THE AMERICAN NOVEL

剑桥美国小说新论·26
（英文影印版）

New Essays on

Native Son

《土生子》新论

Keneth Kinnamon 编

北京大学出版社
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导　读

北京大学英语系教授　陶洁

近年来，美国文学在我国很受欢迎。大专院校英语系纷纷开设美国文学选读和专题课，学生从中学到的大部分内容是美国小说。不仅如此，在本科毕业论文、硕士论文或博士论文方面，学生所选题材也大多为关于某部美国小说或某个美国小说家。然而，我们的学生往往热衷理论而对作品或作家缺乏深入细致的了解和分析。他们往往先大谈理论规则，然后罗列一些例证，不能很好地把理论和文本融会贯通，恰如其分地结合在一起。在这种情况下，我们需要一些好的参考资料来帮助学生更好地认识和理解他们在阅读或研究的作品和作家。《剑桥美国小说新论》正是这样一套优秀的参考书。

这套丛书的负责人是曾经主编过《哥伦比亚美国文学史》的艾默里·埃利奥特教授，并且由英国剑桥大学出版社在上世纪80年代中期开始陆续出书，至今仍在发行并出版新书，目前已有五十多种，不仅出平装本还有精装本。一套书发行二十多年还有生命力，估计还会继续发行，主要因为它确实从学生的需要出发，深受他们和教师的喜爱。

《剑桥美国小说新论》的编排方式比较统一。根据主编制定的原则，每本书针对一部美国文学历史上有名望的大作家的一本经典小说，论述者都是研究这位作家的知名学者。开篇是一位权威专家的论述，主要论及作品的创作过程、出版历史、当年的评价以及小说发表以来不同时期的主要评论和阅读倾向。随后是四到五篇论述，从不同角度用不同的批评方法对作品进行分析和阐

释。这些文章并非信手拈来，而是专门为这套丛书撰写的，运用的理论都比较新，其中不乏颇有新意的真知灼见。书的最后是为学生进一步学习和研究而提供的参考书目。由此可见，编书的学者们为了帮助学生确实煞费苦心，努力做到尽善尽美。

这五十多种书有早期美国文学家库珀的《最后的莫希干人》，也有当代试验小说大师品钦的《拍卖第49号》和厄普代克那曾被《时代》杂志评为1923年以来100部最佳小说之一的《兔子，跑吧！》；有我们比较熟悉的麦尔维尔的《白鲸》，也有我们还不太了解的他的《漂亮水手》；有中国学生很喜欢的海明威的长篇小说《永别了，武器》，令人想不到的是还有一本论述他所有的短篇小说的集子。有些大作家如亨利·詹姆斯、威廉·福克纳等都有两三本作品入选，但它们都分别有专门的集子。丛书当然涉及已有定论的大作家，包括黑人和白人作家（可惜还没有华裔作家的作品），但也包括20世纪70年代妇女运动中发掘出来的如凯特·肖邦的《觉醒》和佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》，甚至还有我国读者很熟悉的斯托夫人的《汤姆叔叔的小屋》。当年这部小说曾经风靡美国，在全世界都有一定的影响，后来被贬为“政治宣传”作品，从此在美国文学史上销声匿迹。70年代后随着要求扩大文学经典中女性和少数族裔作家的呼声日益高涨，人们才开始重新评价这部作品，分析它对日后妇女作家的影响、对黑人形象的塑造，甚至它在美国文学的哥特式传统中的地位等等。

这样的例子还有很多，例如威廉·迪恩·豪威尔斯和他的《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》。以前人们只肯定他在发展现实主义文学和理论方面的贡献，对他的作品除了《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》评价都不太高。但在这本新论文集子里编者对已有定论进行挑战，强调豪威尔斯的小说、他的现实主义跟当时的社会经济文化现状有很大的关系。他的小说既有其文学形式，又是一种社会力量。另外一位19世纪新英格兰作家萨拉·奥尼·裴威特过去一向被看成是乡土作家，现在学者们用女性主义观点强调她的《尖枞树之乡》对美国文学的贡献，分析当年的种族、民族主义和文学市场

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对她写作的影响。用封底宣传语言来说，这本集子对美国文学研究、女性主义批评理论和美国研究等方面都会引起很大的兴趣。

还有一本书似乎在我们国家很少有人提起过——亨利·罗思的《就说是睡着了》。此书在20世纪30年代曾经风靡一时，此后长期销声匿迹，60年代又再度受到推崇。现在这部小说则是上面提到的《时代》杂志100部优秀小说中的一部，被认为是上个世纪头50年里最为出色的美国犹太小说、最优秀的现代主义小说之一。评论家认为集子里的文章采用心理分析、社会历史主义等批评方法探讨了有关移民、族裔和文化归属等多方面的问题。

这套集子里还出现了令人信服的新论点。很长时间内海明威一直被认为是讨厌女人的大男子主义者。但在关于他的短篇小说的论述里，作者通过分析《在密执安北部》，令人信服地证明海明威其实对妇女充满同情。不仅如此，这一论断还瓦解了海明威在《太阳照样升起》中充分暴露他的厌女症的定论。

然而，作者们并不侈谈理论或玩弄理论名词，所有的论断都是既以一定的理论为基础，又对文本进行深入的分析；既把理论阐述得深入浅出，又把作品分析得丝丝入扣，让人不由得不信服。他们能够做到这一点完全是因为他们了解学生的水平和需要。

我认为《剑桥美国小说新论》是一套很好的参考书。北京大学出版社购买版权，出版这套书是个有益于外国文学研究教学的决定。

Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism of the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretive issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside

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剑桥美国小说新论

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Introduction

KENETH KINNAMON

I

LIKE Henry James and Thomas Wolfe, Richard Wright is his own best critic, at least on matters pertaining to the conception and composition of his greatest novel. In person and on paper he was ready to explain the genesis of *Native Son* (1940), analyze its personal and political significance, and defend it from racist attack. As a militant black Communist writer, winner of the *Story* magazine contest for employees of the Federal Writers Project for *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) as well as second prize in the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1938* for "Fire and Cloud," he was already an experienced lecturer as he was completing his novel in the late winter and spring of 1939. In February of that year he lectured at the Harlem Community Center on "Negro Culture in New York"; in May he spoke at the Brooklyn YMCA on "The Cultural Contributions of the Negro in America"; and in September he appeared with Langston Hughes and the Communist politician James W. Ford at the Festival of Negro Culture in Chicago. He may not have discussed his forthcoming work on these occasions, but he probably did so back in New York in a guest appearance in his friend Edwin Seaver's writing class at the New School for Social Research on December 8, 1939; in a lecture on "The Problems of the Fiction Writer Today" at the Dalcroze School of Music on January 26, 1940, under the auspices of the League of American Writers; and in a talk the following month in Chicago at the Woodlawn A.M.E. Church.[1]

I am grateful to Ellen Wright for granting me permission to use and quote from restricted material in her late husband's papers at Yale. Without her generous cooperation this introduction would not have been possible.

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Native Son was published on March 1, 1940, to great critical acclaim. Within two weeks Wright had spoken at Columbia University and at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library on "How 'Bigger' Was Born," a lecture he repeated in July at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Chicago and at the White Rock Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, and in September at a gala fund-raiser for the Negro Playwrights Company at the Golden Gate Ballroom in Harlem.[2] A condensed version appeared in print in the *Saturday Review* in June, followed by a more drastic condensation in the September–October issue of *Negro Digest*. Sales figures on *Native Son* were excellent in March and April, but when they began to fade in May, Wright's editor at Harper's, Edward Aswell, proposed a "documentary edition" (later called "author's edition") of the novel with an appendix containing the full text of "How 'Bigger' Was Born," David L. Cohn's hostile review of *Native Son* in the May issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and Wright's rebuttal of Cohn.[3] When Cohn understandably refused to go along with this scheme, Harper's published the complete *How "Bigger" Was Born* as a pamphlet. Grosset and Dunlap included the pamphlet version as a preface to its inexpensive reprint of *Native Son* in 1942, and it has been reprinted several times since.

In *How "Bigger" Was Born* Wright recalls and analyzes the long gestation of *Native Son* in the experiences of his childhood in the South. Restless and rebellious, the Bigger type Wright observed (and to a degree himself embodied) both defied the racist order and withdrew from the black culture which provided nurture and compensation to those who could accommodate their lives to the system of white supremacy. The first example Wright cites appears to be merely a schoolyard bully, but as other examples unfold, his violent, aggressive personality comes to seem generic, his sadism his only means of self-realization. The other four southern Biggers described by Wright turned from brutalizing other blacks to direct confrontation with the white world. Bigger No. 2 declined to pay his rent or his debts for food and clothing, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the racist economic system which denied an adequate supply of these essentials to black people. The third Bigger moved a step further by taking his recreation without paying the white man for it, habitually walking into a motion picture theater

without a ticket. Bigger No. 4, a more intellectual type with a manic-depressive personality, violated racial taboos of all kinds, refused to work, brooded and joked about racial injustice, and ended up in an insane asylum. The fifth Bigger specialized in boarding streetcars without paying and sitting in the white section, defying with knife in hand the white conductor's orders to move. These exhilarating gestures of rebellion were necessarily of brief duration in a Jim Crow society: "Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken."[4]

For historical reasons, Wright explains, black reaction to the conditions of southern life tended toward the extremes of rebellion and submission, the latter category including both drunks and strivers, Uncle Toms and blues men. The rebellious Bigger type, though, was both estranged from the folk culture and attracted to the promise and glamour of the white life to which he was denied access. First understanding the Bigger phenomenon only in these racial terms, Wright added the dimension of class to caste through his contact with Communism, somewhat euphemistically called in *How "Bigger" Was Born* "the labor movement and its ideology." Bigger could be white as well as black, and his rebellious personality held a revolutionary potential that could seek either Communist or fascist fulfillment. Although Wright had already encountered problems with party functionaries and was to denounce his former comrades bitterly in *The Outsider* (1953), he could hardly have been more emphatic in declaring the importance of that deepened understanding of the Bigger type made possible by Marxist thought: "The extension of my sense of the personality of Bigger was the pivot of my life; it altered the complexion of my existence. . . . It was as though I had put on a pair of spectacles whose power was that of an x-ray enabling me to see deeper into the lives of men."[5] Critics who read *Native Son* as a black nationalist repudiation of Marxism – Bigger's instinctive black triumph over Boris Max's arid white theorizing – would do well to ponder these words. Wright's effort in the novel is to reconcile his sense of black life with the intellectual clarity and the possibility of social action provided by Communism, to interpret each group to

the other. What he would soon be writing to explain his revolutionary verse of the mid-thirties applies equally well to *Native Son*, though his audience for the novel was much larger: "I would address my words to two groups: I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them."[6]

Further exposure to the urban Biggers of Chicago, more explosive even than the Biggers of the South, deepened Wright's understanding of the type, as did his further reading in white literature reflecting the frenetic life of cities and his close study of Biggers in pre-Revolutionary Russia and in Nazi Germany. "Tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless," Wright explains, the Bigger Thomas of his novel is the "product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out." Obstacles to telling the truth about such a character were formidable, but Bigger had so captivated Wright's imagination that he resolved to portray him, determined to do justice to all the dimensions of his complex character and significance: his individual consciousness in all its subjectivity; his ambivalent feelings as a black native son toward the country that excludes him; the existential qualities of "primal fear and dread"[7] that are the psychological basis of all our lives, underlying and conditioning out social experience; the political meaning of Bigger's life; his relationship with other blacks; his raw Chicago environment.

In *How "Bigger" Was Born* Wright states that his exposure to urban Biggers while working at the South Side Boys' Club coalesced the years of brooding about the type and prompted him to begin the actual writing of the novel. The year was 1935. Probably he only sketched preliminary notes, for at this time he was busy writing poetry and the posthumously published *Lawd Today* (1963). More sustained work began in New York early in 1938. The first reviews of *Uncle Tom's Children* persuaded him that an even more unflinching confrontation with the full dimensions of racism was necessary: "I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over

it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest."[8] Moving to Brooklyn on April 13 to live with Chicago friends Jane and Herbert Newton, Wright worked intensely on his novel through the spring, summer, and early fall, completing a first draft of 576 pages by October 24.[9]

The rebellious young black men Wright had himself observed in the South and the North became collectively the prototype of his protagonist, but as if to validate the literary character another Bigger, whom Wright never saw, emerged from obscurity late in May and affected the novel even more directly than his earlier counterparts. As Wright was nearing the midway point of his first draft, two young black men, Robert Nixon and Earl Hicks, were arrested in Chicago and charged with the murder of a white woman. Nixon became the central figure in the case, which received sensationalized coverage in the Chicago press, especially the openly racist *Tribune*. One article, for example, asserted that "civilization has left Nixon practically untouched. His hunched shoulders and long, sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his out-thrust head and catlike tread all suggest the animal. . . . He is very black – almost pure Negro. His physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in the species." The reporter continued: "A jungle negro, this type is known to be ferocious and relentless in a fight. Though docile enough under ordinary circumstances, they are easily aroused. And when this happens the veneer of civilization disappears." And as if the simian imagery were not already obvious enough, Nixon is said to kill "with a ferocity suggestive of Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' – the work of a giant ape."[10] As soon as Wright heard about this case, early in June, he wrote his friend Margaret Walker in Chicago, asking her for newspaper clippings on the Nixon case. Walker complied, collecting all the clippings from all the Chicago dailies. So assiduous was she that "he had enough to spread all over his nine by twelve bedroom floor and he was using them in the same way Dreiser had done in *American Tragedy*. He would spread them all out and read them over and over again and then take off from there in his own imagination."[11]

Not content with press coverage of the Nixon case, Wright trav-

eled to Chicago in November to gather additional information. A typed agenda for this trip shows how thorough and meticulous Wright was in accumulating naturalistic details to assure the verisimilitude of his Chicago setting.[12] The Nixon case both stimulated his imagination and provided him material, but he shaped the material to his thematic purpose. Newspaper coverage of Bigger Thomas, the inquest, and the trial corresponds in many details to that of the Nixon case, but elsewhere Wright makes significant changes to develop his ideological points. Nixon's first attorney was Joseph Roth of the International Labor Defense, but he was soon replaced by black lawyers of the National Negro Congress, who represented Nixon at the trial. By eliminating black legal representation and magnifying the role of the white radical Boris Max, Wright accomplishes two purposes. As a Communist, Max can articulate a Marxist analysis of Bigger's situation that clearly derives from Wright's own conceptual analysis of the effects of racism on the Bigger type.[13] At the same time, in the final scene Wright can contrast Bigger's black emotional apprehension of the meaning of his ordeal with Max's white intellectual interpretation of it, a contrast of complementary understandings not possible if Wright had followed the Nixon case and provided Bigger with black lawyers. Another change also shows Wright's Communist perspective in *Native Son*. After Nixon was arrested for the murder of Mrs. Florence Johnson, Chicago police used third-degree methods to extract from him confessions, later withdrawn, of other crimes, including the murder of another woman a year earlier, when he was alleged to have written the words "Black Legion" with his victim's lipstick on her bedroom mirror. The Black Legion, as Humphrey Bogart fans will recall from a film about the group, was an extremist right-wing organization in Detroit and other midwestern cities, a kind of northern urban version of the Ku Klux Klan. When Bigger thinks of diverting suspicion from himself, he signs the ransom note "Red" and draws a hammer and sickle. By changing from fascists to Communists, Wright implies that the latter share with Bigger the role of social outcast, a point Max emphasizes later in the novel.[14]

Most of *How "Bigger" Was Born* is devoted to Bigger himself, but at the end of the essay Wright turns to the actual process of writing

the novel, concentrating on the tension between truth and plausibility, the varieties of narrative technique used while maintaining and projecting Bigger's perspective, the opening and closing scenes written after the first draft, and, briefly, the process of revision. This remarkable exercise in literary autoanalysis concludes by placing *Native Son* and its subject in the context of the American tradition in fiction: "We do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him."[15]

2

As revealing as *How "Bigger" Was Born* is, it does not tell us everything about the composition of *Native Son*. An examination of letters, notes, manuscripts, and galley and page proofs at Yale, Princeton, the Schomburg Collection, and the Fales Collection of New York University supplements the essay in rewarding ways. These materials show in detail Wright's evolving conception of his novel and the artistry with which he articulated, shaped, and refined it. They also show how others seem to have participated in this creative process, notably his literary agent Paul Reynolds, his editor Edward Aswell, and the author of the introduction, Dorothy Canfield Fisher. My somewhat cursory examination of these materials allows me to make some preliminary observations and reach some tentative conclusions, but they await and require more thorough and detailed investigation.

After completing his first draft, Wright began to revise his book, a process that continued for over a year.[16] Large and small changes were made, most on Wright's own initiative but some suggested by others. Stylistic revision usually moved toward clarity, more precise diction, or greater economy of expression. For example, the Schomburg version's "another cigarette in his lips" becomes the more vivid "another cigarette slanting across his chin" in the published novel. The prolix "Bigger took a deep breath and looked from face to face, as though it seemed to him the heighth [sic] of

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