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The Racial Issues in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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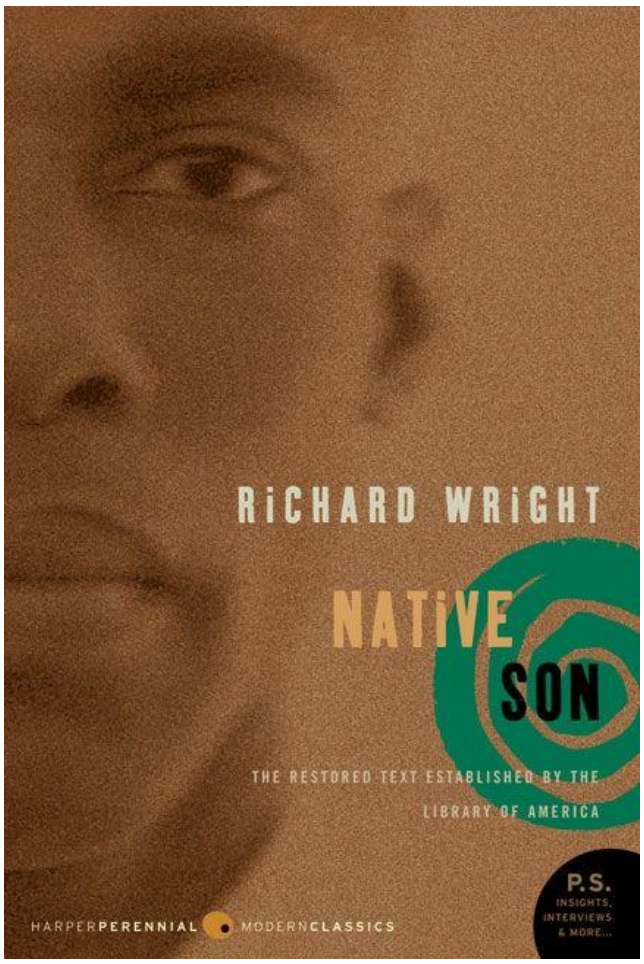

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Abstract

Richard Wright in his astonishing novel, Native Son (1940). Wright explore the inheritance of black American history and its effect upon American citizens, and present a worldview tempered by the cynicism that has formed during centuries of oppression. These authors support the resistance against the white power systems which have perpetuated this oppression, but with a realistic view of the repercussions of racial conflict. The authors establish

the black American identity as a state of being both inside and outside one's homeland, deeply rooted in American culture but exiled from real citizenship. Expatriation has enabled these authors to examine the international bonds between black Americans and other oppressed peoples, leading each to assert that those who are cognizant of these racial issues around the world have an obligation to fight for freedom and for the right to exist within one's home country.

The most well-known of Richard Wright's works, *Native Son* follows the crimes of a young black man, Bigger Thomas, who is completely socially isolated and who becomes nearly barbaric in his actions as a result. The narrative explores the psyche of this man stuck within the cycle of racism which prevents his advancement, and which pushes him to commit murder as a means of protecting himself within a broken system. Bigger Thomas stands as a representative of many such lives which have been lost to the ravages of systematic racism. As Wright explores in his introduction, these men have faced a lifetime of bigotry and white control, and they have found that the only effective means of self-assertion and self-expression is through violence. These men live in a country that despises them, whose justice system has no recourse of self-defense, and whose liberal whites do not understand the depth of hatred faced by black Americans. The Bigger Thomases of the world see the system which aims to destroy their sense of self and will to live, and so they fight back against that system through the only means they have. Wright's narrative explores not only the psychological process behind Bigger's actions, but also reveals the repercussions of othering black Americans to the point that they are utterly estranged from their countrymen. By examining this particular figure of a black American, Wright is able to depict the fatal disadvantages that black people face as a whole and investigate the social undercurrents that lead to such violent rebellion.

Bigger is a young, poor black man living in the 1930's Chicago South Side with his mother and two siblings. His father is dead, and Bigger must provide for the family alongside his mother. He is part of a gang that frequently robs black businesses in order to get money. Bigger has been registered with the local social aide office and has received a job assignment that he is reluctant to accept, for his mother is constantly guilting him to accept it and to work like a man. He focuses on the gang's next hit instead, their first attack planned against a white business. He and his friends are nervous to target a white man, so Bigger starts a fight that prevents them from enacting the robbery and which splits him from the gang. He accepts the job position, and when he arrives at the home of his new employer, Bigger finds himself utterly lost and isolated within the rich white home of Mr. Dalton, a real estate investor who owns Bigger's apartment building and many others. Bigger has never been in a professional or social setting with whites and finds himself extremely uncomfortable and shy in their presence.

Mrs. Dalton, the blind wife of Mr. Dalton, and their daughter Mary Dalton are both welcoming to Bigger, but also excessively overfamiliar. Bigger fears for his job because of Mary's openness, but overall enjoys the new position because he will be newly independent and well-paid. Later that night, he is asked to drive Mary to her class, but finds that she actually wants to pick up her Communist activist boyfriend, Jan. Feeling that he must obey Mary's every command in order to keep his job, Bigger must obey their wish to sit in the front seat of the car with him and to dine

at an 'authentic' black restaurant. He is forced to sit and eat with them, and he drinks heavily in order to cope with his discomfort while they attempt to recruit him into the Communist Party. They give him pamphlets, and then ask him to drive around the park while they continue to drink.

After dropping Jan off at a party, Bigger brings Mary back to the Dalton home, where he must help her up to bed because she is too drunk to walk. Mrs. Dalton comes in to check on Mary, but she does no know that Bigger is in the room. He panics and fears that Mary will give him away, and he accidentally suffocates her with her pillow. After Mrs. Dalton leaves, he realizes he must dispose of the body and come up with an alibi for this death. Bigger sneaks the body to the cellar, cuts off its head, and stuffs it all into the furnace to be incinerated.

The next day, the house is filled with journalist reporting the missing heiress, as well as a private investigator working for Mr. Dalton. They accidentally discover the bones of Mary in the furnace, and Bigger flees the house before they can place blame on him. He reaches out to his girl, Bessie, and confesses his crimes to her, forcing her to go on the run with him. He knows that she is a liability and is coldly aware that he must get rid of her eventually. The two run around the South Side looking for adequate shelter, and after they bunk down for the night in an abandoned building, Bigger rapes Bessie and smashes her head in with a brick. He dumps her still-living body down an airshaft and continues to flee, carefully tracking and avoiding the police-condoned mob searching for him.

The area of freedom becomes more and more restricted, until Bigger is finally stranded on a rooftop, where he resists capture but is eventually frozen out. He is taken to jail, where he must face the Daltons, his family, and his gang. Bigger receives the sympathy of Jan, who realizes his own role as a white man in the oppressive system, and who puts him in touch with a Communist lawyer, Max. This lawyer understands the reality of Bigger's life as a black man and gets him to open up about the motives for his crimes. Max uses these motives in court to argue against the racist structure that has created Bigger and motivated his actions, but the influence of the prosecution is too strong for them to achieve anything. Bigger is sentenced to death, and in the days before he is executed, he comes to terms with what his life has been. He finds that his crimes meant something, that they were a means of expressing control in a world that deprives him of his self-sovereignty. Bigger then walks calmly to his death.

The Bigger character is a conglomeration of tendencies observed by Richard Wright during his time among the various black communities of America. Wright recognized the urge to express some type of control among many black men, even to the point of sadism. The general Bigger is "never…happier then when he had someone cornered and at his mercy" (*Native* ix), for he is able to invert the power structure that has dominated his life and redirect that hatred towards someone else. The white system has treated Bigger sadistically his entire life, indeed all black men during their lives. Innocent men are picked up by the police for unresolved crimes, then "grilled night and day, hanged up by his thumbs, dangled by his feet out of twenty-story windows, and beaten (in places that leave no scars…)" (xxviii).

The police system has every opportunity to use and abuse black men, and the justice system manipulates these 'criminals' in order to send a message to the black community. The courts use black defendants, innocent or not, as "bloody symbol[s] of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world" (257). Police abuse reiterates and confirms stereotypes of black criminality, which in turn keep black people poor and powerless. The Bigger figure reacts to this suppression by taking what he needs from the system.

Although Wright reflects that he personally was "more willing to tighten our belts than risk conflict" (ix), he recognizes the value of Bigger's attitude in light of a culture that does not allow a black man to make enough money to pay rent, live well, and eat well all at once. Black Americans have been deprived of any power via "disenfranchisement…supplemented by a whole panoply of rules, taboos, and penalties designed to not only insure peace (complete submission), but to guarantee that no real threat would ever arise" (xii). The black community still desires to be an active part of their nation, "to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were" (xiv), and so they come to admire the agency of totalitarian leaders as men of action. The Bigger model of man desires this level of control, to be empowered to decide his own life, to be able to "take his life into his own hands and dispose of it as he pleased" (141). However, this desire for self-control extends beyond himself, and results in cruelty towards those who are closest to him.

He must live as he likes to be utterly free, and so he must sacrifice family connection in order to be his own first priority. Bigger is extremely critical of his family—his mother, who has worked herself into constant fatigue for her family, is a mere nag to him. His sister is only an object for mockery, and his young brother is unintelligent and annoying to him. Bigger disdains his family, and so he shrinks back from his role as a provider for them, leaving the entire burden on their mother. Even as his mother is begging the Daltons to spare her son's life, Bigger only feels shame: he is so far distant from her emotionally that he cannot understand or bear her open submission to rich white people. Bigger's girlfriend Bessie is merely a means to an end for him—he uses her for sex, and then forces her to help him flee with "fear of capture and death" (142). Bigger only sees value in a life as it benefits himself, and so he coldly decides who around him is worthy of his support, and who may die.

Although Bigger manipulates those around him in an effort to control his surroundings, he is still impotent when faced with the vast white system which overreaches him:

> He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He know the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullest how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (13).

Bigger is tormented by the idea that he is helpless to change his life or the lives of his loved ones, and this frustration transforms into more anger towards his world and towards himself. He desires control, so his sense of self is deeply threatened by his impotence. He is a conscious man, aware of all of his disadvantages, but this knowledge is aggravating. He cannot stop thinking about

the system in which he exists, and he "can't get used to" the fact that "[t]hey got things and we ain't….[t]hey do things and we can't" (22-23). His friend Gus tells him "[y]ou think too much" (24) for his own good, and Gus is right. The white power system was designed to keep black Americans deaf and dumb, ignorant of the extent of their disadvantages and unwilling to fight for themselves. By being actively conscious of the racism surrounding him, Bigger feels the effects all the more painfully. This frustration only feeds his need to act, because he believes that "his folks…had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much" (100). Restricted by a system that devalues their lives, they do not have any options through which they can make their lives matter. Even the family aide programs that are offered by white liberals are pointless, because they only exist to reduce white guilt and cannot truly affect a people whose lives they cannot understand.

Bigger's "feeling of being forever commanded by others so much that thinking and feeling for [him]self was impossible" (307) renders him incapacitated against the snare of the white power system. He cannot escape it, and so he can only violently resist it in order to feel some sort of control over himself and the path of his life.

The cycles of fear and of violence that run throughout the black community in Wright's Chicago are inextricably linked. Blacks exist in the context of white life, and so they must consider the rules of the whites at all times. Men such as Bigger, who are conscious of their disadvantages under white control, feel that the whites are inside his head. He internalizes white restriction and instills fear in himself out of habit. While planning their first robbery of a white business, Bigger feels that the risk is greater than ever despite the store being smaller than others they have robbed.

> Blum's store was small and Blum was alone, but Bigger could not think of robbing him without being flanked by his three pals. But even with his pals he was afraid. He had argued all of his pals but one into consenting to the robbery, and toward the lone man who held out he felt a hot hate and fear; he had transferred his fear of the whites to Gus. He hated Gus because he knew the Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery. (28)

The ideological isolation in which Bigger has achieved his manhood makes him unable to truly connect with anyone. He looks down upon those who he perceives to live 'lesser' lives, most directly in his relationships with women. Although Bigger has been raised by his hardworking mother, he has come to resent her as a symbol of their family's poverty and of the futility of working to improve one's life. Bigger feels a similar disdain for his girlfriend Bessie, whom he views as powerless and deprived of true feeling or purpose. He resents both women because they do not live as he does, constantly rebelling against the system of control surrounding them.

Wright's America is the manufacturer of this environment of physical and mental control, and there are many ideologies within it that allow for the continued disenfranchisement of black Americans. One of the most powerful of these principles is the illusory American Dream, the idea that anything is available to those who work hard to advance themselves. The Dream lures devotees

with the "glitter…[of] newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life" (xiii). The glamour of rich whites is advertised to poor whites and blacks alike, but it is the poor black who are truly estranged from the wealth of America. The knowledge of how to succeed within the American system is carefully guarded within the white world: "it was all a game and white people knew how to play it" (36). Bigger idolizes the icons of rich whitedom, as keepers "of white secrets" (45) that lead to wealth and glamour. Because he is excluded from the possibility of achieving his dreams of influence, the rich white world stands as a forbidden temptation, a mocking phantasm of unattainable well-being. Bigger stands both within and without this national dream, in a dual state of identity. He has been brought up in the context of American idealism and optimism, but "not allowed to live as an American" (xxiv). He cannot participate in the dream he can only surpass the low expectations that have been set for him.

The accidental murder of Mary is the only real act of Bigger's life thus far, and he "did not want to be called crazy" for it (286). Rather, he has an intense compulsion to share the background of his life and to have his crime be understood. This need for compassion binds him to Max, who along with Jan is the only man who pushes Bigger to try to explain what his life has been like and what he felt when he killed Mary. Bigger can only communicate this to Max because of his sympathetic experiences, because to explain his motivations requires "an explanation of his entire life" (286). Bigger's life has been isolated by both the white system and by the racial self-consciousness that has distanced him from other black people: "he had never given himself whole-heartedly to anyone or anything, except murder" (383). He has long wished to share his emotions but has had no outlet to do so. In talking with Max, he is able to reflect upon his actions and present the feelings of his real self in the safety of a sympathetic counsel. Max understands his need to express the real self, even using it within his argument that black people have been stripped of agency and identity in America:

> Your Honor, remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread! And they can *murder* for it, too! Did we not build a nation, did we not wage war and conquer in the name of a dream to realize our personalities and to make those realized personalities secure! (366).

Self-expression is the only path to self-control for Bigger, and after discovering this ability it becomes his only comfort. He feels a deep need to be understood before his death, and in the final scene of the novel he is able to discuss his perspective one last time with Max. Through his discussions with Max, Bigger is able to feel "a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person" (333) that he never had been able to before. He accepts this feeling as common to all man, as a sign that he is indeed a person who deserves to have emotions, who deserves to have his story told.

Bigger Thomas is Wright's image of the American creature—a figure viciously alone and yet deeply craving connection with others. The narrative of Bigger is a tale of manhood and self-determination warped by isolation and fear, the struggle of a black man to be seen and understood by the white world which engulfs him. Although he is born of this country, he is not of it: to assert his personhood within America is to commit a forbidden offense against the power systems that define the country itself. Bigger must work outside of the law in order to find some means of

control. He acts to protect himself, he murders to defy the white system and to defeat fear. He has been so thoroughly estranged from his countrymen that he has become a different people. His life is so replete with futility and anger that he must take action, any action, to rebel against this constant oppression. Wright has thoroughly depicted the psychological development of such a man, making clear the fatal repercussions of that total lack of empathy that is racism. Wright's portrayal of the American system of racism not only destroys a man's life from birth, it breeds inhumanity in those who benefit from it.

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