Chapter - III
RICHARD WRIGHT’S NATIVE SON

Richard Wright (1908-1960) is one of the most important and influential 20th century African American writers. He was a powerful novelist, short story writer, poet and essayist. He was a powerful, sometimes controversial novelist. Much of his literary output concerns racial themes. His work redefined discussions of race relations in America in the mid 20th century. It is said, “The central characters in his fiction are usually bitter, alienated black men, and his treatment of their experience provides a vivid portrayal of both the economic and psychological effects of racism.”

Richard Wright was born in Rucker Plantation Roxie, Mississippi, on Sept 1908, the first of two sons to Ells Wilson, an elementary school teacher and Nathaniel Wright, an illiterate alcoholic sharecropper. The family moved to Memphis, Tennessee. The father disturbed the family and the boy grew in poverty. Mother’s illness complicated the matter further. She suffered a stroke in 1919. In the following year Wright was sent to his grandmother’s home in Jackson, where he remained until 1925.

Wright had many troubles with his mother because of her ill-health as in the case of Allen Ginsberg. He had ideological problems with his grandmother. It is said, “Early strife with his aunt and grandmother left him with a permanent, uncompromising hostility toward religious solutions to everyday problems.”

Richard began to write quite early. At age fifteen, he wrote his first short story “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” which appeared in Southern Register. Wright excelled in grade school. He was then and there a race-conscious student.
In 1923, he registered for Mathematics, English and History courses at the Lanier High School in Jackson, but soon gave up education. Because he had to earn a living. Critics think that his childhood in Memphis and Mississippi shaped his lasting impressions of American life.

Richard Wright could not have much education. He however, studied such great writers as Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gertrude Stein and many others. He migrated to Chicago in 1927 at the age of nineteen, finding a job as a postal clerk and continuing to educate himself. He developed an interest in Karl Marx and joined the Communist Party in 1933, which he resigned eleven years later as he was disillusioned with the party’s ideological rigidity.

Richard Wright lived in Chicago for ten years. He wrote the novel Cesspool in 1935. The work is about one day in the life of an angry black postal worker. The work was published posthumously, first appearing in Lawd Today in 1963.

The novel is partly an autobiographical work as Wright was a postal clerk. He lost this job during the 1930s Great Depression. In 1932, he began attending meetings of the John Reed Club, which was dominated by the Communist Party. Wright had a relationship with the Party workers. In fact, he joined the Communist Party in 1933 and wrote for periodicals and many proletarian poems.

Wright wrote four novellas about racial oppression in the South. He published all these as Uncle Tom’s Children in 1938. One of these stories was “Bog Boy Leaves Home.”

Wright left Chicago for New York in 1937, and he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he used to complete his finest novel Native Son (1940). The novel deals with a black man who accidentally kills a white woman and then murders his own lover. The book sold two lakh copies in a month. So Wright was, like Theodore Dresier and John Steinbeck, became a best seller.
Native Son is considered by most critics to be Wright's best work. Divided into three sections –'Fear,' ‘Flight,’ and ‘Fate’- the novel examines topics such as black consciousness, racial dynamics, and freedom and determinism.

In Chicago Wright forged his ties with Communist Party. He worked on the WPA Writers Project. He became the Harlem editor of the Daily Worker. He contributed 200 articles for that. Besides, he ran his own literary magazine New Challenge. He befriended the great Black writer Ralph Ellison. Also he got story magazine's first prize of 500 dollars for his short story “Fire and Cloud” in 1938.

Wright got the Springarn medal in 1940 and in 1943 he began his autobiographical novel Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth (1945). This work chronicles both the cruelty of racial attitudes among southern whites and what Wright calls the negative confusions of the black community. A number of acclaimed writers admired it. The book sold four lakh copies in a few months.

Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth describes Wright's life from 1912 to 1927. Although the book is an autobiography, Wright's biographer Michel Fabre has suggested that it may not be an entirely truthful account of Wright's early life from a mature perspective.

The young Wright endured a childhood of poverty, and scenes of hunger and want recur in the book. His mother often sent him to beg food from his father, who lived with his mistress. Having to belittle himself to survive stirred Wright's animosity toward whites. He also blamed his father, a criticism that he extended to the black race generally. Abandoned by whites and blacks alike, Wright felt alone and helpless.

Black Boy met with popular and critical success, and its admirers included William Faulkner. Although some have criticized Wright’s discussion of Southern black despair, Black Boy nonetheless records a black writer trying to understand and deal with the oppressive culture in which he was raised. A continuation of his
autobiography appeared in the Atlantic Monthly as “I Tried to Be a Communist” (1944) and posthumously as *American Hunger* (1977).

Wright got national attention for the collection of four short stories titled *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). He based some stories on lynching in the Deep South. The publication and favorable receptions of *Uncle Tom's Children* improved Wright's status with the Communist Party and enabled him to establish a reasonable degree of financial stability. He was appointed to the editorial board of *New Moses* and Granville Hicks, prominent literary critic and communist sympathizer supported him in his ventures.

*Uncle Tom's Children* was selected by the Book of the Month Club as its first book by an African American author. The lead character, Bigger Thomas, represented limitations that society placed on African Americans. He could only gain his own agency and self-knowledge by committing heinous acts.

Wright was criticized for his works which described violence. In the case of *Native Son*, people complained that he portrayed a black man in ways that seemed to confirm whites' worst fears. In July 1940, after the novel *Native Son* appeared, Wright went to Chicago to do research for writing a chronicle of American slavery. He visited the American Negro Exhibition with Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps and Claude McKay. Then he and Paul Green collaborated on a dramatic version of *Native Son* in Chapel Hall, North Carolina. The play opened in Broadway, with Orason Well as director and received good reviews. His new book *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro* was published in 1941 with critical acclaim.

In 1945 Wright had published *Black Boy* which was now followed by a sequel *American Hunger*, however published posthumously in 1977. It is like a second volume to *Black Boy*. The Library of America edition restored it to that form. *American Hunger* deals with Wright’s involvement with John Reed Clubs and the
Communist Party which he left in 1942. In the volume's restored form the diptych structure compared the certainties and intolerance of organized communism, the 'bourgeois' books and condemned members with similar qualities in fundamentalist organized religion. He believed in far-left democratic solutions to political problems.

Richard Wright loved acquisition of knowledge about human destiny and solving the Black man's problems. So he traveled. In 1946 he moved to Paris, befriending such great writers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Like Camus, Wright wrote an existentialist novel, also called The Outsider (1946). This novel describes African American characters' involvement in the Communist Party in New York. Wright became a French citizen and published a minor novel Savage Holiday in 1954. He traveled in Europe, Asia and Africa. He used this experience for many of his non-fictional works. For example, Black Power (1954) is a commentary on the progress achieved in Africa.

Wright's 1949 essay, which had first appeared in Atlantic Monthly, was republished in The God That Failed in 1949. This created some problem for him. The American CIA and even FBI put Wright under surveillance in 1943. The McCarthyism, which banned Arthur Miller's activities, also banned Wright's activities though he could star as Bigger Thomas (in an Argentinean film version of Native Son in 1950).

In 1955 Wright participated in the Bandung Conference and his book The Color Curtain (1955) reports it. White Man, Listen (1957) is his non-fictional work. The Long Dream (1958) is his novel. Eight Men (1961) is book of short stories. These works dealt with poverty, hunger and the black man's protest against racism. It is said of him, "The black revolution has been happening for a long time. It began decades ago with the works of Wrights and Ellison, whose prophetic books defined the self-image of the Negro in America."
Wright’s another novel *Island of Hallucinations* was ready in 1959. The plot hinged on the theme of the black man’s liberation. Gradually Wright felt a little suffocated by French politics. The peaceful Parisian atmosphere was shattered by quarrels and attacks instigated by enemies of the expatriate black writers. Once he thought of staying in London.

The French publication of *White Man, Listen* in 1959 failed. Wright fell ill and he gave up his desire to go to England. In 1960 the stage adaptation of *The Long Dream* had bad reviews. He could not publish *The Long Dream* in France. Even his work of publishing *Island of Hallucinations* was delayed. His speech on his achievement was broadcast from Paris in 1960. He spoke of racial problems in America and America’s policy on Africa. It is said, “In spite of his financial straits, Wright refused to compromise his principles.”

Wright declined to speak for the Canadian Radio. He rejected an invitation from the Congress for Cultural Freedom to go to India to speak at a conference in memory of Leo Tolstoy. He made a lecture ‘The Situation of the Black Artist and Intellectual in the United States’ in the American Church in Paris 1960. He criticized the American racial policies.

In 1957 Wright had contracted amoebic dysentery in Africa. His health deteriorated over the next three years. He died in Paris of a heart attack at his age of 52. He was buried in Le Pere Lachaise Cemetery. But Wright’s daughter Julia accused the politicians that he was murdered.

Many of Wright’s books are published after his death. Some of his shocking descriptions about race, gender and politics are omitted. Unexpurgated versions of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were published in 1991. His another novel *Rite of Passage* appeared in 1994 for the first time.

Wright loved all kinds of literature. He loved the Japanese form of haiku and wrote 4000 haikus in his last years. Such of his book is *Haiku: This Other World*

As for Wright’s family history the following is said.

Wright married Dhima Rose Meadman, a modern-dance teacher of Russian-Jewish ancestry, in 1939, but the two divorced a year later. In 1941 he married Ellen Poplar, the daughter of immigrants of Polish Jewish ancestry and a Communist Party organizer in Brooklyn. They had two daughters: Julia born in 1942 and Rachel in 1949.

In *Black Boy* Wright discussed a number of authors who influenced him, including H.L. Mencken, Gertrude Stein, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sinclair Lewis, Marcel Proust and Edgar Lee Master.

*Black Boy* became an instant best-seller upon its publication in 1945. Wright’s stories published during the 1950s disappointed some critics who said that his move to Europe alienated him from American blacks and separated him from his emotional and psychological roots. Many of Wright’s works failed to satisfy the rigid standards of New Criticism as the works of younger black writers gained in popularity. During the 1950s Wright grew more internationalist in outlook. While he accomplished much as an important public literary and political figure with a worldwide reputation, his very creative work did decline.

While interest in *Black Boy* ebbed during the 1950s, resurgence of interest in Wright’s work occurred in the 1960s with the advent of the militant black consciousness movement. In the judgment of most modern critics, *Black Boy* remains a vital work of historical, sociological, and literary significance whose seminal portrayal of one black man’s search for self-actualization in a racist society
made possible the works of such successive writers as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. It is generally agreed that Wright’s influence in *Native Son* is not a matter of literary style or technique. His impact, rather, has been on ideas and attitudes, and his work has been a force in the social and intellectual history of the United States in the last half of the twentieth century. “Wright was one of the people who made me conscious of the need to struggle,” said writer Amiri Baraka.

During the 1970s and 1980s, scholars published critical essays about Wright in prestigious journals. Richard Wright conferences were held on university campuses from Mississippi to New Jersey. A new film version of *Native Son*, with a screenplay by Richard Wesley, was released in December 1986. Certain Wright novels became required reading in a number of American universities and colleges.

Recent critics have called for a reassessment of Wright’s later work in view of his philosophical project. Notably, Paul Gilroy has argued that the depth of his philosophical interests has been either overlooked or misconceived by almost exclusive literary enquiries that have dominated analysis of his writing. His most significant contribution, however, was his desire to accurately portray blacks to white readers, thereby destroying the white myth of patient, humorous, subservient black man.

While some of his work was weak and unsuccessful especially that completed within the last three years of his life – his best work will continue to attract readers. His three masterpieces *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy* – are a crowning achievement for him and for American literature.

In April 2009, Wright was featured on a US postage stamp. The 61 cent, two ounce rate stamp is the 25th installment of the literary arts series and features a portrait of Wright in front of snow swept tenements on the South Side of Chicago, a scene that recalls the setting of *Native Son*. In 2009, Wright was featured in a 90-minute documentary about the WPA Writers’ Project titled *Soul of a People*:
Native Son is a novel by Richard Wright, published in 1940. Native Son tells the story of 20-year-old Bigger Thomas, an African American living in poverty. Bigger lives in Chicago's south side ghetto in the 1930s. He gets into trouble as a youth, but he gets the job of a driver in the white family of the Daltons. Then on, he gets an awareness about social conditions and identity. He drives the car for his boss's daughter Mary and her lover Jan. Once he takes her for an outing. She drinks heavily. When he takes her home, he kills her by design. He runs from the police to a girl-friend’s house and she too criticizes him for his act of murder. He is caught. His communist lawyer Max tries to save him.

It is said,

Wright gets inside the head of 'brute Negro' Bigger, revealing his feelings, thoughts and point of view as he commits crimes and is confronted with racism, violence and debasement. The novel's treatment of Bigger and his motivations conform to the conventions of literary naturalism.6

Wright’s novel Native Son is a powerful black narrative. The novel has three parts - Book One “Fear,” Book Two “Flight” and Book Three “Fate.” Many publishers have republished the narrative. Jonathan Cape’s edition of 1970 has an Introduction “How ‘Bigger’ was Born” by Richard Wright himself. The book is aptly dedicated to Wright’s mother with the words ‘who, when I was a child at her knee, taught me to revere the fanciful and the imaginative’7 (p. 1).
In this introduction Wright reveals that an imaginative (creative) work is a reflection of one’s experience. He observes, “The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them.”

The novel begins with an epithet from the Book of Job – Job’s words.

Even today is my complaint rebellious,
My stroke is heavier than my groaning.

Book One is called “Fear.” The narrative begins with Bigger Thomas’s waking up, in a small dark room at the sound of an alarm clock. Wright recounts Bigger’s story. Bigger lived in one room-house with his mother (called Mrs. Thomas), his brother Buddy and his sister Vera. The novel begins to match the facts of creation about the black ‘native son.’ The beginning is about the morning. The black thinker Du Bois once said, “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.” The words ‘beginning’ and ‘morning’ matter for the black man and the black race. Look at it.

Brrrrrriiiinnng!

An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring created. A woman’s voice sang out impatiently: ‘Bigger, shut that thing off!’

A surly grunt sounded above the tinny ring of metal. Naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floor and the clang ceased abruptly.

‘Turn on the light, Bigger.’

‘Awright,’ came a sleepy mumble.

Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds, rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands. From a bed to his right the woman spoke again:
‘Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you all out of here.’

Another black boy rolled from bed and stood up. The woman also rose and stood in her nightgown.

‘Turn your heads so I can dress,’ she said.

The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of room. The woman rushed out of her nightgown and put on a pair of step-ins. She turned to the bed from which she has risen and called:

‘Vera! Get up from there!’

‘What time is it, Ma?’ asked a muffled, adolescent voice from beneath a quilt.

‘Get up from there, I say!’

‘O.K., Ma,’

No sooner all the children get up than they notice a bloody cat in their room. It is after Bigger, and all of them try to kill it. Bigger as the bigger boy than Buddy kills it ultimately with the help of a skillet. Vera faints because of fear, and the mother scolds the boy:

‘Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? what would you think then?’ she asked. ‘Suppose those rats cut out veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever bothers you.’ All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won’t take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!’

‘I prophesy much as I please! And if you don’t like it, you can get out. We can get along without you. We can live in one room just like we living now, even with you gone,’ she said.

‘Aw, for chrissakes!’ he said, his voice filled with nervous irritation.
‘You’ll regret how you living some day,’ she went on. ‘If you don’t stop running with that gang of yours and do right you’ll end up where you never thought you would. You think I don’t know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy. Just remember that’10 (pp. 12-13).

The family activities continued. Vera went behind the curtain and Bigger heard her trying to comfort his mother. 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 that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair.

Bigger knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness. He would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself Mother’s song ‘Life is like a mountain rail-road and we must make the run’ goaded Bigger. The mother insisted on him to work and earn. This was a question of family’s survival. Besides, he was sick of his life at home. The paint-workers painted a banner before him in the street. He read the line ‘If you break the law, you can’t win.’

Bigger wanted a cigar, wanted to buy a magazine, and see a movie, but not enough money for anything.

Bigger walked to the friends poolroom and met his friend Gus. They thought of robbing whites, and he thought something bad may happen. They met other friends GH and Jack and planned a robbery. The friends looked at a plane and its action was revealed to them in the form of the words ‘use, speed and gasoline.’ They
talked of flying as the rich whites. They played the game ‘play-acting,’ the white men’s game.

The blacks thought they were in something like jail, or outside the world. Bigger thought with anger ‘They own the world,’ depriving it to the blacks. Bigger, Jack and G.H., all decided to rob the white man Blum’s store. Wright writes about the group’s tensions over the issue of robbing.

Bigger was afraid of robbing a white man and he knew that Gus was afraid, too. 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 that all 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 felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery. Like a man about to shoot himself and dreading to shoot and yet knowing that he had to shoot and felt it all at once and powerfully. He watched Gus and waited for him to say yes. But Gus did not speak. Bigger’s teeth clamped so tight that his jaws ached. He edged toward Gus, not looking at Gus, but feeling the presence of Gus over all his body, through him, in and out of him, and hating himself and Gus because he felt it. Then he could not stand it any longer. The hysterical tensity of his nerves urged him to speak, to free himself. He faced Gus, his eyes red with anger and fear, his fists clenched and held stiffly to his sides.

Still further, Bigger got irritated, troubled, because of his violent temper. Wright says of his nature:

All that morning he had lurked behind his curtain of indifference and looked at things, snapping and glaring at whatever had tried to make him come out into the open. But now he was out; the thought of the job at Blum’s and the tilt he had had with Gus had snared him into things and his self-trust
was gone. Confidence could only come again now through action so violent that it would make him forget. 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-like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-way, invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating. He was 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 (p. 31).

Then Bigger strode silently beside Jack for six blocks. It was noon when they reached Forty-Seventh Street and South Parkway. The Regal was just opening. Bigger lingered in the lobby and looked at the colored posters while Jack bought the tickets. Two features were advertised: one, *The Gay Woman*, was pictured on the posters in images of white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming, and dancing in night clubs; the other, *Trader Horn*, was shown on the posters in terms of black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle. Bigger looked up and saw Jack standing at his side. He followed Jack into the darkened movie.

Then came *The Gay Woman* in which, amid scenes of cocktail drinking, dancing, golfing, swimming, and spinning roulette wheels, a rich young white woman kept clandestine appointments with her lover while her millionaire husband was busy in the offices of a vast paper mill. Several times Bigger nudged Jack in the ribs with his elbow as the giddy young woman duped her husband and kept from him the knowledge of what she was doing. Soon a Communist man exploded a bomb at the rich young woman’s man. Bigger and Jack discussed about the matter. Bigger learnt from Jack what communism was and why the communists tried to finish the capitalists.
The picture continued and showed the rich young woman in a fit of remorse, telling her lover that she thanked him for saving her life, but that what had happened had taught her that her husband needed her.

Bigger turned his eyes to the screen, but he did not look. He was filled with a sense of excitement about his new job. Was what he had heard about rich white people really true? Was he going to work for people like one saw in the movies? If he were, then he would see a lot of things from the inside; he would get the dope, the low-down. He looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind. Those were smart people: they knew how to get hold of money. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it.

Bigger’s going to work for the Daltons was something big. Maybe Mr. Dalton was a millionaire. Maybe he had a daughter who was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money. This thought was in his mind.

The movie was over by twenty to three in the afternoon. The two left the cinema halls. Bigger reached home. His mother disliked him. He dashed out, and joined his friends again. Nearly about ten pages follow about his clash with Gus, indicating Bigger’s cruel nature. He visited his home again and Wright reveals his tempestuous nature in the following passage:

He listened a while to her rubbing clothes on the metal washboard, then he gazed abstractedly into the street, thinking of how he had felt when he fought Gus in Doc’s poolroom. He was relieved and glad that in an hour he was going to see about that job at the Dalton place. He was disgusted with the gang; he knew that what had happened today put an end to his being; he knew that what had happened today put an end to his being with them in any more jobs. Like a man staring regretfully but hopelessly at the stump of a cut-off arm or leg, he knew that the fear of robbing a
white man had hold of him when he started that flight with Gus; but he knew it in a way that kept it from coming to his mind in the form of a hard and sharp idea. His confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness.

Bigger was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness. Then he thought of a good reason why he should take it; in order to get to the Dalton place, he had to go through a white neighborhood. He had not heard of any Negroes being molested recently, but he felt that it was always possible.

He went out and walked south to Forty-sixth Street. Then eastward. Well, he would see in a few moments if the Daltons for whom he was to work were like the people he had seen elsewhere.

This was cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses. He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605, when he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now.

Bigger reached the Dalton house. Some one welcomed him. He was asked to sit upon an arm chair and he sat awkwardly. Wright writes, "He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable" (p. 47).

Henry Dalton began to enquire Bigger. Henry’s wife was blind. Dalton said he lived at 3721 Indian Avenue. He had a share in the South Side Real Estate Company. He knew that Bigger lived at 31 Street with his mother. His house rent was 8 dollars per week. Dalton said,
‘The relief people said some funny things about you. I’d like to talk to you about them. Now, you needn’t feel ashamed with me,’ said Mr. Dalton, smiling. ‘I was a boy myself once and I think I know how things are. So just be yourself…’ Mr. Dalton pulled out a package of cigarettes. ‘Here, have one.’

‘Nawsuh; thank you, suh.’

‘You don’t smoke?’

‘Yessuh. But I just don’t want one now.’

‘Now, Bigger, the relief people said you were a very good worker when you were interested in what you were doing. Is that true?’

‘Well, I do my work, suh.’

‘But they said you were always in trouble. How do you explain that?’

‘I don’t know, suh.’

‘Why did they send you to the reform school?’

His eyes glared at the floor.

‘They said I was stealing!’ he blurted defensively. ‘But I wasn’t.’

‘The pay calls for $20 a week, but I’m giving you $25. The extra $5 is for yourself, for you to spend as you like. You will get the clothes you need and your meals. You’re to sleep in the back room, above the kitchen. You can give the $20 to your mother to keep your brother and sister in school. How does that sound?’

‘It sounds all right. Yessuh.’

‘I think we’ll get along.’

‘Yessuh.’

‘Now, Bigger,’ said Mr. Dalton, ‘since that’s settled, let’s see what you’ll have to do everyday. I leave every morning for my office at nine. It’s twenty-minute drive. You are to be back at ten and take Miss Dalton to school.'
At twelve, you call for Miss Dalton at the University. From then until night you are more or less free. If either Miss Dalton or I go out at night, of course, you do the driving. You work every day, but we don’t get up till noon on Sundays. So you will have Sunday mornings to himself, unless something unexpected happens. You get one full day off every two weeks.'

‘Oh, Father!’ a girl’s voice sang out.

‘Yes, Mary,’ said Mr. Dalton.

Bigger turned and saw a white girl walk into the room. She was very slender.

‘Oh I don’t know you were busy.’

‘That’s all right. Mary what is it?’

Bigger saw that the girl was looking at him.

‘Is this the new chauffeur, Father?’

‘What do you want, Mary?’

‘Will you get the tickets for the Thursday concert?’

‘At Orchestra Hall?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes. I’ll get them.’

‘Is this the new chauffeur?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Dalton. ‘This is Bigger Thomas’ (pp. 51-52).

Mary then enquired Bigger whether he had joined a union. This hurt both Dalton and Bigger.

The girl picked up the cat and walked from the room. There was some silence. Bigger wished the girl had not said anything about the unions. Maybe he would not be hired now. Or, if hired, maybe he would be fired soon if she kept acting like that. He had never seen anyone like her before.
Soon Dalton said he had a support for the National Association for the Advancement of colored people just to please him. He asked his maid Peggy to give him food, and show him his room. He asked Bigger to drive the car for Mary that day night.

Thereafter, Bigger followed Peggy. She provided him good food. She told him that Mrs. Peterson, the landlady was rich, and kind to the black folks. Likewise Henry Dalton gave five million dollars for the colored schools. Mr. Green who served ten years in the house, was schooled, and he left on getting a govt job. As an Irish woman Peggy sympathized with Bigger. Peggy spoke of Mary thus:

‘She’s a sweet thing, she is,’ she said. ‘I’ve known her since she was two years old. To me she’s still a baby and will always be one. But she’s kind of wild, she is. Always in hot water. Keeps her folks worried to death, she does. She runs around with a wild and crazy bunch of reds…’

‘Reds!’ Bigger exclaimed.

‘Yes. But she don’t mean nothing by it,’ Peggy said. Like her mother and father, she feels sorry for people and she thinks the reds’ll do something for ‘em. The Lord only knows where she got her wild ways, but she’s got em. If you stay around here, you’ll get to know her. But don’t you pay no attention to her red friends. They just keep up a lot of fuss’ (p. 58).

Bigger went behind Peggy down the basement. She went to the kitchen and he went to his room. He stood in the middle of the floor. There were pictures of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Jack Dempsey, and Henry Armstrong; there were others of Ginger Rogers, Jean Harlow and Janet Gaynor. The room was large and had two radiators. He felt the bed: it was soft. ‘Gee! He would bring Bessie here some night,’ he felt.

Then he drove the car towards the University. Mary asked him to drive the car to a friend instead. He worried. Maybe she was talking about the reds? But none of
his friends was red. If Mr. Dalton should ask if he had taken her to the University, he would have to say yes and depend upon her to back him up. But suppose Mr. Dalton had some one watching, someone who would tell where he had really taken her? Bigger had heard that many rich people had detectives. Mary was an odd girl. He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he lived in the same world as she.

Mary came back from the dark building with her friend Jan.

Bigger flushed warm with anger. Goddam her soul to hell. Was she laughing at him? Why didn’t they leave him alone? He was not bothering them. He almost disliked them. Then he drove them out, while the two talked of the beauty of life.

‘Isn’t it glorious tonight?’ she asked.

‘God yes!’ Jan said.

Bigger listened to the tone of their voices, to their strange accents, to the exuberant phrases that flowed so freely from their lips.

‘That sky!’

‘And that water!’

‘It’s so beautiful it makes you ache just to look at it,’ said Mary.

‘This is a beautiful world, Bigger,’ Jan said, turning to him.

‘Look at that skyline!’

Bigger looked without turning his head; he just rolled his eyes. Stretching to one side of him was a vast sweep of tall buildings flecked with tiny squares of yellow light.

‘We’ll own all that some day, Bigger,’ Jan said with a wave of his hand.

‘After the revolution it’ll be ours. But we’ll have to fight for it. What a world to win, Bigger! And when that day comes, things’ll be different. there’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor.’
Bigger said nothing. That cat whirred along (pp. 68-69).

Then Mary spoke of her concern for the blacks:

'You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses,' she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming to either side of them, 'and just see how your people live. You know what I mean? I've been to England, France and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human... There are twelve million of them... They live in our country... in the same city with us...’ her voice trailed off wistfully (p. 70).

'Aren't you coming with us, Bigger?' Mary asked in a sweet tone that made him want to leap at her. They entered a hotel.

The people in Ernie's Kitchen Shack knew him and he did not want them to see him with these white people. He knew that if he went in they would ask one another: Who're them white folks Bigger's hanging around with?

'I-I... I don't want to go in...' he whispered breathlessly.

'Aren't you hungry?' Jan asked.

'Naw; I ain't hungry.'

Jan and Mary came close to the car.

'Come and sit with us anyhow,' Jan said (p. 71).

Finally Bigger joined them for beer and food. By chance, his old friend Jack spoke to him, embarrassing him. His lover Bessie also spoke to him. Then Bigger got good things and Jan held a dialogue with him.

'Where were you born, Bigger?
'In the South.'
'Whereabouts?'
'Mississippi.'
'How far did you go to school?'
'To the eight grade.'
'Why did you stop?'
'No money.'
'Did you go to school in the North or South?'
'Mostly in the South. I went two years up here.'
'How long have you been in Chicago?'
'Oh, about five years.'
'You like it here?'
'It'll do.'
'You live with your people?'
'My mother, brother, and sister.'
'Where's your father?'
'Dead.'
'How long ago was that?'
'He got killed in a riot when I was a kid—in the South.'
There was silence. The rum was helping Bigger.
'And what was done about it?' Jan asked.
'Nothing, far as I know.'
'How do you feel about it?'
'I don't know.'
'Listen, Bigger, that's what we want to stop. That's what we Communist are fighting. We want to stop people from treating others that
being. He had not known her long or well enough for that, he felt that his murder of 
er her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel. It 
seemed that her actions had evoked fear and shame in him. There were rare 
moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would 
hold of him. He would dream of making a stand against that white force. He 
liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the 
Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned 
with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible 
avenues of escape. It was fear that had made him fight Gus in the poolroom. If he 
had felt certain of himself and of Gus, he would not have fought.

When Bigger got to the driveway he saw that the car was standing just as he 
had left it, but all covered with a soft crust of snow. The house loomed white and 
silent. Peggy enquired Bigger about Mary. She asked about the car. She asked 
about the coincidences. Bigger evaded all of them with cunningness. For a long 
time after she had gone he did not move from his tracks. Then, slowly, he looked 
round the basement, turning his head like an animal with eyes and ears alert, 
searching to see if anything was amiss. The room was exactly as he had left it last 
night. He went to the trunk, grasped its handle and dragged it to the door, lifted it to 
his back, carried it to the car and fastened it to the running board. He looked at his 
watch; it was eight-twenty. Now, he would have to wait for Mary to come out. Peggy 
burst sadly:

‘What on earth a good girl like Mary wants to hang around with that 
crazy bunch for, God only knows. Nothing good’ll come of it, just you mark 
my word. If it wasn’t for that Mary and her wild ways, this household would 
run like a clock. It’s such a pity, too. Her mother’s the very soul of goodness. 
And there never was a finer man than Mr. Dalton (p. 117).
Bigger listened to the dialogue between Mrs. Dalton and Peggy inside the house. The two ladies developed doubts over Mary’s disappearance. Bigger stopped listening, feeling fear for the first time. He had not thought that the trunk was not fully packed.

Then Mrs. Dalton enquired Bigger as follows:

‘You didn’t get much sleep last night, did you?’
‘No,’ he drawled, afraid of what she might mean.
‘Peggy rang for you three times, and you didn’t answer.’
‘I’m sorry, man...’
‘That’s all right. I wanted to ask you about last night...’

Oh, you took the trunk to the station, didn’t you?’ she asked

‘Yessum. This morning,’ he said, detecting hesitancy and confusion in her voice.

‘You left the car in the driveway last night, didn’t you?’
‘Yessum. I was about to put it up,’ he said, indicating that his only concern was with keeping his job and doing his duties. ‘But she told me to leave it.’

‘And was someone with her?’
‘Yessum. A gentleman.’
‘That must have been pretty late, wasn’t it?’
‘Yessum. A little before two, mam.’
‘And you took the trunk down a little before two?’
‘Yessum. She told me to.’
‘She took you to her room?’

He did not want her to think that he had been alone in the room with Mary. Quickly, he recast the story in his mind.

‘Yessum. They went up...’
‘Oh, he was with her?’
‘Yessum.’
‘Anything wrong, mam?’
‘Oh, no! I-I-I … No; there’s nothing wrong’ (pp. 121-122).

Bigger would go out. To go out now would be the answer to the feeling of strain that has come over him while talking to Mrs. Dalton. He would go and see Bessie. The street car came and he got on, thinking of how things had gone that day. No; he did not think they would suspect him of anything. He was black.

But of the whole business there was one angle that bothered him. He should have gotten more money out of it. He should have planned it. He had acted too hastily. Bigger visited Bessie. The two sound like a pair made for each other. Yet they had their own uneasiness as is evident here:

‘Hello, stranger!’
‘Hi, Bessie.’

He stood face to face with her, then reached for her hands. She shied away.

‘What’s the matter?’
‘You know what’s the matter.’
‘Naw, I don’t.’
‘What you reaching for me for?’
‘I want to kiss you, honey.’
‘You don’t want to kiss me.’
‘Why?’
‘I ought to be asking you that.’
‘What’s the matter?’
‘I saw you with your white friends last night.’
‘Aw; they wasn’t my friends.’
‘Who was they?’
‘I work for em.’
‘And you eat with em.’
‘Aw, Bessie…’
‘You don’t even speak to me.’
‘I did!’
‘You just growled and waved hand.’
‘Aw, baby. I was working then. You understand.’
‘I thought maybe you was shamed of me, sitting there with that white gal all dressed in silk and satin’ (p. 124).

Bigger knew that she was trying to see how badly he missed her, trying to see how much power she still had over him. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to him, kissing her long and hard, feeling as he did so that she was not responding. The two wondered about life. Bessie asked bigger about the source of 100 and odd dollars. He did not tell about it. The two enjoyed kisses. Both felt they were made for each other. Gradually, she talked of the news—Leob and Leopold’s murdering a boy and asking his family for a ransom. As she told him Leob’s awful story, Bigger’s heart beat fast.

Bigger lay, his eyes unblinking, his heart pounding, his lips slightly open, his breath coming and going so softly that it seemed he was not breathing at all. You remember them aw you ain’t even listening. He said nothing. how come you won’t listen when I talk to you Why could he, why could he not, not send a letter to the Daltons, asking for money? Bigger He sat up in bed, starting into the darkness. What’s the matter honey He could ask for ten thousand, or maybe twenty. Bigger what’s the matter I’m talking to you He
did into answer; his nerves were taut with the hard effort to remember something. Now! Yes, Leob and Leopold had planned to have the father of the murdered boy get on a train and throw the money out of the window while passing some spot. He leaped from bed and stood in the middle of the floor. Bigger he could, yes, he could have them pack the money in a shoe box and have them throw it out of a car somewhere on the South Side.

‘Honey, tell me where you get that money?’

‘What money?’ he asked in a tone of feigned surprise.

‘Aw, Bigger. I know something’s wrong. You worried. You got something on your mind. I can tell it.’

‘You want me to make up something to tell you?’

‘All right; if that’s the way you feel about it.’

‘Aw, Bessie….’ (p. 130).

Bessie worked long hours, seven days week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for her starved life. It was her hankering for sensation that he liked about her. Most nights she was too tired to go out; she only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her the liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her himself. He had heard her complain about how hard the white folks worked her; she had told him that she lived their lives when she was working in their homes, not her own. That was why she drank.

Bigger saw her waiting at the door for him. He put on his coat and cap and they walked slowly down the stairs, saying nothing. It seemed warmer outside. As he walked beside her he felt that 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 the other Bessie to advantage. He wished he could clench his fist
and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie’s face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him. They sat in a hotel. They ate, drank
and spoke that:

‘Maybe I’ll have to get out of town soon,’ he said.
‘The police?’
‘Maybe.’
‘What you do?’
‘I’m planning to do it now.’
‘But where you got that money?’
‘Look, Bessie, if I had to leave town and wanted dough, would you help me if I split with you?’
‘If you took me with you, you wouldn’t have to split.’
He was silent; he had thought of Bessie’s being with him. A woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away. He had read of how men had been caught because of women, and he did not want that to happen to him. But, if, yes, but if he told her, yes, just enough to get her to work with him?

‘O.K.’ he said. I’ll say much; I’ll take you if you help me.’
‘Listen, here’s the dope see? The gal where I’m working, the daughter of the old man who’s rich, a millionaire, has run off with a red, see?’
‘Eloped?’
‘Hunh? Er… Yeah; eloped.’
‘With a red?’
‘Yeah; one of them Communists.’
Oh! What’s wrong with her?
‘Aw; she’s crazy. Nobody don’t know she’s gone, so last night I took the money from her room, see?’ (pp. 134-135).
In his conversation with Bessy, Bigger revealed important things. One—he should make the Daltons to believe that Mary was kidnapped (while, he said to Mrs. Dalton that she was with Jan), two. Mary was not found. He is sure that she is not alive (meaning that someone, rather he has finished her). Bessie remembered that Bigger was a rascal. She said he stole a silver piece from Mrs. Heard’s home, and also a radio from Mrs. Macy’s. Bigger planned Leob and Leopold’s design to ask the Daltons for ransom. He asked Bessie to help him in that, which she hesitated. She accepted only a part of the job he was thrusting upon her. He was confident. He thought he needed not to worry as long as he could manage his affairs carefully.

The shame, fear and hate which Mary, Jan, Mr. Dalton and that huge rich house had made rise so hard and hot in him had now cooled and softened. Had he not done what they thought he never could. His being black and at the bottom of the world was something which he could take with a new-born strength.

Bigger’s body felt free and easy now that he had lain with Bessie. That she would do what he wanted. She would be bound to him by ties deeper than marriage.

Later that day Bigger reached Dalton’s house, and Peggy said:

‘Mr. Dalton’s worried. You know, Mary didn’t pack the new cloths she bought to take with her on the trip. And poor Mrs. Dalton’s been pacing the floor and phoning Mary’s friends all day’ (p. 148).

Mr. Dalton enquired Bigger for what occurred there the previous day. Bigger said, he got the car and drove through the falling snow toward the Loop. In answering their questions he felt that he had succeeded in turning their minds definitely in the direction of Jan. If things went at this pace he would have to send the ransom note right away. He would see Bessie the next day and get things settled. He would ask for ten thousand dollars.
Later there was an enquiry of Bigger:

‘Bigger, this is Mr. Britten,’ Mr. Dalton said. ‘He’s a private investigator attached to the staff of my office…’

‘Yessuh,’ Bigger said again, his tension slackening.

‘He wants to ask you some questions. So just be calm and try to tell him whatever he wants to know.’

‘Yessuh.’

‘First of all, I want to have a look at that trunk,’ Britten said.

He watched Britten turn the trunk over and bend to it and try to work the lock.

I got to be careful, Bigger thought. Sweat came onto his neck and face. Britten could not unlock the trunk and he looked upward at Bigger.

‘It’s locked. You got a key, boy?’

‘Nawsuh.’

Bigger wondered if this were a trap. He decided to play safe and speak only when he was spoken to.

‘You mind if I break it?’

‘Go right ahead,’ Mr. Dalton said. ‘Say, Bigger, get Mr. Britten the hatchet.’

‘Yessuh,’ he answered mechanically.

‘Now, take your time and think hard. I want to ask you some questions.’

‘Yessuh.’

‘What time did you take Miss Dalton from here last night?’

‘About eight-thirty, suh.’

Bigger knew that this was it. This man was here to find out everything. This was an examination.

There was another silence. They wanted him to draw the picture and he would draw it like he wanted it. He was trembling with excitement. In the past they had
always drawn the picture for him. He could tell them anything he wanted. It was his word against Jan’s and Jan was a red.

‘Well, she couldn’t hardly stand up, suh. When we got home, he had to lift her up the steps,’ Bigger said with lowered eyes.

‘That’s all right, boy. You can talk to us about it,’ Britten said. ‘Just how drunk was she?’

‘She passed out,’ Bigger said.

‘Britten looked at Dalton.

‘She could not have left this house by herself,’ Britten said. ‘If Mrs. Dalton’s right, then she could not have left.’

Britten stared at Bigger and Bigger felt that some deeper question was on Britten’s mind.

‘What else happened?’

‘Well, I told you Miss Dalton told me to take the trunk. I said that ’cause she told me not to tell about me taking her to the Loop. It was Mr. Jan who told me to take the trunk down and not put the car away.’

‘He told you not to put the car away and to take the trunk?’

‘Yessuh. That’s right.’

‘Why didn’t you tell us this before, Bigger?’ asked Mr. Dalton.

‘She told me not to, suh.’

‘How was this Jan acting?’ Britten asked.

‘He was drunk,’ said Bigger, feeling that now was the time to drag Jan in definitely (pp. 150-151).

Britten had searched Bigger’s room. His clothes were tumbled. Britten was familiar to him; he had met a thousand Brittens in his life. The knowledge that he had killed a white girl when they regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel
the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened
the score.

‘We want to talk to you,’ said Britten.

‘Yessuh.’

He did not hear what Britten said after that, for he saw directly behind Britten
a face that made him hold his breath. It was not fear, but a tension, a supreme
gathering of all the forces of his body for a showdown. Jan was brought in now.

‘Go on in, Mr. Erlone (Jan),’ Mr. Dalton said.

Bigger saw Jan’s eyes looking at him steadily. Jan stepped into the room and
Mr. Dalton followed. Bigger stood with his lips slightly parted, his hands hanging
loosely by his sides, his eyes watchful, but veiled.

‘Sit down, Erlone,’ Britten said.

‘This is all right,’ Jan said. ‘I’ll stand.’

‘Where’s Miss Dalton?’ Britten asked.

Jan looked round the room, puzzled.

‘You know your story by heart, don’t you?’ Britten said.

‘Say, Bigger, what’re they doing to you? Don’t’ be afraid. Speak up!’ said Jan.

Bigger did not answer.

‘Where did Miss Dalton tell you she was going?’ Britten asked.

‘She told me she was going to Detroit.’

‘Did you see her last night?’

Jan hesitated.

‘No.’

‘You didn’t give these pamphlets to this boy last night?’

Jan shrugged his shoulders, and said:

‘All right. I saw her. So what? You know why I didn’t say so in the first
place...’

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‘No. We don’t know,’ Britten said.
‘Well, Mr. Dalton here people don’t like reds, as you call ’em, and I didn’t want to get miss Dalton in trouble.’
‘Then, you did meet her last night?’
‘Yes.’
‘Where is she?’
‘If she’s not in Detroit then I don’t know where she is.’
‘You gave these pamphlets to this boy?’
‘Yes; I did.’
‘You and Miss Dalton were drunk last night…’
‘Aw, come on! We weren’t drunk. We had a little to drink…’
‘You brought her home about two?’
Bigger stiffened and waited.
‘Yeah.’
‘You told the boy to take her trunk down to the basement?’
Jan opened his mouth, but no words came. He looked at Bigger, then back to Britten.
‘Come on, Erlone. I don’t know what you’re up to, but you’ve been lying ever since you’ve been in this room. You said you didn’t come here last night, and then you say you did. You said you weren’t drunk last night, then you say you were. You said you didn’t see Miss Dalton last night, then you say you did. Come on, now. Tell us where Miss Dalton is. Her father and mother want to know.’
Bigger saw Jan’s bewildered eyes.
‘Listen, I’ve told you all I know,’ said Jan, putting his hat back on. ‘Unless you tell me what this joke’s all about, I’m getting on back home…’
‘Wait a minute,’ said Mr. Dalton. He came forward a step, and fronted Jan.
‘You and I don’t agree. Let’s forget that. I want to know where my daughter is ...

Later Jan confronted Bigger and wanted information. But Bigger acted the same. He even threatened Jan with his gun. Then Bigger and Jan departed for safety.

Bigger went towards his house. He wrote a kidnap note. He looked around the street and saw a sign on a building: THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and that company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him. His mother always took the rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant like a god.

When the car came Bigger rode south and got off at Fifty-First Street and walked to Bessie’s. He had to ring five times before the buzzer answered. ‘Goddammit, I bet she’s drunk,’ he thought. He mounted the steps and saw her peering at him through the door with eyes red from sleep and alcohol. His doubt of her made him fearful and angry.

Bigger changed the pencil from his right to his left hand. He would not write it. He swallowed with dry throat. ‘Now what would be the best kind of note? He thought, I want you to put ten thousand… Naw; that would not do. Not ‘I,’ It would be better to say ‘we.’ We got your daughter, he printed slowly in big round letters. That was better. He ought to say something to let Mr. Dalton think that Mary was still alive. He wrote: She is safe. Now, tell him not to go to the police. No! Say something about Mary first! He bent and wrote: she wants to come home… Now, tell him not to go to the police. Don’t go to the police if you want your daughter back safe. Naw; that ain’t good. His scalp tingled with excitement; it seemed that he could feel each strand of hair upon his head. He read the line over and crossed out ‘safe’ and wrote ‘alive.’ For a moment he was frozen, still (p. 160).
Bessie found that Bigger had killed Mary and she anticipated the fact that he may kill her too. Bigger began to doubt her; he had never heard this tone in her voice before. He saw her tear-wet eyes looking at him in stark fear and he remembered that no one had seen him leave his room. To stop Bessie who now knew too much would be easy. He could take the butcher knife and cut her throat. He had to make certain of her, before he went back to Dalton’s. Quickly he stooped over her, his fists clenched.

‘I don’t want no playing from you now.’

‘I’m scared, Bigger,’ she whimpered.

She tried to get up; he knew she had seen the mad light in his eyes. Fear sheathed him in fire. His words came in a thick whisper.

‘Keep still, now. I ain’t playing. Pretty soon they’ll be after me, may be. And I ain’t going to let ‘em catch me, see? I ain’t going to let em! The first thing they’ll do in looking for me is to come to you. They’ll grill you about me and you, you drunk fool, you’ll tell! You’ll tell if you ain’t in it, too. If you ain’t in it for your life, you’ll tell.’

‘Naw; Bigger! she whimpered tensely. At that moment she was too scared even to cry.

‘Bigger, honey, I’d run of with you, I’d work for you, baby. We don’t have to do this. Don’t you believe I love you?’

‘Don’t try that on me now.’

‘Come on! You got to do better than this.’

‘I’d rather have you kill me right now,’ she sobbed.

‘Don’t you say that again!’

She was silent. His black open palm swept upward in a swift narrow arc and smacked solidly against her face.

‘You want me to wake you up?’
She bent her head to her knees; he caught hold of her arm again and dragged her to the window. He spoke like a man who had been running and was out of breath:

‘Now, look. All you got to do is come here tomorrow night, see? Ain’t nothing going to bother you, I’m seeing to everything. Don’t you worry none. You just do what I say. You come here and just watch. About twelve o’clock a car’ll come along. It’ll be blinking its headlights, see? When it comes, you just raise this flashlight and blink it three times, see? Like this. Remember that. Then watch that car. It’ll throw out a package. Watch that package, ‘cause the money’ll be in it (pp. 172-173).

Then Bigger went back to the Daltans. He took the letter out of his pocket and slipped it under the door. Turning, he ran down the steps and round the house. ‘I done it! I done it now! They’ll see it tonight or in the morning.’ Bigger then had his food in Dalton’s house. It seems he was free from shame. He is no doubt, a criminal. Then Dalton came with the kidnap letter and called upon Britten. Three more white men enquired Bigger seriously. Then the pressmen arrived.

Mr. Dalton said in a quiet voice that carried throughout the room, though it was spoken in a tense whisper, ‘that Miss Dalton has been kidnapped…’

‘Kidnapped?’

‘Oh!’

‘When?’

‘We think it happened last night,’ said Mr. Dalton.

‘What are they asking?’

‘Ten thousand dollars.’

‘Are you going to pay the ransom?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Dalton. ‘I’m going to pay. Listen, gentlemen, you can help me and perhaps save my daughter’s life by saying in your stories that I’ll pay as I’ve been instructed. And, too, what’s most important, tell the kidnappers through your papers that I shall not call in the police. Tell them I’ll do everything they ask. Tell
them to return our daughter. Tell them, for God's sake, not to kill her, that they will get what they want...' (pp. 190-191).

The pressmen published that Jan was being held for investigation at the Eleventh Street Police Station and that Mary had been missing from her home since eight o'clock Saturday night. It also mentioned that Mary had been in the company of Erlone until Early Sunday morning at a notorious South Side Café in the Black Belt.

There is what Aristotle calls 'recognition.' The press people lingered for enquiry. Peggy, by chance, if not by design, asked Bigger to clean the furnace. Bigger started doing it. Soon the furnace which had pieces of Mary's flesh, smoked badly. A pressman tried to help Bigger in clearing it. Because it got into people's eyes. Bigger heard someone near him; then someone was tugging at the shovel in his hands. He held onto it desperately, not wanting to let it go, feeling that if he did so he was surrendering his secret. The pressman with the shovel stood in front of the furnace and looked down into the ashes strewn over the floor. 'What's he doing?' Bigger wondered. He saw the man stoop and poke the shovel into the ashes.

The man's voice trailed off and he stooped again. Bigger saw come into full view on the surface of the ashes several small pieces of white bones. Instantly, his whole body was wrapped in a sheet of fear.

'My God! It's from a body...'

'And look! Here's something...'

One of them stooped and picked up a bit of round metal and held it close to his eyes.

'It's earring...'

'It's the girl's.'

'Good God!'

'Who do you suppose did it?' (p. 206).
Soon Bigger ran away. He wanted to tell Bessie not to go to that house. It was all over. He had to save himself. But it was familiar, this running away. All his life he had been knowing that sooner or later something like this would happen to him. He came to Cottage Grove Avenue and walked southward. He could not make any plans until he got to Bessie’s and got the money. He took the paper into a doorway. His eyes swept the streets above the top of it; then he read in tall black type: MILLIONAIRE HEIRESS KIDNAPED. ABDUCTORS DEMAND $10,000 IN RANSOM NOTE. DALTON FAMILY ASK RELEASE OF COMMUNIST SUSPECT. Yes; they had it now. Soon they would have the story of her death, of the reporters’ finding her bones in the furnace, of her head being cut off, of his running away during the excitement.

Bigger met Bessie. He trembled. She was wanting the word that would free her of this nightmare; but he would not give it to her. She caught hold of his coat and he felt her body trembling. ‘Will they come for me, too, Bigger? I didn’t want to do it!’

He told Bessie that he killed and burnt Mary. The two knew that the police was after them. He dragged her with him for holding in an old building. ‘Oh, Lord.’ They’ll catch us anywhere. They stooped in front of tall, snow-covered building whose many windows gaped blackly. He could not leave her here and he could not take her with him. If he took her along she would be crying all the time; she would be blaming him for all that had happened. He stiffened: Bessie stirred. Her deep, regular breathing had stopped.

Gradually his breath subsided until he could no longer hear it and then he knew that Bessie was not breathing. The room was filled with quiet, cold, death, blood and the deep moan of the night wind. Soon Bigger threw away Bessie’s body into an aircraft pit. But he left the money in Mary’s pocket. He felt that if he should
ever see her face he would be overcome with a sense of guilt. He sighed and went through the hall and entered another room. He would have to do without money. He spread the quilts upon the floor and rolled himself into them. He had seven cents between him and starvation and the law and the long days ahead. 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 about him. Bigger hated 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.

Bigger ran away, forgetting 10 dollars kept in Bessie’s pocket. He went to the Street, early morning. He stole a three cent newspaper. He sat on a roof, reading it, REPORTERS FIND DALTON GIRL’S BONES IN FURNACE. NEGRO CHAUFFEUR DISAPPEARS. FIVE THOUSAND POLICE SURROUND BLACK BELT. AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. COMMUNIST LEADER PROVES ALIBI. GIRL’S MOTHER IN COLLAPSE (p. 228).

Immediately a cordon of five thousand police, augmented by more than three thousand volunteers, was thrown about the Black Belt. Chief of Police Glenman said that morning that he believed that the Negro was still in the city, since all roads leading in and out of Chicago were blocked by a record-breaking snowfall. Indignation rose to white heat that night as the news of the Negro’s rape and murder of the missing heiress spread through the city.

The whole Chicago city was in tense. The Police officer Glenman, and the Mayor Ditz ordered for search. The blacks were put in trouble.
Bigger crouched behind a chimney and looked down into the street. Maybe all of the black men and women were talking about him that morning. He climbed through the window and walked to the street, turned northward, joining the people passing. No one recognized him. He looked for a building with a ‘For Rent’ sign. He passed a bakery and wanted to go in and buy some rolls with the seven cents he had. But the bakery was empty of customers and he was afraid that the white proprietor would recognize him. Later he slept there, stole into his consciousness a disturbing, rhythmic throbbing which he tried to fight off to keep from waking up. His mind, protecting him, wove the throb into patterns of innocent images. It was dangerous of stay there, but it was also dangerous to go out. The singing filled his ears: it was complete, self-contained, and it mocked his fear and loneliness.

Bigger got up the second day of escape and read the newspapers. His photo plus police’s failure to catch him appeared there. He examined the map again; the police had come from the north, as far south as Fortieth Street; and they had come from the south. That meant he was somewhere in between, and they were minutes away. He read:

Today and last night eight thousand armed men combed cellars, old buildings and more than nine thousand Negro homes in the Black Belt in a vain effort to apprehend Bigger Thomas, 20-year-old Negro rapist and killer of Mary Dalton, whose bones were found last Sunday night in a furnace (p. 240).

Bigger lowered the paper as he could read no more. The one fact to remember was that eight thousand men, white men, with guns and gas, were out there in the night looking for him. According to the paper, they were but a few blocks away. ‘Could he get to the roof of this building?’ he felt. He relaxed a bit; at least the roof to his right was safe now. He waited to hear sounds that would tell him that some one was climbing up through the trapdoor. Then he was stiff with fear. There were
pounding feet right below him. They were on the top floor now. Finally under the
terror-song of the siren, the voices came so close that he could hear words clearly.

‘God, but I’m tired!’
‘I’m cold!’
‘I believe we’re just wasting time.’
‘Say, Jerry! You going to the roof this time?’
‘Yeah; I’ll go.’
‘That nigger might be in New York by now.’
‘Yeah. But we better look.’
‘Say, did you see that brown gal in there?’
‘The one that didn’t have much on?’
‘Yeah.’
‘Boy, she was a peach, wasn’t she?’
‘Yeah; I wonder what on earth a nigger wants to kill a white woman for when
he has such good-looking women in his own race...’ (p. 244).

He flinched; someone was crawling in the loft below him. With gun in hand,
Bigger crept across the roof. He came to a small mound of brick. He saw one of the
men rise and flash a light. The circling beams lit the roof to a day night brightness
and he could see that one man held a gun. He was crawling to the other ledge, over
the snow, on his hands and knees, when he heard the man yell, ‘There he is!’

The three words made Bigger stop. He had been listening for them all night
and when they came he seemed to feel the sky crashing soundlessly about him.
Dizzily, he drew back. This was the end. There were no more roofs over which he
could run and dodge. The man was still coming. Bigger stood up. The siren was
louder than before and there were more shouts and screams. Men were coming up
out of the trapdoor far in front of him and were moving toward him, dodging behind
chimneys. He raised the gun, leveled it, aimed, and shot; the men stopped but no one
fell. He had missed. He shot; the men stopped but no one fell. He had missed. He shot again. No one fell. The bedlam in the street rose higher; more men climbed through trapdoors to the roof. He wanted to shoot, but remembered that he had but three bullets left. He would shoot when they were closer and he would save one bullet for himself. They would not take him alive.

‘All right, boy!’ a hoarse voice called. ‘We’re giving you your last chance. Come on down!’ (p. 246). Bigger lay still.

He opened his eyes and saw a circle of white faces; but he was outside of them, looking on. He heard men talking and their voices came to him from far away:

‘That’s him, all right!’
‘Get ‘im down to the street!’
‘The water did it!’
‘He seems half-frozen!’
‘All right, get ‘im down to the street!’

He felt his body being dragged across the snow of the roof. Then he was lifted and put, feet first, into a trapdoor.

‘You got ‘im?’
‘Yeah! Let ‘im drop on!’
‘O.K.!’
‘Kill that black ape’ (p. 253).

Two men stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him. They placed a foot on each of his wrists, making them sink deep down. His eyes closed, slowly, and he was swallowed in darkness. There was no day for him now, and there was no night; there was but a long stretch of time; and then – the end. Toward no one in the world did he feel any fear now. Food was brought to him upon trays and an hour later the trays were taken away, untouched. They gave him packages of cigarettes.
He did not use them. Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life he chose not to struggle any more.

One morning a group of men came and caught him by the wrists and led him into a large room in the Cook County Morgue, in which there were many people. He blinked from the bright lights and heard loud and excited talking. At first he thought that it was the trial that had begun, and he was prepared to sink back into his dream of nothingness. Though he could not have put it into words, he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment: that they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control. The atmosphere of the crowd told him that they were going to use his death as a bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world.

Sitting beside Mrs. Dalton was Mr. Dalton, looking straight before him with wide-open eyes. Mr. Dalton turned slowly and looked at Bigger and Bigger’s eyes fell. He saw Jan: blond hair; blue eyes; a sturdy, kind face looking squarely into his own.

‘Hey! How’re you feeling, boy?’

‘Hunh? Bigger grunted. It was the first time he had spoken since they had caught him.

‘You better lie down, boy. You’ll have to go back to the inquest this afternoon’ (p. 258).

Bigger felt their hands pushing him back. The door closed. He was alone. The room was quiet. He had come out into the world again. He did not turn to the papers until after the man had left the room. Then he spread out the Tribune and saw:
NEGRO RAPIST FAINTS AT INQUEST. He understood now; it was the inquest he had been taken to. He had fainted and they had brought him here.

‘He looks exactly like an ape!’ exclaimed a terrified young white girl who watched the black slayer being loaded onto a stretcher after he had fainted. The moment the killer made his appearance at the inquest, there were shouts of ‘Lynch ‘im! Kill ‘im!’ But the brutish Negro seemed indifferent to his fate, as though inquests, trials, and even the looming certainty of the electric chair held no terror for him. He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man’s civilization. Native Son resembles Eugene O’Neill’s expressionistic play Hairy Ape. What Mallikarjun Patil observes about Hairy Ape as follows is true of Bigger here: He writes, “The idea that man is an animal is presented here. At the same time, man’s inborn or instinctual pride, stubbornness and animality mar his peaceful life as seen in Yank’s life. Aristotle considered the pride of the tragic hero as a flaw and an-error or frailty’ and it is the pride in man that binds him with self-deception as explicit in the case of Yank.”

Overcome with drowsiness, he closed his eyes; then opened them. The door swung in and he saw a black face. Who was this? A tall, well-dressed black man came forward and paused. Bigger pulled up and leaned on his elbow. The man came all the way to the cot and stretched forth a dingy palm, touching Bigger’s hand.

‘Mah po’ boy! May the good Lawd have mercy on yuh.’

He stared at the man’s jet-black suit and remembered who he was: Reverend Hammond, the pastor of his mother’s church. And at once he was on guard against the man.

The preacher’s words ceased droning. Bigger looked at him out of the corners of his eyes. The preacher’s face was black and sad and earnest and made him feel a sense of guilt deeper than that which even his murder of Mary had made him feel.
‘Son, fer thousan’s of years we been prayin’ for Gawd t’ take th’ cuss off us. Gawd heard our prayers ‘n’ said He’d show us a way back t’ ’m. His Son Jesus came down’t earth ‘n’ put on human flesh ‘n’ lived ‘n’ died t’ show us the way.

‘Son, promise me yuh’ll stop hatin’ long enuff fer Gawd’s love’t come inter yo’ heart’ (p. 265).

Bigger said nothing.

Then Jan arrived. He lit another cigarette and offered one to Bigger; but Bigger refused by keeping his hands folded in front of him and staring stonily at the floor. Jan’s words were strange. He had never heard such talk before. The meaning of what Jan had said was so new that he could not react to it; he simply sat, staring, wondering, afraid even to look at Jan.

‘Let me be on your side, Bigger,’ Jan said. ‘I can fight this thing with you, just like you’ve started it. I can come from all of those white people and stand here with you. Listen, I got a friend, a lawyer. His name is Max. He understands this thing and wants to help you.

Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him.

‘This is Reverend Hammond, Max,’ Jan said.

Max shook hands with the preacher, then turned to Bigger.

‘I want to talk with you,’ Max said. ‘I’m from the labor defenders. I want to help you.’

‘I ain’t got no money,’ Bigger said.

‘I know that. Listen, Bigger don’t be afraid on me. And don’t be afraid of Jan. We’re not angry with you. I want to represent you in court. Have you spoken to any other lawyer?’ (p. 270).
Bigger looked at Jan and Max again. They seemed all right. But how on earth could they help him. He wanted help, but dared not think that anybody would want to do anything for him now.

‘Forget about that. Listen, they’re taking you back to the inquest this afternoon. But you don’t have to answer any questions. See? Just sit and say nothing. I’ll be there and you won’t have to be scared. After the inquest they’ll take you to the Cook County Jail and I’ll be over to talk with you’ (p. 270).

The door swung in and a tall, big-faced man with gray eyes came forward. Max, Jan and the preacher stood to one side. Bigger stared at the man’s face. Then he remembered: it was Buckley, the man whose face he had seen the workmen pasting upon a billboard a few mornings ago.

‘So you’re homing in again, hunh, Max?’

‘This boy’s my client and he’s signing no confessions,’ Max said.

‘What the hell do I want with his confession?’ Buckley asked. ‘We’ve got enough evidence on him to put him in a dozen electric chairs.

Bigger had been on the verge of accepting the friendship of Jan and Max, and now this man stood before him.

‘I’m the State’s Attorney,’ Buckley said, walking from one end of the room to the other. His hat was on the back of his head.

‘Listen, Max. You’re wasting your time. You’ll never get this boy off in a million years. Nobody can commit a crime against a family like the Daltons and sneak out of it. Those poor old parents are going to be in that court room to see that this boy burns! This boy killed the only thing they had. If you want to save your face, you and your buddy can leave now and the papers won’t know you were in here…’

‘I sympathize with you, Mr. Dalton,’ Max said. ‘But killing this boy isn’t going to help you or any of us.’

‘I tried to help him,’ Mr. Dalton said.
‘We wanted to send him to school,’ said Mrs. Dalton faintly.

‘I know,’ Max said. ‘But those things don’t touch the fundamental problem involved here. This boy comes from an oppressed people. Even if he’s done wrong, we must take that into consideration.’

‘I want you to know that my heart is not bitter,’ Mr. Dalton said. ‘What this boy has done will not influence my relations with the Negro people. Why, only today I sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boy’s Club...’

‘Mr. Dalton!’ Max exclaimed, coming forward suddenly. ‘My God, man! Will ping-pong keep from murdering? Can’t you see? Even after losing your daughter, you’re going to keep going in the same direction? Don’t you grant as much life-feeling to other men as you have? Could ping-pong have kept you from making your millions? This boy, millions like him, want a meaningful life, not ping-pong...’

Bigger did not want his mother to come in here now. He looked about with a wild, pleading expression. Buckley watched him, then turned back to the policeman.

‘They have a right to see ‘im,’ Buckley said. ‘Let ‘em come in’ (pp. 273-274).

He saw his mother’s face; he wanted to run to her and push her back through the door. She was standing still, one hand upon the doorknob; the other hand clutched a frayed pocketbook, which she dropped and ran to him, throwing her arms around him, crying, ‘My baby.’ Bigger’s body was stiff with dread and indecision. He felt his mother’s arms tight about him and he looked over her shoulder and saw Vera and Buddy come slowly inside, looking timidly. Beyond them he saw Gus and G.H. and Jack, their mouths open in awe and fear. Vera’s lips were trembling and Buddy’s hands were clenched. Buckley, the preacher, Jan Max, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton stood along the wall, behind him, looking on silently.

‘Oh, Bigger, son!’ his mother wailed. We been so worried... We ain’t slept a single night! The police is there all the time... They stand outside our door.. They watch and follow us everywhere! Son, son...’ (p. 275).
His mother gave him an incredulous stare. Bigger turned his head again and looked feverishly and defiantly at the white faces along the wall. He had lived and acted on her assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer.

'Son, there's a place where we can be together again in the great bye and bye. God's done fixed it so we can. He's fixed a meeting place for us, a place where we can live without fear. No matter what happens to us here, we can be together in God's heaven. Bigger, your old ma's a-begging you do promise her you'll pray.'

'She tellin' yuh right, son,' the preacher said.

'Ve leaving you now with God, Bigger,' his mother said.

'Be sure and pray, son,'

They kissed him.

'There's nothing I can do now,' Mrs. Dalton said calmly. 'It's out of my hands. I did all I could, when I wanted to give your boy a chance at life. You're not to blame for this. You must be brave. Maybe it's better...' (p. 279).

They left except Buckley. Bigger sat again upon the cot, weak and exhausted. Buckley stood over him, asking.

'Now, Bigger, you see all the trouble you've caused? Now, I'd like to get this case out of the way as soon as possible. The longer you stay in jail, the more agitation there'll be for and against you. And that doesn't help you any, no matter who tells you it does. Boy, there's not but one thing for you to do, and that's to come clean. I know those reds, Max, and Erlone, have told you a lot of things about what they're going to do for you. But, don't believe 'em. They're just after publicity, boy; just after building themselves up at your expense, see? They can't do a damn thing for you! You're dealing with law now! And if you let those reds put a lot of fool ideas into your head, then you're gambling with your own life.'
'You look like an intelligent boy. You see what you’re in. Tell me about this thing. Don’t let those reds fool you into saying you’re not guilty. I’m talking to you as straight as I’d talk to a son of mine. Sign a confession and get this over with.’

Bigger said nothing; he sat looking at the floor.

‘Boy,’ said Buckley in a voice so loud that Bigger flinched, ‘where’s Bessie?’

‘She tried to get out of that air-shaft, but she couldn’t. She froze to death. We got the brick you hit her with. We got the blanket and the quilt and the pillows you took from her room. We got a letter from her purse she had written to you and hadn’t mailed, a letter telling you she didn’t want to go through with trying to collect the ransom money. You see, boy, we got you. Come on, now, tell me all about it.’

Bigger said nothing. He buried his face in his hands.

‘You raped her, didn’t you? Well, if you won’t tell about Bessie, then tell me about that woman you raped and choked to death over on University Avenue last fall.’

‘Boy, you might just all well tell me. We’ve got line on all you ever did. And how about the girl you attacked in Jackson Park last summer? Listen, boy, when you were in your cell sleeping and wouldn’t talk, we brought women in to identify you. Two women swore complaints against you. One was the sister of the woman you killed last fall, Mrs. Clinton. The other woman, Miss Ashtons says you attacked her last summer by climbing through the windows of her bedroom.’

‘I ain’t bothered no woman last summer or last fall either,’ Bigger said.

‘Boy, why didn’t you and your pals rob Blum’s store like you’d planned to last Saturday?’

Bigger looked at him in surprise.

‘You didn’t think I knew about that, did you? I know a lot more, boy, I know about that dirty trick you and your friend Jack pulled off in the Regal Theatre, too. You wonder how I know it? The manager told us when we were checking up. I know
what boys like you do, Bigger. Now, come on. You wrote that kidnap note, didn’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ he sighed. ‘I wrote it.’

‘Who helped you?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Who was going to help you to collect the ransom money?’

‘Bessie.’

‘Come on. Was it Jan?’

‘Naw.’

‘Bessie?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then why did you kill her?’

Nervously, Bigger’s fingers fumbled with a pack of cigarettes and got one out. The man struck a match and held a light for him, but he struck his own match and ignored the offered flame.

‘When I saw I couldn’t get the money, I killed her to keep her from talking,’ he said.

‘And you killed her, but it don’t matter now,’ he said.

‘I didn’t mean to kill her, but it don’t matter now, he said.

‘Did you lay her?’

‘Naw’ (p. 285).

Bigger wept because he had once again trusted his feelings and they had betrayed him.

Gradually, more from a lessening of strength than from peace of soul, his sobs ceased and he lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. He had confused and death loomed now for certain in a public future. They clicked the handcuffs upon his wrists and led him into the hall, to waiting elevator. The doors closed and he dropped
downward through space, standing between four tall, silent men in blue. The elevator stopped; the doors opened and he saw a restless rows of people and heard a babble of voices. They led him through a narrow aisle. There the crowd said,

‘That sonofabitch!’

‘Get, isn’t he black!’

‘Kill ‘m!’ (p. 289).

The noise ceased. The policemen pushed Bigger into a chair. Stretching to the four walls of the room was a soiled sheet of white faces. Standing with squared shoulders all around were policemen with clubs in hand, silver metal on their chests, faces red and stern, gray and blue eyes alert. To the right of the man at the table, in rows of three each, six men sat still and silent, their hats and overcoats on their knees. Bigger looked about and saw the pile of white bones lying atop a table; beside them lay the kidnap note. In the center of the table were white sheets of paper fastened together by a metal clasp. It was his signed confession. There was Mr. Dalton white faced, white-haired; and beside him was Mrs. Dalton, white and straight, her face, as always, titled trustingly upward. Then he saw the trunk into which he had stuffed Mary’s body, the trunk which he had lugged down the stairs and had carried to the station. And, yes, there was the hatchet blade and a tiny round piece of metal. Bigger felt a tap on his shoulder and looked around.

Under the man’s questioning, Mrs. Dalton said that her age was fifty-three, that she lived at 4605, Drexel Boulevard, that she was a retired school teacher, that she was the mother of Mary Dalton and the wife of Henry Dalton. When the man began asking questions relating to Mary, the crowd leaned forward in their seats. Mrs. Dalton said that Mary was twenty-three years of age, single; that she carried about thirty thousand dollars’ worth of insurance, that she owned real estate amounting to approximately a quarter of million dollars, and that she was active
right up to the date of her death. Mrs. Dalton’s voice came tense and faint and Bigger wondered how much more of this he could stand.

The coroner walked close to Jan’s chair and leaned the upper part of his body forward and asked in a loud voice,

‘Do you believe in social equality for Negroes?’

‘I believe all races are equal …’ Jan began.

‘Why did you leave an unprotected white girl alone in a car with a drunken Negro?’

‘I was not aware that Bigger was drunk and I did not consider Mary as being unprotected.’

‘You had enjoyed her company?’

‘Why, yes.’

‘And after enjoying a woman like that, isn’t there a let-down?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Mr. Erlone, were you surprised when you heard of the death of Miss Dalton?’

‘Yes. At first I was too stunned to believe it. I thought surely there was some mistake.’

You hadn’t expected that drunken Negro to go that far, had you?’

‘I hadn’t expected anything.’

‘Will Mr. Henry Dalton please come forward?’ the coroner asked (pp. 300-301).

Bigger listened as Mr. Dalton told how the Dalton family always hired Negro boys as chauffeurs. The coroner told how Bigger had come to the house, how timid and frightened he had acted. He told how he had not thought that Bigger had anything to do with the disappearance of Mary, and how he had told Britten not to question him. He then told of receiving the kidnap note, and of how shocked he had been when he was informed that Bigger had fled his home.
‘They do have a bearing!’ Max shouted. ‘You said we could question with latitude here! I’m, trying to find the guilty person, too! Jan Erlone is not the only man who’s influenced Bigger Thomas! There were many others before him. I have as much right to determine what effect their attitude has had upon his conduct as you had to determine what Jan Erlone’s said!’

‘I’m willing to answer his questions if it will clear things up,’ Mr. Dalton said quietly.

‘Thank you, Mr. Dalton. Now, tell me, why is it that you charged the Thomas family eight dollars per week for one room in a tenement?’

‘Well, there’s housing shortage.’

‘All over Chicago?’

‘No. Just here in the South Side.’

‘Your own houses in other sections of the city?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why don’t you rent those houses to Negroes?’

‘Well… Er… I-I-I don’t think they’d like to live any other place.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Nobody.’

‘You came to that conclusion yourself?’

‘Why, yes.’

‘Isn’t it true you refuse to rent houses to Negroes if those houses are in other sections of the city?’

‘Why, yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it’s an old custom.’
'Mr. Dalton, do you think that the terrible conditions under which the Thomas family lived in one of your houses may in some way be related to the death of your daughter?'

'I don’t know what you mean.'

'That’s all,' said Max.

After Mr. Dalton left the stand, Peggy came, then Britten, a host of others, reporters, and many policemen.

'We will now hear from Bigger Thomas!' the coroner called.

A wave of excited voices swept over the room. Bigger’s fingers gripped the arms of the chair. Max’s hand touched his shoulder. Bigger turned and Max whispered,

'Sit still.'

Max rose.

'Mr. Coroner?'

'Yes?'

'In the capacity of Bigger Thomas’s lawyer, I’d like to state that he does not wish to testify here.'

'His testimony would help to clear up any doubt as to the cause of the death of the deceased,' the coroner said.

'My client is already in police custody and it is his right to refuse…'

'All right… All right,' the coroner said.

Max sat down.

'Gentlemen,' he said, facing the six men in the rows of chairs, ‘you have heard the testimony of the witnesses. I think, however, that you should have the Police Department.’

Bigger was crushed, helpless. His lips dropped wide apart. He felt frozen. He had completely forgotten Bessie during the inquest of Mary. The jury said:
... the said Mary Dalton came to her death in the bedroom of her home, located at 4605 Drexel Boulevard, from suffocation and strangulation due to external violence, said violence received when the deceased was choked by the hands of one, Bigger Thomas, during the course of criminal rape...

...we, the jury, believe that the said occurrence was murder and recommend that the said Bigger Thomas be held to the grand jury on a charge of murder, until released by due process of law...’ (pp. 307-308).

In this passage we notice that the Negro housing problem was very bad. A social historian Benjamin Quarles comments: “Though the Negro’s high level of unemployment and lower average income had a marked effect on the kind of housing he could afford, his residence was also determined by the color of his skin. As the Untied States Civil Rights Commission pointed out in 1959, housing ‘seems to be the one commodity in the American market that is not freely available to everyone who can afford to pay.’ By the beginning of the sixties, segregation in housing had become a universal fact of Negro life.” Segregated housing also operated to the disadvantage of the Negro by fostering a ‘two-price’ system in which he paid a higher price than a white renter or purchaser for the same housing. To meet the higher prices, Negro families often had to double up or take in lodgers, increasing the population density of the neighborhood. Moreover, segregated housing tended to produce segregated schools.

They led him through the gate. He stood a second, facing the front door of the Dalton home, the same door before which he had stood so humbly with his cap in his hand a little less than a week ago. The door opened and he was led down the hall to the rear stairs and up to the second floor, to the door of Mary’s room. It seemed that he could not breathe. The man with the golden star on his chest came to him and spoke in a soft low tone.
‘Now, Bigger, be a good boy, just relax and take it easy. We want you to take your time and show us just what happened that night, see? And don’t mind the boys’ taking pictures. Just go through the motions you went through that night…’ They clamped the steel handcuffs on his wrists and led him down the hall. It gripped him: that cross was not the cross of Christ, but the cross of the Ku Klux Klan. He had a cross of salvation round his throat and they were burning one to tell him that they hated him.

‘Only God can help you now, boy. You’d better get your soul right!’

‘I ain’t got no soul!’

One of the men picked up the cross and brought it back.

‘Here, boy; keep this. This is God’s cross!’

‘I don’t care!’

‘Aw, leave ‘im alone!’ one of the men said.

‘Now, listen, Bigger. I want you tell me all about yourself…’

‘Mr. Max, it ain’t no use in you doing nothing!’ Bigger blurted.

Max eyed him sharply.

‘Do you really feel that way, Bigger?’

‘There ain’t no way else to feel!’

‘I want to talk to you honesty, Bigger. I see no way out of this but a plea of guilty. We can ask for mercy for life in prison…’

I’d rather die!’

‘Nonsense. You want to live.’

‘For what?’

‘Don’t you want to fight this thing?’

‘What can I do? They got me.’

‘You don’t want to die that way, Bigger.’

‘It don’t matter which way I die,’ he said; but this voice choked.
‘Listen, bigger, you’re facing a sea of hate now that’s no different from what you’ve faced all your life. And because it’s that way, you’ve got to fight. If they can wipe you out, then they can wipe others out, too.’

‘Bigger, tell me, did you feel more attraction for Mary than for the women of your own race?’

‘Naw. But they say that. It ain’t true. I hated her then and I hate her now.’

‘But why did you kill Bessie?’

‘To keep her from talking. Mr. Max, after killing that white woman, it wasn’t hard to kill somebody else. I didn’t have to think much about killing Bessie. I knew I had to kill her and I did. I had to get away…’

He paused. Max leaned forward and touched him.

‘Go on, Bigger.’

‘Well, they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. They like God …’ He swallowed and sighed. ‘They don’t even let you feel what you want to feel. They are after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die.’

‘But, Bigger, I asked you what it was that you wanted to do so badly that you had to hate them?’

‘Nothing. I reckon I didn’t want to do nothing.’

‘But you said that people like Mary and her kind never let you do anything.’

‘I’d like to be in business. But what chance has a black guy got in business? We ain’t got no money. We don’t own no mines, no railroads, no nothing. They don’t want us to. They make us stay in one little spot…’

‘I don’t know. I wanted to do things. But everything I wanted to do I couldn’t. I wanted to do what the white boys in school did. Some of ’em went to college. Some of ’em went to the army. But I couldn’t go.’

‘Did you ever go to church, Bigger?’
‘Yeah; when I was little. But that was a long time ago.’
‘Your folks were religious?’
‘Yeah; they went to church all the time.’
‘Why did you stop going?’
‘I didn’t like it. There was nothing in it. Aw, all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn’t get ’em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it don’t get ’em nothing. The white folks got everything.’

‘Well, Bigger,’ Max said. ‘we’ll enter a plea of not guilty at the arraignment tomorrow. But when the trial comes up we’ll change it to a plea of guilty and ask for mercy. They’re rushing the trial; it may be held in two or three days. I’ll tell the judge all I can of how you feel and why. I’ll try to get him to make it life in prison (pp. 330-331).

Yet he saw and felt but one life, and that one life was more than a sleep, a dream. He was tired and feverish; but he did not want to lie down with this war raging in him. He lifted his hands to his face and touched his trembling lips. ‘Naw… Naw…’ He ran to the door and caught the cold steel bars in his hot hands and gripped them tightly, holding himself erect. His wet lips tasted salt. He sank to his knees and sobbed: ‘I don’t want to die… ’ Having been bound over to the grand jury and indicted by it Bigger lay one sunless gray morning on his cot, staring vacantly at the black steel bars of the Cook County Jail. Within an hour he would be taken to court where they would tell him if he was to live or die, and when.

His mother and Vera and Buddy had come to visit him and again he had lied to them, telling them that he was praying, that he was at peace with the world. But that lie had only made him feel more shame for himself and more hate for them. A few moments before the trial, a guard came to his cell and left a paper. ‘Your lawyer sent this,’ he said and left. He unfolded the Tribune and his eyes caught a headline:
He came to know that fearing outbreaks of mob violence, Gov. H. M. O’Dorsey ordered out two regiments of the Illinois National Guard to keep public peace during the trial of Bigger Thomas, Negro rapist and killer, it was announced from Springfield, the capital.

A guard led Bigger outside the door. The corridor was lined with policemen. It was silent. He was placed between two policemen.

‘I hope Ma won’t be there.’

‘I asked her to come. I want the judge to see her,’ Max said.

‘She’ll feel bad.’

‘All of this is for you, Bigger’ (p. 340).

They stood and were surrounded by policemen. Bigger walked beside Max down a hallway and then through a door. He saw a huge room crowded with men and women. He looked about. There were his mother and brother and sister; they were staring at him. There were many of his old school mates. There was his teacher. And there were G. H, Jack, Gus and Doc. The man pronounced Bigger’s name over and over again.

‘Your Honor,’ Max said, ‘after long and honest deliberation, I have determined to make a motion in this court to withdraw our plea of not guilty and enter a plea of guilty.

‘The laws of this state allow the offering of evidence in mitigation of punishment, and I shall request, at such time as the Court deems best, that I be given the opportunity to offer evidence as to the mental and emotional attitude of this boy, to show the degree of responsibility he had in these crimes. Also, I want to offer evidence as to the youth of this boy. Further, I want to prevail upon this Court to consider this boy’s plea of guilty as evidence mitigating his punishment. . . .’
'Your Honor!' Buckley shouted.

'Allow me to finish,' Max said.

Buckley came to the front of the room.

'You cannot plead that boy both guilty and insane,' Buckley said. 'If you claim Bigger Thomas is insane, the State will demand a jury trial. . . .'

There was a long argument which Bigger did not understand. The judge called both lawyers forward to the railing and they talked for over an hour. Finally, they went back to their seats and the judge looked toward Bigger and said, 'Bigger Thomas, will you rise?'

'How far did you get in school?' the judge asked.

'Eighth grade,' Bigger whispered, surprised at the question.

'If your plea is guilty, and the plea is entered in this case,' the judge said and paused, 'the Court may sentence you to death,' the judge said and paused again, 'or the Court may sentence you to the penitentiary for the term of your natural life,' the judge said and paused yet again, 'or the Court may sentence you to the penitentiary for a term of not less than fourteen years.

'Now, do you understand what I have said?'

Bigger looked at Max; Max nodded to him.

'Speak up,' the judge said. 'If you do not understand what I have said, then say so.'

'Y-y-yessuh; I understand,' he whispered.

'Then, realizing the consequences of your plea, do you still plead guilty?'

'Y-y-yessuh,' he whispered again, feeling that it was all a wild and intense dream that must end soon, somehow.

'That's all. You may sit down,' the judge said.

'Is the State prepared to present its evidence and witnesses?' the judge asked.
'We are, Your Honor,' said Buckley, rising and half-facing the judge and the crowd.

'Your Honor, my statement at this time will be very brief. There is no need for me to picture to this Court the horrible details of these dastardly crimes. The array of witnesses for the State, the confession made and signed by the defendant himself, and the concrete evidence will reveal the unnatural aspect of this vile offense against God and man more eloquently than I could ever dare. In more than one respect, I am thankful that this is the case, for some of the facts of this evil crime are so fantastic and unbelievable, so utterly beast-like and foreign to our whole concept of life, that I feel incapable of communicating them to this court.

'I say, Your Honor, this is an insult to the Court and to the intelligent people of this state! If such crimes admit of such defense, if this fiend's life is spared because of such a defense, I shall resign my office and tell those people out there in the streets that I can no longer protect their lives and property!' If his plea is simply guilty, then the State demands the death penalty for these black crimes.

Britten told how he had suspected that Bigger knew something of the disappearance of Mary; and said that 'that black boy is as sane as I am.' A newspaperman told of how the smoke in the furnace had caused the discovery of Mary's bones. Bigger heard Max rise when the newspaperman had finished.

'Your Honor,' Max said. 'I'd like to know how many more newspapermen are to testify?'

'I have just fourteen more,' Buckley said.

'Your Honor,' Max said. 'This is totally unnecessary. There is a plea of guilty here.

'I'm going to prove that that killer is sane!' Buckley shouted.

'The Court will hear them,' the judge said. 'Proceed, Mr. Buckley.'
Fourteen more newspaperman told about the smoke and the bones and said that Bigger acted ‘just like all other colored boys.’

Before they took him back to his cell, he asked Max.

‘How long will it last?’

‘I don’t know, Bigger. You’ll have to be brave and hold up.’

‘I wish it was over.’

‘This is your life, Bigger. You got to fight.’

‘I don’t care what they do to me. I wish it was over.’

The next morning they woke him, fed him, and took him back to court. Jan came to the stand and said what he had said at the inquest. Buckley made no attempt to link Jan with the murder of Mary. G.H., Gus and Jack told of how they used to steal from stores and newsstands, of the fight they had had the morning they planned to rob Blum’s. Doc told of how Bigger had cut the cloth of his pool table and said that Bigger was ‘mean and bad, but sane.’ Sixteen policemen pointed him out as ‘the man we captured, Bigger Thomas.’ They said that a man who could elude the law as skillfully as Bigger had was ‘sane and responsible.’ A man from the juvenile court said that Bigger had served three months in a reform school for stealing auto tires.

The judge informed Buckley that he could sum up. For an hour Buckley commented upon the testimony of the State’s witnesses and interpreted the evidence, concluding with the words,

‘The intellectual and moral faculties of mankind may as well be declared impotent, if the evidence and testimony submitted by the State are not enough to compel this Court to impose the death sentence upon Bigger Thomas, this despoiler of women!’

Court opened and the judge said,

‘Are you ready to proceed, Mr. Max?’

‘Yes, Your Honor.’
‘Your Honor, never in my life have I risen in court to make a plea with a firmer conviction in my heart. I know that what I have to say here today touches the destiny of an entire nation. My plea is for more than one man and one people.

‘But I make no excessive claims, Your Honor. I do not deal in magic. I do not say that if we understand this man’s life we shall solve all our problems.

‘No! I could not! So today I come to face this Court, rejecting a trial by jury, willingly entering a plea of guilty, asking in the light of the laws of this state that this boy’s life be spared for reasons which I believe affect the foundations of our civilization.

‘Your Honor, that mob did not come here of its own accord! It was incited! Until a week ago those people lived their lives as quietly as always.

‘Who, then, fanned this latent hate into fury? Whose interest is that thoughtless and misguided mob serving?

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

‘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!’

‘Your Honor, another civil war in these states is not impossible; and if the misunderstanding of what this boy’s life means is an indication of how men of wealth and property are misreading the consciousness of the submerged millions today, one may truly come.’
‘Let us not forget that the magnitude of our modern life, our railroads, power plants, ocean liners, airplanes, and steel mills flowered from these two concepts, grew from our dream of creating an invulnerable base upon which man and his soul can stand secure.’

Buckley said, but I demand, in the name of the people of this state, that this man die for these crimes.

Max was on his feet.

‘Your Honor, you cannot do this... Is it your intention... More time is needed... You...’

‘The court will give its decision then,’ the judge said.

‘Well, I reckon it’s all over for me now,’ Bigger sighed, speaking as much for himself as for Max.

‘I don’t know,’ Max said.

‘I know,’ Bigger said.

‘Well, let’s wait.’

‘He’s making up his mind too quick. I know I’m going to die.’

‘I’m sorry, Bigger. Listen, why don’t you eat?’

‘I ain’t hungry.’

‘This thing isn’t over yet. I can ask the Governor...’

‘It ain’t no use. They got me.’

‘You don’t know.’

‘I know’ (pp. 379-380).

Max said nothing. Bigger leaned his head upon the table and closed his eyes. He wished Max would leave him now. Max had done all he could. He should go home and forget him.
‘In Number 666-983, indictment for murder, the sentence of the Court is that you, Bigger Thomas, shall die on or before midnight of Friday, March third, in a manner prescribed by the laws of this State’ (p. 380).

Bigger did want to see Max and talk with him again. He recalled the speech Max had made in court and remembered with gratitude the kind, impassioned tone.

The next day at noon a guard came to his cell and poked a telegram through the bars. He sat up and opened it. ‘BE BRAVE GOVERNOR FAILED DONE ALL POSSIBLE SEE YOU SOON MAX’ (p. 384).

Bigger balled the telegram into a tight knot and threw it into a corner.

‘I’m all right, Mr. Max. You ain’t to blame for what’s happening to me. . . . I know you did all you could. . . .’ he said when Max visited him finally.

He saw Max look at the floor and frown. He knew that Max was puzzled.

‘You asked me questions nobody ever asked me before. You knew that I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man. . . .’

‘Mr. Max, how can I die!’ Bigger asked; knowing as the words boomed from his lips that a knowledge of how to live was a knowledge of how to die.

Max turned his face from him and mumbled, ‘Men die alone, Bigger.’

‘I’m all right, Mr. Max. Just go and tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn’t crying none...’

Max’s eyes were wet. Slowly, he extended his hand. Bigger shook it.

‘Good-bye, Bigger,’ he said quietly.

‘Good-bye, Mr. Max’ (p. 392).

He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut.
Bigger’s tragedy is like that of Nat Turner’s in the African American history. Benjamin Quarles says, “No revolt equaled that of Nat Turner in its consequences. A slave preacher in Southampton County, Virginia, Turner’s actions were inspired by his interpretation of the Old Testament and his belief that he was God’s chosen instrument to lead the slaves out of the house of bondage. Turner’s preparation consisted of prayer and looking for a sign from on high, rather than in the enlisting of a large force. Hence, on the August evening in 1831 when he set out on his crusade, his total party numbered not more than eight. They began by killing Nat’s master and his family. Pushing through the countryside, they gathered additional recruits, eventually numbering seventy. Taken by surprise, with their houses open in summer weather, nearly sixty whites were seized and put to death. After forty-eight hours the rebellion came to an end, the aroused whites having mobilized volunteer companies and called out the militia. ‘The Prophet,’ as Turner was called by the slaves, was caught and sent to the gallows, along with nineteen other culprits.”

This is how Wright’s novel *Native Son* is a beautiful depiction of the blacks in crisis. Wright’s characterization is very vivid and elaborate. Mary Dalton is the major character, though she is seen only in book first. She is a Communist sympathizer, frolicking with Jan, a known Communist.

Henry Dalton, her father is a millionaire, controlling a big renting business. His philanthropy shows off his wealth. He shows his sympathy for the black, but he is blind to the real plight of blacks in the ghetto, Mrs. Dalton’s blindness serves to accentuate the story of racial blindness throughout the story. It is said, “Both Bigger and Max comment on how people are blind to the reality of race in America.”

Communism is almost a character in the novel in the sense the heath is a character in both Hardy’s fiction and Emily Bronte’s novel *Wuthering Heights*. Jan
takes Mary’s murder as an opportunity to face racism. He argues that the whites control the blacks’ destiny.

Boris Max, a Communist Party lawyer defends Bigger’s case. As a Jew and Communist, he understands Bigger better. Wright through him reveals the blacks’ destiny in the world. Bigger horrifies him by displaying just how the white society has damaged the black. The third part of the novels displays this. Bessie is an example for this kind of victimization.

Bessie is a good black lady. Bigger uses her for his satisfaction, bodily and emotionally. He kills her finally. She is a lovely character. Another fine character is Peggy, an Irish maid at the Dalton’s home.

As we have seen throughout the narrative, the protagonist Bigger Thomas is a victim of the white civilization. He commits two ghastly murders, because of his hatredness of the white society and also of human society. He is a typical ‘outsider.’ Critics think that he is a failed human being, a man-hater. He wanted to live a life, and do business but he says, “They (whites) don’t leave him.’ This of his feeling recurs. Ultimately he rebels against the white world. His brother Buddy, sister Vera, are well depicted. Then his mother emerges the finest black woman character in the novel. She does all good things to support her family. She believes in afterlife for the marginalized.

Likewise, Brittain, a private investigator and Buckley, the state attorney, the coroner, and the judge, -even the army, police, and the mob, all are very well portrayed in Native Son.

Wright’s protest novel Native Son, appeared from the Book-of-the-Month Club. It was was an immediate best-seller. It sold 2,50,000 in the first week of its publication. Irwing Howe says, “It made Wright the wealthiest of black writer of his times.”

Richard Wright was a Christian, no doubt. But he embraced Communism later rather unsuccessfully. It is said, “The presence of the Bible is apparent in *Native Son*. Biblical allusions appear frequently throughout the novel, but they do not serve as an uplifting component of Bigger Thomas’s life. Instead, Richard Wright seems to allude to the Bible with irony. Bigger is exposed to Christianity through his religious mother, Reverend Hammond, a Catholic priest, and his encounter with the church. However, Bigger’s constant rejection of Christianity and the church reveals Wright’s negative tone toward the religion.”

If one reads Wright’s life and times, one comes to know how many great writers have influenced Richard Wright. One of them, greater after the Bible and Communism, was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s epic-making thesis novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Barbara Hochman thinks, “*Native Son* contains several allusions to other works that were significant during Wright’s time. One of the major works that influenced *Native Son* was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This novel was published in 1852 and was not only the best-selling novel of the century but also played a major role in the abolitionist movement.”

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is a great narrative. It was variously exploited for stage and film later. Wright and Paul Green adapted it and Orson Wells directed the
production. Canada Lee acted Bigger's role. Kent Gash directed it again. *Native Son* was filmed twice once in 1951 and again in 1986. Wright himself involved in the first production in Argentina. He played the role of Bigger.
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6. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
7. All the textual references are from Richard Wright’s Native Son, Jonathan Cape, London, 1970.
10. All the textual references are from Richard Wright’s Native Son.
15. Richard Wright, Wikipedia.