



# The Destructive Impact of Racism on African Americans in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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Received: 03 Sep 2024; Received in revised form: 01 Oct 2024; Accepted: 08 Oct 2024; Available online: 15 Oct 2024

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**Abstract**— *Richard Wright's Native Son is a powerful indictment of the systemic racism that ravages countless lives in America. The novel explores not just the rampant racism of the time but also the complicated and psychologically damaging web that it weaves when coupled with the equally oppressive, and sometimes corrosive, forces of social class and gender. The continuous oppression and systemic discrimination against African Americans create a psychological toll that few can endure, as well as a constant state of survival that many abandon hope of ever escaping. Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, illustrates the explosion that such a life can trigger in some individuals. Although the novel centers on Thomas, Wright's story is not just about one man. It tells the story of many black men and women who have suffered the same extreme effects of racism. The paper examines the destructive impact of racism on African Americans in terms of four primary themes: identity, violence, systemic oppression, and the interplay of race and gender.*



**Keywords**— *Racism, African Americans, oppression, violence, and stereotypes.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Published in 1940, Richard Wright's *Native Son* is a foundational piece of literature in the African American canon that confronts the brutal reality of racism in America. Bigger Thomas, a young black man living in the impoverished South Side of Chicago, finds himself embroiled in a series of appallingly tragic events that escalate towards violence and murder in the novel. By the time we reach the denouement, Wright has wrought a powerful exposé of the dehumanizing effect of systemic racism and the way it orders society. Wright draws on Bigger's life to expose the dehumanizing effects of systemic racism. He shows how systemic racism creates societal structures that take away the agency and identity of the individuals who must live within them.

In the novel, racism permeates every aspect of life—personal, societal, and institutional—engendering feelings of despair and hopelessness. Bigger's not-so-internal conflict reflects the dual nature of a society that perpetuates destructive racial stereotypes while at the same

time denying vitally important human dignity. Wright meticulously examines how race impacts the relationship between individuals and society. He asks fundamental questions about our world and the kinds of lives we are free to lead. His investigation goes to the root of the problem, which he sees as more than just a matter of "white" and "colored" people inhabiting the same space. What does it mean for all Americans to inhabit the same world? What kind of world can they realistically hope to build together? His answers are not easy or comfortable, but they are essential. This paper will pursue three main lines of inquiry: the formation of identity in a context of imposed oppression, the extreme violence of racism and white supremacy, and the appearance, in the literature and lives of Wright's characters, of hopefulness and hopelessness in the quest for liberation.

## II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF RACISM

In *Native Son*, racism profoundly and pervasively influences Bigger's identity. He deals with a world that largely defines his existence in terms of the color of his skin, a world that for him is one of both personal and societal prejudice. Wright gives us a protagonist who is filled not only with the pathos of his situation, but also with the resentment of being a second-class citizen—a resentment that ultimately leads to Bigger's committing acts of violence. Wright shows how society's demands and its discriminatory treatment shape Bigger's self-perception and his role in the world. In a moment of desperate clarity, Bigger reflects: "I was a man, but I was a black man" (Wright 152). This statement sums up the tension between how he sees himself and how society views Black people. It makes the perfect point for a commencement speech because it is about the powerful potential inherent in any young person, particularly a young Black person, standing on the edge of the future.

Systemic racism confines Bigger's life, restricting his ambitions and aspirations. He sees no successful future for himself and adopts a nihilistic outlook. As literary critic Ellen Wright put it, "Bigger's existence is a testament to the suffocating effects of racial oppression, where dreams are constantly deferred" (Wright 75). In a world filled with racial tension, Bigger has no other option but to resort to violence. The psychological toll of living in a racial pressure cooker simply drives him there; it drives him there in the name of misguided power and agency in a world that gives him neither.

## III. THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT

More than just his internal chaos, Bigger's milieu amplifies his identity crisis. An environment as oppressive and relentless as his self-hatred besets him in an oppressive and relentless environment on all sides. Poverty, ignorance, and hopelessness are the three constants that surround and constrain him. Wright's use of vivid imagery makes for an effective presentation of the oppressive atmosphere that surrounds Bigger. The author's words describe the four walls that seem to protect him from the outside world but instead serve as a prison: "The cold, gray buildings loomed over him like silent sentinels, witnesses to his hopelessness" (Wright 37). Bigger's surroundings not only provide the setting for his behaviors, but they also instigate his mental downward spiral.

The absence of positive role models and a supportive community exacerbates Bigger's isolation. People surround him, reinforcing the negative stereotypes that fuel violence. These individuals shape Bigger's perception of

himself as either semi-human or subhuman. As he struggles to understand himself and his identity, he becomes more alienated from his community and from himself as a human being. Proposals suggest that Bigger's violence is a poor attempt to assert his identity in a world that devalues him. Critics have suggested this interpretation, and it seems to fit quite well with the outcomes of Bigger's storyline (Wright 101).

## IV. THE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL STEREOTYPES

Racial stereotypes profoundly influence Bigger's identity. Characters like Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone embody the complexity of white liberalism, which is not nearly as supportive as it appears and plays a big role in reinforcing systemic racism. Bigger views Mary as a benignly racist, and consequently condescending, person. Mary, more so than her well-meaning husband, attempts to "help" Bigger in a way that ultimately, and ironically, further alienates and angers him. If Mary and her husband can't understand Bigger's interactions, they're "like the rest of them." (Wright 120). Mary cannot see Bigger as he is, either because she cannot quite believe it or because her milieu absolutely cannot believe it. She gently guides him, filled with affectionate disbelief, towards the truth. She embodies the "peaceful" aspect of American racism, infused with the very violent tendencies that Mary and her husband undoubtedly reject.

Bigger's interactions with white people influence his view of them and contribute to an almost pathological sense of self-hatred. He sees the white characters in his life as oppressors, and he judges them harshly. He attempts to carve out a different identity for himself, taking the fatal route because he lacks a solid base from which to launch his life. Some critics argue that Bigger's violence represents a desperate attempt to establish his identity in a society that consistently undervalues him (Wright 101).

## V. THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY THROUGH VIOLENCE

Bigger's violence is partly a misguided effort to assert his identity. When offered no legitimate means of expression or agency, he tries to follow his way into power. Therefore, the only way he can think to express himself is through acts of murder and violence. Wright captures perfectly this moment of understanding when Bigger thinks about his feelings of helplessness: "I wanted to be a man, to have power, to be able to do something." (Wright 182). This need to be in control and to have one's life mean

something is almost dreadfully satisfied when Bigger gets to commit two murders.

Bigger's violence is not merely responsive; it is also expressive, an art of rebellion that inverts the prevailing relationship between violence and virtues. In poorly understood and lamely acted-out ways, Bigger's violence is a ploy to assert over and against the conditions of his existence, a tortured claim to a positive identity. However, the violent rebellions of this proud poor person, conscious even in his half-witted way of some history of resentment, not only earn him a falsely positive label in the eyes of the virtuous "bad Negro," but also forge for him an even more tightly bound insignia of "badness" in the life he lives and the history he shares with other awful Negroes (Harris 639).

Violence in Bigger won't be contained. It explodes. Bigger does more than just act; he reacts violently, as if the magma of hot emotions were seeking relief, hungrily and furiously carving out a space for self-definition. If it were not for the target practice of oppressive and malevolent forces in his life, Bigger might have found a more peaceful path to self-actualization. These forces aren't the only ones contributing to his violence. Ironically, the internal and external factors that push him toward rebellion also push him toward dehumanization and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

## VI. VIOLENCE AS A RESPONSE TO OPPRESSION

One can understand Bigger's violent temper as a direct response to the oppression he experiences. The novel shows how a deeply entrenched culture of systemic racism sows the seeds of violence not only against individuals but also within communities. Bigger's initial act of violence—killing Mary Dalton—crystallizes something essential about the intersections of race, class, and power. Wright writes, "He felt a rush of power as he realized that in that moment he could break free from the chains that bound him" (Wright 157). Although this act was monstrous, it was also Bigger's attempt to assert some sort of control and gain a modicum of power in a society that had stripped him of both.

Bigger's acts of violence and brutality aren't just personal failings; they are also a scathing indictment of a society that withholds not only power, but also purpose and promise to African Americans. Richard Wright uses the South Side of Chicago as a setting to comment on the nationwide systemic inequalities that render Black lives valueless. Bigger's violence—prototypical in its unfocused, inchoate rage—mirrors the unfocused anger of a community that feels pushed into the proverbial corner.

As critic Robert Butler notes, "Wright's narrative captures the cyclical nature of violence rooted in oppression, where one act begets another, creating a tragic feedback loop" (Butler 44).

## VII. THE DEHUMANIZATION OF BLACK LIVES

Wright argues that racism robs both the oppressor and the oppressed of their humanity. Bigger's actions are a direct expression of the rage and frustration that come with longstanding systemic disenfranchisement. The violence in the novel is not gratuitous; it is a natural outcome of societal structures that deny African Americans the dignity and respect granted to their white counterparts. In the novel, the law and judicial system treat Bigger as a subhuman not deserving of dignity or respect.

Throughout the book, Wright demonstrates how Bigger's encounters with authority figures already predispose them to see him as a criminal. They don't consider him to be deserving of any human empathy, let alone the basic empathy that authorities should show during the interrogation process. Throughout the novel, we witness several different authority figures interact with him, and Walter Lee's police interrogation at the end merely reenacts Bigger's vulnerability to the authority figure's assumed presumption of guilt. Critics understand this as a direct commentary on a justice system that views Black lives as expendable (Butler 79).

## VIII. THE IMPACT OF FEAR AND MISTRUST

The community's fear and mistrust fuel the violence in the novel. Bigger's experiences, particularly with the power structure, make him even more paranoid. In his mind, he is also the defendant in his own trial. He constantly feels as if he can't let anyone see what he is doing or what he is really about. Despite being the "top dog" in his own community, his paranoia and deadly fear of racial oppression isolate and intensify his danger (Patterson 781).

The Black community lives under a constant cloud of fear, Wright shows us. Wright makes it clear that the racism of the society it lives in has forced this community's atmosphere of apprehension upon it, not something it voluntarily created. Fear of the unexpected and the unknown colors Blacks' lives every day, every hour, and indeed every minute. Critics point out that this situation mirrors larger societal problems, demonstrating that the generated fear is both causative and reactive toward what we generally label as oppression (Butler 102). In what way does Bigger's violence reflect the workings of racism and the racist institutions that surround him? When it comes to

producing violence, how toxic is the atmosphere of racism?

### IX. THE TRAGIC CYCLE OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

In Wright's novel, the violence reaches its peak in Bigger's self-destruction. Bigger behaves violently, and a series of events spiral out of control, leaving him in a precarious situation. Wright does not fully explore the implications of this event, both for the individual and for society. Still, he certainly hints that the violence stems from racism. Wright gives us a painful moment of clarity with Bigger, but it is too late for Bigger to change his path.

Bigger attempts to understand the true meaning of his feelings of remorse and regret when confronted with the consequences of his actions. The violence he intended to assert his identity ultimately leads to his alienation and demise. Wright poignantly captures this tragedy, emphasizing the deep psychological scars that racism inflicts on individuals. Critics argue that Bigger's self-destruction serves as a broader commentary on the toll of systemic oppression, illustrating how society can create conditions that lead to the annihilation of the self (Lehan 88).

### X. THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM

Wright's exploration of liberation in *Native Son* is fraught with contradictions. Bigger's actions, driven by a desire for freedom, ultimately result in his entrapment. The moment he takes Mary's life, he believes he has liberated himself from the confines of racial oppression; however, this act of violence only tightens the noose around his neck. Critics have noted that Wright's portrayal of freedom in *Native Son* is deeply ironic, as Bigger's quest for liberation becomes a vehicle for his destruction (Butler 120).

Wright's narrative forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that liberation for Black individuals in a racist society is often an illusion. Bigger's misguided belief that violence can lead to freedom underscores the tragedy of his situation. In his desperate quest for agency, Bigger becomes trapped in a system that ultimately betrays him. This illusion of freedom reflects the broader struggles faced by African Americans in their fight against systemic racism.

### XI. THE SEARCH FOR REDEMPTION

As Bigger navigates his tumultuous journey, the theme of redemption emerges as a complex and often elusive goal. The events, his mistakes, and their consequences force the

protagonist to engage in profound introspection and contemplation. Wright captures this internal struggle emotionally: "I had to be free. I had to be a man. But what does it mean to be a man in a world that denies your humanity?" (Wright 234). In *Native Son*, the fundamental problem is the search for human identity and redemption in a world that methodically reduces Black people to subhuman status.

Bigger finally confesses, and in this moment, he appears to be both coming clean and seeking a path to absolution. However, in this section of *Native Son*, Wright conveys through his protagonist the notion that the path to redemption is a slender one, with societal structures conspiring against the individual seeking redemption. Bigger's quest for redemption reflects the deep and enduring psychological wounds that racism inflicts, as well as the much-needed collective healing that American society requires. Critics have observed that Bigger's guilt for murdering Mary and his attraction to her in life and in death reveal a profound struggle not only with systemic oppression but also with ingrained racism (Lehan 95).

### XII. THE ROLE OF SOCIETY IN SHAPING IDENTITY

Wright emphasizes how American society shapes its people's identities. Systemic racism traps the characters in *Native Son*, dictating their actions and beliefs. Omitting any romantic notions of free will, Wright illustrates how the interplay between individual and societal forces shapes—and too often mars—identity. For him, the "Negro" is not just a victim of circumstances but a person with agency, shaped by the same society that initially made him a victim.

Wright takes apart the idea of individualism when it comes to living under systematic oppression, particularly in the context of an environment that limits one's agency. What he says mirrors contemporary discussions of the impact of systematic racism on the lives of individuals. As critic Anna K. Houghton noted, "Wright's work remains relevant today, reminding us that the fight against racism requires a collective effort to dismantle the structures that perpetuate oppression" (Houghton 120).

### XIII. THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Wright advocates for not just individual but also collective action in the fight against racism. Solidarity among people of all colors and conditions is essential, he argues, if anyone is to achieve true freedom. This is especially necessary for those whom a hostile society has historically

denied not just citizenship but also humanity. Bigger Thomas is not only existentially isolated, but also deprived of the kind of community support that might have helped him resist the inhuman demands placed upon him by society (Lanser 31).

Wright's emphasis on collective action most directly expresses the contemporaneity of his work. Today, racial justice demands the same serious commitment from American people as Bigger Thomas in Wright's novel, as recent events serve as a reminder that black people's lives in America are still not safe. No movement for social justice ever wins all of its objectives; rather, it wins some and pays in blood for others along the way. Wright's life and work remind readers of this putative black truth (Houghton 145).

#### XIV. THE IMPACT OF SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Wright's racism critique has yet another dimension. Wright examines the class issue as it intersects with race. He demonstrates the inextricable connection between Bigger's lived experiences and the socioeconomic factors that overdetermine the marginalization of black people in America. Systemic racial and class inequalities shape Bigger's life, and Wright forcefully presents the intertwined nature of these realities through the devastating consequences they inflict on Bigger.

Wright's depiction of the economic conditions endured by African Americans stands as a potent condemnation of a society indifferent to the plight of its weakest members. In Bigger's life, race and class interact. They shape his identity and drive him to violence. Critics have concluded that the best way to understand Bigger Thomas' character and the reasons for his actions is to grasp the full dimension of racism—a dimension that extends well beyond the immediate economic deprivation that Wright so powerfully evokes.

#### XV. CONCLUSION

A potent condemnation of racism and its disastrous effects on African Americans, Richard Wright's *Native Son* is impossible to miss as one of the monumental works of 20th-century American literature. It demands attention, not only for its complex and heartbreaking protagonist, Bigger Thomas, but also for its brazen portrayal of the lethal and dehumanizing absurdities of life under the color line. Bigger's emergence as a stereotypic "bad nigger" is no accident; Wright makes sure we see what makes systemic oppression and racism "tick." He accomplishes this with both literal and figurative violence, weaving a narrative

roiling with anger and despair. African Americans have had to accept not only the lash of oppression, but also the monstrous violence that emerges from systemic disenfranchisement. Like the novel, both of these revolve around the urgent societal changes necessary to fulfill the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all.

When we contemplate the messages relayed in *Native Son*, it becomes clear that the pain and suffering endured by Bigger Thomas are not exclusive to the realm of novels. For a man like Richard Wright to craft a novel about a black man's murder of a young white woman and then delve into the reasons for that murder, his work calls for understanding the plight of not just a single man, but of a whole race of people across the expanse of time, which is the legacy of racial oppression in America.

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