

Richard wright's native son: fiction or truth?



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Understanding the mindset and motivations of Richard Wright while writing *Native Son* proves to be important in understanding the effect of the novel on society. "Wright... was caught up in a hideous present moment, the Great Depression years and the Chicago black ghetto, when it was an achievement to survive, and when the Communist Party seemed to offer him an undreamed of freedom, an unqualified social acceptance" (McCarthy 100). This knowledge may clarify many aspects of this novel including the condition of the main character, Bigger Thomas. Wright's "burning sense of the degraded image of the Negro in American life drove him in every book to reproduce an image of the Negro in his most brutalized condition" (McCarthy 101). Such was the case for Bigger. Forced to share a small one-room apartment in the "Black Belt" with his mother, brother and sister, Bigger felt trapped most of his life with the knowledge that "they keep us bottled up here like wild animals" (Wright 249). The conditions Wright endured led him to write the story of Bigger Thomas while the similar conditions Bigger endured led him to murder. Bigger is "thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life" (Wright 274). Murder, for Bigger, was what literature was for Wright. Harold T. McCarthy explains that literature was "instrumental in enabling [Wright] to become a person wholly different from the being predicated in his environment" (99). Wright was looking for an outlet from the suffering imposed on him by society. He created this same need in Bigger, and the end result was murder. Through Bigger's feelings of freedom, Wright also was able to feel free from the burdens of his environment. The root of this

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freedom felt by Bigger, and in turn by Wright, stemmed from the desire to rise above the harsh conditions forced upon him. Robert Butler refers to the text "How 'Bigger' Was Born" when he describes, "Bigger was modeled in certain ways on five black men from [Wright's] childhood and adolescence in Mississippi who were rebellious lawbreakers whom he both admired and feared. Each was the product of an unjust social system, and Wright envied their ability to lash out against a segregated world that frustrated many of their most human impulses" (555). Not one for violence himself, Wright turned to literature in protest to his world. It was not enough to just create a fictional story about a black man finding freedom in an unjust world.

According to Robert Butler, Wright "weighted Native Son in 'public,' historically verifiable events that provided the novel with an authority and resonance it otherwise would not have possessed" (563). Wright hints at such "historically verifiable events" with dialogue between Bessie and Bigger: "You remember hearing people talk about Loeb and Leopold." "Oh!" "The ones who killed the boy and then tried to get money from the boy's family..." (Wright 136) Robert Butler explains the significance of these boys, clarifying Wright's allusion to them in Bigger's story. "For just as Loeb and Leopold had committed what most people at the time believed was a horrible new crime that reflected the anarchy and amorality of modern life, Bigger is presented by Wright as a new kind of literary figure whose story illustrates in a bold and lucid way the central problems of American history and modern culture" (Butler 559). Butler discusses the importance of comparisons between the events that take place in Native Son with the Loeb and Leopold case, specifically the legal strategies used by Darrow, Loeb and Leopold's attorney, with Bigger's communist defense, Max. Examining

Butler's comparison helps illuminate the true impact of *Native Son* on society. Butler points out how "Max and Darrow premise their legal strategies on strongly deterministic grounds, arguing that the crimes committed were produced by unhealthy social environments that emotionally distorted their clients and stunted their human development" (557). As part of Bigger's defense, Max explains to the judge: But to him it was not murder. If it was murder, then what was the motive...there was no motive as you and I understand motives within the scope of our laws today. The truth is, this boy did not kill... what Bigger Thomas did... was but a tiny aspect of what he had been doing all his life long! He was living, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. (Wright 400) Similarly, according to Butler, Darrow argued, "his clients acted as mentally diseased young men mechanically driven by misshapen social impulses" (558). Wright drew from the Loeb and Leopold case not by coincidence. Knowledge that Bigger's legal defense is based upon real life events creates a greater impact; driving the issues to heart stronger than a fictional case alone might be able to do. While Bigger's story seems to focus solely on the condition of the oppressed black man, there is an even greater impact in comparing his situation to that of Loeb and Leopold. It is important to note that Loeb and Leopold came from very different backgrounds than Wright or Bigger. In a sense, Loeb and Leopold, wealthy white boys, had more in common with Mary Dalton than Bigger Tomas. Even with this knowledge, Wright's use of these boys as a source still provides a dramatic impact of his story. Butler explains: By thus connecting Bigger with two other men from vastly different social and economic circumstances, Wright makes an important point about capitalism in America, namely that it corrupted and alienated all levels of

society, regardless of race and class. As a Marxist and a Communist, Wright asserted that materialism and selfishness had infected modern society from top to bottom, producing a deep alienation and moral vacuum that threatened modern civilization with anarchy and violence. Just as Mary Dalton and Bigger Thomas are finally shown as more alike than different as two "crazy" young people who cannot relate to the empty world that they have inherited and try to find meaning in rebellious acts of breaking taboos of many kinds, so too are Loeb, Leopold, and Bigger tragically alike as victims of similarly dehumanizing environments. (Butler 561) It may at first appear that Wright set out to speak against racism in America. But as Butler points out, "terrifying violence and anarchy, for Wright, knew no racial or national limits but infected society on all levels" (562). Max touches on this issue in a final conversation with Bigger after he has been condemned to death: Bigger, the people who hate you feel just as you feel, only they're on the other side of the fence. You're black, but that's only part of it. You're being black... makes it easy for them to single you out... And the rich people don't want to change things; they'll lose too much. But deep down in them they feel like you feel, Bigger, and in order to keep what they've got, they make themselves believe that men who work are not quite human. They do like you did, Bigger, when you refused to feel sorry for Mary. But on both sides men want to live; men are fighting for life. Who will win? Well, the side that feels life the most, the side with the most humanity and the most men. (Wright 428) Rooting the story of Bigger in real life events allows Wright to address many social issues with greater impact. As a Marxist, Wright believed the social environment in America was disabling to everyone. But as a black man, Wright had an even stronger message to deliver through

Bigger Thomas. "As the ironic juxtaposition of Bigger's narrative with the story of Loeb and Leopold narrative has surely demonstrated, Bigger is a 'native son' in the sense that he... is a product of a diseased American social environment, but unlike them, he is not fully a 'native son' because he enjoys no second chances and no protections of law and privilege that Wright perceived to be the birthright of wealthy white people (Butler 565). The message underlying Bigger's story is greater than the plight of the black man. The story of Bigger, for Wright, is one that can befall anyone. As a nation, America has progressed through many movements and oppressions. "At any given moment in a culture, there may be a dominant discourse, or a swirl of competing discourses; there may be a decaying discourse held by one segment of a culture, but under attack and falling apart; and a rising discourse, gaining adherents. There may well be, in reality, as many discourses as there are people- or even more, since some of us change our minds often, or haven't made up our minds on many things" (Lynn 134). It is the finicky nature of humanity that calls for the need of literature such as *Native Son*. The impact made by such literature can help the progression of needed "rising discourse." Understanding the motivations behind such literature can make the impact of stories like Bigger's even more relevant.

Works Cited
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