

Racial Conflict between Black and White Communities in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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One of the most excellent writers of African-American literature, Richard Wright was born on 4 September, 1908, on a ranch in Mississippi. He was the first baby of Nathan Wright, an illiterate sharecropper, and Ella Wilson Wright, a schoolteacher. His father neglected the family unit to live with other female. His mother became chronically ill and the family was enforced to live with relatives. Finally, they settled with Wright's grandmother. He attended a Seventh-day Adventist school where his aunt taught, he rebelled against religious regulation. The illnesses of his mother drained the family economically. Wright was forcing to work a number of jobs during his early days and teenage years. Although irregular education, he became a passionate booklover and graduated as valedictorian of his junior high school. Economic dilemma worsened, and he was forced to drop out of high school after only some weeks to find work. Shortly before the beginning of the great dejection, the family moved to Chicago, where he devoted himself sincerely to writing. Richard Wright became a part of the Communist Party in 1934, and began publishing articles and poetry in numerous left-wing publications. He took a work with the Federal Writers' Project helping research the history of blacks in Chicago. He moved to New York in 1937, and became Harlem editor for the *Daily Worker*, a communist newspaper. Approximately this time, he wrote and published *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of short stories that addresses the social realities faced by black community in American. He became extremely interested in the philosophical movement of existentialism, often socializing with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, two of the movement's most important figures. He died of a heart attack in 1960. Today he is honored as one of the best writers in African-American literature, an incredible influence on such prominent contemporaries and followers as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, among many others. He is often called the father of black American literature.

On 1 March, 1940 history of American literature was made with the publication of the novel by a relatively strange creator, Richard Wright. The day *Native Son* appeared American society was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later require. It made impossible a repetition of the previous lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama and claustrophobia of dream Richard Wright's novel brought out into the poem, as no one ever had before, the hated, trepidation and brutality that have cropped and may yet wipe out culture. Irving Howe observed:

A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cast of his submission. *Native Son* assaulted the most cherished American vanities: the hop that the accumulated injustice of past world brings with it no lasting penalties, the fantasy that in his humiliation the Negro somehow retained a sexual potency-or was it a childlike good nature? – That made it necessary to envy and still more to suppress him. Speaking from

the black worth of retribution, Wright insisted that history could be a punishment. He told us the one thing even the most liberal whites preferred not to hear: that Negroes were far from patient or forgiving that they were scared by fear, that they hated every movement of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and that often enough they hated us, the decent and cultivated white men who from complicity or neglect shared in the responsibility for their plight (Irving 100-05)

The response to *Uncle Tom's Children* had disenchanted the author, though he had worked hard to illustrate racism as he observed it at that time in American society. With his next literary work *Native Son*, that motivated genuine controversy of both black and white American community, he determined to make his readers feel the reality of race relations by writing something so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. The central character of the novel, Bigger Thomas, hails from the lowest stair of society. Writer does not infuse him with any of the romantic aspects as common to literary heroes. Comparatively, given the communal circumstances in which he must live, Bigger is what one might expect him to be gloomy, resentful, anxious, detestable, and cruel. A true evaluation of the novel thus may be given in this way:

Published in 1940, Richard Wright's *Native Son* was an instant success, even though it met with some controversy and chagrin among middle and upper middle class black Americans, who wished he had published a novel celebrating black people's ability to transcend oppression. On the other hand, as a contemporaneous *Time* magazine article noted, Wright had written an even more difficult novel – one about a black man justly accused of murder whose actions were nevertheless shaped by American cultural, social, and economic forces that he couldn't control. The sales of *Native Son* made Wright a wealthy writer and one of the most acclaimed black writers of all time. He is often called the "father" of black American literature (www.shmoop.com/native-son/, Web).

In his famous article *How Bigger Was Born*, Richard Wright explains that Bigger is a combination of men he had himself known while growing up in the South. Confronted by racism and domination and left with very few options in their lives, these men displayed gradually more harmful and aggressive behavior, and were, in effect, disasters waiting to happen. In Chicago, removed from the dreadful domination of the South, Richard Wright revealed that Bigger was not entirely a black phenomenon. He saw, just as Bigger does in *Native Son* that millions of whites suffered as well, and he understood that the direct reason of this distress was the structure of American society itself. *Native Son* thus represents Richard Wright's vital caution that if American social and economic realities did not change, the oppressed masses would soon rise up in rage against those in authority. In the words of a well-known critic:

If a black man were to be seen with a white woman (let alone discovered in a white woman's bedroom) in the United States in Bigger Thomas's time (around 1940), he faced violent racism. He might be subject to a horrific end similar to that which Emmett Till endured several years later. In 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African-American teen, was brutally murdered in Money, Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. He was taken out of his uncle's house in the middle of the night, beaten, shot in the head, and thrown in the Tallahatchie River with barbed wire wrapped around his neck. His

murderers, the husband of the white woman and his half-brother, were acquitted of their crime but later openly confessed to the murder (www.shmoop.com/native-son/ , Web).

The injurious consequence of racism extends to the fair residents. It prevents whites from realizing the right sympathy natural in groups that they dominate. Really, one of the massive strengths of *Native Son* as a history of the effects of domination is Richard Wright's amazing capability to investigate the psychology not only of the demoralized but of the oppressors as well. He illustrates that racism is critical to both the communities. Many whites in the novel, such as Britten a racist, anticommunist private investigator and Peggy an Irish immigrant who has worked as the Daltons' cook for years, fall victim to the obvious pitfall of racial discrimination among whites: the undiplomatic common sense of superiority that deceives them into seeing blacks as less than human being. Writer illustrates that this sagacity of superiority is a weak point, as Bigger is capable to manipulate it in his disguise the murder of Mary the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton a white millionaire couple living in Chicago and Mrs. Dalton is blind. Bigger realizes that a male with Britten's prejudices would never believe a black man could be capable of what Bigger has done. Indeed, for a time, Bigger manages to run away the doubt.

Other colorless characters in the story are mostly persons with a self-consciously progressive outlook toward race relations are affected by racism in additional complex ways. Though the Daltons, for illustration, have made a fortune out of exploiting blacks, they forcefully present themselves as philanthropists committed to the black American reason. They maintain this deception in an effort to avoid confronting their fault, and we appreciate that they may even be unconscious of their own deep-rooted racial prejudices. Jan Erlone, a member of the Communist Party and Mary Dalton's boyfriend represent an even subtler form of racism, as they willfully seek to take care of blacks and treat them as social group, but finally fail to recognize them as individuals. This breakdown has unfortunate results. Mary and Jan's easy supposition that Bigger will welcome their friendship deludes them into overlooking the opportunity that he will respond with doubt and fear, a usual reaction considering that Bigger has never experienced such sociable behavior from whites. In this regard, Mary and Jan are deceived by their failure to identify Bigger's personality just as much as an overt racist such as Britten is deceived by a failure to recognize Bigger's humanity. Ultimately, author portrays the vicious sphere of racism from the white side as well as from the black one, emphasizing that even well-meaning whites exhibit prejudices that feed into the similar black actions that confirms the racist whites' sense of supremacy.

Native Son opens with the ringing bell of an alarm clock, a wake-up call not only for Bigger and his family unit, but also a word of caution to America as a whole about the dangerous state of race relations in the nation Richard. Wright sees a black resident that, though freed from entire slavery, still lives under awful environment, is unable to take part in an election, and is terrorized by groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The North is somewhat more included, but lots of blacks there still live in distressed poverty. Wright believes these surroundings have created individuals who are isolated not only from the white humankind but also from their own community, whose only release is through violence. Bigger is the epitome of such personality. He is separated from his family and friends, irritated by his mother's religious songs, and kept poor and weak through the oppressiveness of white community of that time.

Native Son is printed in the method of urban naturalism, much similar to *The Jungle*, a famous novel of Upton Sinclair. The characters of both the literary works are urban residents whose destinies are determined by forces almost entirely away from their control. Like the central personality of *The Jungle*, a poor Lithuanian immigrant in Chicago, Bigger perceives that the narrow limitations of his life were previously determined before his birth. A lengthy unequal separation of supremacy between white and black community, rich and poor people has fascinated him within a disadvantaged race and a disadvantaged category. He feels watched and controlled even when white communities are not there, as if white natives assault his very insides. The feeling of discrimination may be seen in these lines:

We black and they white. They got things and we aren't. They do things and we can't. It's just like jail. Half the time I feel I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence (Rampersad 163).

He feels similar to a male condemned to a dishonored existence and definite doom. Having developed beneath the environment of cruel racial discrimination in American society, Bigger is troubled with an authoritative conviction that he has no control over his existence and that he cannot seek to anything other than menial, low-wage work. His mother annoys him to take a work with a wealthy white man named Mr. Dalton, but Bigger in its place chooses to meet up with his associates to preparation the robbery of a white man's accumulate.

Frustration, fear and Anger, define Bigger's everyday life, as he is required to hide behind a front elevation of toughness or danger succumbing to hopelessness. While Bigger and his criminal fellow have robbed numerous black prosperous people but they have never attempted to cheat a white man. Bigger sees whites not as individuals, but as a natural oppressive. Bigger's fear of confronting this power overwhelms him. He sadistically assaults a member of his mob to disrupt the robbery. He feels that white society is like a hell for the blacks where they can do nothing according to their own wishes. He asks his friend Gus. "Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Bigger asks his friend Gus. Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships?" (Rampersad 163)

Mr. Dalton and other rich real estate barons are successfully robbing to the black poor people on Chicago's South Side. They decline to permit blacks to lease apartments in mostly white neighborhoods. Consequently guide to overpopulation and artificially high rents in the predominantly black South Side. Mr. Dalton sees himself as a generous humanitarian. However as he donates funds to black schools and offers jobs to poor, nervous black boys like Bigger. Mr. Dalton practices this token charity chiefly to ease his guilty conscience for exploiting poor blacks.

Mary Dalton, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, identifies herself as a progressive, dates an admitted communist, and interacts with Bigger with small observe for the stern border line society imposes between black men and white women. Mary's contravention of this boundary leads to her death and the resulting maturity of Bigger's personality. She frightens Bigger by ignoring the communal taboos that manage the relations between white women and black men. On his first day of job, Bigger drives Mary to meet her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, a member of the Communist Party and Mary Dalton's boyfriend. Eager to confirm their

progressive ideals and racial tolerance, Mary and Jan force Bigger to take them to a restaurant in the South Side. Despite Bigger's embarrassment, they order drinks, and as the evening passes, all three of them get drunk. Bigger then drives around the city while Mary and Jan make out in the back seat. Afterward, Mary is too drunk to make it to her bedroom on her own, so Bigger helps her up the stairs. Drunk and aroused by his extraordinary closeness to a youthful white woman, Bigger begins to kiss Mary but her blind mother, Mrs. Dalton, enters the bedroom. Though Mrs. Dalton cannot see him, her ghostly attendance terrifies him. Bigger worries, that Mary in her drunken situation will expose his existence. He covers her face with a pillow and by accident smothers her to death. Bigger tries to hide his fault by burning Mary's dead body in the Daltons' heating system. He decides to attempt to utilize the Daltons' prejudice against communists to frame Jan for Mary's vanishing. Bigger believes that the Daltons will suppose Jan is risky and that he may have kidnapped their daughter for political purposes. Additionally, Bigger takes improvement of the Daltons' racial prejudices to avoid disbelief, continuing to play the part of an anxious, unaware black servant who would be unable to consign such an act.

Bigger escapes the enormous manhunt for as long as he can, but finally, he is arrested after a striking shoot-out. The media and the public decide his blame and his punishment before his trial even starts. The angry general population guesses that he raped Mary before killing and destroyed her body by fire to conceal the proof of the rape. Moreover, the white powerful and the white crowd apply his crime as a reason to terrify the whole South Side of America. Boris A. Max a Jewish lawyer who works for the Labor Defenders, a union joined with the Communist Party. Max argues, based on a sociological investigation of American culture, that institutionalized racism and prejudice, not natural racial qualities creates circumstances for brutality in urban ghettos. He tries to put away Bigger from the death punishment, arguing that while his client is accountable for his fault, it is very important that he is a product of his surroundings. His crime belongs to the anxious, hopeless survival that he has experienced in a racist culture since birth. Lawyer cautions that there will be more boys and mature person like Bigger in society, if America does not put an ending to the inhuman cycle of hatred and retribution. Despite Max's arguments and advice to the white power, Bigger is sentenced to death because racism facts are there.

The central character of the novel Bigger is not a conventional male protagonist by any means. However, Richard Wright compels us to go into Bigger's mind and to recognize the upsetting effects of the communal circumstances in which he was born and raised. He was not born as a sadistic criminal. He is a native son a result of American culture of that time and the violent behavior and racial discrimination that saturate it.

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