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ビガー・トーマス

アメリカ社会に生きる或る黒人青年の心理の考察

Bigger Thomas :
The Psychological Perspective of a Black Man in America

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Introduction

While *Native Son* has many political themes that articulate Richard Wright's own philosophy, particularly his infatuation with communism and Marxism, a more personal, individual quest also expresses itself throughout the novel. The purpose of this paper is to explore that quest, and show how Bigger Thomas seeks psychological freedom from fear and alienation. Even though Bigger Thomas is physically free, he is imprisoned by fear and hatred, which results in rebellion and alienation from his environment and from himself. He responds to his environment by isolating himself, thus becoming even more entrapped. Ironically, it is only when he kills someone, an act which we as readers realize will eventually lead to his imprisonment and ultimately his death, that he begins his emotional and psychological journey toward freedom and self-realization. It is this journey of self-discovery that transforms a tragic hero.

Chapter 1 . Fear

To say that Bigger Thomas is simply afraid, a timid and weak person, is an understatement. Bigger, Richard Wright's "native son," is consumed by terror. This is evident throughout the novel through Bigger's actions, but also, symbolically, in Wright's style.

The name of Book One is "Fear." In the opening scene of the novel, Bigger shows that he can be brave when he kills a big black rat in the small apartment where he lives with his mother, sister and brother, but he is, in fact, dogged by fear and unable to overcome the simplest of obstacles :

He hated his family because he knew they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them,

but behind a wall, a curtain. (Richard Wright, *Native Son* 14.)

The above passage also suggests two related themes which will be discussed in this paper the alienation and the rebellion of the main protagonist. The fear and rebellion within Bigger are a result of his alienation from both culture and the outside world, from America as a whole.

We see fear illustrated in how Bigger is described, in how the narrator relentlessly describes his fear and alienation and in how he uses the color " white " throughout the book to illustrate Bigger's terror of the white world about which he knows very little. The plan to rob Blum's *Delicatessen* illustrates that fear. He and his friend Gus had pulled off robberies on many occasions before, but this time it was different:

They had never held up a white man before. They had always robbed Negroes. They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that the white policeman never really searched dilligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes. (*Ibid.*, p.17.)

Ironically, this dramatic demonstration of Bigger's terror of the white world comes on the very day he is to start his job as chauffeur for the Daltons, who are symbols of all that Bigger fears and hates in the white world wealth, arrogance, and power.

To quell some of those fears, Bigger decides to take his knife and his gun along to meet the Daltons. Doing that would take away some of his fear and make him feel that he was equal to them. Taking them, gives him a sense of completeness. (*Ibid.*, p.44.)

At the same time that Wright is introducing Bigger to the white world, he also begins using the word " white " to illustrate Bigger's fears and to prefigure Bigger's dive into a cold, white hell. Mrs. Dalton has white eyes and is seen wearing a white dress. Mr. Dalton has white hair. The Daltons have a big, white cat. Eventually, the falling snow which turns the city of Chicago completely white, and the bright whiteness coming from the flashes of the newsmen's cameras in the basement of the Daltons, are used to bring out experiences of sheer terror in Bigger's life.

The color " white " used in describing white people within their own world also symbolizes coldness and distance between the white and the black world. Notice also the way the newspapers illustrate the manhunt. The area which has been investigated is shown and described, as the " white section " of town. So Bigger can be seen as " a black spot " seeking refuge in whiteness. And, of course, in this case, the " white section " means the white world.

Upon entering the Dalton home, Bigger is shocked to see how different the white world is from his own black world. And this enormous difference makes him feel more and more

isolated and fearful. When Mr. Dalton, his daughter, Mary, and Jan Erlone, her communist friend show kindness to Bigger, he becomes suspicious and then terrified. As they become increasingly friendly, his consciousness of being a black in a white-dominated society increases. Bigger's fear, along with latent anger and hatred for whites, is apparent. The evening gets worse and worse. He is forced to have dinner with Mary and Jan at a restaurant in the "Black Belt," where, heretofore, he has been comfortable. But now, he is embarrassed to be seen by blacks. Then, Jan offers to drive home. Thus, instead of his being alone as chauffeur he finds himself between Mary and Jan in the front seat. Their somewhat patronizing attempt to make him relax has exactly the opposite effect:

There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls. (*Ibid.*, p.68.)

Bigger is stiff with fear, like an animal being stalked:

His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into so small a space, but he dared not move...his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. These people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black. So he sat still, his arms and legs aching. (*Ibid.*, p.69.)

Later that evening, because of his fear of being found in Mary's room by Mrs. Dalton, he kills Mary, whom he has brought back to her room because she is very drunk. It is this irrational, animal fear which leads Bigger to kill Mary, and which he feels again when Peggy comes into basement to check on Mary:

Quickly, he wondered if he would have to kill her to keep her from telling if she turned on the light and saw something that made her think that Mary was dead. Without turning his head he saw an iron shovel resting in a near-by corner. His hands clenched. (Book Two, p.111.)

While the reader sees Bigger's actions as the result of social pressures in a white-dominated society, Wright depicts Bigger Thomas as a young black man who does not understand why he is terrified. Just as Wright feels he himself is quite different from other American blacks, he portrays Bigger as different from his family, friends, and pastor none of whom seem to have the same fears, at least not to the same degree. Wright, on the other hand, seems to want his main character to be representative of all American blacks, even though most blacks, though they suffer discrimination, do not kill.

Chapter 2 . Resistance

Bigger Thomas is an oppressed human being, living in a society and culture which takes pride in being free and democratic, but which is anything but that for Bigger. He feels oppressed by all those with whom he comes in contact, even his mother. She shouts at him for being lazy when he does not help her with chores at home or help his sister Vera.

He reacts to oppression with resistance and rebellion. For example, when he is offered a chauffeur's job with the Daltons, he hates the idea:

You know, Bigger, " his mother said, " if you don't take that job the relief will cut us off. We won't have any food... " Yes, he 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. (Book One, p.16.)

After thinking about it for a while, he recognizes his fate, that he cannot escape discrimination, poverty, or his mother's nagging. He realizes that he does not have the right to refuse the job. This type of rebellious thinking, which apparently began early in Bigger's life, enables Richard Wright to express another of his favorite themes : how capitalism, as practiced in America at least, allows some people to gain power and wealth, while others suffer from poverty and discrimination.

Richard Wright, who became seriously interested in Marxism in the early thirties and who formally joined the Communist party in 1933, saw his fiction as a " weapon " to be used in the struggle to transform American society. *Native Son* was begun just three years after Wright became a Communist and the novel can be read as a radical indictment of the American system.

Wright also illustrates how poverty and discrimination lead to resistance way. While Bigger is brooding about whether or not to take the job, he sees a billboard with the face of a white man, David A. Buckley, plastered across it. Wright creates Buckley, a politician who eventually prosecutes Bigger for murder, as another symbol of everything that Wright hates. Buckley and Bigger are representatives of utterly different and conflicting worlds. In the opening chapter, we are given picture of Buckley:

" That's Buckley! " He spoke softly to himself. " He's running for State's Attorney again. " The men were slapping the poster with wet brushes. He looked at the round florid face and wagged his head. Bet that sonofabitch rakes off a million bucks in a year. Boy, if I was in his shoes for just one day I'd never have to worry again. (*Ibid.* , p.16.)

As I suggested above, the plan to rob Blum's *Delicatessen*, also illustrates Bigger's rebelliousness, as does the killing of Mary Dalton, although it is an accident born out of fear

and rebelliousness.

The source of Bigger's resistance is very clear. It is based on a deep, instinctive sense of racial injustice and of the impossibility of achieving anything at all in the white man's world. This is clearly shown in a scene where Bigger and Gus see an airplane and a pigeon flying overhead.

" Now, if I could only do that, " Bigger said. Gus laughed. " Nigger, you nuts. " " I reckon we the only things in this city can t go where we want to go and do what we want to do. " " Don't think about it, " Gus said. " I can't help it. " " That's why you feeling like something awful's going to happen to you, " Gus said. " You think too much. " " What in hell can a man do ? " Bigger asked, turning to Gus. " Get drunk and sleep it off. " " I can't. I'm broke. " (*Ibid.*, p.24.)

The freedom of the bird and white pilot remind Bigger that he cannot do anything by his own free will. He wants to abandon his own world his family, friends and the black community in which he lives and find freedom. Bigger's strong desire for freedom makes him different from Gus, who, because of his color, is resigned to his fate.

Bigger's perception of social injustice and his rebelliousness grows after he kills Mary. The next morning, he is aware of how shabby his family's apartment really is:

He looked round the room, seeing it for the first time...He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. Why did he and his folks have to live like this ? (Book Two, p.100.)

Throughout *Bigger*, Wright shows his own rebellious nature by describing the effects of capitalism on the people he cares about. Bigger notices how thin his sister Vera is compared with Mary. Vera does not get enough to eat. Bigger also feels sympathy for his girl friend, Bessie, who must work at a white-owned restaurant day and night.

He felt the narrow orbit of her life : from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved...He had heard her complain about how hard the white folks worked her; she had told him over and over again that she lived their lives when she was working in their homes, not her own. (*Ibid.*, pp.131-132.)

He eventually sees Mr.Dalton as just another representative of the evils of capitalism and white domination. Mr.Dalton is considered as a philanthropist because he has contributed millions of dollars to charities for blacks and other poor people. However, Dalton also owns South Side Real Estate Company which charges blacks higher rents than whites for the same type of apartments. Moreover, his apartment houses are in South Chicago, which is also part of the isolated " Black Belt " or black ghetto of Chicago.

Although he did not consciously intend to kill Mary, Bigger does not regret Mary's death or feel guilty about it. Gone temporarily are the rebelliousness and his feelings of inferiority. He knows that he has the advantage now and enjoys playing with Mr. Dalton and Mr. Britten, the private investigator, by deceiving them in their search for the missing Mary. For the first time in his life, he feels superior to whites because he feels that he is calling the shots.

His temporary superiority disappears when Mary's body is discovered in the furnace of her home. At this moment, he realizes that he can never escape being black in American society. Here, Wright shows the reality of the so-called "American Dream" – a dream which can be realized and achieved only by white people.

After Bigger is charged in Mary's death, he flees and wanders through Chicago, white with snow, a black man trying to escape in a white city, an impossibility, especially when 8,000 white policemen and volunteers are sent out to hunt him down.

In Book Three, entitled "Fate", Wright portrays Max, a communist lawyer, as another side of himself, as a person who is able to understand the evils of capitalism and articulate them intelligently. It is Max who points out the social implications of Bigger's trial :

" Listen, Bigger, you're facing a sea of hate now that's no different from what you've faced all your life. And because it's that way, you've got to fight. If they can wipe you out, then they can wipe others out, too. (Book Three, p.320.)

Max tries hard to make Bigger fully understand his situation. Actually he could be considered as a rebel for killing Mary since he has really been oppressed by whites during his entire life. Max tries to persuade Bigger to consider his own life as part of the struggle to change an unequal society, one in which blacks are not the only victims:

" You think that because your color makes it easy for them to point you out, segregate you. But they do that to others, too. They hate me because I'm trying to help you. They're writing me letters, calling me a ' dirty Jew '. (*Ibid.* , p.322.)

Max asserts that the struggle is not between whites and blacks but between the rich and powerful and the working class. Through Max, Wright also predicts the future of race relations in America:

" Your Honor, Bigger Thomas was willing to vote for and follow any man who would have led him out of his morass of pain and hate and fear. " Your Honor, another civil war in these states is not impossible ; and if the misunderstanding of what this body's life means is an indication of how men of wealth and property are misreading the consciousness of the submerged millions today, one may truly come. (*Ibid.* ,p.369.)

History, of course, has proved Wright right. Not only was there major civil unrest in the

1960s, but racial discrimination remains a significant problem for blacks and other minorities in America today. Bigger and Max are representatives of rebellion and resistance and they speak for Wright. Although they are cast as two different characters, both speak for Wright: Bigger displays emotional rebelliousness, Max intellectual resistance.

Max argues that if white capitalists with money and power, persons such as Mr. Dalton, had granted blacks equal opportunity in housing, education and employment, and not forced them into a " Black Belt ", crimes, such as those committed by Bigger, might have been prevented. Max also argues that the general public is responsible because most people in America are blind politically and socially speaking.

Despite Max's explanations, Bigger's consciousness remains purely black. He correctly understands that white people will assume that he surely must have raped Mary before killing her.

Wright depicts Bigger as a man who is quite different from other blacks in that he resists the powerful white world. His family, Beth and some friends turn to religion or alcohol to them accept injustice but they too, in a different way, are part of his oppressive environment.

Bigger's defeat is caused by his attitude to the white world. Mary, on the other hand, dies because she is a liberal with an interest in rescuing poor blacks. Her wish to know more about blacks and the way they live make her approach Bigger in the first place. Thus, she too, is a rebel. Her death is caused by over stepping the boundaries that society has prescribed for her.

Despite his flaws, Bigger is heroic because he does rebel against his suffocating environment. The victory for Bigger is that when he becomes fully conscious of his resistance against whites, he feels alive and finds some measure of self-identity, dignity, and worth.

Chapter 3 . Alienation

Wright portrays Bigger as a man who is trying to find his place in American society while actually living outside it. He lives in his own world, in isolation, not understanding the relationship between himself and the world around him. In some ways, he is even isolated from himself:

He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. (Book One, p.14.)

Critic Kenneth Kinnamon underlines Bigger's alienation :

Bigger's emotional pattern precludes any viable human relationship. He is profoundly alone...His conflict with his mother is intensified because of her nagging and because her religious resignation contrasts sharply with his own rebellious instincts...Only his younger brother, Buddy, can evoke some feeling of tenderness. His relations with

whites are of course even more distant and fearful.

Bigger recognizes that his oppression is part of his fate as a black man. As he becomes increasingly conscious of his situation, he becomes desperate, as if falling into an abyss, losing control of his actions :

“ Naw; it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's...It's like I was going to do something I can't help... ”

“ Yeah ! ” Gus said with uneasy eagerness. His eyes were full of a look compounded of fear and admiration for Bigger. “ Yeah; I know what you mean. It's like you going to fall and don't know where you going to land... ” (*Ibid.* , pp.24-25.)

Most of the time, Bigger is conscious of his social isolation from white people. Wright clearly shows Bigger's isolation but also the alienation of blacks from whites and whites from blacks in general. In the scenes mentioned above Bigger feels alienated when he has to eat with Jan and Mary and then sit between them in the car home. Wright shows us the limitations of Mary's understanding and her own alienation:

“ You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses, ” she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming to either side of them,...They live in our country...In the same city with us... ” her voice trailed off wistfully. (*Ibid.* , p.70.)

Her unconscious patronizing attitude toward blacks is elegantly illustrated by Wright in expressions such as “ they're human ” and “ they live in *our* country. ” In spite of her struggle to befriend Bigger, she cannot relate to Bigger, nor can he relate to her. The harder she tries to relate to him, the more afraid of her he becomes and his alienation increases as a result.

After suffocating Mary a few hours later, Bigger recognizes that he lives in his own world and that he had to kill her because she had tried to invade his world. That at least is how he justifies killing her. Bigger did not intend to kill her. Thus the color white becomes a symbol of alienation as well as fear. The “ white blur ” of Mrs.Dalton intensifies Bigger's terror, hatred and alienation. Complex emotions are at work the need to protect himself, latent fear and aggression towards Mary, and general hostility towards whites. They mingle and coexist in his heart and cause him to act spontaneously. Bigger Thomas has two faces. Superficially, he accepts his situation in society, with all its contradictions. His other face, one of terror, hatred, and isolation, is concealed and he rarely shows it without an external provocation from white society, such as when Mrs.Dalton approached him.

Bigger is depicted as a man whose alienation is so complete that he cannot live in a world which has been constructed by and for whites. He could have lived with his discontent as long as he stayed in black society. But when Bigger tries to cross the line between the black

and white world, he destroys himself. Perhaps Bigger simply is not destined to continue living in black society like other blacks. One senses an invisible and magic power drawing him to the white world. And so Bigger, unfortunately, becomes a chauffeur for a wealthy white family.

Bigger is clearly an exceptionally tragic case. Few blacks have as extreme reactions as Bigger and, despite feeling sympathy for Bigger, the reader knows that Bigger cannot survive for long in either the white or the black world. However, it is clear that Wright wanted to illustrate the anger, alienation and suffering of blacks, so he developed Bigger as an atypical character who is nevertheless a vivid dramatization of the black dilemma in America at that time. Wright's own intensity sets him apart from other black writers of his time.

While there is little doubt that Bigger killed out of fear, rebelliousness and isolation, he has committed a serious crime for which he must be punished. Yet, once we look into the circumstances, we understand why Bigger killed Mary and Beth. His lawyer, Max, understands and accuses the state for failing to give blacks equal opportunities. Whether the problem is called capitalism, institutional racism, segregation, or apartheid, the result is the same two races isolated and alienated from one another. Max sums it up well when he says that the fundamental reason for Bigger's crime is the state's exclusion of blacks from society.

Chapter 4 . Emancipation (Conclusion)

Bigger's soul-searching just before his trial illustrates his quest for psychological and emotional freedom. At this moment, in a symbolic act that reminds us of Christ, Bigger stretches out his arms to touch other people :

“ Not that he wanted those hearts to turn their warmth to him...but just to know they were there and warm...And it that touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity, there would be a supporting openness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life...He would not mind dying now if he could only find out what this meant, what he was in relation to all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood...It was too late... (Book Three, pp.335-336.)

His awareness of his own isolation increases when he hears his enemy Buckley say, somewhat eloquently, “ His very existence is a crime against the state ! (*Ibid.* , p.367.)

Thus, the biggest and most meaningful event in Bigger Thomas life is his murder of the white woman. Before the murder, he is nobody and has nothing. Afterward, he is the focus of hatred by citizens and an outcast in society. The trial also gives Bigger freedom from “ white terror. ” It gives him an identity: he is labeled as a killer in the eyes of American society; at the same time, he identifies himself as a rebel against that society. Yet, simultaneously, he is seeking wholeness.

He has always lived an isolated, alienated life, but in the end has the chance to emancipate

himself emotionally and psychologically, even as he awaits execution. In the last scene of the novel, Wright, ever enigmatic, paints a puzzling picture of Bigger. On the eve of his execution, still trying to affirm his existence and identity, Bigger tells Max :

What I killed for must have been good ! ” ...I didnt’ know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ém...It’s the truth, Mr.Max. I can say it now, cause I’m going to die. I know what I’m saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I’m all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way. (*Ibid.*,p.392.)

In his interpretation of Bigger Thomas as a “ *New Black Hero*, ” Robert Butler concludes :

By the end of the novel, Bigger is in control of his inward life...While it is true that he cannot change the fact that he is imprisoned and will soon be executed, he is psychologically liberated by the knowledge that he can meet his death in a controlled, dignified way after he has come to human terms with himself and others.

Max does not understand this fully, so Bigger adds :

“ I’m all right, Mr. Max. Just go and tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn’t’crying none...” ...“ I’m all right. For real, I am.”(*Ibid.*)

Max leaves in tears, though it is difficult to know what the tears mean and whether or not Max is crying because he is telling Bigger good-bye or whether he is recalling the entire sad history of blacks such as Bigger. Our last image of Bigger Thomas is of him grasping the bars to his cell as Max leaves.

Then he smiled a faint, wry bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door slammed shut. (*Ibid.*, p.392.)

Text

Wright, Richard, *Native Son*. (New York, First Perennial Library, 1966.)

Notes

- 1) Butler,Robert, *Native Son : The Emergence of a New Black Hero*. (Boston : G.K. Hall&Co., 1991.) , p.5.
- 2) Kinnamon, Kenneth, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*. (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1972.) pp.130-131.
- 3) Butler, *Ibid.*, p.110.