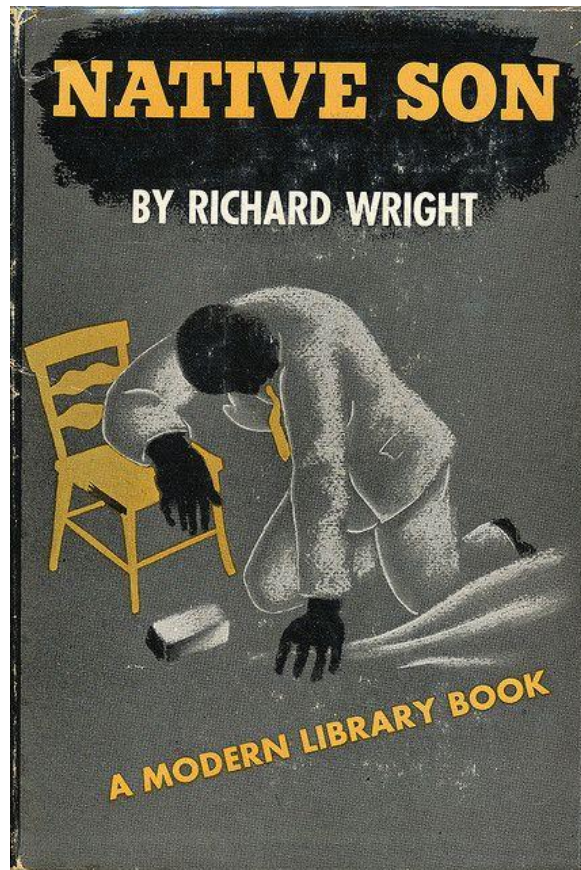


## Rhythm of Life in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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### Abstract

The Existential Theory of Rollo May discusses the purpose of freedom and anxiety in human beings. The life of the protagonist Bigger Thomas in the novel *Native Son* gives him a chance to choose his own way of life to attain either mental or physical freedom to choose and direct his life either constructive or destructive. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is a protest novel. The three sections, fear, flight, and fate, bring out the nature of human life and shows that psychological changes will always make everyone to face either construction or destruction to one's self or to others. The life of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* reveals the strength of individual in forming his self-identity in American soil which made him gain

meaningless power, which, in turn, led him to develop his anxiety and hatred feelings to face death in the end.

**Keywords:** Richard Wright, Rollo May, Existential theory, Freedom, Power, Love, *Native Son*, Fear, Flight, Fate.

### **Rollo May**

Rollo May was an influential American psychologist. He introduced a new branch of psychology called existential psychology. Existentialism is a study based on man's search for meaning and purpose in life. May's idea of existentialism came through personal hardship. May suffered with tuberculosis, a bacterial lung infection, and hospitalized for several years. During his illness, May explored meaning of life in the face of his death. This curiosity ultimately led May to study clinical psychology. In fact, he was the recipient of the first PhD in clinical psychology granted by Columbia University.

### **May's Theory of Existential Psychology**

Rollo May's theory stems from humanistic psychology. This focuses on the capacity for growth and achievement in human beings. May explored the purpose of anxiety in human beings. His exploration proved that anxiety emerged because of uncertainty in life and of looming death. May's theory analysed that human beings fear death because they cannot comprehend their own lack of existence. May believed that facing these feelings of anxiety and fear was a necessary experience in achieving personal growth and meaning in life.

### **Theory of Freedom**

May focused on the theory of freedom as the pinnacle of human existence. Freedom, in May's theory represents the power to choose and direct one's life. May's idea on love and will explored life's challenges. He believed that people have freedom and courage to be authentic and fulfil their potential. In order to preserve the sense of self, people need to give up self-centeredness and reach out to others.

### **Good and Evil**

May believed that human beings are capable of both good and evil. Rollo May sees evil and violence at the core of each human being – it is the daimonic within humans that, when left as an impersonal force, will come out as rage and abusive sex. He postulates that

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daimonic system, such as anger, sex, and power has the potential to get out of control and limit one's freedom for authentic living. Thus, when an individual is not able to balance and integrate sense of self the daimonic system may take control of the person resulting in psychopathology or self- destruction.

### **Richard Nathaniel Wright, an American Novelist**



Richard Nathaniel Wright was an American novelist, auto biographer, short story writer, essayist, scriptwriter, dramatist, poet, and editor. Richard Wright was born on Sep 4, 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father an illiterate sharecropper. When Wright was young, he lost his father. He began writing and he struggled hard to become a successful writer. His works include *Native Son* (1940), *The Black Boy* (1945), *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), *The Long Dream* (1958), *Lawd Today* (1963), etc. He was the first writer of his age to confront readers with dehumanizing effects of racism. He revealed the psychological and physical torments caused by segregation and discrimination. All his stories revolve around the themes of alienation, denied freedom, and personal identity. The protagonists created by Wright frequently resort to brutality in order to overcome racial barriers.

#### ***Native Son***

The novel *Native Son* (1940), is a story of 20 year old Bigger Thomas , a black American youth living in utter poverty in a poor tenement house in Chicago South Side in 1930's. The novel *Native Son* divided into three sections entitled fear, flight, and fate. The

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section “fear” opens with Bigger Thomas wakes up in a dark, small room at the sound of the alarm clock. The rat in the house made everyone shout and scream, Bigger chased the rat and killed it with iron rod. Later Bigger made Vera, his sister to faint by hitting her with an iron skillet. Bigger hates his family because they suffer and he cannot do anything about it. Bigger’s mother insisted him to meet Mr. Dalton, so that they appoint him as the chauffeur, by which their family can be living a descent life. Bigger met Mr. Dalton that evening, he was appointed as a chauffeur. Dalton’s gave him a separate room and food including his salary. Bigger felt happy that his family poverty will be resolved with his new job. First day the order was to take Dalton’s daughter Mary Dalton to her university. But Mary Dalton who was a young white woman of a rich man is not up to her family values whereby ordered Bigger to take her to her boyfriend Jan who is a communist. They both treated Bigger as their equal rather than treating with colour consciousness. Jan and Mary made Bigger to drive to a local restaurant in his locality. After their dinner, the three travelled together. All three were fully drunk and Bigger dropped Jan in his house, later took Mary to her house but she was not in the condition to walk to her room been carried by Bigger whereby drunken Bigger was attracted by Mary, suddenly realised the presence of someone in the room. It was Mary’s mother blind Mrs. Dalton. In order to escape from that horrible situation Bigger accidentally kills Mary by keeping a pillow on her head to stop her murmur, later saw her dead. Bigger puts her body into the basement furnace of Dalton’s house.

### ***Flight***

The section titled “Flight” focuses on Bigger Thomas’s first try to deceive Dalton’s about their missing daughter by plotting Jan Elsinore in her disappearance. Bigger also planned about sending a ransom note asking for money to Dalton’s. He ordered Bessie, his girlfriend to join him in this plan so that they both can settle down. Mr. Dalton after receiving the note appointed Britten, a private detective to investigate this case. Britten suspected Jan after enquiring Bigger about their journey together that night. The team of Britten found the earring and some bones in the ashes of the furnace. Bigger seeing them with the proof flee away to safeguard himself from police. He started hiding in the old buildings with Bessie. He with an intention to stop Bessie’s intervention in his murder of Mary raped and killed her by hitting her head with a brick. After committing two murders Bigger wanted to hide from police, the house-to-house search made him to surrender to police and was imprisoned.

## **Fate**

The life of Bigger Thomas in prison is entitled as “Fate” where Jan appoints a lawyer Max a Jew. The imprisonment made Bigger to realize all are human and no one is different in this earth. The speech given by the lawyer Max made him realise his own actions. At the end of the trial, Max makes an appeal for Bigger’s life, but it fails and Bigger condemned to death. The last words of Bigger to Max reveal that his crime must have had a good purpose or else he would not have risked his life committing them. Bigger’s reasoning power made Max to feel for his death and two men departed to their world.

## **Bigger Thomas**

Richard Wright’s novels portray physical and psychological torment produced by segregation and racial discrimination. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel *Native Son* is resort to brutality. His daimonic systems like anger, sex, and power are not integrated to self. As Rollo May points out, people are capable of both good and evil. As in the words of Dorothy Canefield, “This novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American literature has yet had, comparable only to Dostoevsky’s revelation of human misery in wrong doing” (Reilly 41). These systems have the potential to get out of control, limit one’s freedom for authentic living, and propel a person to engage in evil deeds. The novel *Native Son* glimpses the life of Bigger Thomas. He was not able to control his daimon system, was able to produce self-destruction for himself and his people, also discovered his real self, and acquired psychic freedom.

The life of Bigger Thomas in the apartment with his family shows his feeling of anger, which is always inbuilt in his nature because of their helpless situation in fulfilling their basic needs as blacks. The section “Fear” in the novel opens with the scene of Bigger chasing a rat in room. The following lines prove his action with anger.

A huge black rat squealed and leaped at Bigger’s trouser-leg and snagged it in his teeth, hanging on.

“Goddamn!” Bigger whispered fiercely, whirling and kicking out of his leg with all the strength of his body. The force of his movement shook the rat loose and it sailed through the air and struck the wall. Instantly, it rolled over and leaped again. Bigger dodged and the rat landed against a table leg. With

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clenched teeth, Bigger held the skillet; he was afraid to hurl it, fearing that he might miss. The rat squeaked and turned and ran in a narrow circle, looking for a place to hide; it leaped again past Bigger and scurried on dry rasping feet to one side of the box and then to the other, searching for the hole. Then it turned and reared upon its hind legs.” (NS 449)

Bigger Thomas always wanted to do something to make his family come out of poverty but he faces failure because of denied freedom because of his colour. He always keeps himself unheard for every word of mother, sister and his younger brother because he thought if he is to answer them then surely out of his anger, he might surely land up either in killing himself or someone else. His mood of anger also made him disrespectful for all in his family. The following lines shows his hatred when controlled by anyone even his mother. “As he ate he felt that they were thinking of the job he was to get that evening and it made him angry; he felt that they had tricked him into a cheap surrender” (NS 455). He met his friends Gus, G.H., and Jack in poolroom and planned to rob Blum’s store. When they were planning, the fear of Gus made Bigger to go out of his control to attack his own friends. The violence action expressed by him shown in the following lines:

“Bigger’s stomach burned and a hazy black cloud hovered a moment before his eyes and left. Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind, dry and fast vanishing” (NS 470). By this violence action, he gained confidence. It was like a “rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger- like a water ebbing and flowing from the tug of far-away, invisible force” (NS 471).

### **Bigger Thomas with Bessie in *Flight***

The section “Flight” in the novel glimpses the physical pleasure of Bigger Thomas with Bessie and planning to send a ransom note to Dalton’s demanding money. As Bigger felt, the nervous fear after murdering Mary Dalton started finding Bessie his girl friend to make him comfortable in giving him comfort for both body and mind. The questioning nature of Bessie on Bigger’s plans made him feel like “As he walked beside her he felt there were two Bessie’s: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; the other was in Bessie’s face; it asked questions; it bargained and sold other Bessie to advantage” (NS 575).

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The sense of power kindled in Bigger after murdering a white girl, and he started planning to escape from his accidental murder by feeling a sense of power in himself. He took Bessie and hid in an old building where he committed a brutal murder of black girl, this time he committed a murder knowingly and these two murders created a sense of freedom in him. As said in the words of Wright, “He had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself” (NS 671).

### **Inner Feelings of Bigger Thomas in *Fate***

The section entitled “Fate” in the novel focuses the inner feelings of Bigger Thomas in the prison and his hatred, love, and power ended and it is worthless because of his brutal actions. The meeting between Jan and Bigger in the prison made him realize that his actions created destruction for his environment. Wright expressed the feelings of Bigger as “For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan’s humanity came in the stab of remorse; he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him” (NS 715).

### **Absurd World and *Native Son***

In Existential view the world is absurd, and there is no hope in changing it, but Rollo May says that man is responsible for his own actions in this world. Man can become master by choosing his path with his acquired knowledge either constructive or destructive. In the novel *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger Thomas acquired knowledge of the world after committing murders that made him gain mental freedom but sentenced to death. He as an individual is responsible for his own destructive actions whereby his anxiety and hatred feelings made him a victim in the society. Instead of controlling his feelings, the daimonic system such as anger, sex, and power, controlled him, which made him appear as a murderer to the society, liar to his family, and with his meaningless power sentenced to death by court of law. Hence, *Native Son* is a protest novel with its rhythms of life.

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