

In black and white: native son



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In his novel “Native Son,” author Richard Wright depicts the struggles of Bigger Thomas, whose life reaches a major turning point after he kills Mary Dalton. The difference between Bigger’s dreams and the “illusion” of reality plays a significant role throughout the novel. Bigger’s dreams and innermost desires symbolize the longing of African Americans as a whole; however, they are oppressed by the reality of their situation. This crisis enhances Richard Wright’s overall message of the novel. His use of this conflicting theme in addition to innocence and brutality and other points of contrast subtly coincide with the central theme of the racial strife experienced between two very different worlds. The fact that Wright compares Bigger’s life to a nightmare or dream during intense moments supports the notion that Bigger’s perception of life lies on the line where reality and illusions merge together. In addition, the coma-like state that Bigger seems to live in is existent from the birth of his crime to his death. For example, when Mrs. Dalton walks in on Bigger alone with Mary, a terror seizes him as though “he were falling from a great height in a dream”(85). When he wakes up the day after Mary’s murder, he remembers as if it was a mere nightmare that he had “killed Mary, had smothered her, had cut her head off and put her body in the fiery furnace” (97). However, the actuality of her death interferes with the live Bigger lives in his dreams. On several occasions an image of Mary’s head “hovered before his eyes” and he even dreams of his own head “lying with black face and half-closed eyes and lips parted with white teeth showing and hair wet with blood” (165). As a result, Bigger’s dreams serve to signify his conscience towards his murder of Mary, in which remorse is scarcely expressed. In addition, as Bigger is in his cell he contemplates that after death he would “sigh at how simple and foolish his dream had been.” This

further justifies the notion that Bigger's life alternates between reality and a "dream." Bigger's dreams exist not only internally during sleep, but are expressed externally in the form of his aspirations as well. For example, when he and Gus observe a plane writing in the sky above them, Bigger comments "I could fly a plane if I had a chance" (17). Although he only went to eighth grade, Bigger's actions in the story prove that he has the capacity to fly an airplane. However, Gus retaliates by saying "if you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school." These "ifs" dismisses Bigger's dream as a merely unattainable goal. This proves that his aspiration of becoming a pilot is oppressed by his position in society, diminishing his "chance." Further supporting Gus's verdict, when Max asks Bigger what he wanted to do that he was not allowed to, Bigger replies that he wanted to be an aviator, but the school he wanted to attend "kept all the colored boys out" (353). The fact that the white world is so exclusive to Bigger instills a feeling of hostility within him, because he knows he will never be able to experience it. Bigger describes this feeling to Gus as being "on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence." Nevertheless, Bigger still continues to dream, and he and Gus engage in a game where they "play white." As they hold back the urge to laugh, they "guffawed, partly at themselves and partly at the vast white world that sprawled and towered in the sun before them" (18). Using the terms "vast," "sprawled," and "towered," Wright's diction succeeds in creating an image of an overwhelming force against Bigger that reserves the power to distinguish his fantasies from reality. In her essay, "Urban Racism Causes Bigger's Irrationality," literary critic Seodial Deena claims that Bigger falls "victim of city politics and the media." In contrast to the poverty-

stricken world of African Americans, the white world is portrayed to have “plenty of food, comfort, privacy, opportunities, money, and fun” (Deena 135). This is evident when Bigger watches *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn* at the movies. In *The Gay Woman*, “gleaming sands” and “a stretch of sparkling water” creates a sense of glamour, and ultimately motivates Bigger to take the job. He begins to fantasize whether Mary Dalton was a “hot kind of girl” who “spent lots of money” and perhaps would even pay him not to tell of a “secret sweetheart.” *The Gay Woman*’s effect of such persuasion is further enhanced when *Trader Horn* unfolds afterwards. Images of “naked black men and women whirling in wild dances” are portrayed and African-Americans are viewed as uncivilized compared to the wealthy, aristocratic whites. As Bigger watches the film, these images were replaced in his own mind by “white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing.” As a result, Bigger accepts the job because he expects what is portrayed to him by media; however he learns, as Deena claims, “not all that glitters is gold.” The theme of innocence and brutality is visible in several aspects of *Native Son*. The deaths of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears provide an example for these contrasting points. Literature scholar Steven J. Rubin’s, “*Native Son* is a Novel of Revolt” explains that Bigger’s murder of Bessie is “simply proof of his new ability to act” because it gives him a sense of “control over his destiny.” Unlike Mary, Bigger deliberately and unnecessarily kills Bessie. In addition, although both deaths are equally brutal, Mary’s death generates uproar while Bessie’s murder is used as mere evidence. Richard Wright’s incorporation of these two deaths in such a manner supports the message of racial prejudice set in 1930’s Chicago. Their murders are also symbolic of

how innocence is treated with brutality in numerous conditions throughout the novel. Although Mary has good intentions and claimed to be “ on Bigger’s side,” he still kills her and cruelly disposes of her body. Adversely, Wright demonstrates that African-Americans were also brutally treated by white police despite their innocence. In his essay, “ How ‘ Bigger’ was born” Wright explains that in times of crime in which citizens “ are clamoring for police action, squad cars cruise the Black Belt and grab the first Negro boy who seems to be unattached and homeless” (455). Although they are innocent, the day they are picked up by the cops, a silent contract is sealed foreboding their sentence or execution. As a result, public tension is relieved at the expense of the innocent-similar to the killings that relieve tension within Bigger from his external surroundings. In addition, Bigger treats innocence with cruelty due to the sense of shame or helplessness that it instills within him. This can be detected from early on in the novel. When Mrs. Thomas complains of their living conditions briefly after Bigger kills the rat, it is revealed that Bigger “ hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them” (10). As a result, he prevents himself from feeling “ to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives.” In addition, when Reverend Hammond visits and asks Bigger to accept God, the Reverend made him “ feel a sense of guilt deeper than that which even his murder of Mary had made him feel” (284). The innocence and salvation Reverend Hammond tried to preach to Bigger was what he had “ killed within himself...even before he had killed Mary” (284). Consequently, Bigger treats the Reverend coldly throughout the remainder of his life. Two opposites on the color spectrum, two opposites in Native Son. Black and white. Through “ Native Son” Richard Wright manages to

successfully create an accurate portrayal of an African American caught in the gray between these two worlds, through the use of Bigger Thomas. A fruit beared by the society he has been forced to live among, Bigger falls victim to false perceptions of what it means to be on the other side. The muddled line between dreams and realities as well as the cause and effect of innocence and brutality that affected both colors highlights the inequality and racial corruption of 1930's America. In conclusion, Wright's central theme of an African American's role in a white society as well as its involvement in their outcome powerfully radiates through Bigger Thomas.