

Native Son

In *Native Son*, Wright employs Naturalistic ideology and imagery, creating the character of Bigger Thomas, who seems to be composed of a mass of disruptive emotions rather than a rational mind joined by a soul. This concept introduces the possibility that racism is not the only message of the novel, that perhaps every person would feel as isolated and alone as Bigger does were he trapped in such a vicious cycle of violence and oppression. Bigger strives to find a place for himself, but the blindness he encounters in those around him and the bleak harshness of the Naturalistic society that Wright presents the reader with close him out as effectively as if they had shut a door in his face. In the first book, Wright tells the reader "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 flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force" (p.31). Bigger is controlled by forces that he cannot tangibly understand. The society seems to bear down upon him like a weight, and only by being nonconformist to all philosophies does Bigger feel that he can throw off that weight of oppression and misunderstanding.

Bigger's many acts of violence are, in effect, a quest for a soul. He desires an identity that is his alone. Both the white and the black communities have robbed him of dignity, identity, and individuality. The human side of the city is closed to him, and for the most part Bigger relates more to the faceless mass of the buildings and the mute body of the city than to another human being. He constantly sums up his feelings of frustration as wanting to "blot out" those around him, as they have effectively blocked him out of their lives by assuming that he will fail in any endeavor before he tries. He has feelings, too, of fear, as Wright remarks "He was following a strange path in a strange land" (p.127). His mother's philosophy of suffering to wait for a later reward is equally stagnating -- to Bigger it appears that she is weak and will not fight to live. Her religion is a blindness; but she needs to be blind in order to survive, to fit into a society that would drive a "seeing" person mad. All of the characters that Bigger says are blind are living in darkness because the light is too painful.

Bigger wants to break through that blindness, to discover something of worth in himself, thinking that "all one had to do was be bold, do something nobody ever thought of. The whole things came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made them blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it" (p.120). Just as Bigger later hides himself amidst the catacombs of the old buildings, many people hide themselves deep within their minds in order to bear the ordeal of life and the oppression of an uncaring society. But their blindness allows them something that Bigger cannot achieve: it allows these people to meld into the society that is the city, while Bigger must stand at the outside of that community alternately marvelling and hating the compromises of those within.

Bigger is alone; he is isolated from every facet of human affection. Max tells the court that Bigger cannot kill because he himself is dead, and a

person without empathy or sympathy, without the deep, steadying love of family or faith in anything. When he lashes out in violence it is in a way a search for what hurt him; he hurts others because it is a way of hiding that he is hurt and afraid. At one point in the novel he cries because "once again he had trusted his feelings and once again they had betrayed him" (p.359). If one considers life to be a period of growth and learning, recognition of self-worth and of the worth of others, then Bigger has not been given the chance to live. Book Three is called "Fate", and indeed Bigger seems to be controlled his entire life by ambivalent outside forces who could care less about him.

Considering the nature of a soul to be the essence of self and truth in each individual, Bigger has not been allowed to develop either truth or self. He has been lied to until he believes the lies he tells himself. He has no place in society. His own mother believes in him no more than the billboard reading "you can't win" that he sees each day outside his apartment. He has grown up in an environment where enormous rats fester in holes and water is a maybe situation, where meals are precarious and money is almost nonexistent, and where he is told time and time again that he has no worth, no dignity, no intelligence or creativity. Is it any wonder that Bigger is violent? It seems more fantastic that all of the people around him are not.

The title of the novel begins to explain Bigger's situation; he is more a child of the city itself than of human parentage. His soul is as stunted as an undernourished plant whose blooms are destroyed before they can come to fruition. When he says, upon reading the paper "No! Jan didn't help me! He didn't have a damned thing to do with it! I -- I did it!" (p.283) he is clinging to the act of violence he performed as an affirmation of self. He is isolated by a blind society, he is loved by no one, he has never been given a chance to explore who and what he is. His attitude of "why care?" is rather to be expected, predicted, than wondered over.

At the close of the novel, Bigger struggles to explain to Max the turmoil of emotions he feels, to assert for once and always his individuality by telling someone who will remember. His thought "Max did not even know!" (p.494) shows some of the passion behind his quest for self. If extreme emotions are polar opposites of each other, and one is born simply with the capacity for emotion itself, then Bigger could have been great. But the image of the death of the product, the child, of the city appeals to those who caused his birth, and there is no redemption for Bigger.

Society hates most what it itself creates, and Bigger as the very reflection of that society must die. He is not a good person, he is not noble or true or brilliantly creative. But he has the capacity for all of those things, and has not been given the chance to fulfill them. His crime of violence is as much the crime of the people around him, who stifled his soul and nourished the other, baser side of him that was the only way he had of self-expression.