

A book review of native son by richard wright

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Strong interest in Wright's life, his work, and his influence continues in the 1980s and 1990s, although with not quite the same emphasis as in the preceding four decades. The focus of attention has shifted somewhat, with studies of Wright's political vision diminishing and analyses of his craftsmanship and literary sources increasing.

The great majority of scholars and critics during this period are in general agreement about the centrality of Wright's position in African-American letters and his great importance in American and modern traditions, although some reappraisal of a negative sort has also developed, especially among those expressing dissatisfaction with Wright's portrayal of female characters.

And with the publication in 1991 of the Library of America editions of Wright's major work, the critical response to Wright has entered an important new phase in which fundamental questions are now being raised about which texts are the most authentic representations of Wright's actual intentions and which texts are highest in literary quality.

Wright's achievement in *Native Son* was not only to project the experience of American black people, in all its raw brutality but also to form it into a rich, coherent, balanced vision of life. Wright attracted in some ways to Western culture because of its tradition of Enlightenment rationalism that promises political freedom to oppressed people. Wright was deeply suspicious of other aspects of the West, especially its history of racism.

Although characters like Bigger Thomas are initially described as alienated from both self and community, they experience genuine selfhood and

become a participant in the life of the spirit by establishing kinship with others. I envision Bigger Thomas as caught between these two opposite qualities of Western culture, for he is both victimized by Western racism and also achieves selfhood in a very Western way through “revolutionary will, individualism and self consciousness” (p. 311).

The slum conditions of the South Side so vividly portrayed in *Native Son* had been the daily reality of a decade in Wright life (1927- 1937). He had lived in a cramped and dirty flat with his aunt, mother, and brother. He had visited hundreds of similar dwellings while working as an insurance agent.

The details of the Chicago environment in the novel have a verisimilitude that is almost photographic. The “Ernie's Kitchen Shack” of the novel, located at Forty-Seventh Street and Indiana Avenue, for example, is a slight disguise for an actual restaurant called “The Chicken Shack,” 4647 Indiana Avenue, of which one Ernie Henderson was owner. Similar documentary accuracy is observed throughout the book.

Wright drives his story forward at a furious yet skillfully controlled pace. The full drama is unfolded in just about two weeks. There is first of all the prophetic killing of a rat in the room where Bigger, his mother, his sister and his brother live in quarreling, desperate squalor.

Then Bigger, who has a bad name as a braggart living by shady devices, goes out to meet the poolroom gang environment provides. He plans a hold-up he is afraid to carry out. To hide his cowardice he terrorizes one of his friends.

You see his character. That is the point. Wright is champion of a race, not defender of an individual wrongdoer. Bigger gets a job as chauffeur in the house of Mr. Dalton, who is a philanthropist toward Negroes and owner of many Negro tenements. Mary Dalton, the daughter of the house, and her friend Jan, a supernally noble radical, make him drink with them. Through an accident, Bigger kills Mary Dalton.

That is the first murder. There is a gruesome dismemberment to hide the crime. Bigger thinks of demanding money, and makes his girl, Bessie, help him. His crime is discovered. After that there is the flight, the second murder, deliberate and brutal, the manhunt spreading terror over the whole South Side, then the spectacular capture and the day of reckoning in court for all concerned.

Apart from the ideas that give it volume, force and scope, *Native Son* has some magnificently realized scenes: in the early part, where Bigger, a stranger and afraid, as Houseman said, in a world he never made, gropes for freedom from the walls that hold him; in the flight across the roofs and the stand high over the world, in the jail where processions of people come to see him, at the inquest and in the howling mob outside the court.

The measure in which it shakes a community is the measure of its effectiveness.