

Native son: a tale of race, psychology and skewed morality

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Native Son: A Simple Question and an Unraveling Answer

Nearly everyone stands at odds with Bigger Thomas in the novel *Native Son*, from the family he never loves to the social hierarchy he hates. The majority of 1930's-era Chicago seems to view him as worthless if not reprehensible, and his actions by the book's end support this in the public eye; Bigger, as the newspapers report, brutally rapes and kills two women without batting an eye. As ideologies duel in court over the black crook's case, readers and characters alike may wonder, "What created Bigger? What gave rise to the mindset allowing this young man to act the way he acts and kill how he kills?" Those whites ready to lynch and threaten Bigger - the vocal and most violent facets of an oppressive majority - place the blame squarely on his shoulders; the opposition begs to differ, as the readers, having "experienced" the tale from their eyes, likely will. When it comes to revealing what contributed to Bigger's mindset, author Richard Wright offers a slew of answers which turn what could have become a one-sided thriller detailing an open-and-shut case into a tale of race, psychology and skewed morality in the United States at large.

Perhaps by taking into account what did and didn't form Bigger's mindset, we can more easily answer the question at hand. Those long-standing, somewhat stereotypical standbys of the African-American experience pass Bigger by; he feels nothing for religion, he lacks a sense of unity or family for the longest other than an awareness of his familial burdens and a desire for simple fun with his friends, and music plays no substantial part in his life. A dream metaphorically demonstrates the lack of power these things hold over

him; in an effort to “[protect] him” from reality, Bigger’s mind presents various images in his dream, including a playing phonograph, his mother, and a crowd of black people hundreds strong moving in rhythm, none of which calm him or “ answer the question,” and as if to cap the symbolism off, he soon after wakes and turns to a black church with little more than a quibble in response to its song and dance: “ Aw, them folks go to church every day in the week, he thought” (253). Bigger’s experience, for the most part, is visceral, a life wherein the strongest escape proves an escape he forges with his own strength; the most exhilarating, fulfilling world he inhabits during at least the first portion of the story is one in which he, via shattering his world’s convention and will for stability through two murders, “[has] created a new world for himself” (241).

In the minds of Native Son’s white community at large, the motives for Bigger’s crime appear as blatant as the color of his skin. As he combats Bigger’s defender in court, Buckley, already a skilled lawyer and politician in his setting, serves as a mouthpiece for, if not that white society’s most common beliefs, then what he perceives as pandering to those deep-seated values: “ How that poor child must have struggled to escape that maddened ape!” he shouts of Bigger’s victim, among many other racially-charged insults likening Bigger to beasts (412). The newspapers, too, reveal various whites’ racist verdicts when they publish claims that segregation and limits on education might have kept Bigger’s “ poor darky family of a shiftless and immoral variety” (280) out of trouble, as do the yells in favor of his death by

lynching. In the context of nature-versus-nurture arguments, the root of the crime, as these people would say, dwells in Bigger's nature.

However, even readers living within the social mores of the day could use Bigger's story in its own context to disprove such statements. For one thing, Bigger feels and acts like a human, not a mindless beast; he shows himself fully capable of thinking his actions through and thoroughly; he knows the rules of the land full and well, and thus feels intense fear when he becomes aware of his first murder and knows that "the vast city of white people" will seek to trap him for it (87); he writes the ransom note which policemen declare "too elaborate to be the work of a Negro mind" (245).

Even if these tidbits fail to sway some, Wright offers plenty of reason directly addressing the central question of what formed Bigger's mindset through the mouth of Bigger's lawyer at the podium, Max. This character delivers answers with confidence, along with fair reason for it; readers witness his discussions with his client for their utility as well as their sympathy. When he asserts that Bigger "[has] got to fight" (346), snaps that Bigger must care for his own future, and exchanges life lessons with him, he speaks on even, person-to-person terms with no money and unforeseeable fame to come from his efforts. With this more personal link established, the character already holds more credibility in terms of recognizing Bigger's deeper character than the faceless masses furiously opposing the criminal's race. Society, as Max puts it, forms the real crux of Bigger's crime, because had the prejudice between the ethnicities of Bigger and his victim not existed, no crime would have taken place: "What would a boy, free from the warping

influences which have played so hard upon Bigger Thomas, have done that night...?" (395) After deciding that Bigger would have simply explained his situation, Max claims that as a result, "there would have been no murder" (395). White "guilt-rage" combined with black "fear-hate," in Max's words, form a potent and deadly mix that riles and disorients ordinary citizens: "Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times...and you have the psychology of the Negro people" (397).

Native Son proclaims that the same society which labels Bigger's entire race inferior should take the largest fall for his crimes. Those concepts and activities which kept many blacks "docile" in that era failed Bigger, leaving discontentment with life - discontentment not with his lack of these things, but with his lacking lot in life and the knowledge - which strikes him with more force than it might strike those with a strong faith in another life or a hobby they dedicate the self to - that his world accepts whites and turns away people like him.