

Inner feline demons:  
wolfe's "the child by  
tiger"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Muscles tensed, nostrils flared, the beautiful feline creature eyes its soon-to-be prey, a harmless antelope drinking from the watering hole. Without a moment of hesitation, the black and orange striped tiger breaks out into a full stride and pounces on its victim, tearing the defenseless antelope to bloody shreds with its razor sharp teeth, and powerful bone crushing bite.

This tiger, resting at the top of the animal food chain, is a seasoned predator.

Thomas Wolfe's "The Child by Tiger," set in the Deep South in the early 1930s, addresses the predatory nature of mankind, contemplating the existence of an inner "tiger" in all men and women. The story begins with the narrator reflecting on African American Dick Prosser's rampage, twenty-five years after the event occurs. The story reveals, through the exemplary case of Dick, that hostile social environments can ignorantly drive men and women to commit unfathomable crimes that unleash their inner "tigers."

Dick faces constant adversity due to his racist social environment, which slowly causes his inner tiger to surface. A motif of "darkness" appears in the last paragraph (Wolfe 657). Indeed, this motif reveals that Dick has always had a dark passenger, or an inner tiger. Dick, a "token of the other side of man's dark soul," is a staunch representation of a fundamental evil, the evil that develops from the mere experience of life. This evil, which plagues all who experience life, is embedded so deeply into Dick's "soul" in particular, that he physically becomes a "token," or a tangible representation of this evil (657). However, Dick's malevolent nature does not become apparent to all until he is pushed too far by his social context, causing him to unleash his "unknown demon," by committing horrific and satanic evils, namely murder. Furthermore, the repetition of "silence" in the first paragraph, infers that

Dick originally tries to silence his emerging inner evil. His efforts, however, are fruitless, as he ultimately embraces his animalistic and natural "demon," succumbing to the evil that matures out of his harsh experiences in life.

The town, with its deep-seated racism, unknowingly pushes Dick to his breaking point. Throughout the narrative there is a repetition of "mystery" surrounding Dick and the reasons for his rampage. The community members truly believe the motive for Dick's rampage to be a "mystery," illustrated by the repetition of the word, however, from an outside perspective, it is quite evident that the discriminative policies of the community pushed him to these extremes. "No one ever knew" why Dick snapped (656). The community members at the time were clearly unaware of how racism, which was commonplace in their society, formed a harsh social environment for African-Americans, including Dick. It remained a "wonder" how their own derogatory treatment of Dick could push him to a murderous rampage (656).

In truth, the community does not even see their treatment of Dick and other African-Americans as "derogatory," rather their racist beliefs were so significant that they felt their treatment of African-Americans as less-than-humans was fair and deserved. These racist beliefs of the society are also perpetuated by a mob mentality that is evident within the community, as individuals are scared to speak out against the racism, scared to speak out against the mainstream belief of the "mob." The town's racism ultimately causes Dick releases his inner tiger in his attack on the town because of the horrible social conditions he endured, mainly the racism from the members of the town.

Dick's situation provides an example of how a discriminative social context can drive men and women to commit heinous acts of terror, to release their inner "tiger," or predator. Dick constantly faces adversity in a bigoted society which actively works against him. This hardship even pushes him to extreme measures, particularly when he unleashes his ever-present inner darkness on an entire town in the form of a mass murder. The townspeople unsuspectingly cause Dick's evil to surface; they are, in a certain sense, responsible for his rampage on the town. Thus, Dick is not similar to a tiger feasting on a harmless antelope. Rather, Dick is a tiger feasting on an entire society full of tigers, whose inner darkness manifests itself in the horrible atrocity of racism. Perhaps the point can be more broadly applied to society as a collective whole: appearances can be deceiving. The existence of the tiger is ubiquitous; each and every human carries around this tiger, like a dark passenger rooted in secrecy, cloaked in a veil of disguise.