

Segregation and inequality in native son

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The Consequences of Fear That Resides Within

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, racism becomes the norm of an oppressed community through the fears of the unfortunate. In 1930s Chicago, segregation and discrimination are predominant, where blacks are forced to live in destitution and the whites live in luxury, which is justified through corruption. The blacks are ultimately suspected and convicted for crimes whether they are accidental, deliberate, or not committed at all, and they have no say in the court. The reader can see through the hatred for Communists such as Jan and through blacks, primarily Bigger, that the laws of the society demonstrate inequality. Bigger's only chance of hope for freedom is Max, the lawyer who speaks up for him and speaks to him as a real person. He tells Max his story of his crime, and his justification is mainly fear. Through the upbringings and internal conflicts of the characters, a racist society can drive degraded beings to acts of aggression out of fear, eventually creating a rival.

Through Bigger's internal conflicts about being subservient in his society, anger slowly builds up inside of him due to the oppression that he experiences. In the beginning of book one, he is talking to his friend Gus, and he imagines all the opportunities he could have if he was white. He essentially feels sorry for himself and complains, and he tells Gus of an internal fear that he predicts, which foreshadows Bigger's downfall at the end. He feels “. . . like something awful's going to happen to me . . . me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there . . .” (Wright 20). This mindset of oppression instills a deep apprehension in

Bigger, which leads him to feel hostile towards the white people. He begins to question his poverty and the reason behind it. However, his fear of his own destruction holds him back from his ambition.

At the same time, Bigger displays aggression due to his upbringing by showing violence towards his own friends. For instance, he and his friends, Gus, Jack and G. H., plan to rob a store owned by someone named Old Blum. Gus shows up late, which is unusual because he is said to be the toughest out of the four men. When Bigger expresses his anger towards Gus, he becomes forceful and he “. . . placed the knife at Gus’s throat . . . Bigger pushed the knife harder into Gus’s stomach” (Wright 38-39). The reader can argue from Bigger’s behavior that he feels a sense of power when he acts insensitive towards people of his own kind because he tries to compensate for his inferiority to the whites. His friends conclude that he does this out of fear (Wright 36-37). Bigger’s lack of education, going to school only up to the eighth grade, shows that he does not know how to effectively communicate in public because he displays uncontrollable fear and anger.

Without doubt, the reader can visualize the poverty-stricken life that Bigger is forced to live through, and he strives to find meaning in his life; this meaning is achieved through violent, relentless murder. While he is given the opportunity to work for a rich white family, the Daltons, he becomes entangled in a dilemma where he accidentally smothers and kills drunken Mary while trying to sneak her back home late at night without anyone’s knowledge (Wright 87). Bigger reflects back on his crime the next day and he comes to an epiphany that “. . . he had created a new life for himself . . .

It was something that was all his own . . . a kind of terrified pride . . . that . . . he would say publicly that he had done it” (Wright 105-106). Bigger feels that he can create a better reality for himself away from his family without remorse because he finally feels that surge of power as if he can stand on equal grounds against the whites. This in turn, leads to Bigger being pressured to become more malevolent and vengeful later on. On the other hand, the murder of Mary Dalton is because of Bigger’s guilty fear of him being fired from his first well-paying job. He realizes that he has come out of his deprivation of feeling like an individual human being, and his killing Mary is justified through him being ashamed and scared for all of his life.

Segregation can cause the oppressed to revolt against the superior in a racial community, which is represented by the protagonist’s attempt to escape from fear and the hope to find new meaning to life. The background of someone’s life contributes to how he/she acts in society, which the reader can see in Bigger. His aggression is the effect of him being degraded for the color of his skin, and he takes it out on his own kind to feel strong and hide his fear. The character’s fears become the roots of low self-esteem because of the lack of opportunities presented in a racist society. From this, the reader can become drawn into the minds of the oppressed that being on the lowest level of society can instigate conflict and the feeling intimidated.