

The the hopelessness, repression, and social injustices

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The novel *Native Son*, written by author Richard Wright is the story of a young black male living in the racially segregated black belt community on the Southside of Chicago in the 1930's. The main character, Bigger Thomas, finds himself seeking an opportunity outside of this community only to have it all go horribly wrong during a moment of panic, which then sends his life into a downward spiral. The author brings into question whether or not Bigger's fate was a result of his own doing or if it was predetermined by the fact that he is nothing more than a product of the hopelessness, repression, and social injustices inflicted upon the African American minorities in the United States during that period in history. The main character, Bigger Thomas, is depicted as a poor African American male who struggles with all of the issues associated with life in the Black Belt. This was until an opportunity presented itself in the form of a job offer with a wealthy white family across town.

This opportunity created some major inner struggles for Bigger. More specifically, his underlying resentment towards the white community that discriminated against himself and his community, but he was also envious of their success and while fearful of their power. He ultimately recognized that despite his internal struggles, this was an opportunity to make something of himself and improve his disposition. Accepting this new opportunity would allow him to get out of his current neighborhood and all of the disadvantages that came with it. But, this opportunity did not come without some well-founded concerns on his part. The family who provided Bigger with this opportunity was strongly entrenched in the wealthy white community across town, which was generally distrustful of the African American community as a whole.

As a result, this struck fear in his heart over what his role might be. In order to analyze this novel, we must identify why Bigger committed the act of murder, which is the main event that the story is centered around. When he was faced with a life changing decision at his new job on the first day, Bigger responded in the only way he deemed rational. As a result, Bigger Thomas accidentally killed the Dalton's daughter Mary, because he thought it was necessary in order to protect himself and save his job. Bigger's intent was never to kill Mary when he used a pillow to smother her; he sought merely to silence her so as to avoid having Mrs.

Dalton detect his presence in the room. He was fully aware of the potential repercussions of a black man in the bedroom of a young white woman and being accused of something he hadn't done. His experiences with racial stereotyping had taught him to assume that because he was black and alone in a room with an unconscious white girl he would immediately be accused of rape. At the time of the murder, Bigger was not angry with, nor was he intent on striking a blow for African American rights by sending a message using the death of a white female at the hands of an African American male. Later on in the novel, Bigger admits to his attorney that Mary's behavior toward him in fact made him hate her. At the same time, his hate for Mary is not what caused him to smother her to death, it was simply a misguided attempt to evade discovery by her mother. How does society discourage criminal behavior among its citizens? This is accomplished through processes that are in intended to regulate behavior or social control.

These control measures are internal in the form of norms and values, and external in the form of rewards and punishments. The author of *Native Son* utilizes this social control theory extensively throughout this story with examples of how crime and deviance played a major role in Bigger's life and the overall storyline. The social control theory unlike most criminology theories places its focus on why people obey the laws and rules to conform to the generally expected societal norms. Elizabeth Groff explains to us that, "As people bump into one another, their familiarity with and liking for each other increases... In this manner, norms emerge and strengthen over time" (Groff 94). The main elements that constitute this conformity are tied to societal bond, attachment to others, commitment for following rules, involvement by typical societal behaviors, and a belief in a basic value system. In general people obey the laws of the land based upon a fear of the consequences of breaking said laws. An example of this concept plays out when Bigger considers the consequences of committing a robbery with his friend. "They had always robbed " negroes".

They felt it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policeman never really searched diligently for " negroes" who committed crimes against other " Negroes" (Wright 23). He considered the costs and risks associated with his potential deviant activity. Control theorists further believe that criminal behavior is part of basic human nature and that all humans have a tendency towards violence or criminal behavior. When an individual's bond with society is broken, the logical result will be criminal activity. The less an individual believes that he or she should or is required to obey society's laws, the more likely he/she is to violate them.

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This example lies in the next quote, "You'll regret how you living someday," 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" (Wright, 117). This is primary example of Bigger's separation from his societal bonds and a feeling that he did not fall within the bounds or normal confines of society.

Another important factor of the social control theory is the concept of free will. The crucial question associated with free will is whether an individual has the power to make a choice and whether his or her decision was inevitable and they really could not have done otherwise. This point gains relevance in the *Native Son* as Bigger was faced with a life changing choice when Mary's mother entered the room. Some might argue as Bigger might as well, that he lacked the opportunity to exercise free will. Mary's behavior, his situation, the social implications, and the presence of Mary's mother all left him the inevitable decision to silence Mary.

In fact, Bigger later in the book expresses that he even believes Mary's actions played a role and even contributed to her eventual demise. After the commission of the murder, Bigger then began to consider the fact that he had deviated from the social norms and the possibility of harsh treatment he might receive from the white community and the judicial system. Given the current societal standards, it was very reasonable for Bigger to assume that he would be treated harshly and any assertion on his part of accidental circumstances would most likely have been immediately dismissed by the judicial system as well as public opinion.

So that raises the question of whether in fact if Bigger ever really had the ability to exercise his free will. While Mary's death was excessive and unnecessary, the fact that Bigger had to take some action to avoid detection was most likely unavoidable. Bigger feared that being a member of the African American lower class, his transgressions would certainly be treated much more severely by the justice system automatically regardless of the circumstances. As a result once Bigger identified his predicament, his thought process resorted to that of basic survival instincts." She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer.

He had killed a whitewoman. He had to get away from there." (Wright, 87).

His recognition that his skin color compounded his existing problem was a key motivator in guiding his actions when he was disposing of the evidence.

But these actions only served to further support the white community's preconceived deviance traits of the African American community. His actions in effect eliminated his ability to utilize the truth, that it was an unintended and accidental event. No matter what explanation he had, ultimately society will judge him harshly based upon the color of his skin and that would always make him guilty. Bigger's flight was also in part influenced by the overall lack of community resources and material inequalities of the Black Belt area of Chicago at that time. The Black Belt was a predominately African American impoverished area in Chicago's South Side.

This segregated community was almost exclusively home to many of the African American residents of Chicago during this time period. This area was plagued with extreme overcrowding, dilapidated tenements, high rents,

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and cramped “kitchenette” style apartments. In addition to these deplorable living conditions, many of the African-American residents that were fortunate enough to purchase homes were subjected to unfair and discriminatory practices.

This included housing covenants and redlining tactics by the local financial lenders, who were largely owned and operated by the wealthy white community. “No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live.” (Wright, 161). Also of note was the area’s high unemployment rate, inadequate housing, extreme poverty, high crime rates, and over-crowded conditions also contributed to an overall sense of frustration among this African American community. The denial of basic rights and frequent violent protests in nearby white neighborhoods played a major role in the belief that these residents were second class citizens and less worthy than their white counterparts. Despite a series of state laws that were passed during the late 1800’s to include an 1885 law against discrimination in public places, the segregation of the African American community remained rampant in the Black Belt area. More importantly, in context with this analysis, it was common place in both belief and practice that laws were rarely equally enforced.

It was very common for African American residents to be subjected to harsh penalties for offenses that many white offenders would go completely uncharged. The African-American community was a regular target of harassment by the police and crimes committed against them were an

everyday occurrence. Ultimately, white racial superiority was used to justify any act of violence or oppression taken against the African American community. Bigger knew nothing but frustration his entire life. He often found himself frustrated by being poor and that he was made to feel inferior simply because he was black.

He was also continually frustrated by his desire to be more and his realization that those desires were largely unattainable. This also resulted in a level of anger and at the same time fear of the white community. "Why had he come to take this goddamn job? He could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate" (Wright, 15). Another example of this realization presents itself when Bigger was talking with Gus about his dream of becoming a pilot. Gus' response to Bigger was, "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go that aviation school, you could fly a plane" (Wright, 17). This statement reinforces the assertion that what the white community perceives the African American community to be, is more powerful than what the African American community believes about themselves.

Inequality imposed upon the African American community was common place and Bigger often found himself on the bottom end of these inequalities. There was a very clear a visible difference between the white world and the black world in Chicago. The most identifiable limitations or weaknesses of the control theory is that it places too much importance on the bonds between an individual and society, and does not effectively address self-determination and impulsiveness. Mary's death, I would argue was nothing

more than a series of unfortunate and accidental events, which were escalated by panic or impulsiveness. Bigger was not seeking revenge, money, status, or power when Mary was killed.

Rather, he simply panicked and Mary's death, while tragic, was far from intentional. Bigger had no forethought or ill will in his actions that resulted in Mary's death. In fact, Mary's death was the direct result of impulsiveness and an overreaction by Bigger in the heat of the moment. Ultimately Bigger chose not only his response but also the level of his response. Another specific flaw in this theory is that it places a high correlation between a single parenting and criminal behaviors, it tends to ignore the fact that this family dynamic does not automatically lead to individuals becoming criminals. There are many examples of single parent homes that produce law-abiding and productive citizens who never consider engaging in deviant behavior. One cannot simply ignore the many other outside factors such as peer or group pressure that can play a significant role in which path people choose to take. In Bigger's world deviant behavior is considered more of the social norm, if a person is raised in and around a community that the majority finds it morally acceptable to break the law, then members of that society will not be persuaded to avoid being labeled with these deviant behaviors.

In conclusion, the reader is most likely moved to feeling empathy for Bigger as a result of all of the cards being against him and the belief that no one will ever believe the true sequence of events. Bigger was driven to his actions by fear that if he were discovered that at a minimum he would lose his job and be back to his old life. As a result, he convinced himself that he was

morally justified in his actions. Bigger's understanding of the societal implication of his actions was in fact accurate and he in fact would face severe repercussions regardless of his decisions or actions on that day. His racial and socioeconomic position in the community most certainly would have negatively contributed to his fate. The author asks the question of whether it is fair to condemn someone that was created by their environment. While Bigger eventually felt remorse for Mary's death, he still failed to see the error in his decisions or deeds. While this is a tragic sequence of events, we cannot allow those feelings to excuse his actions and damage that resulted from those actions.

Bigger, in fact, took an innocent life and as such should be held accountable. Furthermore, the motivation in this case does not outweigh the results of his actions. The judicial system needs to act accordingly in the blind in this case and judge the act itself rather than the man and any of the prejudices that were thrust upon him by the color of his skin. If a person commits the crime, they must be obligated to suffer its consequences regardless of whatever advantages or disadvantages they may have been afforded in their development.

Ultimately it comes down to a choice and living with the consequences be it good or bad of your decision. Individuals make choices about deviance based on costs and benefits to themselves in the form of positive rewards for socially approved behaviors and negative costs for breaking the social norms. Social control occurs only works when costs of deviance outweigh or are higher than rewards.