and hostile race," may not take kindly to Max's characterization. Since Max, too, is white, the slur on white people implies that Max believes he alone is a superior specimen, capable of rising above racial prejudice. But his own repeated references to the twenty-year-old Bigger as a "boy" contain a hint of racism: While the word might portray Bigger as a youth incapable of comprehending murder, the rest of Max's defense hinges on Bigger's adult reactions to a life and heritage of racial oppression. Finally, the excerpt is one of

many examples of Max's overblown rhetoric. He says in many words what could be said in a few; he says things that probably should not be said at all. Whatever else he is, Max is a ham who enjoys being in the spotlight.

Furthermore, Max is so intent on generalizing about black oppression that he barely mentions the most convincing—and accurate—defense available to him. Instead of arguing that Bigger smothered Mary solely by accident, he portrays his client as "a self-confessed murderer" and the perpetrator of "one of the darkest crimes in our memory." As if these descriptions were not damning enough, he later rages nonsensically: "The truth is, this boy did *not* kill! Oh, yes; Mary Dalton is dead. Bigger Thomas smothered her to death. Bessie Mears is dead. Bigger Thomas battered her with a brick in an abandoned building. But did he murder? Did he kill?" It seems as if Max is inciting his opposition to riot, but he appears oblivious to the incendiary possibilities of his rhetoric. He reminds the judge and everyone else that Bigger not only killed Mary but savagely murdered Bessie as well. And then he expects his appalled audience to agree that Bigger's behavior "was an act of *creation!"* Furthermore, "[h]e was impelled toward murder as much through the thirst for excitement, exultation, and elation as he was through fear! It was his way of *living!*" If Max is indeed "one of the best lawyers" working for the Communist Party in Chicago, as Jan Erlone has said, then the party is in trouble. Buckley's outraged response is inevitable: "And the defense would have us believe that this was an act of creation! It is a wonder that God in heaven did not drown out his lying voice with a thunderous 'NO!'" Max, however, seems blind to the ways in which he is destroying his own case. Although he puts on a show of passionate commitment to Bigger, his faulty argument undercuts his purpose.

Although Max appears to believe that philosophizing is his strong suit, he does not flesh out his philosophical claims well enough to make them convincing. For example, his assertion that Bigger's crimes were creative acts reflects a Nietzschean ideology. In Nietzsche's essay "'Good and Evil,' 'Good and Bad,'" in *On the Genealogy of Morals,* the discussion of the relationship between oppressors and oppressed supports Max's seemingly outlandish claim. The powerless members of society, Nietzsche writes, define themselves by striking out against those who wield power. Their defining, or "creative," acts enable them to label themselves "good" in contrast to their oppressors, whom they perceive as an omnipotent "evil." This kind of creation is reactionary, springing from a deeply ingrained hatred of the ruling class. Such a paradigm may apply to Bigger and his situation, but Max does not prepare his audience for a Nietzschean revelation. Out of context, his claim that Bigger murdered others to create himself hardly inspires sympathy. The judge, unless he has a Nietzschean bent of his own, is unlikely to fill in the gaps Max leaves in his argument. Whatever logic underpins his claim, it does little good if it remains unarticulated.

Max's argument is further weakened by a series of logical fallacies. Several examples will illustrate the point. First, in assuming that Bigger's crimes followed naturally from his perceptions of a hostile world ("This is the case of a man's mistaking a whole race of men as a part of the natural structure of the universe and of his acting toward them accordingly."), Max is guilty of a *post hoc,* or "doubtful cause," fallacy. He is unable to prove that coming of age in a racist society caused Bigger to act as he did. Without

defense witnesses or testimony from Bigger himself, the judge has nothing to go on but Max's word in this instance. And, as in his allusions to Nietzsche, Max omits the crucial connections in his argument. He admits that he speaks "in general terms"—but these terms do not substantiate his claim.

Max also uses the fallacy known as "two wrongs make a right." Instead of focusing his discussion on Bigger, he lashes out at other people whom he considers wrongdoers. This, of course, does not lessen Bigger's crimes. Having rhetorically asked who is responsible for the mob raging outside, he answers:

The State's Attorney knows, for he promised the Loop bankers that if he were re-elected demonstrations for relief would be stopped! The Governor of the state knows, for he has pledged the Manufactur- ers' Association that he would use troops against workers who went out on strike! The Mayor knows, for he told the merchants of the city that the budget would be cut down, that no new taxes would be imposed to satisfy the clamor of the masses of the needy!

The prosecutor, the governor, and the mayor may well be scheming—even crooked—politicians, but they are not on trial. Since he is speaking in a court of law, Max's unsubstantiated accusations are dangerously disrespectful as well as illogical. The attack, which occurs early in his speech, does not strengthen his defense of Bigger, nor is it likely to endear him to the judge, who also holds political office.

But Max makes an even greater mistake in lashing out at the Daltons, the object of sympathy in the courtroom and throughout the city. He does not seem to realize that his attack on Mary's parents is obtuse to the point of being cruel:

The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich. And Mr. Dalton, a decent man, tried to salve his feelings by giving money. But, my friend, gold was not enough! Corpses cannot be bribed! Say to yourself, Mr. Dalton, "I offered my daughter as a burnt sacrifice and it was not enough to push back into its grave this thing that haunts me."And to Mrs. Dalton, I say: "Your philanthropy was as tragically blind as your sightless eyes!"

These comments are another example of the "two-wrongs-make-a-right" fallacy. Max does not stand to gain anything by accusing the Daltons of complicity in Bigger's crimes. While they may not be as well-intentioned toward blacks as they say they are, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton are no more on trial than the mayor of Chicago is. Further, they are in mourning, and it is unrealistic of Max to expect the judge or any of his listeners to see the aging couple as guilt-ridden schemers.

The "slippery slope" fallacy is at the crux of Max's argument. He insists that sentencing Bigger to death is tantamount to starting an open war between the races:

The surest way to make certain that there will be more such murders is to kill this boy. In your rage and guilt, make thousands of other black men and women feel that the barriers are tighter and higher! Kill him and swell the tide of pent-up lava that will some

day break loose, not in a single, blundering, accidental, individual crime, but in a wild cataract of emotion that will brook no control.

But Bigger's death will not necessarily lead to more violence in Chicago's Black Belt or elsewhere. In fact, Bigger's death in the electric chair may come as something of a relief, even to those who don't despise him. Bessie Mears's friends and family, though they do not appear in the novel, would probably be glad to see Bigger die. He has murdered one of his own race, after all. Blacks have as much reason as whites do to fear him.

At the close of his speech, Max declares: "With every atom of my being, I beg this in order that not only may this black boy live, but that we ourselves may not die!" The statement implies that all of American society will collapse if Bigger is put to death. Though personally convinced that Bigger's fate is momentous enough to rock civilization, Max has no sound basis for this claim. In Max's eyes, Bigger is a symbol of all the oppression blacks have suffered since they first arrived in America, but in most other people's eyes, Bigger is a self-confessed murderer, an object of terror. And it is the judge's responsibility to decide the man's fate, not a symbol's. Max's illogical hyperbole does not effectively further his case. His inability—or refusal— to make sound connections between his generalizations and Bigger's own experience ultimately undermines his argument

In spite of his generalizations, self-doubts, long-winded tangents, and logical fallacies, Max might still win his case if he could characterize Bigger Thomas as a flesh-and-blood man, not a symbol to be inflated like a balloon and floated over white people's heads. He makes a start on this late in his speech when he suggests that life in prison "would be the first recognition of his personality [Bigger] has ever had." But overall, Max's defense amounts to little more than an extended exercise in convoluted philosophizing and moralistic fingerpointing. His patronizing air does not help his case, either. We can imagine the judge gritting his teeth as Max informs him: "There are times, Your Honor, when reality bears features of such an impellingly moral complexion that it is impossible to follow the hewn path of expediency." Max is so caught up in his own windy rhetoric, in fact, that he ignores two glaringly obvious means of winning the case: pleading not guilty or pleading insane. The former plea would place the burden of proof on the prosecution, and the latter would at least give him the opportunity to recast Bigger's crimes in a different light.

By making Bigger plead guilty, Max puts himself center-stage, and his own hubris takes over. The length of his speech and its rambling content suggest that Max has wanted to tell off the world for a long time. He picks the wrong occasion to do so. The judge cannot be faulted for sentencing Big- ger to death: One man's diatribe does not blot out two dead women, sixty witnesses for the prosecution, and a city full of outraged citizens.

Buckley, despite being an almost absurdly abrasive, racist figure, knows how to play the legal game much better than his opponent does. In his opening statement, Buckley announces, long before Max's speech, "There is no room here for evasive, theoretical, or fanciful interpretations of the law." He is right. And Max, [as Dorothy Redden

suggests] hardly "the author's spokesman for the truth," is wrong to assume the role of an angry prophet when his client desperately needs a levelheaded lawyer.

The question remains: How does this interpretation of Max alter our reading of *Native Son?* Put briefly, when we view Max as a subversive presence destroying whatever slim chance Bigger has to survive, book three becomes an even darker denouement to the action in books one and two. Max, like the Daltons, attempts to assuage his own conscience by championing Bigger. In the end, he fails himself as well as his client. Perhaps in Bigger's final facial expression, "a faint, wry, bitter smile," we see his recognition of this failure. Max, too, is guilty, but only Bigger will die.

Source: Hilary Holladay, *"Native Son's* Guilty Man," in *The CEA Critic,* Winter, 1992, pp. 30-36.

Adaptations

Richard Wright himself starred in a low budget film adaptation of *Native Son* in 1950. The film, directed by Pierre Chenal, is available on video from Classic Pictures Incorporated.

Native Son was adapted to film in 1987. The film, directed by Jerrold Freedmand, starred Victor Love as Bigger Thomas, Elizabeth McGovern as Mary Dalton, Oprah Winfrey as Mrs. Thomas, and Matt Dillon as Jan Erlone. The film was produced by Diane Silver for Cinecom Pictures.

Several recordings have been made of the novel. The most recent one was done in 1991 by Caedmon Productions.

Richard Wright gave a talk on March 12, 1940, at Columbia University which explained his ideas about Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. This talk has since been published as "How 'Bigger' Was Born" and is included in most recent editions of the novel.

Topics for Further Study

Read Ann Petry's *The Street.* Compare the climactic death in that novel to the crimes of Bigger Thomas. Does Lutie Johnson's escape from the street justify her crime and the abandonment of her child? Is she an innocent victim of circumstances or did she take advantage of circumstances?

Consider the following list of questions compiled by Robert Butler as the essential list critics have long struggled with: "Is the novel an artistic success, or is it crude propaganda that is deeply flawed by the melodramatic action and stereotyped characterization required by the advancement of a political thesis? Does the book supply a believable vision of race relations in America? Does it provide an accurate image of Afro-American life? Is the central character a boldly conceived new hero, or is he an overdrawn, heavily exaggerated, symbolic monster?"

Do some research on living conditions in Chicago in 1940. How realistic is depiction of the city in the novel compared to your research? (Start with the article *"Native Son:* The Personal, Social, and Political Background," by Kenneth Kinnamon.)

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Workers during the Great Depression are faced with unemployment rates as high as 25% and relief comes through socialistic government programs. The U.S. also increases defense spending as officials realize the nation will become involved in World War II.

Today: Unemployment stands around 6%, but corporate downsizing has many workers concerned about their future. The government must reduce a multibillion dollar deficit, yet the stock market continues its strong performance.

1940s: Blacks are excluded from the suburban housing boom of the era. The Federal Housing Authority practices "redlining": on city maps it draws red lines around predominantly black inner-city areas and refuses to insure loans for houses in those areas. This practice contributes to the demise of the inner city.

Today: Though many upper- and middle-class blacks live and work in the suburbs, poor blacks are often confined to substandard housing in decaying urban areas, or ghettos.

1940s: Race relations are tense as blacks grow frustrated with segregation and discrimination. In southern states, poll taxes and literacy tests are used to prevent blacks from voting. Tempers explode during race riots in Detroit and Harlem in the summer of 1943.

Today: Though civil rights legislation enacted during the 1960s has improved the conditions of minorities, particularly African Americans, the nation was polarized along racial lines in the debates over the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson trials.

What Do I Read Next?

Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth, published in 1945 by Harper, was a semiautobiographical version of Richard Wright's life.

The 1963 novel entitled *Lawd Today!,* published by Walker, is in many ways Wright's best work, although it was never as successful as *Black Boy* or *Native Son.*

A member of the "Wright School," Ann Petry wrote about the trials of life on 116th Street in Harlem in *The Street.* In that 1946 novel, published by Houghton, Petry explores the relationship of environment to a black woman's effort to live with self-respect in the ghetto.

The 1952 Random House novel, *Invisible Man,* by Ralph Ellison has become a classic portrayal of black experience in America.

The most authoritative biography of Richard Wright to date is Michel J. Fabre's *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright,* Morrow, 1973.

Topics for Discussion

1. What is the significance of Mrs. Dalton's blindness? Why is it important as both a symbol and plot device?

2. Why does Bigger not want to take Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone to black bars?

3. Why is it ironic that Mr. Dalton gives money to charity?

4. Why does Bigger have no qualms about lying, stealing, and killing?

5. Is all of the violence in this story necessary? What would the novel lose if the violence were eliminated?

6. Why doesn't Bigger accept his mother's religion? Why is he embarrassed when she asks him to pray?

7. Why is Bigger able to express his feelings to Boris Max, the lawyer from the Communist party? What does Max learn from Bigger?

8. Why does Jan Erlone, Mary's lover, think he is responsible for Bigger's actions?

9. Boris Max says that Bigger was not treated unjustly by the court because there was never a chance for any justice.

What does he mean by this? Do you agree?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925), or read critiques about that novel, and compare it to Native Son.

2. When Wright moved to Chicago, he worked for the American Communist party. Research the growth and beliefs of the party in America during the 1930s.

3. Explain Wright's concept of "destiny" as it shapes the lives of Bigger, Jan Erlone and Boris Max.

4. Explain Wright's use of irony and symbols.

5. Compare the character and destinies of Bigger and his girlfriend, Bessie Mears.

Literary Precedents

Called the black version of An American Tragedy (Dreiser, 1925), Native Son adheres more closely to the naturalistic method practiced by Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis than Uncle Tom's Children had.

Bigger's willful violence makes him at best an antihero, and any hope for melioration seems remote. Wright's careful documentation of Bigger's condition and his reproduction of newspaper accounts is reminiscent of the popular social novels written by John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and James T.

Farrell. At its worst moments, Native Son echoes the cold, analytical prose of much proletarian literature.

Further Study

Richard Abcarian, Negro *American Literature,* Wadworth, California, 1970.

A fundamental commentary on African American literature, its roots, and importance in the canon. There is a significant discussion of Richard Wright's novel.

Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice,* Cambridge, 1954.

A fundamental source to understand the problem of prejudice and racism in general and concepts such as visibility and difference.

James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Partisan Review,* Vol. XVIII, 1955, pp. 665-80.

Baldwin argues that "protest" novels, like *Native Son,* do little to advance the cause of racial justice in America.

James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name,* Dell, 1961.

Baldwin's essays about African Americans and Black literature. Some of them include references to his mentor, Richard Wright, whom he later rejected.

Russel Carl Brignans, *"Richard Wright: An Introduction to The Man and His Works,"* University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970, p. 147.

Brignans posits that Bigger Thomas was a precursor of the existentialist hero more closely associated with French literature.

Arthur Davis and Michael W. Peplow, *Anthology of Negro American Literature,* Holt, New York, 1975.

A collection of critical essays on African American literature, including Richard Wright's texts, plus a very clear and interesting introduction.

Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *New Leader,* Vol. XLVI, December 9, 1963, pp. 22-6.

Ellison believes *Native Son* has an aesthetically narrow view of the black experience in America because it is filtered through a sociopath, Bigger Thomas.

Leslie Fiedler, "Negro and Jew: Encounter in America," in *No! In Thunder,* Stein and Day, New York, 1972.

This article investigates the relationships between Jews and African Americans in the United States. Useful to understand the relationship between Bigger and Jan.

Katherine Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim,* Scarecrow Press, 1977.

Fishburn declares that Bigger is an anti-hero whose quest for freedom leads to his ultimate alienation from the world.

Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in *A World More Attractive,* Horizon Press, 1963, pp. 98-110.

Defending Wright against Ellison and Baldwin, Howe asserts that *Native Son* continues the tradition of black protest through literature and takes that protest to a higher level.

Dale McLemore, *Racial and Ethnic Relations in America,* Boston, 1980.

An advanced study of the subject of ethnic relations in the United States with a large section devoted to African Americans and a discussion of cultural versus racial differences.

Maria K. Mootry, "Bitches, Whores, and Woman Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer, Prentice Hall, 1984.

Mootry asserts that Bigger is unable to see women as human beings who have the same rights to expression as he does. Consequently, this restricted view makes his self-destruction a foregone conclusion.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark, Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Picador, 1992.

This work contains the ideas of the Noble Prize winner about African American literature: its roots, purposes, and future.

Charles Poore, review in the *New York Times,* March 1, 1940, p. 19.

Poore sums up the excitement surrounding the release of *Native Son.*

Louis Tremaine, "The Dissociated Sensibility of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son" in Studies in American Fiction,* Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring, 1986, pp. 63-76.

Tremaine views Bigger as a man hungering for selfexpression even though he knows that expression is denied him.

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James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Partisan Review,* Vol. XVIII, 1955, pp. 665-80.

David Bradley, "On Rereading *Native Son,"* in *The New York Times,* December 7, 1986, pp. 68-79.

Robert Butler, *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero,* Twayne Publishers, 1991, 132 p.

Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *New Leader,* Vol. XLVI, December 9, 1963, pp. 22-6.

Hilary Holladay, *"Native Son's* Guilty Man," in *The CEA Critic,* Winter, 1992, pp. 30-6.

Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in *A World More Attractive,* Horizon Press, 1963, pp. 98-110.

Joseph Hynes, *"Native Son* Fifty Years Later," in *Cimarron Review,* January, 1993, pp. 91-97.

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Theodore Solotaroff, "The Integration of Bigger Thomas" (1964), in his *The Red Hot Vacuum & Other Pieces on the Writings of the Sixties,* Atheneum, 1970, pp. 122-32.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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