



*Unraveling Native Son:
Propagating Communism, Racial Hatred, Societal Change or
None of the Above??*

by: Jacqueline Becker
Department of English

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the many different ways in which Communism is portrayed within Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. It also seeks to illustrate that regardless of the reasoning behind the conflicted portrayal of Communism, within the text, it does serve a vital purpose, and that is to illustrate to the reader that there is no easy answer or solution for the problems facing society. Bigger and his actions cannot be simply dismissed as a product of a damaged society, nor can Communism be seen as an all-encompassing saving grace that will fix all of societies woes. Instead, this novel, seeks to illustrate the type of people that can be produced in a society divided by racial class lines. It shows what can happen when one oppressed group feels as though they have no power over their own lives. I have attempted to illustrate that what Wright ultimately achieved, through his novel *Native Son*, is to illuminate to readers of the time that a serious problem existed within their society, specifically in Chicago within the "Black Belt" and that the solution lies not with one social group or political party, not through senseless violence, but rather through changes in policy.

*Unraveling Native Son:
Propagating Communism, Racial Hatred, Societal
Change or None of the Above??*



Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*, presents Communism in many different lights. On the one hand, the pushy nature of Jan and Mary, two white characters trying to share their beliefs about an equal society under Communism, by forcing Bigger, the black protagonist, to dine and drink with them, is ultimately what leads to Mary's death. On the other hand, the Communist characters in the book have the highest moral fiber and are presented in the most positive light. This could be due to the fact that Communism, at the time in which *Native Son* was written, was widely viewed as a negative thing in America; or, it could also be due to the fact that Wright himself was wrestling with his own beliefs about the Communist party and its effectiveness. Regardless of the reasoning behind the conflicted portrayal of Communism within this text, it does serve a vital purpose, and that is to illustrate to the reader that there is no easy answer or solution for the problems facing society. Bigger and his actions cannot be simply dismissed as a product of a damaged society, nor can Communism be seen as an all-encompassing saving grace that will fix all of society's woes. Instead, this novel, seeks to illustrate the type of people that can be produced in a society divided by racial class lines. It shows what can happen when one oppressed group feels as though they have no power over their own lives. Mostly though, it shows how ineffective attempts to rectify the wrongs of society, like throwing millions into charities for the oppressed group, while still forcing them to live in squander, as the Dalton family in the novel does, only furthers the division of the classes. Ultimately, what Wright achieves, through his novel *Native Son*, is to illuminate to readers that a serious problem exists within society, specifically in Chicago within the "Black Belt" and the solution lies not

with one social group or political party, not through senseless violence, but rather through changes in policy.

It is no secret that early reviews of Wright's novel claimed that the piece was little more than an expression of "white hate" and that it was intentionally trying to provoke violence between the races. In the essay "Richard Wright and *Native Son*: Not Guilty" Dorothy S. Redden provides many examples of such reviews for *Native Son*, specifically one by David L. Cohn that reads "the preaching of Negro hatred of whites by Mr. Wright is on par with the preaching of white hatred of Negroes by the Ku Klux Klan"(Redden 111). In her essay Redden is arguing against such claims as those made by Cohn and seeks instead to have readers view the text differently. She states that "*Native Son*' is not choked with rage, hatred, or vengefulness. It is taught with emotion, but that emotion is contained and transcended;" a claim which is supported by her illustrations and reading of the various characters within the novel (112). Redden invites her readers to understand that if Wright were effectively setting out to write a novel promoting "white hate" then the voice of reason within the text probably would not have come from an older white man (Max) and that the other white characters in the book would have probably been made more hate-able.

I agree with Redden and feel that the character set-up within *Native Son* demands a deeper reading and subsequently a more substantial interpretation than Cohn's. Bigger Thomas is the protagonist of the novel, yet the personality of this character is established very early on as both hostile and violent. Wright does not portray Bigger as a victim of society in "Book One," but rather shows readers a young man that is full of anger and prone to outbursts of rage against people, even people of his own race. He is not intended to be viewed as an innocent victim of society and this becomes crystal clear when the text reads, in "Book Two," that: "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" (Wright 106). What this illustrates to readers is that Bigger had contemplated killing on many occasions, prior to the poor circumstances that resulted in his murder of Mary. Bigger is violent throughout most of the book and when that violence is coupled with the knowledge that he had frequently murdered individuals in his thoughts, it becomes apparent that regardless of the circumstances,

eventually Bigger Thomas would have committed murder. It is important to also note, so that it cannot be argued that his murderous inclinations themselves were the product of a broken society, that multiple other Black characters are introduced throughout the course of the novel, all of which suffered the same societal circumstances as Bigger, yet, none of them are revealed to be secretly harboring murderous desires.

Next, it is equally as important to closely examine the white characters presented within the text, in order to determine whether or not a reader should agree with Redden or Cohn, regarding the claim that the text propagates “white hate.” The main white characters given within the text are “the Dalton family,” “Max,” and “Jan.” The latter two of these three are not only white, but also communist, which requires another level of unpacking their roles within the story. Starting with the Dalton family it is made starkly apparent to readers, that as Redden says: “the worst one can say about the various Daltons is that they are literally or figuratively blind; they are not ‘evil’” which is referring to the misguided belief on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton that, in an attempt to assuage feelings that can only be described as white guilt, they can throw money at the black population and somehow this would fix the societal problems between the races (112). It is apparent that Mr. Dalton is completely unwilling to take any real actions, like offering decent housing at decent prices outside of the “Black Belt” because in his own words that would be “unethical”(Wright, 328). However, this disinclination toward action on the part of Mr. Dalton does not mark him as a “bad” white person, but instead as a typical businessman of the time. In fact, it is necessary to take notice that the black man that occupied the Chauffer role for the Dalton’s prior to Bigger was given an education and subsequently able to procure for himself a better job. All of these revelations show that the Dalton’s, while seriously misguided, were not guilty of anything that could allow a reader to view them as evil, and, because of this, it is fair to assume that this is because Wright did not intend for them to be viewed as such.

Max can quite easily be viewed as the only voice throughout the whole novel that ever exhibits reason or speaks rationally on a large scale. He is able, though ineffectively, to shine light on all the problems that arise from a society torn apart by segregation and racial lines. The speech he gives toward the end of “Book Three” in *Native Son* does

absolutely nothing toward achieving a stay of execution for Bigger but it does create a window through which readers can look at the inequalities present within the Chicago society and then possibly seek to work toward change. At one point during this speech Max claims:

But once you see them [black people] as a whole, once your eyes leave the individual and encompass the mass, a new quality comes into the picture. Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted stripped and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights (Wright 397).

This snippet from his much larger speech, really begs the judge, and consequently the reader, to understand that though the black people were technically free they were still suffering from oppression on a massive scale. Segregation and subsequent lack of equal housing are only two of a much larger number of things that played a role in the death of Mary Dalton. While society cannot solely be blamed for the actions of Bigger Thomas and the events that led to Mary's death, it is important to take note, as Max points out that Bigger was one man in a population of oppressed people with no legal recourse. His murder of Mary was the result of fear. The larger, unspoken, claim being made in this part of Max's speech is that any black man in Bigger's position would have probably acted the same if not similarly when threatened with the fear of being caught in a white woman's bedroom, especially with said white woman being inebriated and unconscious.

Last, in the line of character examination comes Jan. He is a character with outstanding moral fiber, in that he not only stands out and speaks about his Communist rooted ideas regarding social change, equality, and justice but also acts upon them. His inclusion of Bigger during dinner and drinking, prior to Mary's death was an attempt on his part to make Bigger feel both included and equal to him and Mary. Bigger repays the misunderstood kindness of Jan by framing him for the kidnapping of Mary. It is after the truth is revealed about Mary's death that the true moral fiber of this character is illuminated for the reader, specifically, when Jan visits Bigger in jail. Jan tells Bigger that he truly loved Mary and that for a few moments after finding out what had happened between Bigger and Mary, he wanted to kill Bigger but then he says "And then I got to thinking. I saw if I killed, this thing would

go on and on and never stop. I said, 'I'm going to help that guy, if he lets me,' "and then later "I can fight this thing with you, just like you've started it. I can come from all of these white people and stand here with you" (Wright 288-89). This is a striking change from the other white characters and it also illustrates that Jan truly believes in his ideals and is willing to put them into action in order to bring about change. Further credibility is also added to the claim of Jan's outstanding moral fiber when the text states, "He [Bigger] looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest face" (289). What all of these white characters have in common is the fact that nowhere in the text are any of them portrayed as bad people, which if the intention behind the text was to further "white hate" as previously suggested by Cohn, would not be the case.

So if this text is not actively trying to continue the cycle of hate and subsequent violence between the black and white races, the question becomes: what is this text trying to accomplish? The answer it seems may be rooted in some of Wright's own political beliefs. In the article "The Road Out of the Black Belt: Sociology's Fiction and Black Subjectivity in *Native Son*" Cynthia Tolentino quotes Wright saying: "I was a Communist because I was a Negro. Indeed the Communist Party had been the only road out of the Black Belt for me" and comments that "For Wright, Communism represented a necessary stage in the reform of racial inequality and the emergence of the black consciousness" (377). If this is in fact true then the argument can be made that *Native Son* is an expression by Wright that though the ideals behind the Communist movement for social equality were valid, enough action was not being taken to bring them about. Wright's statement that Communism was his only way out of the black belt is very telling; yet, he does not choose to allow his character, Bigger, to take the same road out of the black belt although it is laid almost at Bigger's feet. In fact, Wright chooses to deny Bigger any way out of the black belt other than death. During the course of the novel two opportunities are placed before Bigger. First, the opportunity given to him by the Dalton's to get an education, earn a decent wage, and maybe eventually the opportunity to move away and build a better life for him; Second, his interactions with Jan and Mary open the door to the same Communist road out of the black belt that Wright himself traveled. Both doors are however quickly slammed shut by Wright as the text progresses and I believe this is because it sets up

the scene for the real cultural work of the piece, which is to illustrate to all readers that in order for real social change to occur real action has to be taken.

The assertion being made within books one and two of *Native Son* is not that young black men should sit around waiting for opportunity to come knocking but rather that they take some action to bring about the change that they want to see. With that being said, in no way does this text suggest that the correct action is to commit murder in order to create a shift in power. Nor does it suggest that relying on party politics is the best option, which is why I believe that Max's final speech, while powerful, is also impotent. In her article Tolentino writes: "Through the narration of the events leading up to Mary's death, the novel suggests that the crime is largely motivated by Bigger's confusion and fear over how he will be perceived as a black man" (386). This quote is pointing to the fact that Bigger's actions toward Mary and even to some degree later on with Bessie, His girlfriend, whom he also murders, originated out of a place of fear. Bigger was afraid because he was preconditioned by society to know that a black man alone in a room with a drunken passed out white woman only had one end result for the black man: Death. This line of thinking allows readers to create a "what-if" scenario within their minds: What-if Bigger had not needed to fear the consequences of being found in Mary's room? What-if Bigger felt confident enough to explain to Mrs. Dalton the truth of the situation? In other words Bigger's motivation for killing Mary originating out of a place of fear allows readers to consider the depth of the fear that he felt on a much more personal level.

Another avenue for consideration comes from Anthony Dawahare's book *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box*. In this book, Dawahare asserts that Bigger's actions stem from an Oedipal situation in which Bigger is cast as the son who then must destroy the father figure, which can be equated to white society. He goes further to say:

For a reader without such psychological issues, the end of the novel would prompt further reflection on how an unresolved social and/or racialized Oedipal struggle for men contributes to sexism and makes working-class men susceptible to the call of nationalism. In either case, the reader comes away with a better sense of the interrelatedness of the oppressive social system and neurosis. Dialectically, then, in Wright's

urban fiction, the path to socialism involves retracing and understanding the hazardous, regressive missteps people may take in hope to be free from the pain of Social inequality. The novel ends where revolutionary action may begin. (Dawahare 31)

The “hazardous, regressive missteps” that Bigger makes are the murders of Bessie and Mary. Dawahare’s assertion that these missteps are often taken “in hope to be free from the pain of social inequality” can be directly bolstered by Bigger’s emotions following Mary’s murder and are reflected in his seeming lack of emotion regarding Bessie’s death (31). After killing Mary, Bigger is described in the text as having: “in him a terrified in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed” (Wright 106). His murderous actions toward Mary instilled within Bigger a sense of fulfillment, pride, and freedom that he had never felt prior to the killing. He, Bigger, had entered the home of a white man, murdered the white man’s daughter, and then left the home without anyone knowing what he had done. He had knowledge that the white people did not have and that knowledge, the truth about what happened to Mary, gave him a feeling of power that he was unable let go of. In fact, the longer he considered his actions with Mary, as he began to plan the communist kidnap ruse, he began to see all the flaws and mistakes he made, subsequently he vows to do better on future murders.

Once Bigger begins to consider how he would act in future circumstances it is clear that he has changed the way in which he views his role in society. He sees that if he were able to get away with his murder of Mary and successfully get the ransom money form the Dalton family, then it would be possible for him to perfect his craft (so to speak) and he understands that it would be possible for him to make a life for himself by profiting off of the murder of other individuals. However, Wright does not endorse this way of thinking within the novel as all of Bigger’s thoughts quickly turn from future crime possibilities toward saving himself. His paranoia about being found out, as well as the fact that his kidnapping ruse caused more and more people to be present at the house, delays him from emptying out the remaining evidence from the furnace. This delay is what leads to the uncovering of Bigger’s crime. After the truth of his actions is revealed Bigger’s new motivation becomes

escape. He brings Bessie with him out of necessity, knowing the whole time that he would need to dispose of her at some point. When Bessie's death does finally occur it is strikingly more violent than Mary's but also much more strategic. What is similar between the two murders is Bigger's reaction, or rather his lack of emotional reaction. In fact, when Bigger goes through the events in his mind, during the inquest, the text reads: "Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was just 'evidence'" (331). This insight into Bigger's thought process is very enlightening because it illustrates his understanding of society. Sitting in court Bigger recognizes that the legal system, that society, values the life of a white girl much higher than it values the life of a black girl. The text elaborates on this by proving Bigger's thought to be true when the dead body of Bessie is brought into the courtroom and presented as a spectacle.

What all of these things together illustrate to the reader is that the real problem being addressed within the novel is the societal inequality between the races. Just as Langston Hughes had used his poetry as a call to arms in order to bring about change, Wright is using his novel *Native Son*. The article, "Pretext, Context, Subtext: Textual Power in the Writing of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Martin Luther King, Jr." co-authored by Mary L. Bogumil and Michael R. Molino seeks to explain the ways in which the works of both of these Authors' achieve this goal through their literary works. They write:

The process of textual analysis is not just a hunt for racist, sexist, repressive language, but a dialectic in which each of us reads, interprets, and critiques the polyvocalic texts that make up our culture. Certainly, racist, sexist, and repressive language can be high-lighted and perhaps eliminated along the way, but it is through reading, interpreting, and critiquing the polyvocalic texts which constitute our culture that we can articulate our own beliefs, and if we do not articulate our own beliefs, we shall fall victims of those who articulate texts that treat people, in Gates' words, as though they "were zeroes" or "absences" (810).

In other words, it is through reading that people allow their minds to open up to ideas that they would be otherwise reluctant to entertain. At the moment in history when both Hughes and Wright were writing people believed in the Jim Crow model of society and they wore cultural

blindness that made them unable to acknowledge the harm that arose out of such a system. *Native Son* actively seeks to remove those blinders and paint a real picture of what Jim Crow society really looks like. Wright, convinced, that a Communist platform heavy with ideas on how to bring about social change and light on action to bring it about, also does not seek to place his political belief up on a pedestal within the novel. He instead takes a much more convoluted path, weaving all of these topics of discussion into one novel. *Native Son*'s message is hard to decipher because there are a multitude of possible interpretations present within it, however, the one thing that it does achieve is making readers sit down and think, to process the scenes that they read on the page, and then come to their own conclusions. It is for that reason that the answer, as to what message *Native Son* is propagating, transforms from: communistic ideals, racial hatred, societal change, or none of the above? And morphs into an answer of: all of the above.

Works Cited

- Bogumil, Mary, and Michael Molino. "Pretext, Context, Subtext: Textual Power in the Writing of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Martin Luther King, Jr." *College English* 52.7 (1990): 800-11. JStor. National Council of Teachers of English. Web. 2 May 2015. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/377634>>.
- Dawahare, Anthony. *Nationalism, Marxism, And African American Literature Between The Wars: A New Pandora's Box*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. EBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 4 May 2015.
- Redden, Dorothy. "Richard Wright and *Native Son*: Not Guilty." *Black American Literature Forum* 10.4 (1976): 111-16. JStor. St. Louis University. Web. 3 May 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041608>.
- Tolentino, Cynthia. "The Road Out Of The Black Belt: Sociology's Fictions And Black Subjectivity In *Native Son*." *Novel: A Forum On Fiction* 33.3 (2000): 377-405. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 9 Apr. 2015.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Bros. 1940. Print.