Chapter III

*Native Son: Unleashing the Black Power*
Native Son is the finest Proletarian novel ever written in America. Wright was a Communist when he wrote it and he could make it in the rich American tradition of naturalistic fiction upholding the view that environment shapes the character and the shape of the world contributes to the formation of Bigger. But he meticulously ends it on an existential note projecting Bigger as one too big to remain belittled on a confessional plane. The thematic concern of Native Son is akin to the central theme of most black American writing; the doubleness of black existence in the United States. While presenting his guilt-of-the-nation thesis in Native Son, Wright explores the stifling limitations imposed on the blacks.

James Baldwin wrote in 1951 that Native Son was “the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet of what it means to be a Negro in America.” Bigger Thomas, a nineteen-year-old edgy small time criminal from Chicago’s South Side Ghetto defines this sense of exclusion from the main stream as he and his friends stand on a street corner watching a plane fly overhead:

Every time I think about it, but I can’t help it.
Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there.
We black and they white. They got things and we
ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. (23)

“Playing white” with his friends on a Chicago street corner is a grim substitute for living white, for living in a world where one may presumably be whatever one wants to be. The suffocation of the one-room apartment in which Bigger lives with his mother, sister Vera, and his younger brother Buddy frightens him. Nevertheless he is more frightened with the suffocation in the white world and tries to overcome this fear by becoming violent. But the fear remains in him as substantiated in Book I “Fear.” Though he proposes to his friends a plan to rob a whiteman, he himself is afraid of committing the crime and makes Gus a scapegoat. The fear of the whites had been with Wright since his childhood: “I had already grown to feel that there existed men against whom I was powerless, men who could violate my life at will” (Black Boy, 65).

As a child, Wright was never under the direct impact of the whites' hatred or hateful acts but he could experience it indirectly and it was so obvious that he recollected it when the brother of his friend was murdered. The things that influenced his conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to him directly. He needed only to hear of them to feel their full effects in the
deepest layers of his consciousness creating a sense of distance between him and the world in which he lived. Milton Rugoff observes,

Bigger Thomas is 250 years of Negro frustration incarnate. He is filled with fear and uncertainty for himself, and with hate for the white men around him. Instinctively he learns that the one thing that can give him confidence and a sense of power is the act of transgression. The bolder it is, the more adequate. ¹

Wright's use of realism in depicting the details of slum life is striking. Wright begins his novel with the ubiquitous rats, the uninvited guests that are not uncommon in ghetto life. Bigger stalks a huge yellow-fanged black rat that attacks him on the leg and kills it.

A picture of Bigger and his whole family battling a giant slum rat- is symbolic of the capitalist monster which devours the Negro people with peculiar relish. Wright does this picture with a marvellous bit of stark writing. ²

This is analogous to the later action in the novel. Bigger too, synonymous with the vicious and bold rat that is hunted, is
cornered and finally killed. R.C. Brignano considers Bigger's action "ironically symbolic (since later) Bigger will assume the role of a hunted animal, and the rat will be interchanged in the minds of the Whites with Negroes in general." While running away from the police, Bigger sees a rat slipping into a hole. He feels sorry that he has no such hole through which he can dart for safety.

Bigger's development is perverted by environmental pressures that make him feel that violence is the only way to self-actualization. Since he has no skills valued by society, he is forced to accept the post of chauffeur at the Daltons. In spite of Bigger's hatred for the whites, the moment he is invited into the house of the Daltons, he behaves like any other Negro in tune with the subservient behavioral patterns:

He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that his was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him they that they did. (50)
Mary Dalton and her Communist friend Jan sympathize with Bigger, a sympathy that is more offensive to a Negro than class prejudice. Bigger fails to understand their rational thinking. When Jan persuades him to shake hands with him and not to call him “sir” while Mary stands there smiling with her shining eyes, Bigger, very much conscious of his black skin, feels humiliated. His self-hatred is evident:

It was a shadowy region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. (67-68)

He feels towards Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate. To worsen his predicament further, Jan starts driving, making Bigger sit between them. Never in his life has he been so close to a white woman. Jan goes ahead with his philosophy that after revolution they will win a world in which there will be no white and no black, and no rich and no poor. Bigger sits still with his arms and legs aching. They go to eat at the place meant for the coloured people. Mary tells Bigger placing her hand on his arm and pointing to the houses of the
blacks that she wants to go into those houses to see how the blacks live. Never in her life has she been inside of a Negro home. Bigger thinks that they are thinking of his life and the life of his people:

Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—himself and them in it. (70)

Bigger drives Mary home and he kisses her while almost carrying her to her bedroom but he is afraid of what he is doing when the blind mother of the girl stands at the door. In trying to stop the girl from mumbling, he kills her. His killing Mary is too sudden, accidental and that has nothing to do with his hatred of the whites. The desire for violence arises in Bigger when he loses his self-trust. He puts her dead body in a trunk and burns it in the furnace. Leaving no evidence behind, he thinks that they cannot say he did it and if they do say he did it, they cannot prove it. It is surprising to note the change in Bigger after the murder of Mary. He behaves like a professional killer and simultaneously exploits the situation to extract money from the Daltons by writing a letter that the Communists have kidnapped.
Mary and are demanding ransom. He wants to make Jan a scapegoat. At no point of time, he feels the need to tell himself that the murder was an accident:

No; it was no accident, and he would never say that it was. There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed. (101)

Bigger thinks of running away from the place on many an occasion though he is confident that he will not be caught. However, he feels that there is no need to hide himself as all are blind to his deed. He has a dream of making a stand against the whites and he is nearing its fulfilment.

He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl. . . . He wished that he had the power to say what he had done without fear of being arrested; he wished that he could be an idea in their minds; that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover
before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy. He was not satisfied with the way things stood now; he was a man who had come in sight of a goal, then had won it, and in winning it had seen just within his grasp another goal, higher, greater. (122)

Deep down in him, he feels the desire to express his solidarity with the blacks. He wants to unite them and make them act in togetherness to get rid of their shame and fear.

His plans fail when the bones are discovered in the ashes of the furnace and he becomes the suspect. He takes his girlfriend Bessie out and after sexually having her, he wants to blot her out as he thinks that she is a burden to take with him. He kills her by smashing her head with a brick. This is a murder in cold blood. He feels the "narrow orbit of her life" (131) and seeks justification in her elimination. The aimlessness of her life makes her helpless and she succumbs to Bigger's heartlessness:

"Bigger, please! Don't do this to me! Please! All I do is work, work like a dog! From morning till night. I ain't got no happiness. I ain't never had none. I ain't got nothing and you do this to me. After how good I been
to you. Now you just spoil my whole life. I’ve done
everything for you I know how and you do this to me.

Please, Bigger...” (169-70)

After the meticulous execution of Bessie’s murder, he feels
a sense of guilt, but the very moment he feels satisfied with his
actions. He has murdered twice and this has created a new
world for himself. He experienced the same sense of freedom
earlier also when he killed Mary Dalton, cut her head off, and
burnt her body:

The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of
it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for
him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier
of protection between him and a world he feared. He
had murdered and had created a new life for himself.
. . . it was the first time in his life he had had
anything that others could not take from him. (101)

Bigger’s longing for the identification of a “murderer”
reveals that his choices are moral and metaphysical, not political
or racial. He has chosen violence and death as a sign of his
being. Bigger’s original alienation from the Negro community is
his free choice. His mother, his sister, his girl-each has made an
individual adjustment of some sort to the conditions of Negro life, but Bigger cannot abide by either his mother's religiosity, his sister's Y.W.C.A. virtue, or Bessie's whiskey—all seem to him evasions of reality. He hates his mother because her religion is Bessie's whiskey. He does not want to confine himself to the house. He longs for becoming a part of the world by merging with it. He is in need of a chance to live like others though he is black.

In spite of his best efforts to run away, he is captured in an exhausted and stupefied state after being hunted down like an animal, like the rat he killed. After the arrest, he succeeds in blotting out everything from his mind. The whites charge him with not only murder but with rape and murder. Bigger considers it death before death comes, for the newspapers headlines read AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. Samuel Sillen opines that

Bigger Thomas is not a "sex-slayer" at all. He is a fear-ridden boy whose attitude of iron reserve is a wall between himself and a world which will not allow him to live and grow. A deepening sense of hysteria has accompanied the blocking of his normal impulses.
Ironically, Bigger is accused of a crime he has not committed and this crime of rape gains prominence over the crime he has really committed, murder of Mary Dalton.

Your Honor, must not this infernal monster have burned her body to destroy evidence of offences worse than rape? That treacherous beast must have known that if the marks of his teeth were ever seen on the innocent white flesh of her breasts, he would not have been accorded the high honour of sitting here in this court of law! O suffering Christ, there are no words to tell of a deed so black and awful! (376)

Bigger is referred to as “Jungle beast,” “brutish Negro,” “black killer,” and “ape.” The white mob cries for Bigger’s blood. The prosecution charges him with the rape of Mary Dalton:

He planned to rape, to kill, to collect. He burned the body to get rid of evidence of rape: he took the trunk to the station to gain time in which to burn the body and prepare the kidnap note. He killed her because he raped her: mind you, your Honor, the central crime here is rape: Every action points towards that! (377)
Jan’s humanity comes as a stab of remorse to Bigger when he says that he wants to help him through Max, his lawyer friend. Jan is jailed in Mary Dalton’s murder case when Mr. Dalton suspects his role as it is made to believe through the kidnap note. Bigger’s conversation with Max gives us a glimpse of what Bigger is. From the moment he is captured to the time of his sentencing, Bigger alternates between defiance and depression. He feels that the whites are determined to make his death mean more than mere punishment. They regard him as a “figment of that black world” which they fear and are anxious to keep under control.

During the trial, Max argues that if Bigger is given death sentence that would be the end of this case but not the end of this crime. For Max the whole of American society is responsible for the death of Mary Dalton. The crime should not be seen as a crime committed by a Negro in isolation. The focus should be on the motivating factors for Bigger’s crime. When Bigger’s “crimes” are discussed, the socio-economic conditions that compelled the emergence of Bigger as a criminal should also be taken into consideration. The whole American society is held guilty for the treatment that a Negro gets.
Max explains Bigger’s crimes in terms of the distressing psychological blows on Negro history compounded by social and economic exploitation. He questions the cause of all the high feeling and excitement about this case. The entire Negro population is terrorized in the name of the hunt for Bigger Thomas and hundreds of Communists are arrested and labour union headquarters and workers’ organizations are raided solely because a Negro has committed a crime. He declares:

Taken collectively they are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights. (364)

*Native Son* is a psychological as well as a sociological novel and Bigger’s development is outlawed by shame, fear, and hate in the three sections of the novel. Book One, “Fear,” deals with one day in Bigger’s life. Different kinds of fear determine Bigger’s life, the major being his being black. His nature is composed of dread and hatred. Devoid of warmth, love or loyalty, he possesses the freshening spirit of freedom only after committing two murders. Beginning with killing a rat and ending with killing a white girl, Bigger’s activity for the day from his waking up to
sleeping is symbolic of meaninglessness. He experiences frustration resultant of the great white world's titillations. Book Two, "Flight," shows a tremendous acceleration of action in forty eight hours. The last section, Book Three, "Fate," is the depiction of humanizing Bigger or socializing him with the resurrection of the self.

The act of unconscionable violence is the byproduct of Bigger's fear sometimes that something awful is going to happen to him as he often confides in his friend, Gus. The hatred that he nurtures for the whites is generated from his fear of whites. When Bigger is the product of a defective environment, it can be construed that the presence of white district in the vicinity acts as a stimulant. In killing Mary Dalton he feels that he has destroyed all the oppressive forces that compel him to feel miserable. Killing Bessie is another act of self-liberation for Bigger:

Bigger's murder of Bessie marked a new stage in Wright's literary evolution: everything that he had learned from his naturalist models up to this point had prevented him from allowing his characters to give in to these demonic temptations, but now Bigger claimed his right to "create" in the existentialist
meaning of the word, by rejecting the accidental nature of his first murder with this further proof of his power to destroy.6

In the cell Bigger allows himself to be confronted with all the people whom he has already met: the Daltons, Jan, a Negro preacher, members of his family and his street gang, Max, and the District Attorney. He rejects family and religion and opens up himself to Max after twenty years of mistrust. He trusts him to be a real human being who makes him feel a human being. Max considers his murders positive acts as he is prepared for the consequences. He is wonderstruck at Bigger's unshaken conviction of self-knowledge. In his Marxist defense of Bigger, he makes the readers feel that Bigger enjoys a new sense of potency, a reverse racism, in his murders.

Bigger's alienation can be viewed as a psychological, sociological, and philosophical phenomenon. Bigger suffers from the five main components of alienation as identified by Melvin Seeman: normallessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, social-isolation, and self-estrangement.7 Bigger experiences uneasiness and anxiety. Fearing that he will lose control, he tries to strike out at society. He is powerless to control his own fate. Since he is a menial in the society, he feels powerless, and out of
this powerlessness evolves a sense of meaninglessness. To forget it, he indulges in sex and drinking. His sex with Bessie is devoid of love and his drinking of joy. He is also a victim of self-estrangement and suffers from identity crisis.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher in the introduction to *Native Son* points out that the novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American Literature has yet had, comparable only to Dostoevsky's revelation of human misery in wrong doing. Because of constant hunger and loneliness, Wright says, he eventually grew to distrust everything and every body. This is reflected in *NS*. Bigger's family devoid of affection and fraught with bitterness and quarreling is a true representation of impoverished blacks.

Later, Wright remarks in his autobiography that the poverty of his family is also a reason for his alienation. He used to ponder the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid
our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair.8

Wright provided a new definition and made blackness a metaphysical state of alienation so profound that old values no longer applied: blackness was the disturbing, complicated, ambiguous creation of contemporary civilization. Ellison provides us with a puzzling, ambiguous metaphysical definition of blackness:

I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.9

Wright uses the metaphor of blindness for illustrating the races. Daltonism is a kind of colour-blindness. How Daltons have blinded themselves to the realities is realistically presented:
Mrs. Dalton’s blindness is symbolic of the blindness of the white liberal philanthropic community, Mr. Dalton’s to the suffering of the Negroes, and the Communists’ to the humanity of the Negroes though they presumably want to enlist Negroes as equals. The whites are incapable of seeing the blacks as possessors of sensitivity and intelligence. Bigger has blinded himself to the stark veracity of Negro life and the humanity of the whites. He is blind to Jan’s offer of friendship and Mary’s sympathy and only after the murders he does gain the insight.

*Native Son*, a novel of outrage, vividly describes the ravished Negro spirit in seeking revenge in terms of crime and murder. The indomitable spirit waging a war against the system that is meant for “keeping them in their place” is blatantly displayed: “Native Son is the emotional autobiography of a man who refused to be either a thing or a criminal. Bigger Thomas forced recognition by an act of murder, Wright by an act of art.”

In his quest for transcendence, Bigger emerges as an anti-hero as well as a tragic hero. Ironically, he becomes the criminal while forcing the world to accept his existence. Before his execution, he triumphantly declares himself as a murderer with utmost conviction. Bigger’s isolation from society meets the prerequisite of a tragic hero. His alienation is the result of the
white capitalistic power structure. The "monster" is made but not born. Bigger's family, his friends and surroundings too contribute to the making of "Bigger."

Hugh Gloster sees the theme of oppression constituting an all pervading thought of *Native Son* and says that Bigger is blameless: A prejudiced and capitalistic social order, rather than any intrinsic human deficiency, is the cause of the frustration and rebellion of underprivileged Negro youth of America.  

Albert Camus seemed to speak for Bigger, finding in him a metaphysical rebel:

The first and only evidence that is supplied me, within the terms of the absurdist experience, is rebellion. Deprived of all knowledge, incited to murder or to consent to murder, all I have at my disposal is the single piece of evidence, which is only reaffirmed by the anguish I suffer. Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos . . . . It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage be brought to an end . . . .
Metaphysical rebellion stemming from protest against man's situation leads to the deification of man. Man's resorting to violence and crime replaces God's order. Wright identifies himself with Bigger and his experiences of being black create an existential hero, a metaphysical rebel:

He was an American because he was a native son; but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp.13

Native Son is an ironic title for Bigger has no place in the sun in America and his nationality is questionable as he remains an alien in his own land. The alienation, as some feel, is the outcome of society's indifference or cruel treatment. Robert Bone in an essay on Wright explains the movement of change in ideology:

The novel moves, in its denouement, toward values that we have learned to recognize as existentialist. Having rejected Christianity and Communism Bigger finds the strength to die in the courageous acceptance of his existential self; 'What I
killed for, I am!' in embracing his own murderous instincts, however, Wright's hero is compelled to sacrifice other and perhaps more basic values. He has established an identity through murder, but that identity, by virtue of its horror, has cut him off from the human community of which he longs to be a part. That is the meaning of Max's profound revulsion in the final scene. 14

Bigger fears and hates Mary Dalton but ironically she is the only person who tries to understand him earnestly. She is tactless and unconsciously wonders aloud how blacks live, which in turn makes Bigger confirm his hatred against her and he decides to dispel the myth that America is a classless society:

You know, Bigger, I've long waited to go into those houses . . . and just see how your people live . . . I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human . . . .15

Wright's Communist readers are puzzled and displeased with his creation of "Bigger Thomas." Wright refused to allow his "Bigger" to be subsumed by Max's social analyses. In Burke's
view, his role as a Marxist critic transcends his role as a Negro novelist. Burke justifies Wright's handling of Max by arguing that the Lawyer's long address is a "conceptual epitome" of the novel's emotional themes. Book Three, dealing with Max's Marxist ideology, is the conclusion of a neatly drafted case-study. It seems Max is unable either to give Bigger a satisfying ideological social vision or to view Bigger's vision of the world. Wright's separation from the party is the cause of the hiatus.

Walter B. Rideout acclaims Wright's lineage with his communist spokesman Max, the only person who defends Bigger publicly, and says, ignoring the limitations of the novel:

The end of the book comes close to being a tract, but it is saved by the emotional force of its terrible warning . . . the imaginative expansion of the book . . . comes from the relating of the truncated lives of Negroes in the United States to those of all the other 'have-not's', the humiliated and despised, who are goaded on by the American Dream and whose American Tragedy is to be blocked form the dream's fulfillment.16
More than the influence of various schools of thinking like Naturalism that holds natural law and socioeconomic influences superior to the human will and Existentialism that paves the way for stronger and more powerful human element, Wright's life itself or his experiences were able to create heroes like Bigger. However, *Native Son* oscillates between the extremes of absolute determinism and absolute freedom. Considering the socioeconomic and environmental influences on Bigger, he is predestined to become a ploy in the hands of naturalistic tendencies. But the existential drag condemns him to create himself afresh seeking impetus in rebellion:

Therefore, if Bigger can transcend his environment, rise above the pressures of the slum, he can create himself anew. Naturalistically, this is inconceivable—existentially, it is not only possible but unavoidable for a man to continually create himself.17

Bigger as a rebel unleashes "a raging torrent" in search of his soul and that too embracing violence. This is not repugnant as his rebellion finds its roots in the awkward silence and brutal treatment of the world. He experiences utmost freedom in the acts of violence. Bigger's lawyer, Max, also justifies his actions as they have made him feel free. Brignano feels,
The 'act of creation' that Bigger sees in his quasi-accidental killing of Mary is creative. It raises him, and with him his Negro-ness, from the level of obscurity to the realm of recognition. He accomplishes alone something sensational. In so doing, he projects his now unavoidable presence into the white world. His satisfaction is, of course, perverse; but, Wright implies, it is legitimate—the logical outcome of an acknowledged release from a consciously subservient group.  

Unable to tolerate his spiritual oppression and anonymity any longer, Bigger lashes out,

I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room . . . . I was always wanting something and I was feeling that nobody would let me have it. So I fought 'em. I thought they was hard and I acted hard . . . . But I ain't hard even a little bit'. (388)

The upsurge of Bigger's self-hate is evident in the scenes where he is with Mary Dalton and her lover, Jan Erlone:
But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. (67)

Bigger's death can be viewed as a reaffirmation of the values of life. It is a sacrifice for the common good of man. Like Bigger, Nelson Dyar in Paul Bowles' *Let It Come Down* is a victim of his own fate. Dyar takes to crime in order to rustle up his self-dignity. Later in his hideout, under the influence of hashish he accidentally kills his Arab companion, whom he wished him dead just as Bigger killed Mary fearing her and wishing her dead. The gruesome scene of Dyar driving a nail through dead Arab's head is similar to Bigger chopping up Mary's body after asphyxiating her.

Wright ultimately immortalizes Bigger as a black Christ sacrificed for his race upholding the belief that in America the Negro is the ubiquitous scapegoat. The police make a show of Bigger's chase.
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 this 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. (228)

Instead of sending out two or three detectives to arrest Bigger, the police deploy riot squads, swarms of special officers, and the personnel of the fire department. During Bigger's capture, "Two men stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him; they placed foot on each of his wrists, making them sink deep down in the snow. His eyes closed, slowly, and he was swallowed in darkness" (253). The States Attorney steps into the floodlight to announce that he will make Bigger's swift punishment a warning to other potential murderers. 19

Bigger feels like Christ when his family visits him in jail. He tells them that they have to feel proud of him as he has "taken fully upon himself the crime of being black." The murderous predisposition of Bigger can also be the act of innocence. Killing Mary is justified in terms of fear and shame she had made him feel. His new life after the murder seeks refuge in the white
man’s blind pride that blacks are incapable of planning and executing such a bold crime. When Mary’s body is discovered, overtaken by fear, he kills Bessie by smashing her head with a brick.

Wright feels like presenting the life of a Negro in America through the frenzied man who is brought to Bigger’s cell. The man is yelling that his papers have been taken away by them and he will report the matter to the President. He is the demented university student and is writing a book on how coloured people live, and his facts have been stolen. His professor has him locked up. Though uttered by a disordered mind, these lines reflect some of the basic issues that confront the black life all over America:

I’ll tell ‘im you make us live in such crowded conditions on the South Side that one out of every ten of us is insane! I’ll tell ‘im that you dump all the stale foods into the Black Belt and sell them for more than you can get anywhere else! I’ll tell ‘im you tax us, but you won’t build hospitals! I’ll tell ‘im the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts! I’ll tell ‘im you hire us last and fire us first! I’ll tell the President and the League of Nations . . . . (318-319)
Like Cross Damon, Bigger uses murder to create a new world for himself but after his arrest he probes to find an answer to the meaning of his life amidst great despair.

In a part of his last confession Bigger admits that he has never "felt a sense of wholeness" in his entire life and this is the tragedy of his life as it is of the members of his race caught in the hot desert of the white man's prejudice. Max explains that his entire attitude toward life is a crime! and blames the society for Bigger's anomalous behavior:

This Negro boy's entire attitude toward life is a crime! The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence. (366-367)

However, Bigger argues that he should have fought for recognition as a human being and confesses that crime is a morally fine act for him:
‘I believe in myself . . . (W)hat I killed for, I am!

It must’ve been pretty deep in me to make me kill! . . .
it must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something . . . . I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em . . .

. . . (391-392)

This is Bigger’s existential self-realization. Wright universalizes Bigger’s search for self. Bigger’s quest for identity is equated with that of all men.

*Native Son* is an eloquent denunciation of the racial discriminations and socio-economic factors that condition the existence of the blacks. The plight of the Negro is assessed in terms of the sins of society in the novel. It expresses an existential vision of life, linked with the oppressed, traumatic, and precarious aspects of the Afro-American experience. Wright seems to be contented with the growing sway of the American Negro in the changing scenario: “The voice of the American Negro is rapidly becoming the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world today.”

Wright has been forced to win as a Negro who happened to be a writer the recognition that he
desired as a writer who happened to be a Negro. . . . Wright told us more about what it meant to be an artist in an insensitive world than what it meant to be a Negro," writes the critic Warren French, who viewed Wright as a unique "black double" of John Steinbeck, and *Native Son* as "the Negro equivalent of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy.*"22

Dan McCall affirmed that "Wright explored the American mind with the equipment America had forced him to bear in this. His work is an example of what Sartre defined as genius—'not a gift but the way out that one invents in desperate cases.' "23 Twenty-three years after the book appeared, Irving Howe beautifully summed up the book's impact:

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies . . . . A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission. . . . Speaking from the black wrath of retribution, Wright insisted that history can be a punishment. He told us the one thing even the most liberal whites preferred not to hear: that Negroes were far from patient
or forgiving, that they were scarred by fear, that they hated every minute of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and that often enough they hated us, the decent and cultivated white men who from complicity or neglect shared in the responsibility for their plight.

Wright successfully puts forth before the readers "Bigger" of his imagination and the one who he saw and felt through his *Native Son*. He confesses in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" that the recapitulation of his encounters with different "Biggers" during his childhood and adulthood gave rise to the birth of Bigger Thomas. There was a Bigger who used to tantalize him in his childhood by taking away playthings at play. All the boys were afraid of him and often compelled to acknowledge his superiority. His life was a challenge to them and Wright secretly longed to become like him. Later in his adulthood he encountered another Bigger whose hatred was directed not towards the boys but towards the whites who ruled the South.

His hatred was a result of the fact that the whites had everything and he had nothing. He was not paying rent and got food and clothes on credit but never paid. Another Bigger was a "bad nigger" as labeled by the whites. He used to gain his entry forcefully into the theatres and other public places. He was shot
by a cop during the days of Prohibition when he was delivering liquor to a customer. Another Bigger, whose law was death, also made a marked impression on Wright. The Jim Crow laws of the South were not for him. His sense of freedom was meant only for breaking the law. He oscillated between the moods of elation and depression. He had no job and his earning 50 cents a day in digging ditches made him feel that he could not live on that.

He nurtured a grouse against the whites that they would not allow him do anything. He was sent to asylum for being insane by the whites. Another Bigger who confronted Wright was one who used to sit in the streetcars meant for the whites, though there was clear marking for the whites and for the coloured. On being asked, he would plead his illiteracy but he would not go out and threaten with a knife. One can predict the fate of such Biggers in the white dominated world. All these Biggers influenced Wright's imagination in projecting Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Richard Wright not only reacted and felt as Bigger did, but made his readers do the same:

As I contemplated Bigger and what he meant, I said to myself: "I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free myself of his sense of shame and fear." In fact the novel, as time passed, grew upon
me to the extent that it became a necessity to write; the writing of it turned into a way of living for me. 24

G.Lewis Chandler, although voicing severe reservations about Native Son, which, in his view, "boomerangs upon its real purpose and unwittingly returns the Negro to a bestial status where America . . . has tried to keep him," nevertheless sensed that it was possible to view Bigger Thomas as "standing" for all victims of exploitation.25
REFERENCES


5. Samuel Syllen, New Masses, 34 (March 5, 1940) 24-25.


22. The Black American Writer, 1, 125,141, 127.
