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# The Question Of Race In Richard Wright's Novel Native Son

This essay is about racism, the most important theme of the most violent and revolutionary works in the American canon, *Native Son*, written by the African – American writer, Richard Wright. *Native Son*, one of the most famous works of Richard Wright deals with the effects of the Great Migration, a historical event in which millions of African Americans left the oppressive political and social conditions of the South.

This book is about Bigger Thomas, a young African American man who reacts under the pressure of American racism and social injustices during the 1930s, *Native Son* also deals with the impact of slavery on African Americans and the relationships between African Americans and Africans. These international dimensions of *Native Son* are unknown, however, primarily because critics tend to interpret the book mainly as a sociological exploration of the effects of racism on African Americans of the 1930s. Although this type of interpretation is valid, it loses impetus because it fails to analyze the book as Wright's representation of the effects of slavery on African Americans, which is fully understood only when it is contrasted with his exploration, in *Black Power*, of the consequences of slavery on African.

There is a huge distinction between black people, considered morally fallen and the morally pure society, represented by the white race. In the beginning of the novel, the Thomas family is presented living together, in one room. Bigger is still a young man, but he is the oldest man in the house and such as, his mother wants him to work: If you get that job . . . I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs. .

Bigger's mother wants her son to succeed, in part for his own development, and in part so that Bigger's wages can help the family, can raise his sister Vera and his brother Buddy somewhat out of poverty. The job that Bigger can get is that of a driver for a wealthy white family on the South Side of Chicago, but he presents to his friends his dream to become a pilot. He is attracted to the sky and to the planes, because he sees them as symbols of freedom and escape: God, I'd like to fly up there in that sky .

And planes are filled with people who can fly, who have the professional opportunity to take the air. Bigger wants the skills of a pilot, and he wants to leave the neighborhood in which he was raised. This is impossible for him to achieve because, as a black man, he would never be allowed the education and opportunity to become a pilot, as Gus says God will let you fly when He gives you your wings up in heaven. .

The plane as symbol is not an unknown thing to Bigger. He is aware that, in looking at the sky, he is looking at an object of special fascination for himself. Throughout the first part of the novel, called *Fear*, Bigger is presented as the driver of the Dalton family and he has also the responsibility to feed the house's furnace. Thus he knows Mary Dalton and her boyfriend, Jan.

Jan is an avowed communist and he is involved with Mary, who, despite her family's enormous wealth and privilege – based on capitalistic success – has committed herself also to certain communist ideals. Bigger lives the life that Jan and Mary study from the outside. Jan tries to get

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close to Bigger, and this thing is evident in this quote: First of all . . . don't say sir to me. I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's the way it'll be between us. .

They do not understand what it's like to grow up in a shabby tenement, without any privacy. They are educated, and they are afforded other privileges by being white, by moving in a society that is entirely removed from that of Bigger. At the end of the first part, Bigger kills Mary: The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman. He had to get away from here. .

He kills the girl, ironically enough, because he is afraid of what Mrs. Dalton and others might think of him in her bedroom at night. He already expects a white family to think he is doing something wrong with Mary. In killing, he has sealed his fate, forcing himself to live permanently on the run from an entire "city of white people".

Mary is not the Bigger's only victim because lately in the novel, he kills his "girl", Bessie:  
NEGRO KILLER SIGNS CONFESSIONS FOR TWO MURDERS. SHRINKS AT INQUEST  
WHEN CONFRONTED WITH BODY OF SLAIN GIRL. ARRAIGNED TOMORROW. REDS  
TAKE CHARGE OF KILLER'S DEFENSE. NOT GUILTY PLEAS LIKELY .

This is an example of the kinds of headlines that the narrator and novelist imagine for Bigger's trial. It is obvious that Bigger is not afforded any kind of fair trial in the press - after all, he is a 'killer' and not an 'alleged killer' right in the headline, and the reporting of his dismay at the sight of the girl's body seems to show that, though he was capable of doing what he did, he is no longer capable of facing up to it.

This, the newspapermen believe, is a sign of Bigger's underlying cowardice. For the media and many parts of the white Chicago community at large, Bigger's trial is a means of placing further blame on African American populations. Crime, according to these mainstream white viewpoints, is a black problem because African American families do not care to protect their neighborhoods, or because criminality is somehow 'inherent' to them.

The newspaper thus does all it can to fan the flames of racial hatred in the city. In the end, Bigger, during his time in jail, tries his best to understand what he has done and why he has done it, before he is put to death by the state of Illinois. What I killed for must've been good! It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something . . . . I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em . . . .

To this speech Max, his lawyer, has nothing substantive to say - Max is scared at the thought that Bigger believes he has achieved some level of insight through murder.

Max is fundamentally a pacifist, even as he recognizes the events that have caused Bigger to become so violent. And Max finds, ultimately, that there is little he can do or say to Bigger to make sense of the violent mistakes Bigger has made, and through which he has brought his own life to an end. Bigger, for his part, believes that his passions were powerful ones - that his anger against the restrictive elements of white society was themselves persuasive, even though killing is inherently wrong.

He felt, in killing, that he was powerful and consequential, even if he sees during the trial that

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the murders of Mary and Bessie have only created more harm, more suffering, and more pain in the world. At this bleak and somewhat contradictory point (at least on a moral level), the novel draws to a close just before Bigger is put to death. The most representative symbol for this theme is the "black ape".

Various members of the crowds that gather outside the courtroom, after Bigger's capture, describe Bigger as a "black ape," and even newspaper articles circulating in Chicago do the same. It exemplifies the racist discourse common to the United States at that time: a belief that African Americans were somehow biologically inferior to white Americans, and that, as such, black attitudes toward violence, toward women, and toward other parts of society were considered "closer" to those of animals than to those of human beings.

However, besides all these differences between the two races, the real problem is represented by misunderstandings between people of the same color of the skin. Bigger arguing with his friends, even becoming violent with each other. The shocking element of this book is the killing of Bessie by Bigger. Bessie is Bigger's girlfriend and also a woman belonging to the same race and social status.

In conclusion, *Native Son* is an experimental novel in which Wright denounces the social and economic consequences of slavery on African Americans. The poverty and the limited choices that slavery and racism imposed on African Americans are visible in the forces that prevent Bigger from achieving equality in America, and eventually this struggle for equality leads him to a miscalculated violence that results in a trial and his execution.

Thus, as David Bakish points out, Bigger's spiritual death predates his execution because "he is formally killed by the society that had been slowly murdering him all his life". In my opinion, this novel illustrates the difficulties of the black race in contrast to the opportunities and chances of white race people and Bigger's moral development in relation with these distinctions. In the beginning of the novel, he feels his inferiority in face of white race and he manifests it by killing a white.