

**Man-Society Relation
In Richard Wright's *Native Son***

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Richard Wright (1909 - 1960) is an outstanding Negro novelist who made his appearance on the scene of American literature in the twentieth century and left an indelible mark on later Negro fiction in particular and on the consciousness of the modern American society in general through his thorough and sweeping revelation of the soul-shattering condition of blacks in a white-dominated society. His personal experience played a key role in the rise of his great ability to uncover the very roots and multifarious aspects of the misery of American blacks. He was born in the South where racial discrimination practised against blacks was at its worst; and the poverty of his family combined with this racial prejudice to make Richard Wright's childhood and adolescence entirely miserable. He tried different kinds of jobs, subjecting himself to the insensitive humiliation of whites, in order to earn the money which he badly needed to buy food, clothes and schoolbooks. Richard Wright moved

to the North, where he found a continuation of the persecution of blacks, whose sole crime was the blackness of their skin. He gained immense experience of the ferno of black life, and it is on this experience that he draws in the writing of his fiction. So, the main theme in his works is the struggle of blacks in a society which denies them full human existence because it considers them sub-human.

Wright wrote a number of works which established his literary reputation as "one of American literature's most classic and controversial writers" (Trotman, xi). His first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, was published in 1936 and it comprised five novellas. It was followed by a number of full-length novels such as *Native Son* (1940), *The Outsider* (1953), and *The Long Dream* (1958). However, the greatest contribution to the creation of Wright's classic status was made by his novel, *Native Son*. It is also due to this novel that Wright has exercised his tremendous influence on later Negro novelists, as, since its publication in 1940, it has inspired Negro novelists who tried to imitate its model. The success of *Native Son* in this respect is succinctly pointed out by Robert A. Bone:

Richard Wright's *Native Son* marks a high point in the history of the Negro novel, not only because it is a work of art on its on right but because it

influenced a whole generation of Negro novelists. A best-seller and Book-of-the-Month Club selection, *Native Son* was successfully adapted to the Broadway Stage by Orson Welles and was later revived as a movie by Wright himself. Since its appearance in 1940, the novel has inspired a host of imitators who may be said to constitute the Wright school of postwar Negro fiction. (72-73).

The richness of meaning of this masterpiece prompted a corresponding rich variety of critical evaluations. Yet, most of these critical evaluations concentrate on the social and political implications of the novel. James Nagel argues that "as a social document the work is a penetrating and controversial statement which has shocked the conscience of American complacency" (151). The social dimension is also emphasized by Elizabeth Phillips who sees that "*Native Son* is concerned with the failure of society to provide for one of its own members the benefits it has taught him to desire" (26). For Charles Poore, the novel is concerned with a collectivity, which is in this case blacks as a race, and not with the individual human being, and he holds that in *Native Son* "Wright is a champion of a race, not defender of an individual wrongdoer" (25). Henry Seidel Canby admits that "this powerful and sensational novel is very difficult to describe so as to convey its real purpose", but he at the same time concludes that "*Native Son* is a crime story" (23). On

the other hand, some other critics shift the focus of the novel from the collective to the personal plane, holding that the meaning of the life of the black protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is the real concern of the novel. Robert A. Bone states that "it is the hidden meaning of Bigger's life... which is the real subject of *Native Son*" (75). The personal plane as against the collective one is more forcibly emphasized by Donald Gibson who points out that :

Most critics of Wright's novel see only the outer covering of Bigger Thomas, the blackness of his skin and his resulting social role. Few have seen him as a discrete entity, a particular person who struggles with the burden of his humanity The final meaning of the book, as a matter of fact, depends upon the awareness on the part of the reader of Bigger's individuality. (35).

It is clear that Robert A. Bone and Donald Gibson, who are only examples, take the struggle for individuality to be the subject of the novel.

However, one thinks that the novel can be better interpreted in the light of the interplay of the collective plane and the personal plane, because the nature of the collective plane is reflected in the state of existence which the protagonist attains to, and , at the same time, this state of existence is defined against the background of the collective

plane laid out in the novel. To discuss one plane in separation from, or at least without paying sufficient attention to, the other plane would lead to a blurred vision of the message which Wright tries to hammer out in the novel.

It is worthy of note that the nature of the story of *Native Son* underlines the validity of the approach one opts for. The story falls into three books entitled "Fear", "Flight", and "Fate" respectively; and this triadic structure explores the life of the protagonist as it is misshaped, threatened and wasted by a hostile society. In Book One, the novelist shows how fear triggers off the protagonist's crime. We come to see that the hero of the novel, a twenty-year-old Negro called Bigger Thomas, lives in one squalid, rat-infested room with his mother, his sister and his younger brother. Bigger is forced by the insistence of his family to accept a job, as chauffeur and furnace-man, with a rich white family, the Daltons. He drives the daughter of the Daltons, Mary, home, but he finds that she is too drunk to go to her room, and so he has to carry her to her room. Her blind mother comes into the room at this very moment, and Bigger is so frightened that he puts a pillow on the girl's mouth to stop her from mumbling and to avoid being detected by her mother. Bigger finds out that the girl is killed, and then he throws the body

into the furnace to destroy evidence. In Book Two, we come to see how Bigger's life is threatened after the discovery of the bones of the burned body of the girl, and how as a result he runs away. He avoids being captured by hiding in empty buildings, and during his terrified escape he kills his black girlfriend, Bessie, because he can neither take her with him nor leave her behind. After a spectacular hunt, Bigger is captured. In Book Three, we see how fate, as embodied in whites, snatches Bigger's life. Bigger is charged with murder, and during the three-day trial Bigger's lawyer, Max, does all he can to show the court the root cause of Bigger's crime, and to demonstrate that Bigger's crime is part of a greater crime committed by America against its black citizens. However, Max's defense fails to achieve its purpose, and Bigger is sentenced to death. The novel thus comes to its close.

We are now in a position to discuss in more detail Wright's vision of the interplay of the collective and personal planes, or, in other words, the features and consequences of the relation between Bigger, as a human being, and the white-dominated American society. Bigger longs for the fulfilment of his potentialities as an individual human being, potentialities which are reflected in his impulses and desires,

but this fulfilment requires that he should have freedom of choice, which is in turn determined by the nature of the society in which he lives. Bigger as a black is robbed of his freedom, and this loss is deeply felt by him. Once and again, Bigger reveals his awareness of his loss of freedom. On one such occasion, he sees a pigeon flying overhead, which arouses his keen sense of his deprivation, and so he tells his black friend, Gus, bitterly that "I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do" (24). Hence, Bigger's revelations of his desires are always tinged with frustration, as the fulfilment of these desires is almost impossible in the absence of freedom. One of the most urgent desires whose fulfilment, Bigger thinks, would create for him a meaningful life is a sense of belonging. He wants to mix with others, to belong to his world, in order to be able to define himself. When he is running away after the discovery of Mary's bones, he reveals this desire:

It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (226).

It should be noticed that Bigger's desire to have a sense of belonging, to hold communion with others, is not a fleeting wish which lasts only for a short while. It is a desire which recurs in different situations, which is as persistent as Bigger's clinging to life, since it is in the final analysis the vehicle of creating the meaning of this life. So, although Bigger is captured and put on trial, which means that he is facing the chimera of death, he does not cease to think that if he managed to hold responsive communion with others, "there would be union, identity, there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life" (335). Bigger does not merely reveal his desire for relatedness, but he also hopes for the removal of the barriers which block up its development. As Wright points out:

Another impulse rose in him, born of desperate need, and his mind clothed it in an image of a strong blinding sun sending hot rays down and he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun. (335).

We can see that Bigger's hope takes the shape of a vision, a fancy, which indicates that its realization is not possible the light of the actualities of the American socie

Moreover, even this fancy is stifled when Bigger reads the strong expressions of whites' hate for him as reported by newspapers.

As a matter of fact, the stifling of Bigger's desires is persistently maintained by the mechanisms of society. It is the harvest of a process of conditioning which, as Samuel Sitten puts it, "grinds down human personality" (31). Bigger writhes under the painful sense of being constantly shackled by this social control, and so we come to see that in his reflection "he felt that they ruled him, even when they were far away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him" (110). This control is at work even in the absence of its agents, whites; it so penetrates Bigger's consciousness that its agents become like God, which means that Bigger's actions, reactions, and feelings are predetermined. This predetermination entails death-in-life. Bigger stresses this idea when he tells Max that whites "choke you off the face of the earth. They like God.... They don't even let you feel what you want to feel.... They kill you before you die" (227). This thwarting condition uncovers a social illness, it indicates that society has deteriorated as it has changed its creative function into a destructive one. Wright's vision in this respect recalls Zola's view of society as a destructive milieu

which perverts individuality by obstructing its free development. Robert Butler underlines this point of similarity when he observes that "to Wright's and Zola's powerfully inversive imaginations, modern society had become a parody of itself. Instead of protecting life and fostering human value, it had degenerated into an environment of fear which blocked man's most deeply creative impulses" (52). However, what distinguishes Wright's vision is that he does not consider the American society to be producing a parody of itself, but, rather, a parody of its conception. In other words, the American white society does not produce a parody of itself by its conditioning of blacks, rather, it produces a parody of its conception of blacks.

This conception of blacks has as its foundation the idea that blacks are sub-human, an idea which has multifarious manifestations in the practices of the American society. One of these manifestations comes out in the whites' use of animal and insect imagery to refer to blacks. Buckley, the State's Attorney, uses this kind of imagery when urging the court to administer the heaviest punishment to Bigger. So, in his vehement appeal that Bigger receive the death penalty, Buckley tells the court that "every decent white man in

America ought to swoon with joy for the opportunity to crush with his heel the woolly head of this black lizard, to keep it from scuttling on his belly farther over the earth and spitting forth his venom of death" (373). Buckley does also refer to Bigger as "this black mad dog" and "this rapacious thing". Another manifestation of the view of blacks as sub-human is embodied in the policy of racial discrimination practised against blacks, a policy which can be encountered in every field of human activity in America. Bigger has a strong desire to be an aviator, but this desire is frustrated because blacks are not allowed to join the Aviation School. On the contrary, whites can fly because, as Bigger puts it bitterly, "they get a chance to do everything" (19). The resulting meanness of opportunity which is the fate of blacks infuriates Bigger. He does not want to take the job with the Daltons, but the other option is starvation. As Wright tells us, Bigger "could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action" (16).

Due to this policy of racial discrimination, a black is denied the rights of full citizenship. So, white police do not extend their protection to blacks; we come to know that "white policemen never really searched diligently for

Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes" (17). The death of the black girl, Bessie, is an outrageous example which shows how a black is denied all rights. Whites do not care about the murder of Bessie, they simply and in cold blood use her body as evidence in their attempt to make Bigger receive the heaviest punishment for the murder of the white girl, Mary. The newspapers' coverage of the murder of Mary reveals the extent to which blacks are robbed of their rights. One of the newspapers, *The Jackson Daily Star*, reports that "residential segregation is imperative" and that the people of the South "believe that the North encourages Negroes to get more education than they are organically capable of absorbing , with the result that northern Negroes are generally more unhappy and restless than those of the South". The newspaper adds that, according to the experience of the South, blacks can be psychologically conditioned in such a way as to make them look at whites with awe and fear :

Still another psychological deterrent can be attained by conditioning Negroes so that they have to pay deference to the white person with whom they come in contact.... We have found that the injection of an element of constant fear has aided us greatly in handling the problem. (261)

As a matter of fact, this psychological conditioning is a reality implanted in the consciousness of blacks. That is why Wright points out that "to Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead" (109).

A concomitant of this racial discrimination is the division of the American nation into two worlds: the world of whites and the world of blacks. This division and the features which characterize each of the two worlds are pointed out by Bigger when he tells his black friends that "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" (23). Such a division is deeply rooted in the consciousness of Bigger, a fact which becomes clear when he goes to see his white employer, Mr. Dalton. When in the white neighbourhood, Bigger feels that "this was not his world; he had been foolish in thinking that he would have liked it" (146).

In fact, the division of the American nation parallels a division within Bigger himself. Bigger has a real personality which is suppressed by the oppressive conditioning practised by whites, and which expresses itself in Bigger's intermittent revelation of his wishes and desires, and a false

personality which is imposed on him by society. The pejorative conception of Bigger as a black, which is implemented by whites, alienates Bigger from his real personality and brings him to take on another personality, which is false. In other words, the American society crushes Bigger's unique individuality and makes him assume a false personality measured and tailored by the practices of this society. It should be taken into consideration that Bigger's real personality is not extirpated, and that it lies dormant, a condition which gives rise to a duality that characterizes Bigger as a human being. It is worthy of note that Bigger's predicament as such universalizes his experience, it is the predicament of any human being, regardless of racial or national considerations, who falls under the manipulative control of an oppressive collective power. So, we could encounter Bigger in America or in Nazi Germany or in Russia. Wright himself underlines the universality of Bigger's experience when he states, in his essay "How, 'Bigger' Was Born", that :

I was fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia. All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. From far away Nazi Germany and old Russia had come to me items of knowledge that told me that certain modern experiences were

creating types of personalities whose existence ignored racial and national lines of demarcation, that these personalities carried with them a more universal drama-element than anything I'd ever encountered, that these personalities were mainly imposed upon men and women living in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted. (xix).

It is noticeable that imposed personalities uncover the existence of some social illness, an illness which strikes a resemblance between racial America and such countries as Nazi Germany and Russia. In this way, it can be said that Bigger, with his imposed personality, serves as a symbol that exposes the illness of the American society. However, James Baldwin, a distinguished Negro novelist, denies Bigger's status as a social symbol. In his essay, "Many Thousands Gone", he states that "one may object that it was precisely Wright's intention to create in Bigger a social symbol, revelatory of social disease" (72); Baldwin puts it more emphatically when he concludes that "Bigger ...cannot function therefore as a reflection of the social illness" (75). As a matter of fact, both Wright himself and the text of the novel underline Bigger's status as a social symbol. In his "How 'Bigger' Was Born", Wright states that "two items of my experience combined to make me aware of Bigger as a meaningful and prophetic symbol" (xiv). In the novel itself,

Max makes it clear in his speech to the court that Bigger is a social symbol that reveals the illness of society. He tells the court, referring to Bigger, that "the complex forces of society have isolated here for us a symbol, a test symbol. The prejudices of men have stained this symbol... The unremitting hate of men has given us a psychological distance that will enable us to see this tiny social symbol in relation to our whole sick social organism" (354). One thinks that it is in this context that the name of the hero of the novel reveals its significance. The name "Bigger" shows that the hero has a personality which is "bigger" than him as an individual, it is a personality which reflects a greater outside reality. This explains Bigger's recurring feeling that he is doomed, that he has no control over the course of his action. He gives voice to this feeling when he tells his black friend, Gus, that "I feel like something awful's going to happen to me Naw; it ain't like something going to happen to me... It's like I was going to do something I can't help" (23-24).

The imposed, or false, personality spawns within Bigger a variety of feelings and reactions, such as submissiveness, fear, hate and violence. Submissiveness is only a thin veneer which covers up such eruptive feelings and reactions as hate and violence. In the presence of whites, and with his

irresistible "Yessum" and "Yessuh", Bigger reveals his unconditional submissiveness. This submissiveness is related to a profound, and tormenting, sense of inferiority which Bigger cannot help experiencing in the presence of whites. The other feelings and reactions characteristic of Bigger's false personality play a much more important role in developing the action of the novel. Through fear Bigger seeks to have a shield that would protect him from a powerful oppressive reality. Fear by its nature indicates that there is a hostile, harmful, or threatening object against which one needs to defend oneself. So, fear brings Bigger to set up a high wall or a curtain between himself and a hostile world. Samuel Sillen rightly observes that Bigger is "a fear-ridden boy whose attitude of iron reserve is a wall between himself and a world which will not allow him to live and grow" (31). Moreover, it is fear which determines Bigger's attitude to his impulses; so, as Wright puts it in the novel, "that was the way he lived, he passed his days trying to defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared" (44). As a result, fear has a formative role in Bigger's life, in the sense that it colours his approach not only to the outside world, but to himself as well. James Baldwin is in the right when he observes, in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel",

that "all of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear" (33).

As indicated in the above-mentioned quotation, hate is one of the elements which play a formative role in Bigger's life. Like fear, hate is forced upon Bigger by an outside power, and that is why he cannot help feeling it. When he is questioned by Buckley, Bigger reveals the compulsive nature of his hate: "he would have gladly admitted his guilt if he had thought that in doing so he could have given in the same breath a sense of the deep, choking hate that had been his life, a hate he had not wanted to have, but could not help having" (286). This compulsive nature of Bigger's hate is best illustrated by his relation with the two white people who are kind to him, and who look upon him as a human being: Mary and Jan. Bigger's hate is directed to whites in their collectivity, and not to individuals in particular; therefore, Mary and Jan become for Bigger emblematic of the white collectivity. This fact is made clear when Bigger answers Max's question: "when did you start hating Mary?" Bigger's answer is that "I hated her as soon as she spoke to me, as soon as I saw her. I reckon I hated her before I saw her" (226). Bigger's hate is so fixed that Mary's kindness and well-intentioned desire to help do not modify it. He is

aware of Mary's difference from other whites, he is aware that she is the first white person who "responded to him as if he were human" (66), but he cannot separate her in his consciousness from the white collectivity he hates. So, as Wright tells us, for Bigger Mary is "with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. But, for all that, she was white and he hated her" (81). Jan is not only kind to Bigger, he does not only consider Bigger a human being, but he, being a communist, also holds the promise of a change that would bridge the gulf separating whites and blacks. As he tells Bigger, "after the revolution there'll be no white and no black, there'll be no rich and no poor" (69). However, as in the case of Mary, Bigger cannot separate Jan from the white collectivity he hates, and so what he feels towards Jan is "a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (68). It is the same hate which Bigger feels towards those whites who have degraded him, who have deformed him. This is due to the fact that hate, like fear, is deeply rooted in the consciousness of Bigger, a fact which is explained by Max in his speech to the court. He tells the court that "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 the justification of his existence" (366-367). It is worthy of note that hate, like fear, enables Bigger to keep a defensive distance, to set up a wall between himself and the oppressive outside reality. This explains Bigger's change of feelings when he is captured by the white police after the murder. Immediately after his capture, we come to see that "toward no one in the world did he feel any fear now, for he knew that fear was useless; and toward no one in the world did he feel any hate now, for he knew that hate would not help him" (254). It is clear that fear and hate as defensive weapons become of no value to Bigger when he is captured, and that is why he gives them up.

Like fear and hate, violence is an aspect of Bigger's false personality, or, in other words, it is a concomitant of the stifling of Bigger's real personality. Max makes this idea clear when he tells the court that "men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread! And they can *murder* for it" (366). Max makes it clear that this "lack of self-realization" stems from the thwarting of Bigger's individuality, and so he reminds the court that "we should not pretend horror or surprise when thwarted life expresses itself in fear and hate and crime" (359). John Reilly

is in the right when he describes Bigger's violence as "the deep, instinctive expression of a human being denied individuality" (395). Bigger's violence brings James Baldwin to call him "a monster created by the American republic" ("Many Thousands Gone", 72). However, one cannot accept Baldwin's description of Bigger as a monster, especially in the light of a consideration of the motive and nature of his violence. James Nagel sheds light on the motive of Bigger's violence when he calls it an "act of self-defense" (155). As a matter of fact, Bigger's violence is not a consciously conceived plan, rather, it is an instinctive, compulsive response to the encroachment of a hostile society. Irving Howe misses the point when he takes Bigger's violence to be in part "a symptom of Wright's dependence on violence and shock" (67). Wright leaves no doubt as to his intention to show in Bigger's violence a projection of a diseased society. In his "How 'Bigger' Was Born", Wright states that Bigger is the product of "a world in which millions of men lived and behaved like drunkards men who lived by violence, through extreme action and sensation, through drowning daily in a perpetual nervous agitation" (xix-xx). So, Bigger in this respect is like a drunkard, in the sense that his violence is not consciously planned.

It is worthy of note that Bigger's violence comes out in the shape of a number of urges, and that all these urges are aroused by whites. In his reflection after the murder of Mary, Bigger indicates that his violence flared up "every time he looked into a white face" (214). One of the shapes which Bigger's violence takes is the urge to terrify. The novel abounds with occasions on which this urge is aroused. After the murder of Mary, Bigger recalls the injustice done to blacks by Mr. Dalton and other whites in the field of residential segregation; like other whites, Mr. Dalton "would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot"; it is then that Bigger's urge to terrify whites is aroused, and that is why he decides to send a kidnap note to Mr. Dalton, an act which he thinks would paralyze whites with terror. As Bigger himself puts it in his reflection, "he would send the kidnap note. He would jar them out of their senses" (164). On another occasion, Bigger's urge to terrify is aroused when he is on a public car and sees many whites around him. He has a desire to tell them of the murder of Mary, which is still undiscovered, just because he wants to enjoy seeing them frightened, or, as Wright puts it:

He looked out of the car window and then round at the white faces near him. He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl, a girl whose family was known to all of them. Yes; if he did that a look of startled horror would come over their faces.... He wanted the keen thrill of startling them. (123).

Another shape which Bigger's violence takes is the urge to destroy, to blot out, an urge which comes out on numerous occasions. When Bigger goes to see Mr. Dalton for the promised job, he is overwhelmed with a sense of inferiority and a concomitant sense of fear in the presence of Mr. Dalton, and it is then that the urge to blot out flares up. As Wright tells us, Bigger "wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel like this. If not that, he wanted to blot himself out" (49-50). It is obvious that the urge to blot out is directed not only to the other, but to Bigger himself as well. On another occasion, Mary and Jan, in Mary's car with Bigger who is at this time the chauffeur of the Daltons, discuss with sympathy the condition of blacks in America, and it is then that the urge to blot out so flares up that it brings Bigger to think of blotting out the car with Mary and Jan and himself in it. As Wright puts it :

The car sped through the Black Belt, past tall buildings holding black life. Bigger knew that they were thinking of his life and the life of his people. Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out- with himself and them in it.... This thing was getting the better of him, he felt that he should not give way to his feelings like this. But he could not help it. (70).

A third shape which Bigger's violence takes is the urge to kill. It marks the unleashing of a power of resentment which, as Max puts it in his speech to the court, "leaps to kill" (362). Although Mary is the first person Bigger kills, we come to see that murder as an act remained as a possibility long before the actual killing of Mary. This does not mean that Bigger had a plan of killing, but that the urge to kill within him surged up once and again without being daring enough to give itself the concrete shape of an actual act of murder. So, the killing of Mary brings Bigger to recall the upsurges of the urge to kill which he had experienced before the murder. Thus, in his reflection after the murder he points out that "in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill"

(101). In this way, Mary's murder serves as an externalization of the urge to kill intermittently at work within Bigger. This means that Bigger's life is tinged with guilt, guilt which is imposed on him, as it exists before he commits his first actual murder. In his speech to the court, Max sheds light on this point when he tells the court that :

The thing to remember is that this boy's way of life was a way of guilt; that his crime existed long before the murder of Mary Dalton; that the accidental nature of his crime took the guise of a sudden and violent rent in the veil behind which he lived, a rent which allowed his feelings of resentment and estrangement to leap forth and find objective and concrete form. (361).

As a matter of fact, the "veil" which Bigger lives behind, and which hinders the unleashing of his destructive feelings, is made up of fear.

However, it is fear, or, rather, excessive fear which causes "the rent in the veil", and which thus becomes instrumental in Bigger's killing of Mary. Bigger carries the drunken Mary to her room, with no intention to kill her, but excessive fear becomes the main actor in the drama of Mary's murder. In Wright's description of how the murder takes place, we can see that excessive fear plays the key role, the

murder described in the following quotation takes place in Mary's room, where Bigger has just put Mary on her bed, and where Mary's blind mother comes in suddenly:

Then he stiffened. The door behind him creaked. He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton. He wanted to knock her out of his way and bolt from the room... Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. (84).

Thus, the murder simply takes place. We can see that the real culprit is excessive fear, or terror, which at this moment has full control over Bigger.

This raises the question of responsibility for the murder. Responsibility in this context can be considered from two perspectives: the way the murder takes place, and the root cause of the murder. As for the first perspective, it has been indicated that Bigger is pushed to smother Mary to death by the excessive fear of being detected. Excessive fear is aroused by the sudden entrance of Mary's mother, and this, one thinks, makes Mrs. Dalton one of the most significant symbols in the novel. She, with her much emphasized whiteness, symbolizes the white world which pushes Bigger

to crime, and her blindness underlines the blindness of this white world. Thus, the way the murder takes place exonerates Bigger from responsibility. From the second perspective, whites are also to be held responsible, because it is they who sowed the seeds of fear, hate and violence which finally snatch Mary's life. Max reminds whites of their responsibility when he tells the court that "we planned the murder of Mary Dalton, and today we come to court and say :'We had nothing to do with it!'" (363). Jan as a white admits this responsibility; he is fair and brave enough to tell Bigger that "I'm the one who ought to be in jail for murder instead of you. But that can't be, Bigger, I can't take upon myself the blame for what one hundred million people have done" (267). American whites need the courage and moral obligation of Jan in order to face up to their responsibility, but this is not likely to happen, largely due to the blindness created by their racial prejudice.

Bigger is aware of this blindness of whites, especially their blindness to the havoc they have caused within him. When running away after the murder, he reveals his bitter awareness that white newspapers have ignored the havoc within him for long, and that they come to print it now simply because he has thrown it out at them in the form of a

murder. So, in his reflection he points out that white newspapers "had not wanted to print it as long as it had remained buried and burning in his own heart. But now that he had thrown it out, thrown it at those who made him live as they wanted, the papers were printing it" (208). Thus, havoc remains to be burning within Bigger, unheeded by whites. In his "How 'Bigger' Was Born", Wright states that the moral of the novel is "horror of Negro life in the United States" (xxxiii). Bigger's life is actually a dramatization of this horror, a dramatization which gives that horror more than one manifestation. The worst manifestation is that Bigger is robbed of life, a fact which is indicated by Max's appeal to the court : "I ask you to spare this boy.... you would be for the first time conferring life upon him" (369). Another manifestation is that Bigger, being robbed of life as embodied in freedom, loses the opportunity of developing into a person with a healthy psychological make-up. This wasted opportunity is expressed by Bigger when he tells Max that "I would've been all right if I could've done something I wanted to do. I wouldn't be scared then. Or mad, maybe. I wouldn't be always hating folks; and maybe I'd feel at home" (229). Bigger cannot bring himself to forget the injustice done to him in this respect. As Henry Seidel Canby

observes," Bigger dies without hate for anything, except the obscure circumstances which compelled him to be what he was" (24). A third manifestation is that Bigger becomes the slave of certain feelings which are inculcated in him. Bigger's attitude to Mary is a good example which illustrates this aspect. It is an attitude which is an expression of feelings that are formed in him before he meets her. As Wright points out, "it was not Mary he was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys" (108-109). It is clear that the different manifestations coming out of the dramatization of the horror of black life as experienced by Bigger make of him more or less a puppet, and that a puppet cannot be held responsible for the actions of its operator.

The puppet analogy is further emphasized by Bigger's honest denial of any intention on his part to kill Mary. Bigger's denial of any intention to kill Mary is not an attempt made by a murderer to escape responsibility, but it is an honest expression of what really happened. Bigger tells Bessie the truth when he states that "I didn't mean to kill her" (213). He reiterates the same idea when he gives Max an account of how the murder took place. He tells Max that "it was like another man stepped inside of my skin and

started acting for me" (226). Henry Seidel Canby is in the right when he argues that the killing of Mary is an unpremeditated murder, and that "had her blind mother not come in at the fatal moment, the girl would have slept off her drunkenness" (23). As a matter of fact, Bigger does not have the intention to kill Mary or anyone else. This is different from the urge to kill, which is a compulsive, intermittent feeling. Bigger tells Max that "I never wanted to hurt nobody.... I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to, that's all" (388). It is in this context that the killing of the black girl, Bessie, can be appropriately understood. She is Bigger's girlfriend, and though he does not love her, he has no intention to kill her. He kills her because he has to, or, as Wright puts it: "he couldn't take her and he couldn't leave her; so he would have to kill her. It was his life against hers" (222). The role which whites play in Bigger's killing of Bessie is noticeable. He kills this black girl when he is hunted down by white police; he feels that he cannot leave her behind because she would be forced to tell them, and that he cannot take her with him in his frantic escape. So, the murder of Bessie and that of Mary are similar in that they show Bigger to be thrust by an outside power into an area of action he does not intend to wade through.

However, Bigger assumes moral responsibility for his murder, a step which is due to the fact that the murder awakens in him his sense of his identity. That is, he judges from the positive effect which the murder has on him that he is morally responsible. Bigger's controversial admission in this respect reveals his fresh understanding of himself, and his concomitant sense of moral responsibility. He tells Max that :

I didn't want to kill !.... But what I killed for, I *am*! It must have been pretty deep in me to make me kill ! I must have felt it awful hard to murder.... What I killed for must've been good ! I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. (391-392).

This admission is widely misinterpreted, and this is perhaps due to what Wright himself says in this respect. In his "How 'Bigger' Was Born", Wright states that the end of the novel shows Bigger to be "accepting what life had made him" (xxxiii). Almost all critics confirm Wright's above-quoted conclusion. Robert A. Bone points out that "Bigger, repossessed by hate, ends by accepting what life has made him : a killer" (80). Irving Howe stresses the same conclusion, stating that "at the end Bigger remains at the mercy of his hatred and fear" (66). Donald Gibson does also reiterate Wright's conclusion, pointing out that "Bigger tells Max that

he *is* what he has *done*" (39). As a matter of fact, to have a better interpretation of Bigger's admission one should believe the tale, not the teller. Wright is not in the right when he concludes that Bigger ends by accepting his imposed identity. On the contrary, Bigger ends by sloughing off his imposed identity, because the murder, being something which whites did not want, addresses his his sense of freedom and awakens his sense of his own identity.

This explains Bigger's exuberant feelings immediately after the murder. The murder so shakes Bigger that it unleashes the numbed and fettered feelings associated with his authentic existence, and thus it brings him a fresh understanding of himself. First and foremost, the murder resuscitates Bigger's sense of freedom. As Wright puts it in the novel, Bigger has "accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life" (255). This newly won sense of freedom has a number of manifestations which open new vistas before Bigger. He is exhilarated with the idea that he can for the first time impose upon whites, instead of being imposed upon. When Mr. Dalton and his private investigator, Britten, ask Bigger to tell them what happened to Mary, before the discovery of her murder, Bigger's feeling

is that "they wanted him to draw the picture and he would draw it like he wanted it. He was trembling with excitement. In the past had they not always drawn the picture for him?" (149). This exhilaration is also due to Bigger's feeling that he has deviated from the course of action prescribed by whites and that as a result he has done the unexpected. In his reflection after the murder, Bigger reveals his sense of exhilaration stemming from his feeling that he had "done what they thought he never could" (141). In addition, Bigger's sense of escape from the sphere of action dictated by whites gives rise to his feeling that he has created a world which is his own, a world which is not ruled and conditioned by whites. In his reflection, he celebrates this newly won independence, assuring himself that "he had murdered and had created a new life for himself" (101), and that "he had created a new world for himself" (264). Another vista opened before Bigger by his emerging sense of freedom is the possibility of choice, which in turn gives rise to pleasant feelings of individuality. After the murder of Mary, Bigger sees that he can run away, or remain, or confess; and this possibility of choice leads to the rise of his pleasant feelings of individuality. As he puts it in his reflection, "the mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made

him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands" (179). Max stresses the same point when he tells the court that the murder "made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action" (364). Bigger in this way feels that he has regained his freedom, a feeling which triggers off a sense of victory and a concomitant sense of equality. As Wright puts it , "the knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score" (155). Bigger is thus aware of the difference between his identity before the murder, which was the identity of the defeated, and his identity after the murder, which is that of the victorious.

In fact, the murder, through the positive feelings it unleashes, leads to the creation of meaning in Bigger's life. It brings Bigger to feel that his life has been set in order, because, as Samuel Sillen points out, it gives "a focus to the chaotic circumstances of his existence" (32). The rise of a focus, or a purpose, not only creates meaning in Bigger's present life, but it also reveals the meaninglessness of his former life. In this way, the murder, dreadful as it is, becomes the most meaningful and the most creative event in Bigger's

life, a state which lays the blame on society. As Robert A. Bone rightly observes, "Bigger is a human being whose environment has made him incapable of relating meaningfully to other human beings except through murder" (81). It is a sad fact that society with its devastating prejudices and restrictions so conditions the individual that it brings him to find self-creation in the destruction of another human being.

In conclusion, we can see the supreme importance of the relation between man and his society as depicted in this novel, and hence the validity of the approach which takes as the focus of its analysis the interplay of the personal and social planes. In addition to the fact that it addresses the key issues of *Native Son*, this approach strikes a balance between the locality and the universality of this novel. It does not wrench the novel out of the context of the racial problem which grinds blacks in the United States, yet, at the same time, it shows how Wright attains to universality through his penetrating treatment of the condition of a black, who is in the first place looked upon as an individual human being facing a collective enemy, which results in a human predicament that might confront any human being living on the face of this earth.

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