

Fear in "native son"
by richard wright
essay sample



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Fear in “ Native Son” by Richard Wright Essay Sample

In Richard Wright's " Native Son", emotions are a very important element, especially that of fear. Blacks are afraid of whites, whites are afraid of blacks, women are afraid of men, and everyone is afraid of communists. In the novel, however, no fear is as important as the fears that Bigger Thomas feels. If it weren't for fear, nothing would happen in the novel. Fear is a catalyst for Bigger that, without which, Bigger would be living the same life and nothing would change. Fear is the driving force behind many of Bigger Thomas's actions and decisions in the novel, and fear envelops his life. Among these fears are the fear of white people, and the fear of authority. Throughout the novel, Bigger also displays a perplexing fear of being treated as a person, rather than being treated as a black.

One major display of fear in " Native Son" is Bigger's fear of whites. An early example of this is that he is very reluctant to meet with Mr. Dalton and get a job with him. This is because Bigger is scared of being so close to white people, since they represent everything that he dislikes and believes is keeping him down. Another example of Bigger's fear of whites is that he is afraid of robbing a convenience store owned by a white man. He is not afraid of simply doing the action of robbing the store, but he is afraid only because the store owner is white, and he has never robbed a white store before. "... You scared I'm going to say yes and you'll have to go through with the job'...'You calling me scared so nobody'll see how scared you is." Whites are also a source of fear for Bigger because they pretty much own his entire world and control most aspects of it. An eerie allusion to this is the campaign poster for the State's Attorney that had the candidates face on it with a

finger pointed outward with the phrase " You can't win!" emblazoned on the top.

It is almost as if this symbol of white authority is telling the black community that they cannot win or get ahead in life. This view of the whites as a looming overlord helps to instill fear in blacks like Bigger. Not only is this fear of whites that of a fear of power, but it is also of the unknown. At this time in America, there never had been any integration, and different races simply stuck together. Black people stayed in the black neighborhoods, whites in the white neighborhoods, Indians on reservations, and the Chinese in Chinatown. Not to say that this grouping wasn't encouraged, or even enforced in some cases, but another aspect of this is simply that, as they say, ' birds of a feather flock together'.

A fear of one of another race can be attributed to the survival mechanism of sticking to what you know, and people that are similar to you. People are wary of things they do not know or cannot understand, and find comfort in familiar things that they can identify with. And having the same race and background can even be the basis for some societies, because the people have a common link, and often the similar views and goals. Take the state of Israel, for example; a country founded on the basis of being Jewish, and really nothing else. That is just on a big scale what societies were on a small scale in the time of " Native Son". Jews live in Israel, and Bigger lives in the black neighborhood. This group mentality is one thing that leads to distrust and fear between the whites and blacks. They don't know each other, and they don't want to know each other.

Bigger's fear of whites transcends into a general fear of authority and of facing that authority. This fear is a very important one in relation to the plot because it helps drive him to murder Mary and Bessie. When Mrs. Dalton walks into the room and Bigger is with Mary, he becomes terrified of getting caught and he 'silences' Mary so that Mrs. Dalton won't discover him. "He knew that if Mary spoke he would come to the side of the bed and discover him...he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught." Bigger once again becomes deathly afraid of being caught when Bessie begins to panic and considers giving up. "'What's the use of running? They'll catch us anywhere.'" His fear of getting caught is so consuming that he kills without remorse and is not even human when he is in a panic. This fear makes him do anything and everything to get away.

When he is being chased through the city by a posse, he is maniacally running through buildings and opening fire recklessly at his hunters. At this point he seems even less afraid of death than he is of being caught. He is not subscribing to the 'you'll never take me alive' mantra because he is brave and full of pride, he is simply in a frenzy where the only thought in his head is to escape these men, apparently even if it means escaped capture through death. This deep fear once again drives Bigger to kill one of the only people that see something in him. Even though he doesn't seem to be afraid of dying during that part of the novel, his need to escape can also be subscribed to a general fear of death. Not only is he afraid of death in general, but he is especially afraid of death at the hands of white people.

Strangely enough, Bigger also seems to be afraid of being treated as an equal. This becomes clear when Mary and Jan are being nice to him, and treating him with respect. " He felt something in her over and above the fear that she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person."(65) Bigger is very scared and confused about this new situation. Bigger is not used to interacting with white people, for he usually does a pretty good job of avoiding them altogether, and staying with his negro chums, and in this situation he just wanted to be separate entity from Jan and Mary " Why didn't they leave him alone?" It almost seems that Bigger wants to stay in a subservient position to white people and is extremely wary and refusing of this equal treatment he receives. "' don't say sir to me.

I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan." But doesn't this go against the standard fight for equality and civil rights by blacks? Perhaps the black community has become accustomed to being scared of whites, and thriving on this sense of hostility, that once feelings of hatred are removed from one side of the equation, Bigger doesn't know what to do. Or perhaps the black community has found some comfort in being afraid of white society. Blacks view whites as higher than them, so a fear of god can now be turned into a fear of whites. Blacks are historically a very god fearing people, and if the black community has the same feelings of whites controlling everything, creating everything in their community, and being powerful enough to take it away, why couldn't blacks view whites, subconsciously or consciously, as god-like figures? Bigger had fallen out of favor with his gods, and now his judgment day was swift approaching.

Fear is an emotion integral to the psyche of Bigger Thomas, and the entire black community. It has its roots in being a survival mechanism, but also being a social norm in the black community. Fear is a fact of life that they are used to dealing with. Among the things that instill fear in Bigger are white people, authority, and equality. These fears are very important to explore and understand in the novel because they drive him to make many of his decisions and actions, and make Bigger who he is.