A REVOLT FOR SURVIVAL

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright portrays Bigger Thomas, the stereotypical “nigger” by using the tenets of naturalism and existentialism. If as the naturalists contend, physiological conditions, environmental influences and circumstances determine human personality, so that human beings are the products of their environment, then *Native Son* indicates that Bigger Thomas responds to environmental forces he cannot control. But here for the scope of our study, we are not concerned with naturalism in the novel, but we will present Bigger Thomas as an existentialist hero. For the meaninglessness of Bigger’s existence is at one with the existential philosophy. When, at the end of the novel, Bigger says, “But what I killed for, I am” he is accepting responsibility his action. He is ultimately responsible for his actions and must be held accountable. By killing, Bigger has carved out an identity for himself; by destroying, he has created. For the first time in his life he is somebody a murderer. The word “murderer” is appropriate, since Bigger convinces himself after Mary’s accidental death that he really intended to kill her.

In order to show how far Bigger Thomas is an existential hero, we will focus our attention on his immediate physical and psychological environment. Indeed, Bigger is trapped in a hostile environment made of white domination, Chicago’s ghetto and the weakness of the Thomasses’ family. Then we will examine Bigger’s emancipation or struggle for
freedom after the accidental killing of Mary Dalton. And last, we will refer to his religion and show that, in a true existentialist fashion, he scorns religion and the Christian faith.

Bigger Thomas, a poor, uneducated, twenty-year-old black man in 1930s Chicago, wakes up one morning in his family’s cramped apartment on the South Side of the city. He sees a huge rat scamper across the room, which he corners and kills with a skillet. Having grown up under the climate of harsh racial prejudice in 1930s America, Bigger is burdened with a powerful conviction that he has no control over his life and that he cannot aspire to anything other than menial, low-wage labor. His mother pesters him to take a job with a rich white man named Mr. Dalton, but Bigger instead chooses to meet up with his friends to plan the robbery of a white man’s store.

Anger, fear, and frustration define Bigger’s daily existence, as he is forced to hide behind a façade of toughness or risk succumbing to despair. While Bigger and his gang have robbed many black-owned businesses, they have never attempted to rob a white man. Bigger sees whites not as individuals, but as a natural, oppressive force—a great looming “whiteness” pressing down upon him. Bigger’s fear of confronting this force overwhelms him, but rather than admit his fear, he violently attacks a member of his gang to sabotage the robbery. Left with no other options, Bigger takes a job as a chauffeur for the Daltons.
Coincidently, Mr. Dalton is also Bigger’s landlord, as he owns a controlling share of the company that manages the apartment building where Bigger’s family lives. Mr. Dalton and other wealthy real estate barons are effectively robbing the poor, black tenants on Chicago’s South Side—they refuse to allow blacks to rent apartments in predominantly white neighborhoods, thus leading to overpopulation and artificially high rents in the predominantly black South Side. Mr. Dalton sees himself as a benevolent philanthropist; however, as he donates money to black schools and offers jobs to “poor, timid black boys” like Bigger. However, Mr. Dalton practices this token philanthropy mainly to alleviate his guilty conscience for exploiting poor blacks.

Mary, Mr. Dalton’s daughter, frightens and angers Bigger by ignoring the social taboos that govern the relations between white women and black men. On his first day of work, Bigger drives Mary to meet her communist boyfriend, Jan. Eager to prove their progressive ideals and racial tolerance, Mary and Jan force Bigger to take them to a restaurant in the South Side. Despite Bigger’s embarrassment, they order drinks, and as the evening passes, all three of them get drunk. Bigger then drives around the city while Mary and Jan make out in the back seat. Afterward, Mary is too drunk to make it to her bedroom on her own, so Bigger helps her up the stairs. Drunk and aroused by his unprecedented proximity to a young white woman, Bigger begins to kiss Mary.
Just as Bigger places Mary on her bed, Mary’s blind mother, Mrs. Dalton, enters the bedroom. Though Mrs. Dalton cannot see him, her ghostlike presence terrifies him. Bigger worries that Mary, in her drunken condition, will reveal his presence. He covers her face with a pillow and accidentally smothers her to death. Unaware that Mary has been killed, Mrs. Dalton prays over her daughter and returns to bed. Bigger tries to conceal his crime by burning Mary’s body in the Daltons’ furnace. He decides to try to use the Daltons’ prejudice against communists to frame Jan for Mary’s disappearance. Bigger believes that the Daltons will assume Jan is dangerous and that he may have kidnapped their daughter for political purposes. Additionally, Bigger takes advantage of the Daltons’ racial prejudices to avoid suspicion, continuing to play the role of a timid, ignorant black servant who would be unable to commit such an act.

Mary’s murder gives Bigger a sense of power and identity he has never known. Bigger’s girlfriend, Bessie, makes an offhand comment that inspires him to try to collect ransom money from the Daltons. They know only that Mary has vanished, not that she is dead. Bigger writes a ransom letter, playing upon the Daltons’ hatred of communists by signing his name “Red.” He then bullies Bessie to take part in the ransom scheme. However, Mary’s bones are found in the furnace, and Bigger flees with Bessie to an empty building. Bigger rapes Bessie and, frightened that she will give him away, bludgeons her to death with a brick after she falls asleep.
Bigger eludes the massive manhunt for as long as he can, but he is eventually captured after a dramatic shoot-out. The press and the public determine his guilt and his punishment before his trial even begins. The furious populace assumes that he raped Mary before killing her and burned her body to hide the evidence of the rape. Moreover, the white authorities and the white mob use Bigger’s crime as an excuse to terrorize the entire South Side.

Jan visits Bigger in jail. He says that he understands how he terrified, angered, and shamed Bigger through his violation of the social taboos that govern tense race relations. Jan enlists his friend, Boris A. Max, to defend Bigger free of charge. Jan and Max speak with Bigger as a human being, and Bigger begins to see whites as individuals and himself as their equal.

Max tries to save Bigger from the death penalty, arguing that while his client is responsible for his crime, it is vital to recognize that he is a product of his environment. Part of the blame for Bigger’s crimes belongs to the fearful, hopeless existence that he has experienced in a racist society since birth. Max warns that there will be more men like Bigger if America does not put an end to the vicious cycle of hatred and vengeance. Despite Max’s arguments, Bigger is sentenced to death.

Bigger is not a traditional hero by any means. However, Wright forces us to enter into Bigger’s mind and to understand the devastating effects of the social conditions in which he was raised. Bigger was not born
a violent criminal. He is a “native son”: a product of American culture and the violence and racism that suffuse it.

Richard Wright’s Native Son was published in 1940 and the novel is typical of the "Naturalist" genre of American prose fiction that dominated the era. With European antecedents like Zola, Dickens and Doyle, American Naturalists continued the detailed psychological portraits of characters usually city-residents, where extreme poverty and overweening social structures provide the machinery for tragedy and fate. Indeed, Native Son is divided into three books: Fear-Flight-Fate, and the narrative makes no pretense that there will be a happy ending for Bigger, implying that there will be no happy ending for the ubiquitous "Biggers" that populate America's Black Belts. In a separate essay, "How Bigger Was Born," the novelist explains the character presented in Book One as a compilation of stereotypes and common tragedies, wryly named to be an obvious rhyme with a racial epithet. In Book One, Wright combines the social message of urban Naturalist prose with the tricks and mechanics of a detective story.

Evidence of Wright's Naturalist tendencies can be seen in his methods of characterization. Even though he provides extensive psychological details of the main characters, each of these individuals is simply a "type" (or archetype) for some broad section of American society. Bigger Thomas has a rather ubiquitous name, and all of his introspection relates to his experiences as a resident of South-Side apartments. Bigger is to be the
archetypal young black urban male and there are no psychological details that are specific to Bigger alone. Accordingly, we assume that Buddy, Gus, GH and Jack, must have resembling psychological interiors and so, none of their psychological introspection is relayed to the reader.

Ma has no need of a first name because she is exclusively defined by her matriarchal role, unlike Mrs. Dalton. Ma sings hymns and struggles to instill her own Protestant work ethic in her children and after we learn that Ma sings hymns and "prophecies" Bigger's path to the gallows, she becomes the archetype of African-American religion. Wrights considers Ma's religion to be an emotional escape, as passionate and potentially destructive Bigger's sin, and Ma becomes a symbol of ineffectual religious faith to be later juxtaposed with Bessie's alcoholism and Mrs. Dalton's impersonal philanthropy. Finally, Ma's symbolic religious faith largely a faith based on symbols furthers the motif of emotional escape as a consequence and indictment of urban poverty and American racism.

Wright's white characters are afforded similarly cursory psychological portraits; they are not individuals but archetypal figures who only resonate on a symbolic, metaphorical level. Mary Dalton, the heiress of the millionaire Daltons, is as wryly named as her murderer, Bigger Thomas. "Mary" Dalton is an allusion to the Virgin Mary, and this allusion is reified in irony: far from virginal, Mary is a drunken truant. Despite the moral, religious connotations of her name, Mary is a communist sympathizer and a
rather casual romantic whose exploits are uncovered and revealed in a seedy newsreel of all things. Wright's construction of Jan and Mary is deliberate, as they offer a younger parallel to Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, an older pair of well-meaning, patronizing and ultimately ineffectual do-gooders. Rather than offer psychological details of these characters, Wright relies upon impersonal details, political affiliations and cliches as the modes of characterization. Jan and Mary are defined by a youthful exuberance and revolutionary spirit that is revealed primarily by their affiliation with the Communist Party and their passion for labor unions. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton are upstanding citizens whose character-defining magnanimity is exhibited by their decades-long commitment to the NAACP.

More so than Mary, Jan becomes a symbol of the Communist Party's inability to successfully integrate their rank-and-file and policy objectives to include the interests of the common black masses. It is worth noting that, in 1940, Wright was a disenchanted Party member. Another point worth noting is that Wright subverts the Communist Party's traditional "symbols" in order to make Jan a symbol of the Party's failure. The "handshake" between blacks and whites illustrates the Party propaganda. Jan dutifully replicates this in his relations with Bigger, yet his handshake comes off as inherently patronizing and ultimately failing. Jan's well-intentioned, interracial handshake enforces the distance it seeks to breach. Later on in Native Son, Jan will partially emerge from his "flat," largely symbolic role as a
character. On the other hand, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton will never evolve into "round" characters neither as grieving parents who might evoke the readers' compassion, nor as dispassionate millionaires who might provoke the readers' anger. For his 1940 American audience, Wright intends for the Daltons to symbolize the inability of white liberals and philanthropists to cure a national disease (racism) by leisurely applying charity as a salve for the ugliest sores of the impoverished ghetto. For Wright, good intentions are not enough.

The story of Bigger Thomas reconstructs the social atmosphere prevailing in the South after the emancipation of the Negroes. Their closeness to the white world generated hostility, hatred and violence between the two races. Living in Chicago`s South side in the 1930s, Bigger`s every action is predicated on his obsessive fear of the white man. There was no real security for him and he could meet his death at the white man`s hands any time.

Wright expresses an existentialist vision of the race relation in America through the plot of Native Son. Bigger Thomas, a nineteen year old black, an immigrant from the South is hired as chauffeur by the rich Mr. Dalton. Mary, Mr. Dalton`s daughter asks him to drive her to a rendezvous with her forbidden boyfriend, Jan Erione, a white communist. During the evening, Mary and Jan are friendly toward Bigger, thus proclaiming Bigger`s racial equality. At the end of the party, Mary is drunk and Bigger
has to carry her to her room. The blind Mrs. Dalton enters to see if her
daughter has returned; but Bigger fearing that he will be discovered pushes a
pillow down over her face and smothers her inadvertently. Then he makes
an attempt to cast suspicion on Jan by suggesting that Communists have
kidnapped Mary. He enlists the help of his girlfriend Bessie but, fearing that
she may give him away, he murders her. He is hunted, caught, and
condemned to death.

As an object of contempt and brutality, anxious to survive in a hostile
white environment, Bigger is always afraid when dealing with the oppressor.
His fear is first reported in his delaying the robbery at Blum`s. Bigger and
his gang have planned to rob a Jew`s store. But on the very day, Bigger
provokes a hysterical flight to prevent the gang from “doing the job” and to
cover his lack of courage and fear. We can see then, how his own education
has greatly influenced his action. He was born in the environment where he
had been taught to fear the whites and to vow them obedience in order to
avoid the risk of punishment by lynching or death. Therefore, keeping this
education in mind, Bigger dreads the possible consequences that he and his
companions might endure if unexpectedly they got caught during the
robbery. When they now come to take Blum`s store as their next target the
plan was not carried out straight away because the boys came to the
knowledge that robbing Blum who is a white person “would be a violation
of ultimate taboo”.
They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum`s would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them. (*Native Son*, 17-18)

Bigger`s tragedy is that he lives in a society where he sees other boys especially white boys going to movies, enjoying themselves in amusement rooms and buying anything they want. Therefore, he immediately feels deprived since he has no means to afford them. Whites can afford to do everything they want because they are rich. Bigger himself observes:

> We live here and they live there, we Black and they Whites.
> They got things and we ain`t. They do things and we can`t. It just like living in jail. (*Native Son*, 23)

That affirmation reveals the segregated basis of the American society. Bigger is jobless and he lives on relief. Therefore, he is so conditioned by the racial situation that he cannot respond to individual whites as separate persons but only as an abstract embodiment of white power. The inadequacy of his education and his reform school precludes his ever being capable of providing any satisfactory means of supporting himself and his family. One must of course consider Bigger`s rejection of the offer of then Daltons to help him attend night school and continue his education for even beyond that level. Earlier that day, bigger laments the fact that Blacks are
not allowed to enter certain professions. For him, it is symbolized by the airplanes he wishes to fly. The young man refuses offers of assistance to complete his education for no matter his education, the professions to which he might aspire are closed to him.

The life of Bigger Thomas is an unmitigated denial of his hopes. He will not be more integrated in Northern society, he will hover in “No Man’s land” because of the white society and its discriminatory laws. Therefore, Bigger is to live a meaningless existence created out of fear and hatred. As a matter of fact, Bigger is torn between fear which is basically the fear of the whites and hatred which is an expression of his latent aggressive feeling. Bigger doesn’t really know what to do of his life.

He wanted to run. Or listen to some swing music. Or laugh or joke. Or read a *Real Detective Story Magazine* … These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger… He is like a strange plant blooming in the day and wilting at night; but the sun that made it bloom and the cold darkness that made it wilt were never seen. (*Native Son*, 31)

Moreover, the physical reality of the ghettos also affects the personality of Bigger Thomas. As a matter of fact, Bigger’s home is located in the Black Belt, Chicago’s ghetto. The South Side of Chicago where Black people are housed near the railroad is an area of devastated filthy
slums. Like every other urban ghetto, the Black Belt is characterized by abandoned, crumbling, and overcrowded flats. The opening scene in *Native Son* shows him, his brother Buddy, Sister Vera and their mother sharing a one room flat. Their dwelling lacks adequate space for privacy indicated by the fact that each member of the family must keep his eyes averted while others dress. This one room serves as kitchen, living room and bedroom. Their apartment is haunted by an enormous rat which symbolically indicates the status of vermin they have been relegated to by society. Mrs. Thomas and Vera got hysterical at the rodent’s appearance; before Bigger and his brother can kill it, it bites Bigger’s trousers’ leg.

Bigger who is not unaware of that serious problem of accommodation, says to one member of his gang in the street: “you get more heat from sun than from their old radiators at home”. (*Native Son*, 19) The Negro knows that the invisible walls of the ghetto hold him prisoner. The home of the ghetto lacks comfort and therefore does not attract him; he feels more at ease in the streets, yet landlords are always knocking at his door for money. During the Great Depression, houses were scarce and this worsened housing conditions for Blacks. Bigger “…. Remembered that his mother had once made him tramp the streets for two whole months looking for a place to live. And he remembered the time when the police had come and driven him and his mother and his brother and sister out of a flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved out. He knew that Black people could not go outside the Black Belt to rent a flat”
Those squalid surroundings affect Bigger in terms of resentment, frustration, hostility, despair, apathy, self-depreciation and resignation. Bigger who is made to live in a rat-infested house knows quite that others are not so dehumanized. The inaccessibility of the world he covets adds to his despair. For example, Gus looking wistfully at a plane advertising gasoline flying up in the sky says: “Them white boys can fly”. To this, Bigger replies: “They get a chance to do everything”. We can see a Bigger accepting his conditions of living in resignation.

White society hems Bigger in the hell of the Dalton basement to maintain glowing, scaring, fury furnace. Mrs. Dalton`s whiteness haunts him. Upon first seeing her, he notices that “her face and hair were completely white; she seemed to him like a ghost”. Indeed, the blind woman looks like a white blur. During an interview with the wealthy family whose chauffeur he is to be, he saw the luxury of the world he has only known from outside. He is ill at ease, clumsy, tense and bewildered; he is ashamed and seemed humiliated. When he is questioned by Mr. Dalton, we see a timid, diffident and ignorant Bigger who acts in a “Jim Crow” way, answering “Yessuh; nosuh…”. Bigger chooses this appearance in order to sustain the whites prejudice concerning the blacks` real value commonly distorted with the image of a stupid and uncivilized man who does not know much about the modern life:
He had not raised his eyes to the level of the Dalton`s face once since he had been in the house. He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him this was the way the white folk wanted him to be in their presence. None had ever told him that in so many words, but their manners had made him feel they did… (*Native Son*, 50)

Bigger is so afraid that he awkwardly sat on the very edge of the chair at the Dalton`s place. Besides, during the interview, his answers are brief and contrived to match his assumed awkward gestures in order to prove that he is definitely an idiot Negro:

“Well, I`m Mr. Dalton.”

“Yessuh.”

“Do you think you`d like driving a car?”

“Oh, Yessuh.”

“Did you bring the paper?”

“Suh?”

“Didn`t the relief give you a note to me?”

“Oh, yessuh!” (*Native Son*, 49)
No one in the Dalton`s house viewed Bigger as a human being; he is invisible to them and is seen only as a stereotype. Mary Dalton is generous and well meaning but her tactlessness illustrates how difficult it can be for Bigger to go along with a member of the dominant class. When she wonders aloud how Blacks live, she wistfully reveals the enormous gap between the two races.

You know, Bigger, L`ve long wanted to go into these houses…. and just see how your people live … I want to know those people. Never. Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They`re human.

(*Native Son*, 70)

Her constant use of “You”, “Your” and “They” embarrasses Bigger. Even when he is compelled to eat with Mary and Jan, he pretends to be reluctant and shy. The long scene in the furnace room is a vivid depiction of the extent to which whites have become blind through their oppression of Bigger. For instance, Britten, the private detective Mr. Dalton has called on to deal with the mystery of his daughter`s disappearance, suspects Bigger though there is no evidence yet of the latter`s involvement in the affair. Bigger himself knew that Britten was his enemy. When Mary`s bones are finally discovered in the furnace, Bigger is afraid and runs away, making suspicion centre on himself. From now on, he is doomed.
Moreover, Bigger`s family is part of his hostile environment. Parents` influence on children is basic in the shaping of their character; sustained parental care and guidance have healthy impact on children and therefore foster peace and cohesion in society. Richard Wright`s depiction of the Thomas`s` family exemplifies its weakness as a stable family. Mrs. Thomas replaces then father here; she does her best to provide for her children and bestows a great deal of affection on them. But the extremely bad living conditions of the family affect the normal interrelation. Mrs. Thomas snaps at all her wrangling children, but her most bitter reproaches are addressed to Bigger who is shiftless and troublesome. She thinks Bigger does not care about the way they live. Bigger`s mother is aware of the queer nature of her son but cannot understand why he is so. The truth is that Bigger is subject to a serious handicap: there is no father image upon which he can model his behavior. Such an absence generates in him a feeling of insecurity as a male and hinders the confidence he needs to face the problem of life.

Bigger`s position within the family is ambivalent; as a teenager, he still needs the advice and the guidance of a father on the one hand, and on the other hand he should be the one to provide for the needs of his mother, brother and sister. Bigger has no job and obviously cannot support his family materially: this is a serious blow to his ego and it adds to his anger. Bigger Thomas is an unhappy boy, sick of his life at home. From the outset, his uneasiness is expressed through the discussion he had with his family and then,
He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they live, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself, he was even more exactly…

(Native Son, 13-14)

The reference to the cacophonous sound of the alarm dock in the opening line of the novel seems to represent Bigger’s meaningless existence we have dealt with here. But waking up, Bigger will “shut that thing off” and create himself a new, meaningful existence.

The transformation noticed in Bigger is brought about by the murder he commits on Mary Dalton, a murder which has a tremendous psychological impact on him. After the killing, instead of a previously impulsive and fearful character, one sees a new Bigger momentarily emancipated.

Now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried. (Native Son, 109)
Up to then, Bigger Thomas has conceived of white people as omnipotent, untouchable supermen who controlled his existence. Before the accidental killing of Mary, the mere thought of exercising violence against them generated so much fear in him that his will was paralysed. Bigger Thomas` crime gives him the opportunity to recognize that his former deferential attitudes cannot bring him an immediate solution. Mary`s accidental killing makes Bigger discover that he had smashed the gigantic white mountain that is oppressing him: that realization filled him with a new sense of his own existence, of his own worth as a human being. He is now free from the atavistic fear that has been instilled into his person by the system. The metamorphosis which takes place in him at this stage resembles the change that occurs in man after he had made an existential choice. Bigger is himself aware of his rebirth as a “free” man for he avows that he can control himself after the murder. As his lawyer Boris Max declares, Mary`s murder has been a pre-existential act of creation for Bigger; before he killed, Bigger`s life was controlled by white people, after committing the crime he thinks he will fashion his existence on his own terms. The act of murder becomes a regenerative force for Bigger; out of Mary`s death comes life for Bigger: he has murder and has created a new life for himself. Again Max offer the correct explanation:

It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He
accepted because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight. (*Native Son*, 335 - 36)

Another proof of Bigger gaining his self-control is the attempt he makes to get a ransom out of the affair. Whereas previously, very much aware of the penalty involved in venturing into the white man’s world, Bigger foils the plan to rob Mr. Blum, he now becomes intrepid enough to attempt to confuse people by mixing up the murder case with a ransom; all this organized in the calculated manner of a professional gangster.

Bigger uses violence as a means of proclaiming his freedom and self realization. Also, he believes himself the equal of whites because he has destroyed their most prized possession. After Mary’s death, Bigger begins to rationalise that he has destroyed symbolically all the oppressive forces that have made his life miserable. He kills white possession in the person of Mary Dalton, the ideal product of the system. Earlier in his life, Bigger himself knows he will use violent impulses as means of springboard and a technique of survival:

He knew that the moment he allowed his life meal to enter into his consciousness, he will either kill himself or somebody else.

(*Native Son*, 141)
The second odious act of violence results in the death of Bessie Mear who is Bigger Thomas’ girl-friend. She is the object of sexual release for Bigger. He so trusts her that he involves her in his schemes to extort ten thousand dollars from the Daltons. When the remains of Mary are discovered in the furnace, Bigger turns again to Bessie. However, once she discovers that Bigger had killed the girl, she becomes untrustworthy in terms of Bigger needs. Bigger Thomas realizes that she becomes a threat to him. Therefore, he kills her horribly with a brick and feels a vague sense of power afterward.

And yet out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never has his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight.

*(Native Son, 224 - 25)*

In Bessie has been killed Black submission which helps to explain Bigger’s feeling of elation. In fact, for Bigger Thomas, the two murders
represent the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him for they
result from a long, brooding anguish against the whites:

He had killed twice, but in a true sense it was not the first time
he had ever killed. He had killed many times before, but only
during the last two days had his impulses assumed the form of
actual killing. (*Native Son*, 225)

Bigger Thomas’ murder of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mear as acts of self-
assertion are also acts which set him free spiritually. More important, he is
proud
to have killed and to give a new meaning to his life. Therefore
he does not feel sorry of it: I didn’t want to kill! But what I
killed for, I am! What I killed for must’ve been good! I didn’t
know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard
enough to kill for’em. (*Native Son*, 391)

Bigger Thomas thinks that his real destiny is within his grasp and that
it is his responsibility to shape his fate according to his own will.

As long as he could take his life into his own hands and
dispose of it as he pleased, as long as he could decide just
when and where he would run to, he need not be afraid.

(*Native Son*, 141)
Yet this can be possible only through his own actions and commitment. He has to assert himself through his own deeds and he cannot escape the consequences of his actions. Presumably what bestows freedom upon bigger is a developing awareness and a final willingness to face the truth.

He could run away, he could remain, he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands.

(*Native Son*, 179)

It is only when Bigger feels that he is born anew thanks to his actions, when he finds out that he is now surviving that he comes to understand himself and the others, “Things were becoming clear; he would know how to act from now on.” He is moved with pity toward his family. His anger against his friends Gus, G.H. and Jack is transformed into a wish for better things for them. At last his distrust of white people is replaced by respect and love for Jan Erlone and Boris Max. More than ever, he comes to the reflection that “even these people whose hatred had shaped his life were trying like himself to reach something beyond their grasp.” But more emphatically, Bigger`s achievement of personal self-assertion and freedom to survive in a `white controlled society is epitomized by this statement to Max:
I’m all right, Mr. Max. just ol go and tell Ma I was all right
and not worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn`t
crying none. (*Native Son*, 102-103)

To sum up according to the critic Brignanno Russels`s statement,
Bigger Thomas` freedom through murder has raised him from the darkness
of his life to the realm of recognition of himself and of the world which
surrounds him. Violence gives him a sense of freedom from oppression and
power in the shaping of his destiny. Bigger Thomas is resorting to violence
to mould his personality with his psychological transformation. Indeed he
refers to violence as a means of proclaiming of his freedom and self-
realisation through the murder of Mary Dalton. In the process, he
accomplishes the existentialist doctrine. That man`s destiny is dependent on
his own actions to free himself from the shackles of this world.

The white girl`s death though accidental does not explain less the
violence so settled in the hero, for this description reveals a character
without scruple, capable of all kinds of harm and absurdity. But bigger did
go further, discovering the meaning of his act, his feeling and attitudes
changed. Moreover, he did not feel guilty after the furnace scene; he was
only concerned with the effective burning of the body so that the murder
would not be discovered. For no on in the world did he feel any fear now.
The killing put Bigger in a position of having to consider himself and his
situations in a completely new light. Like a man risen up well from a long illness, he felt deep and wayward whims. He has now achieved heroic stature. He is proud for he has reached an ultimate level of rebellion with the death and cremation of Mary.

It seems that he finds fulfillment only by the most violent defiance of the society that oppresses him. As a criminal feeling elation, he achieves a rebirth which is in the measure of the meaninglessness of his former existence. He mainly feels a new pride of having done “something big”, unknown to his blind environment. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time, giving him a name; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and his knife did not. It was a kind of eagerness he felt, a confidence, a fullness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act. His attitudes throughout are determined by the heightened perceptions he enjoys as a result of the murder. He took advantage of the blindness of the others, fooling white folk during the inquest, and toying with the police. His real achievement is his diversion of Britten’s attention from himself by acting like an ignorant Black. Thus both press and police jump to conclusions from the coined story told them by Bigger whom they regard as a stupid but honest Negro.

Bigger associates his girl-friend Bessie Mear in the collection of the supposed kidnapped girl’s ransom and then in his nightly escapes, knowing that he would get rid of her at the right time. Bigger’s first and second crimes have given him the knowledge of himself and his true identity. As an
act of creation, these crimes raise him from the level of obscurity to realm of recognition. Never had his will been so free as this night or day of fear and murder and flight. The point to make then is that Bigger is a human being whose world had made him incapable of relating to others, except through violence and crime. But did Bigger ever feel any guilt or regret? He is prepared to die without the slightest regret for killing twice. Only a queer sense of power remained in him.

He had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply. (Native Son, 225)

Furthermore, Bigger`s violence has been finally shown during his capture by the police. Unwilling to surrender, in a position of self-defence like the rat that bit back at the beginning of the novel, he struck one of the policemen with his gun. He even shot many times to get rid of those policemen who were trying to reach him at the top of the roof. He was not afraid. They defeated him by the means of a hoe, splashing him with water; weakened and was captured.

Yet, Bigger owns something, which is left to him, it is his newborn freedom which allows him to choose his course of action.
Having been thrown by an accidental murder in a position where he has sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him, he has accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder it had made him feel free for the first time in his life. (Native Son, 255)

He has thus chosen murder instead of other reactions, since white oppression gives birth to a variety of attitudes. The majority of the Blacks are submitted to the same suffering but they do not react the same way: some seek consolation through religion, alcohol or deprived life and enjoyment; others struggle for education and welfare and constitute the Black bourgeoisie. Very few Negroes rebel openly except the Bigger Thomas type. At the end of the book, the last part of the story consists of Bigger’s sorrowful meditations which go from his capture to his execution. After the lawyer’s speech has failed to save him, and whites are waiting for his impending death on the electric chair, Bigger takes up the shield of hate which is his destiny. Repossessed by hate, he ends by accepting what life has made of him, a killer, a criminal. He rejects all kinds of compassion, and finally accepts his doom. He remains on his uncompromising position by wholly accepting his fate. What Bigger learns as a result of fear made him able to go to the electric chair declaring in existential terms that what he has done has had value:
It must’ve been good! When a man kills, it’s for something. I didn’t know I was really alive in the world until I felt things hard enough to kill for’em. (Native Son, 391)

It contrasts with the drama and the excitement of the preceding scenes, and can be compared to the last part of The Stranger written by Albert Camus. Indeed, there are some similarities in Bigger Thomas’ and Meursault’s meditations and reactions. Each of them has committed a cold blooded murder and is condemned to death. These two characters are strange, their behavior, when about to die, is characterized by an acceptance of their fate. They wait for death in a equanimous state; it is after all what they deserve. Hope and despair are mixed in them; it is useless to seek protection, comfort or salvation. They realize the meaninglessness of life, its absurdity and come to the conclusion that it is not worth living. Bigger’s self-creation and emancipation goes along with his rejection of religion.

The economic, social and political situation of Blacks tremendously adds to their commitment to religion. Indeed, Negroes constitute a separate race stunted, stripped and held captive in America, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights. This state of poverty is made up by a resort to religion. Mrs. Thomas invokes religion, to draw her consolation, her comfort and a holy protection in order to face the squalid conditions of the family. Thus, not only does she thank God for what she eats, but she uses quite a religious symbol comparing life to a mountain railroad which a
man must endeavour to follow from the cradle to the grave. The white
religion extremely affects the mind of Bigger’s mother to a point of
obsession, in so far as she lives entirely under the law of the Scripture to
which she identifies herself. Accordingly, despite his difficulties, man has
to rely on God and try his best to overcome these difficulties in order to
guarantee his survival until his death. Christian religion as far as its
principles are concerned teaches man submission and humility. Generally
speaking, completely “acculturated” by whites, some Black people
definitively make of it a means of survival. Their life is thoroughly
controlled by the religious regulations and rules. In Church they have been
taught that their God of goodness can relieve them of their burden. People
who feel downtrodden, afflicted and oppressed think that by resorting to
religion which promises honey and milk, they can get solution to their
predicament. The religious beliefs provide consolation and spiritual strength
to bear one’s social conditions.

Bigger’s final hatred of religion is mostly inspired by his social
experience as a Negro in a white dominated society. In this respect, the
bitter reality which occurs is when a captive Bigger is confronted by a Ku
Klux Klan cross flaming atop a building behind an enraged and hostile mob.
Yet previously in the prison when he is waiting to be judged, he received the
visit of the Rev. Hammond who having delivered him a good sermon, gives
him a cross to wear, as a symbol of the remembrance of Christ. Bigger
believes in the possible Christian salvation and he accepts the cross from the
preacher in his cell but later loses his faith and drives it away. Naturally when Bigger Thomas sees the Ku Klux Klan cross, he might think of the paradox between the symbolic offering of salvation for all men and the hateful motivation behind the burning of the cross of the Ku Klux Klan, this racial organization whose main action is to, terrorise Negroes and Whites on the side of the Negroes.

During an interview between Bigger and his Marxist lawyer Max, Bigger says that he no longer can attend services after he realises the “singing, shouting, and praying of his Black skins did not get them nothing.” Bigger’s observation is relevant with the Jim Crow law imposed on the Blacks, which teaches them their place and prevents them from taking advantage of the American modern achievements. That is why Bigger accuses his Black folk of accepting to serve submissively a system which deprives them of everything and which utterly shows and reinforces the supremacy of the Whites. Negro behavior as Bigger himself points out that white people want Blacks to be religious so that they can do what they like with them.

Another important impact on religion lies on the emotional and moral transformation it brings about. Life according to God’s way teaches Black people that they have to arrange their life in a honourable manner, having to forget and forgive instead of sulking and attempting to avenge. Whenever Blacks undergo violent acts from whites in the name of God they forget about. The submissive attitude on the one hand pays them in terms of their
avoidance of white reprisal and lynching and on the other it makes white
people believe that Blacks are weak therefore to their cruelty and
intimidation. Moreover, in the desire to put the religious laws into practice
Blacks are more likely to avoid being involved in vicious achievements such
as rape or robbery which are considered horrible sins. The same belief is
shared by Bigger`s mother who dreads God more than anything else making
them the core of his life. Mrs. Thomas` retreat into religion provides her
with consolation, to put up with her suffering and bring up her children in
rightness and submission.

Instead Bigger joins in a combined force to fight religion in order to
allow himself to have his place in the sun; He does not share his mother`s
religion and seems to consider man`s revolt:

He hates his mother for that way of hers which was like
Bessie`s. what his mother had was Bessie`s whiskey, and
Bessie`s whiskey was his mother`s religion. He did not want
to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep. It was
when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the
movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt
what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of
this world, to lose himself it so he could find himself, to be
allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was.

*(Native Son, 226)*
This involves a genuine commitment and determination. Once more, existentialism views man as set free from the daim of a God, Bigger also perceives man`s position as such. When Bigger meets his death not in despair but with a belief that he is at last to acquire a new freedom by shaping his own destiny he one way or another reaffirms the existentialist tenet that man`s freedom is within his grasp. It is therefore unnecessary to place too much confidence and trust in a God who helps only those who help themselves.

Religion, because of the happy life it promises, incites hope and provides moral strength. Bigger`s family believe in it and entirely rely on it to give a meaning to their existence and to yearn for a better life after their death. Bigger rejects religion thoroughly though he is all the same psychologically influenced through his social education. Religion which promises heaven prevents man from organizing himself in a concrete way in order to find solution to his problems, provided that true happiness of man is the result of his own actions. Mrs. Thomas, Bigger`s mother, finds solace in religion; Reverend Hammond`s influence on her is indeniable. A devout woman, she believes that the fight for a possible well-being and happiness on earth is useless; only happiness in Heaven is her objective. Vera, following in her mother`s steps is already fearful of life and has surrendered her freedom despite her young age.
Bigger scorns religion and the Christian faith. He drives away the priest who tries to persuade him to pray and believe in God. He is aggressive in ignoring the humble Rev. Hammond.

And at once he was on guard against the man. He shut his heart and tried to stifle all feeling. He feared that the priest would make him feel remorse. He waited to tell him to go.

(*Native Son*, 262)

The next scene also telling of Bigger`s aggressivity:

Yu gotta b`lieve tha` Gad gives etemallife th`u the love of Jesus. Son, look at me…” Bigger`s black face rested in his hands and he did not move. “Son, promise me yu`ll stop hatin` long enuff fer Gawd`s lovet`come enter yo` heart” Bigger said nothing. “Won`t yuh promise, son?” Bigger felt that if the preacher kept asking he would leap up and strike him. How could he believe in that which he had killed?.

(*Native Son*, 265)

Bigger throws away the cross given him by the preacher; then he throws a cup of hot coffee into the priest`s face. For him, nothing matters; yet he searches for the meaning of his living and dying; he feels isolated and longs to be a part of the outside world. When he sneaks into his flat to get his pistols to prepare for robbing Blum`s delicatessen, his mother is singing a hymn:
Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart

*(Native Son, 37)*

But his mother’s song is wholly ineffective in his world; it does nothing to forestall his violence. Again, when Bigger is hiding in an empty apartment, he hears singing from a small church.

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away, I ain’t got to stay here…

*(Native Son, 237 - 238)*

The mood of security and resignation that it induces in the worshippers is not without appeal to Bigger, but he cannot accept the surrender, the acquiescence that religion represents.

Would it not have been better for him had he lived in that world the music sang of? It would have been easy to have lived in it, fir it was his mother’s world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a centre, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world.

And he would never do that. *(Native Son, 238)*

After his capture, Bigger tears the crucifix from his neck to emphasizes his denial of his mother’s Christianity. He later rejects the cross offered him by the Rev. Hammond, the pastor of his mother’s church, when the Ku Klux Klan ignites its fiery cross not far from the Dalton residence. “I
... don’t want it”, “I can die without a cross”, “I ain’t got no soul”, “I don’t care”, he would curse when the policemen picked up the cross and brought it back.

A more militant kind of religion is represented by the Ku Klux Klan’s fiery cross on the top of the building near the Dalton’s home. The function of Christianity is to hand an opiate to the Black masses and to lynch those who will not be killed into oblivion of their conditions. After seeing the flaming cross, Bigger rejects violently the wooden crucifix, Rev. Hammond, and later a Catholic priest. “I don’t want you! Take your Jesus and go!” he shouted.

Instead of religious acquiescence, Bigger chooses rebellion as his way of life. The theme of rebellion is the central meaning of Native Son, which the particulars of Wright craft – structure, characterization and symbolism are designed to express. Bigger rebels against his family, against his companions and black life in general and against the white society that oppresses him. The two most important specific forma that this rebellion takes are rape and murder, crimes which Bigger both is and is not guilty of. In his rebellion, anguish, and isolation, Bigger is much as existential hero as Cross Damon, the protagonist of Wright’s next novel The Outsider.

The dominant characteristics of Richard Wright’s heroes are crime and violence provoked by revolt. Both Native Son and The Outsider portray a man in a violent revolt against a hostile environment. As alien in their
homeland, the heroes are crude, resentful, depressed, unstable and devoid of real kindness. Their actions are repugnant and despicable. Their suppressed feelings and emotions have been fully exposed.

Bigger Thomas resorts to violence to achieve some exploits as a man but we know that this method rushes him to electric chair. It is proper both morally and socially speaking that the criminal must be penalized. The tendency toward violence reinforces the beliefs in one’s own inferiority and it warps one’s sense of right and wrong. The use of violence as a springboard for life in *Native Son* proves its short-term efficiency. Hence, violence is not the most symbolic way of struggle for life.

The complex of Bigger’s personality comprises fear, shame and hatred as its primary elements. His consciousness of his fear creates a sense of shame at his own inadequacy, equated by whites with his racial status. The combination of this fear and shame produces hatred, both self-hatred and hatred for the inequities of his life and the whites responsible for those iniquities and his subsequent humiliation. Unable to cope with his dilemma in any rational way, he responds by aggression and violence. Bigger’s emotional pattern precludes any viable human relationship. Bigger can attain a sense of life only by inflicting death. Boris Max, however, offers Bigger the vision of a more constructive kind of rebellion: he tries to supplant Bigger’s racial consciousness with class consciousness.
Then reactions of Bigger are unpredictable because his shattered personality in response to his environment is always swaying between fear and violence, love and hatred. Bigger is presented as a brutal individual, much affected by violence. He lacks self-control and cannot hide the frustration, the despair, the fear, and the hatred that are parts of his personality. He himself offers a certain complexity that makes it difficult to make him fit in any definite classification. He appears as an ordinary Negro under the stress of racism, but at the same time, he is subject to contradictory reactions of a victim and a rebel. That rebel-victim is always on the brink of indulging in some verbal aggression or brutality.

It seems that *Native Son* is a blinding and corrosive study in hate. Bigger’s hatred for whites is excessive. The lot of the blacks in America is improving gradually, but the present disposition of whites will not permit more rapid change. To demand immediate social justice, like Bigger, is to upset the delicate balance in race relation achieved through the exercise of exquisite, intuitive tact. Hatred, the preaching of hatred and incitement can only make a tolerable relationship intolerable. The portrayal of Bigger is so unflinchingly harsh that the book will have the boomerang effect of seeming to confirm white prejudice.

Bigger is a violent individual whose violence mostly directed against his black brothers as an uncontrolled eruption of pent up aggressiveness built over periods of unbearable pressure. He hates the white world, because
it is dangled before him but remains untouchable. It is on his fellow suffers that he usually vents his hatred, it is then he dares to assault since he is too frightened to attack his white persecutor. Why? The oppressed Bigger attacks other oppressed people to right the balance and restore some of his ego and self-valuation. Bigger is a persecuted person whose permanent dreams is to become the persecutor. By aiming his violence at his fellow Blacks, Bigger acts against his own battle. In such a situation, the fellow Black who can be a potential ally is not differentiated from the oppressor.

The feeling of freedom after the accidental murder if Mary Dalton shows the extent to which Bigger`s personality has become warped. His newly acquired freedom resembles almost insanity. Even if we agree to his partial rebirth after Mary`s murder, one is to acknowledge that Bigger has not become a totally new and therefore psychologically sane individual. The most frightening thing about Bigger is his complete divorce from the values of common humanity. Feeling no remorse for his terrible deeds, Bigger lives constantly with this feeling till the end of the novel, for he remains totally adamant to his lawyer`s exhortation to consider his oppressors more human beings like himself.

The discovery of his secret propels him into a process which rides him definitely of whatever humanity is still left in him. Following the white world, clamouring for his life, the old atavistic feeling of fear and despair come back stronger than ever. Bigger goes back so rapidly to his old feeling
of being a hunted animal. Fleeing from the Dalton`s home, he jumps through a window and lands on the snow-carpeted earth; the shock is so hard that he urinates: this symbolizes his return to an animal-like state. One then understands that Bigger becomes a wounded beast at bay, determined to kill in order to survive. He totally reverts to jungle law. He creates and fosters animalistic instinct in him. Feelings such as love, kindness, respect for human life are not innate to Bigger. The hatred has left to him no possibility to a real human. Bigger could have directed his revolt against a brutal oppressor, but instead he chooses as his victim a girl who is friendly to Negroes. By this, he shows that his sickness is too deep to be reached by kindness.

Bigger is compared to a wild animal ready to slash and tear out its prey, or to a madman who, out of his sense, reacts under powerful impulses. The white oppressor does not less explain the violence so settled in the hero, for Bigger reveals a character without scruple, capable of all kind of harm and absurdity. He has killed Mary Dalton inadvertently through fear. But he feels no regret for it, he does not feel guilty. He is only worried about the effective burning of the body so that the whole thing would not be discovered. It seems that he finds fulfillment only by the most violent defiance of the society that oppresses him. No tears with Bigger Thomas, he is a character to shock everyone. His uncontrollable rage bursts out in the form of hideous violence: grotesque pictures are painted, bloodshed is not
spared. Bigger`s world is a Manichean world with a sharp division along the
colour line. That is the pattern after which he views the world; that is why,
when Jan and Mary Dalton lavish their friendship on him, he cannot
responds adequately and hates them for their offer.

The story is drawn to point out Bigger as a brutal and depraved
character, a brute whose savagery goes beyond ordinary humanity. Bigger
has natural aggressiveness, even if it is true that his attitudes are determined
by his environment. Despite social determinism, Bigger owns something,
which is left to him; it is his innate liberty that allows him to choose his
course of actions. He has thus chosen murder instead of other reactions,
since the white oppression gives birth to a variety of attitudes. The majority
of the Black are submitted to the same sufferings but they do not react the
same way. The unbearable white hostility seems responsible for Bigger`s
plight; however he has a part of responsibility for, instead other outlets, he
chooses destructive rebellion as a way of life. Is it worth rebelling as Bigger
does? The remaining problem is that such a murderous rebellion seems
futile because it brings powerful retaliation from the oppressors. It takes the
form of self-destructive action and finally confirms the white ascendancy.

Bigger is provided with a complex awareness: he is too
hypersensitive to racial realities and is too self-conscious to seem an actual
youth. Contrary to his companions who are unemployed and stifled, Bigger
get a job and therefore he has little to complain of. His psychopathic lust for violence seems to confirm the white man’s fantasies of Negro, capable of any crime unless kept aside.

Henceforth, Bigger is not a real existential hero: he is a victim of social and environmental determinism. Bigger has become what he is, not because he is free to choose his course of action, but because circumstances over which he has no control have driven him to his doom. A Negro youth, unable to adapt to his Jim Crow environment, goes berserk and wins up a killer. Bigger almost psychopathic lust for violence gets better of him, and his revolt becomes as completely phony and unreal.

All in all, Bigger Thomas’ historical revolt puts forth the problem of violence as means of political action. Bigger is wrong to present violence as a provisory means to prepare the advent of a society where all men are equal. Indeed, how can we admit that it is necessary to destroy human values so that they would be respected one day? Revolt is for life, not against life. There needs a part of moral in any historical revolt.