

# NATIVE SON

*Native Son*, a novel by Richard Wright, is a book about the hardships in the life of the main character, a black man named Bigger Thomas. Certain aspects to this story can be better understood or reinterpreted through the use of a lens text, such as Richard Wright's essay, "How Bigger was Born", which discusses his process of forming the character Bigger in *Native Son*. In this essay, Wright says,

"I made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere... Whenever I picked up a newspaper, I'd no longer feel that I was reading of the doings of whites alone (Negroes are rarely mentioned in the press unless they've committed some crime!), but of a complex struggle for life going on in my country, a struggle in which I was involved."

This puts a deeper meaning behind specific events in the book, and gives reason to Bigger's realizations. In a sense, Wright experiences the same "aha" moments that Bigger does, and these are reflected in his essay. The structure to this book is one in which initially, the world can only be seen in black and white, but as the story progresses, the blindness is alleviated, allowing society to be seen in color. This structure can be seen in Wright's process of creating Bigger – he saw Bigger as only black, but then he realized there was more to him than that; he no longer faced blindness in developing Bigger. The theme of blindness is further enforced through this

lens text, and the true this meaning of blindness as it applies to novel is shown in “How Bigger was Born”. The Paris Review interview with Ralph Ellison plays off “How Bigger was Born” in the sense that both discuss this sort of enlightenment to life as a human being, rather than a black person. Ellison says, “...the narrator’s development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment, invisibility to visibility” (Ellison). Through the lens texts, I come to understand that the purpose of this novel is a greater awakening to society, as Wright emphasizes his awakening to the world as it actually existed, and present this idea so that the readers would see it that way as well. A clarified purpose to and definite connection between theme, characters and character development can be seen more clearly through the eyes of Wright’s essay “How Bigger was Born” and the Paris Review interview with Ralph Ellison.

These texts reinforce the theme of blindness by emphasizing the transformation Bigger goes through at the end of the book. Wright shows how he experienced a transformation himself while creating Bigger; he realized how Bigger was not just a member of the black community, but also part of a greater society of people: the human race itself. Although Ellison did not write *Native Son*, there is still a crossover in the theme of blindness. He also shows the transformation the narrator in his novel goes through: from “ignorance to intelligence”. Bigger experiences ignorance up until the very end – he has grown up and has been raised to see all white people as essentially a threat to him and other blacks. Bigger thinks white people are blind because they don’t see black people as anything other than bad and people not to be trusted. He says, “And regulating his attitude towards death was the fact that he was black, unequal, and despised” (Wright 256). How the blindness of the white people has severely impacted Bigger is portrayed in this quote. However, Bigger is about as shallow as he thinks the white people are. He believes white people are all the same, and refuses to recognize their individuality. The transformation

occurs when he gets to know Max, his white lawyer, because Max truly tries to understand him and his situation and see him as a human being who needs to be defended rather than a black person that society would normally attack. Regarding his decision to defend Bigger in his trial, Max says, "I'm defending this boy because I'm convinced that men like you made him what he is....If I can make the people of this country understand why this boy acted like he did, I'll be doing much more than defending him" (Wright 271). This shows how Max truly attempts to understand Bigger's side of the story, rather than labeling him as black and ending it.

Throughout the book, Bigger discusses the characters being blind, some physically, such as Mrs. Dalton, but most of them figuratively, in which they fail to see the bigger problem at hand in crucial situations. Bigger makes an important observation about how people "...wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit" (Wright 102). As a result, Bigger come to the realization that he could get away with things that the people surrounding him were blind to. This traces its roots back to Mrs. Dalton: her being blind allowed him to kill Mary and get away with it for longer than he should have. The theme of blindness also gives some of the characters a more defined role in the book.

Through the lens texts, it becomes clear why Wright includes some of the characters he does in the situations they are in. For example, the blind character, Mrs. Dalton, is included to justify Bigger's actions. Bigger kills Mary because he is afraid Mrs. Dalton will falsely accuse him of raping Mary, and her literal blindness sets the stage for the figurative blindness to follow. As both lens texts mention, the characters are brought from the status of black people to human beings. Wright introduces characters like Max and Jan who bring out Bigger's higher value to

society and try their best to understand him; treat him like he should be treated, with dignity and respect. Max presents an excellent speech on Bigger's behalf. He says at one point Bigger was

“...excluded from, and unassimilated in our society, yet longing to gratify impulses akin to our own but denied the objects and channels evolved through long centuries for their socialized expression, every sunrise and sunset makes him guilty of subversive actions. Every movement of his body is an unconscious protest. Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal, is a plot or a conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection. Every glance of the eye is a threat. His very existence is a crime against' the state!” (Wright 367).

Wright contrasts the considerate characters like Max with the protesting crowd during the trial, advocating for him to be executed for his crime. As a whole, these people are portrayed as blind because they aren't in there talking to Bigger, understanding him and his situation; their desire for Bigger to be killed is based solely on the demeaning newspaper headlines and the sheer fact that he is black. The contrast set up by Wright between his characters helps to emphasize the theme of blindness. The ignorance and intelligence, as Ellison points out with the narrator of his novel, is present not only between the early Bigger and later Bigger, but also between the entireties of characters in *Native Son*. Ignorance is seen in the crowd of white people who want Bigger dead – they see the world in black and white. Max and Jan are presented as “intelligence”; characters that can see the world in vivid color and have gone through the realization that in the grand scheme of life, humanity is much greater than being white or black.

The way Bigger develops as a character is seen in both “How Bigger was Born” and the Paris Interview. Bigger is defined by the people he is surrounded with, and I notice there are three

general groups of people that define him. In the first part, he is with his family and friends, and it is here he is seen as an important person that other people rely on. As he moves on to his job with the white people, he feels threatened by the Daltons' desire to help him and inferior to the white people. Bigger wonders how the white people can be so careless with money, while he works so hard to earn enough for his family, and notes how this makes them blind to the real issues at hand in the world. The last group he is with is Max and Jan, the two white people who really opened his eyes to the world as it is. Bigger's very last words to Max (who is probably the last person Bigger talked to before he was executed) were, "Tell... Tell Mister... Tell Jan hello" (Wright 392). Jan was a white person that Bigger had little respect for and was fearful of in the beginning of the book. The change Bigger goes through during this stage in the book was similar to how Wright described his realization during the process of developing Bigger that the world was a muddy in-between of white and black and a "complex struggle for life" that all human beings were involved in. Ellison's describing of the transformation from invisibility to visibility connects themes to characters. Bigger transforms in the sense that with the white people, they see him as just part of the black race, and don't get to know him as an individual, but rather as just another newspaper-headline stereotype of a black person. His interactions with Max and Jan make him feel although he has become visible to the white race no longer as a black person, but rather as a human being.

The lens texts from Ellison and Wright provide an important connection between theme, characters and character development. They gave me a clearer understanding as to how these aspects of the novel were intertwined. The realization Wright had while creating Bigger translated into Bigger's experience with white people and contributed to his awakening to society as it actually existed. Ellison and Wright reinforce the theme of blindness, showing how

there is a general lack of understanding between cultures and this produces the blindness Bigger so eagerly criticizes. The character placement and contrast between characters further implement the theme of blindness. I now see characters as having defining roles as, for example, visibility and invisibility, as Wright and Ellison mention in their texts. Through the lens texts, "How Bigger was Born" and the Paris Review interview with Ralph Ellison, the characters and themes are more noticeably defined and connected, and the novel is clarified as a representation of Wright's experience when he realized the world is more than black and white.

**Works Cited:**

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