

Literary analysis of richard wright's book, native son



**ASSIGN
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Jim Crow laws in 1930's Chicago created a segregation system which prohibited African-Americans from restaurants, water fountains and even bathrooms that "belonged" to whites. In this setting, Richard Wright places his novel, *Native Son*, with one of the most monstrous characters to ever derive from the oppressive system of Jim Crow, Bigger Thomas. Whites employed the system of Jim Crow to force African Americans, like Bigger Thomas, into socio-economic positions of inferiority. The socio-economic conditions of Jim Crow also damped the opportunities of African Americans compared to white citizens which stands as a representation of how an environment of oppression and inferiority, controls and oppresses the violent desires of individuals like Bigger Thomas, with threats of violence. Critic Foucault describes the panopticons as:

"Those in authority rule by surveillance, by watching, by an evasive cultural observation that leads us to internalize the surveilling discipline and regulate, police, ourselves."

Critic Michael Foucault's sense of the panopticon as a system of surveillance can be extended to an analysis of how Jim Crow was used as a form of surveillance to police the black population of 1930s Chicago. It is here that we begin to recognize not only does Jim Crow operate at a surveillance society but it also forces victims, like Bigger Thomas, to police themselves by internalizing feelings of alienation, shame and inferiority, thus causing a victim to be forced into a dangerous state of mind.

The reader's first awareness of Jim Crow as a system of internalized surveillance occurs through Bigger's discussion of his recognition of how that

very system is used to maintain his position of poverty and inferiority in society, as he metaphorically looks through the knot hole in the fence. In the beginning of the novel when Bigger is talking to his friend Gus about how he is socially handicapped in society by his black skin. The oppression and awareness of his inferiority is shown when he says:

' Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't, It's just like living in jail. Half of the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot hole in the fence.' (20).

His use of the phrase " poking a red- hot iron [down his throat]" signals his internalization of the panopticon, resulting in his consistent fear of being watched by white society and forcing him to constantly fear violating the social crows of Jim Crow. Thus, Bigger's feeling of alienation are only intensified when he says " whites live in his stomach" revealing a deep sense of inferiority and feelings of fear that literally lives within him.

Interestingly Bigger and his friends have internalized not only the fear of offending white society but also a fear of the consequences of a crime committed against a white individual such as Mr. Blum. Not only is Jim Crow, Bigger recognizes, operating on the outside as a system but Wright reveals that it is something that has been internalized into African Americans such as Bigger and Gus which programs them to be afraid of robbing someone like Mr. Blum because of racial retribution. A prime example of this knowledge of

the white society and the self-surveillance of Bigger's own action is when Bigger says:

' They had always robbed Negroes. They felt it was easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen never search diligently for blacks that commit crimes against other Negroes, [yet they terrorize and publicly shame blacks that commit crimes against whites] for months they had talked of robbing Blum's, but had not been able to bring themselves to do it. They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; trespassing into a territory where a full wrath of an alien white world' (15).

Wright reveals the internalization of the panopticon in Bigger self-surveillance through his fear of Mr. Blum. Also, it is important to demonstrate that the man, Blum, they are talking about robbing represents not one individual but a white society that will want racial retribution for defying the panopticon or " white world" (14). The imbalance in power between the white communities and African Americans reveals that such oppression is needed to withhold opportunity of socio-economic freedom as well as to maintain power over the black community.

Another example is when Bigger enters the Dalton's household and while he is sitting in this " white home" (45) Bigger connects this world with what he said earlier about going through the " knot hole in the fence" into white society. When he is sitting in the Dalton's Household, Bigger holds onto feelings of distrust which is exemplified when he says how the " strange objects challenged him" (46) inside this white home. Bigger then has a sense

of realization that this “ world would be so utterly different from his own that it intimidates him” (45). Now Bigger is not looking through the knot hole in the fence, he is metaphorically in the white world. Biggers fear of this world is used against him when Mr. Dalton is mindreading Bigger and reading that fear as a sign of respect. Mr. Dalton is now surveilling, reading Bigger’s body language and thinks Bigger is showing the proper deference. Bigger then notices how his fear has overwhelmed him and says:

“ Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this. If not that he wanted to blot himself out. He had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton’s face since he had been in his house. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence” (47-48)

Bigger’s internalized fear and conviction to submit to the presence of whites, reveals further that the surveilling of Bigger by Mr. Dalton and the self-surveillance of his own actions further proves the system of the panopticon under Jim Crow.

Lastly, the burning of cross is a representation of the panopticon at the highest level. The Christian cross traditionally symbolizes compassion and sacrifice for a greater good, and indeed Reverend Hammond intends as much when he gives Bigger a cross while he is in jail. Bigger even begins to think of himself as Christ-like, imagining that he is sacrificing himself in order to wash away the shame of being black, just as Christ died to wash away the world’s sins. Later, however, after Bigger sees the image of a burning cross,

he can only associate crosses with the hatred and racism that has crippled him throughout his life. He begins to feel betrayed which is shown when he says:

“ He had felt betrayed. He wanted to tear the cross from his throat and throw it away. [...] he was feeling the cross that touched his chest, like a knife pointed at his heart. His fingers arched up to rip it off: it was an evil and black charm which would surely bring him death now.”(338)

This reveals that Bigger has come to a point that the white world has crippled him with racism and oppression to a point that he distrusts the cross and believes it will not save him but kill him instead. As such, the cross in *Native Son* comes to symbolize the opposite of what it usually signifies in a Christian context and instead symbolizes the ultimate Panopticon in the system of Jim Crow.

In conclusion, Jim Crow operates at a surveillance society but it also forces victims, like Bigger Thomas, to police themselves by internalizing feelings of alienation, shame and inferiority of the white world. The socio-economic conditions of Jim Crow also damped the opportunities of African Americans compared to white citizens which stands as a representation of how an environment of oppression and inferiority, controls and oppresses the violent desires of individuals like Bigger Thomas, with threats of violence. It is that very system is used to maintain his position of poverty and inferiority in society, as he metaphorically looks through the knot hole in the fence. It is through the life of Bigger Thomas that a reader can analyze his representation to be a whole community of individuals who are oppressed

and forced into self-surveillance of themselves and to constantly struggle against the oppression of the white society.