

# [Native fear: richard wright’s native son](https://assignbuster.com/native-fear-richard-wrights-native-son/)

Fear is a common emotional thread woven deep within the fabric of mankind. It drives our actions, dictates our beliefs and sometimes, as in the case of Bigger Thomas, mandates the type of person we become. An old adage states that the single greatest source of human fear is the unknown; we are most afraid of what we cannot predict given our limited ability of foresight. Bigger Thomas was a gross exception to this theory. What Bigger was most scared of, more than anything in the world, was the inexorable certainty of his future. Bigger feared that as a young black male living on Chicago’s South Side his life course was inalterable. For this, he dreaded his own fate: the inevitable outcome of a life constrained by social forces determined by a billowing and intangible oppressor. The tragedy of Bigger was a three-part progression. Imprisoned by a congenital situation, set on a rigid pathway and thrust into an awful fate, Bigger was born with the very death sentence he would officially receive twenty years later. The Great White ForceIn the novel’s introduction, Wright called Bigger a “ dispossessed and disinherited man” who “ live[d] amid the greatest possible plenty on earth” yet was locked within a separate, dystopic substratum of society (xx). Wright wanted the reader to experience what he called “ No Man’s Land”—the impassable gap between Bigger’s “ stunted place in life” and the America in which he existed but could never live (xxiv). Free will never applied to Bigger Thomas. His every move and every thought were determined by the stifling society in which he lived. “ He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking: it colored life and dictated the terms of death” (307). As a result, Bigger’s frustration was two-fold: he could neither attain the desired resources of American culture nor locate a tangible source of the blockade. White oppression pervaded the whole of society evasively and enigmatically. “ To Bigger and his kind, white people were not really people; they were sort of a great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark” (109). Bigger described the pressures of this “ great natural force” as both external and internal. Its effects threatened from the outside world and were imbued within the farthest-reaching corners of his soul. For Bigger, white people did not reside in the immaculate mansions of the likes of Mary Dalton. Instead, they lived deep in the pit of his stomach. “ Every time I think of ‘ em, I feel ‘ em,” he told Gus (24). At each moment of Bigger’s life he was acutely aware of who he was and who he was not, the little he had and the lot he lacked. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody’s poking a red-hot iron down my throat … 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 (23). And in many ways, Bigger’s life was a lot like living in jail. Though he had the freedom to live, it was only within certain constrained parameters. He enjoyed some sovereignty over his own actions, but the large-scale course of his life was already chosen for him. Highway to HellSet on this pathway, Bigger was trapped by a situation he could not escape. His fear resulted from the realization that he was on one-way track to a future which he dreaded at every moment of every day. As the novel progressed, Bigger became hyperaware of this predicament. These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and glowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. (31)Externally, Bigger’s intense fear of life’s certainty—and his own inability to do anything about it—translated directly into his characteristic anger and rage. He was unmistakably hostile at home because he realized his family’s struggles were irreparable, yet he was “ powerless” to help them in their suffering. Bigger knew that “ the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair” (13). Bigger believed his mother evaded the fear he suffered by blinding herself from the reality of the world. Her life, he argued, “ had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that” (238). Bigger disdained his mother for finding complacency in a life he saw as empty and meaningless, yet he also realized the narrow scope of their options as black Americans. Even when Bigger was granted the opportunity to work in the Dalton’s home—a “ good” job by his mother’s standards—he remained dissatisfied and angry. “ It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action” (16). In fact, Bigger’s entire adult life was defined by the pull he felt between acts of deviance and acts of convention. He could join his friends and rob a local black vendor or he could accept a “ respectable” job as the Dalton’s driver. It did not matter in the end. Nothing did. All of Bigger’s choices inevitably led to the same outcome, and no decision he made along the way could alter his path. The red-lettered poster that hung high above the Black Belt read: “ If you break the law, you can’t win.” But perhaps more obvious to the residents of the area was the unwritten message that pervaded their entire lives: “ If you don’t break the law, you still can’t win.” Destination Death RowBigger knew he was destined to die a victim of an America few would recognize as the beloved country touted for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For this, he suffered mental and emotional anguish every day of his life. He often uttered that he felt “ like something awful [was] going to happen to [him]” (25). Furthermore, Bigger said the murder of Mary Dalton “ seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something life this” (101). The death of Bessie was no different. “ It must be this way,” Bigger said. “ This is the way it had to be” (222). Bigger’s friend Gus, much like his mother, scoffed at his apocalyptic paranoia. He advised Bigger to “ quit thinking about it” before he went “ nuts” (25). But Bigger’s obsessive fear of the future strained every fiber of his being until the crime embedded in his head was manifested in reality. After killing Mary, Bigger was at peace. “ He felt he could control himself now” (102). The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it (102). Bigger felt empowered by this unique vision. Unlike his friends and family, he had a rare ability to step outside his own situation and see its reality. He refused to live on empty hope and voluntary ignorance. He no longer feared the future, for the future was here. The murder of Mary Dalton was his destiny—and he began to embrace it as such. “ It was a kind of eagerness he felt, a confidence, a fullness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act” (111). In his act of destruction, Bigger accomplished something significant, something that mattered. Bigger finally “ had destiny in his grasp.” Through the death of another, he had granted himself a life and “ created a new world for himself” (226). And within this world, he was not floating freely amid the omnipresent stress of his oppressors. Ironically, the very crimes that eventually imprisoned Bigger “ made him feel free for the first time in his life” (255). For the first time in his life he moved consciously between two sharply defined poles: he was moving away from the threatening penalty of death, from the death-like times that brought him that tightness and hotness in his chest; and he was moving toward that sense of fullness he has so often but inadequately felt in magazines and movies (141). Bigger felt he was in control because he was allowed to author his own story. The detectives working on the case wanted Bigger to “ draw the picture” of what happened the night Mary Dalton disappeared—“ and he would draw it like he wanted it” (149). Bigger’s sense of self had long been a social construction, but now he finally had the power to sketch his own identity. For Bigger, the autonomy was an epic breakthrough. Once Bigger became a suspect, however, his fleeting period of confidence was replaced by a familiar and insurmountable fear. “ Somehow something had happened and now things were out of his hands” (204). As the detectives uncovered Mary’s earring and bone fragments, “ the old feeling” that Bigger had known all his life returned in an instant (206). Bigger’s future was as it had always been—predetermined. “[Y]ou whipped before you born,” he later told his altruistic attorney, Max. “ They kill you before you die” (327). As the case centered on Bigger, the media began to control Bigger’s life through sensationalistic newspaper articles that described who he was and what he did. Bigger voraciously read each story, himself believing the half-truths embedded within the tiny print. His destiny was inked each and every morning for all to see. The media blitz was a return to a life he knew all too well, though never on a scale this palpable. The newspapers formed the mouthpiece of the “ great natural force” Bigger had been running from his entire life. One report claimed the “ conditioning of Negroes” was crucial in order to have them “ pay deference” to white people. “ We have found that the injection of an element of constant fear has aided us greatly in handling the problem,” it read (261). Max would argue that this fear was not the answer to the “ problem” of Black Americans. It was the very source. “ I’m defending this boy because I’m convinced that men like you made him what he is” (271). The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become justification of his existence (367). American society had set Bigger on a dastardly course from which there was no escape. It was this systematic and institutionalized torture—this awareness of the inevitable—that caused Bigger to live in constant fear and anger. “ He was living, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live” (366). For Bigger, the American Dream was just a tease. He was disillusioned because the fundamental principles of his society were meaningless and functioned solely as bait for conformity to the status quo. Bigger was frustrated, scared and belligerent because his access to the bountiful opportunities of America was stymied by the color of his skin. The American Dream was a chance birthright—and Bigger was “ just unlucky, a man born for dark doom, an obscene joke happening amid a colossal din of siren screams and white faces and circling lances of light under a cold and silken sky” (256). Source: Wright, Richard. Native Son. Harper Perennial: New York. 1940.