

The effect of blindness in native son



Blindness is prevalent all throughout human society and more specifically, all throughout human nature. To be blind can mean a myriad of things. Literally and physically, it means to lack proper vision. When taking that definition to a figurative level, it means to fail to see through the perspectives of other people, or it can also mean to overanalyze and fail to see the true form of a situation. Depending on the scenario, the effects of blindness can either be positive or negative, although it is usually the latter. In Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, the theme of blindness recurs a multitude of times, and all definitions of blindness apply at least once within the book. The vast effects of the varying multitudes of blindness are prominent within the mindsets of the characters of *Native Son*, and ultimately, it teaches a lesson about society as a whole. Blindness appears repeatedly throughout the book within a variety of characters. The first conspicuous conveyance of blindness is found in Mrs. Dalton. Mrs. Dalton is physically blind and, due to the fact that she is not capable of seeing, she is also figuratively blind as well. In this case, Wright portrays this particular kind of blindness to be a positive attribute. Since Mrs. Dalton cannot see the difference in skin color, she is not biased towards people based on their race. She is very kind to Bigger and even takes interests in what he would like to do with his life. In addition, she even offers to pay for him to go to night school to pursue a proper education for himself. "He had a feeling toward her akin to that which he held toward his mother. The difference in his feelings toward Mrs. Dalton and his mother was that he felt that his mother wanted him to do the things she wanted him to do, and he felt that Mrs. Dalton wanted him to do the things she felt that he should have wanted to do," (Wright 61). Within the moment that these feelings of warmth ran through Bigger's thoughts, it appeared as if he was

temporarily blind to his racism against whites since Mrs. Dalton was blind to any kind of racism against blacks. This can be ascertained, because Mrs. Dalton was one of the only white characters Bigger ever thought somewhat fondly of. By including these details within the story, Wright proved the point that one is not born with innate racism; prejudice is something that must be developed. If everyone were blind, racism would be nonexistent, for no one would even be able to acknowledge the existence of a race if it cannot be seen. Although a positive side to blindness exists, a negative side coexists as well. Up until the end of the story after Bigger had gotten caught and gone to trial, he was one of the most severely blind out of all the characters. Rather than viewing whites as individuals, he viewed them as a mass of people—one that he ardently hated. He hated even those who were kind to him, like Jan and Mary, because instead of believing that they were kind, he believed that they were mocking him or making some sort of joke out of him. This blindness prevented him from taking the steps towards pursuing opportunities—opportunities for progression and advancement, and opportunities for change in his life, as well as in the lives of others. Instead of taking up on Mrs. Dalton's offer to go to school and better himself, Bigger turned that opportunity down. In addition, rather than truly befriending Mary and Jan and possibly helping them understand exactly how it feels to be an oppressed African-American, Bigger emotionally ostracized them. Due to his ignorant blindness, Bigger also constructed a wall so high, that it was impossible for anyone to get in or for him to get out, thus preventing any kind of personal progression. It was not until the very end of the novel when Bigger finally realized how it was wrong of him all of his life to view whites as a single mass of evil racists trying to hold him back from pursuing what he

wanted, when he could have viewed them as individuals, for there were some individuals who actually wanted to help him advance in life. By incorporating this recurring theme, Wright aimed to perhaps make his readers realize their own wrongs, as well as vividly display one of the true roots of racism and prejudice: blindness—blindness to another person's feelings and perspective—blindness to empathy—blindness to the fact that the victims are human beings as well. By making Mrs. Dalton physically blind and in turn, figuratively blind to racism as well, Wright proves the point that prejudice against another race is not a valid reason to hate another person, because one should be judged by the character content, not by their physical appearance. If everyone were blind, racism would cease to exist, for no one would be able to judge a person by the color of his or her skin if it cannot be seen. By making Bigger figuratively blind, Wright proved another point: being blind to empathy and to the perspectives of others leads onto dehumanization of the oppressed in the eyes of the oppressor. This is the plain and simple reason of how racism can exist in the first place. When one can view his or her victim to be inferior or less than human, only then can he or she inflict harm upon that victim without feeling remorse. No matter what time or era, literal and figurative blindness will always exist in society. First of all, racism and prejudice still exist in society and undeniably, it always will. Even though the racism has toned down and there is now more tolerance, there are many people out there who are still racist against people of certain races. As of right now, there is much hate and prejudice surrounding Middle Easterners as well as the religion of Islam. Due to what happened on 9/11 and also with the varying terrorist attacks, Americans have jumped the gun and have aimed their hate towards Muslims and Middle Easterners. Yes, the

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majority of the terrorist attacks were made by Muslims and Middle Easterners, but that does not necessarily mean that all Muslims are evil. There are many who practice the religion peacefully through a different interpretation, and due to the blindness of America, there are numerous people who fail to see that. People should be viewed as individuals, not as a mass. In addition, there is also much prejudice and discrimination against homosexuals due to the blindness of today's society. People boast about America being a country of freedom and acceptance, but how can one brag about something that is not true? In this modern day and age, gays are still not fully accepted in society, and they are also not allowed to get married in certain states. This is due to the ignorant blindness of American society. These people fail to see through the perspectives of homosexuals, and they fail to see that feelings, along with sexual orientation, is something that is neither controllable nor alterable. It is absolutely sickening to see the levels of closed-mindedness and ignorance rise as the levels of reason and empathy decline towards many of the scenarios occurring within society today. Blindness is an innate part of human nature and will always exist within society. A lot of the time, people do not even realize they are blind, so by depicting the blindness of society along with making blindness a recurring theme within *Native Son*, Richard Wright succeeded in doing the world a favor. On a figurative level, there are both positive and negative facets of blindness. First, Wright portrayed how blindness could have positive effects by making Mrs. Dalton blind within the story. Since she was physically blind, it ultimately made her blind towards racism as well since she could not see the difference in skin color, thus proving that the color of one's skin is an invalid justification to judge someone upon. On the other side of the

spectrum, Wright also displayed the negative side of blindness: the side that ravenously eats away at one's humanity. Bigger's blindness towards whites was a major contributor to his downfall in life. Rather than viewing whites as individuals, he viewed them as a single oppressive mass. On the other hand, racist whites viewed African-Americans as a single inferior mass as well, rather than as individual human beings. When one views another person through such a narrow perspective, it dwindles the empathy he or she has for another person; as empathy is tarnished, it slowly disintegrates the degrees of humanity along with it. By vividly exhibiting such behaviors within *Native Son*, readers might realize the times that they have been blind. Bigger may have realized his wrongs and opened his eyes too late, but hopefully readers can procure a lesson out of this novel and open their eyes from blindness soon enough to right their wrongs.