Native Son

The Emergence of a New Black Hero

Robert Butler

Twayne Publishers ★ Boston
A Division of G. K. Hall & Co.

Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero
Robert Butler

Twayne's Masterwork Studies, No. 77

Published by Twayne Publishers
A division of G. K. Hall & Co.
70 Lincoln Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02111

Copyediting supervised by Barbara Sutton.
Book production by Gabrielle B. McDonald.
Typeset in Sabon
by Huron Valley Graphics, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI.

First published 1991.
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 (hc)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 (pb)

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984. ♾™

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Butler, Robert.
Native Son : the emergence of a new Black hero / Robert Butler.
p. cm. — (Twayne's masterwork studies ; no. 77)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8057-8086-6 (hc). — ISBN 0-8057-8148-X (pbk)
1. Wright, Richard, 1908–1960. Native son. 2. Afro-Americans in literature. 3. Heroes in literature. I. Title. II. Series.
PS3545.R815N336 1991
813'.52—dc20 91-8827

For
my wife, Mary Jo,
and my children,
Becky, Geoff,
Mike, and Eric

Contents

Note on the References and Acknowledgments

All quotations from *Native Son, Black Boy,* and the pamphlet "How Bigger Was Born" are from the Perennial Classics paperback edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) and are cited parenthetically in the text.

I am grateful to Canisius College for granting me the sabbatical that provided the time and financial support necessary to research and write this book. My deepest thanks also go to my students at Tougaloo College and Stillman College who first opened my eyes to Wright's fiction and also to my students at Canisius College and Attica Correctional Facility who over the years have greatly deepened my knowledge of *Native Son.*

I would also like to thank Dean Walter Sharrow of Canisius College, Professor John Reilly of the State University of New York at Albany, and Professor Joe Weixlmann of Indiana State University for their steady support and encouragement.

I am grateful to Harper & Row Publishers for permission to quote from "How Bigger Was Born," *Native Son,* and *Black Boy.* My thanks also go to the editors of *Black American Literature Forum* for allowing me to use material from my articles on *Native Son.* Finally, I wish to thank Professor Keneth Kinnamon for so generously making available to me a prepublication copy of his *Essays on "Native Son."*

Richard Wright

Photograph courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Chronology: Richard Wright's Life and Works

1908	Richard Wright is born 4 September on a plantation outside Natchez, Mississippi, to Nathan Wright, a sharecropper, and Ella Wright, a country schoolteacher. He grows up in one of the most poverty-stricken and rigidly segregated parts of the South.
1914–1915	In search of better employment, the Wrights move to Memphis, Tennessee, where Nathan works as a night porter in a hotel and Ella works as a cook for a white family. The Wrights are left destitute when Nathan deserts Ella and the children for another woman. In 1915 Ella contracts an illness that eventually reduces her to the status of an invalid for the rest of her life.
1916–1918	Along with his mother and brother, moves to Jackson, Mississippi, to live with his maternal grandmother, Margaret Wilson, and then to Elaine, Arkansas, where they live with his aunt Maggie and her husband, Silas Hoskins. They are forced to leave Arkansas when Silas is murdered by whites who threaten to kill the entire family. For the next two years, the Wrights move back and forth between Helena and Jackson. During this time Wright's schooling is sporadic, and he becomes acutely aware of southern racism and violence, both of which leave indelible imprints on his consciousness and become important preoccupations in his fiction.
1918–1925	A period of serious and widespread racial discrimination against blacks and other minorities. The Ku Klux Klan is revived throughout the South and in various parts of the North, flourishing throughout the twenties. Racial rioting takes place in many American cities in the years immediately following World War I. Wright attends, with many interruptions, public and Seventh Day Adventist schools. In 1923 he enters the

Smith-Robertson Public School and in 1925 graduates valedictorian. Increasingly aware of southern racism and violence—brought to a sharp focus when the brother of a high school friend is murdered by whites—he decides to leave Mississippi. Saving enough money from an assortment of menial jobs, he arrives in Memphis, Tennessee, in November, 1925.

1926 Begins to read widely and is especially drawn to H. L. Mencken's ideas criticizing American society and modern life. At this point he also begins to read seriously such American naturalists as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis and is also strongly influenced by European realists like Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoyevski. His period in Memphis is a profound psychological awakening that transforms his life and confirms his desire to be a writer.

1927–1931 Moves to Chicago in December 1927 and shortly thereafter is joined by his mother and brother. After working as a waiter and helper in a grocery store, he passes a civil service examination and becomes a postal clerk, a job that enables him to work nights and spend his days reading and writing. Develops a strong interest in Edgar Allan Poe and also begins to read works by T. S. Eliot, Charles Baudelaire, André Gide, Thomas Mann, Friederich Nietzsche, Gustave Flaubert, and Nickolai Gogol. Soon after the stock market crash of 1929 he loses his position as a postal clerk and is forced to support himself and his family with a series of low-paying jobs; for much of this time he has no choice but to live in slum housing very much like that depicted in *Native Son*. In 1930 he becomes an aide at the South Side Boys Club, where he works directly with young men from Chicago street gangs. In 1931 he begins work with the Federal Negro Theatre and becomes a writer for the Illinois Writers' Project.

1932–1934 Becomes interested in Marxism, listening to Communist speakers in Washington Park and attending meetings of the John Reed Club, an organization of young writers committed to using literature as a tool for promoting Marxist ideas. Begins publishing poems, stories, and essays in *New Masses, Left Front,* and other leftist journals. Joins the Communist party in 1933.

1935–1936 Becomes widely known in Chicago literary circles and develops friendships with the novelists James T. Farrell and Nelson Algren. Begins work on his first novel, *Lawd Today,* in 1935 and publishes "Big Boy Leaves Home" in the *Negro Caravan* in 1936. By the end of the year he completes all four stories

that would later be published in *Uncle Tom's Children* and begins work on *Native Son*.

1937 Has ideological differences with members of the Chicago John Reed Club and in the winter of 1937 moves to New York, where he becomes the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker.* Keeping to a rigorous writing schedule, he works intensively on *Native Son* throughout the year.

1938 *Uncle Tom's Children* is published, making Wright one of the Communist party's outstanding young writers. He also becomes deeply interested in the Robert Nixon case, involving an 18-year-old black man accused of murdering a white woman. He does extensive research on the case and uses it as a documentary parallel to characters and events in *Native Son*.

1939 Wins a Guggenheim Fellowship, enabling him to work full-time on the completion of *Native Son*.

1940 *Native Son* is published on 1 March. Later in the year Wright collaborates with Paul Green on a stage version of the novel and begins work on *Twelve Million Black Voices,* a documentary study of the black South featuring photographs by Edward Rosskam.

1941 Receives the Spingarn Medal awarded by the NAACP to an outstanding Negro. Marries Ellen Poplar, a white woman, on 12 March despite her parents' strong objections to her marrying a black man. His doubts about being a member of the Communist party intensify, partly because of the party's turning away from American racial issues in order to pursue a broader struggle against fascism in Europe. Begins to feel sharply divided between his commitment to opposing racial injustice in America and his loyalty to party ideology.

1942 Officially breaks with the Communist party. *Twelve Million Black Voices* is published in October. He completes a manuscript version of *The Man Who Lived Underground,* a short novel notable for its existential rather than Marxist vision of life.

1943 Visits the Deep South to give a lecture at Fisk University in April; the trip reacquaints him directly with the problems of the segregated South, triggering his desire to write his autobiography. By the end of the year he has written *American Hunger,* an autobiography that covers his life up to his departure from Chicago in 1937.

1944 Wright's public disavowal of communism, "I Tried to Be a Communist," is published in the *Atlantic Monthly.*

1945	*Black Boy,* a shortened version of Wright's autobiography, covering his childhood and adolescence in the South, is published in March as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Later in the year he meets writer James Baldwin and helps launch Baldwin's career by assisting him in receiving a grant from the Eugene Saxton Foundation.
1946–1947	Decides to "exile" himself permanently in France, leaving the United States on 1 May 1946. His circle of friends in France includes such existentialists as André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as American expatriate writers Gertrude Stein, Baldwin, and Chester Himes. He also develops close ties with the West Indian poet Aimé Césaire, the Jamaican writer George Padmore, and the African intellectual Léopold Senghor, each of whom is committed to viewing the situation of black people from a global, "third world" perspective.
1949–1950	Works intensively on a film version of *Native Son,* for which he writes the script and acts the lead role of Bigger Thomas.
1951–1956	Works on two novels, *The Outsider,* published in 1953, and *Savage Holiday,* published in 1954. Both novels reflect his increasing interest in French existentialism. In 1953 Wright visits the Gold Coast (now known as Ghana), where he observes firsthand an African nation in the process of liberating itself from colonial rule.
1955–1956	Participates in the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, which focuses on problems of the third world. His book *The Color Curtain* appears in March 1956 and places heavy emphasis on race as the crucial factor in resolving the problems of Western and third-world cultures. In September 1956 he helps organize the First Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in Paris.
1957–1958	Works on a new novel, *Mississippi,* as the first installment of a trilogy centering on a black man's experience in the South and his exile in France. The first volume appears in 1958 as *The Long Dream. White Man, Listen!,* a book about black culture and politics, is published in October 1957.
1960	Dies suddenly from a heart attack, on 28 November, while being treated for an unrelated illness in a Paris hospital.

Literary and Historical Context

1

Cultural Background

Like many American masterworks arising from realistic and naturalistic traditions, *Native Son* vividly reflects the history of its time. It is therefore important that its readers have a clear grasp of the specific historical events and trends that helped shape the novel. Three particular aspects of modern American history are crucial to an understanding of *Native Son:* the Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North in the first half of the twentieth century; the Great Depression, which produced a major crisis in American culture between 1929 and 1940; and the interest in radical leftist politics that developed in response to this crisis. As a glance at the Chronology of Richard Wright's life and works immediately makes clear, Wright personally experienced each of these three important aspects of modern American history and was thus able to write about them with special force and authority.

Historians August Meir and Elliott Rudwick describe the Great Migration as a pivotal event in Afro-American history: "After the Civil War and Emancipation, the major watershed in American black history was the Great Migration to Northern cities that began during

the First World War. According to the census of 1910, blacks were overwhelmingly rural and Southern; approximately three out of four lived in rural areas and nine out of ten lived in the South. A half century later Negroes were mainly an urban population, almost three-fourths of them being city dwellers. The changes in the texture of Negro life that have resulted are enormous."[1] Driven physically out of the South by agricultural disasters brought on by the boll weevil epidemic, soil depletion, and massive flooding, and also alienated from southern culture by its system of segregation, blacks flocked to northern cities in search of a better life. Between 1900 and 1910 the black population of New York grew by 51 percent and the black population of Chicago expanded by 30 percent. The years surrounding World War I witnessed an especially dramatic increase in the numbers of people living in northern cities, for the war greatly stimulated northern industry, creating an enormous need for both skilled and unskilled labor. Between 1910 and 1919 Chicago's black populace more than doubled in size, and it continued to grow steadily throughout the 1920s. Cleveland's black community grew from 8,000 in 1910 to 34,000 in 1919, and such cities as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Boston also witnessed dramatic increases in their black populations. Even though the Great Depression took away much of the economic lure of the northern city, the migration of blacks northward continued, although at a slower rate.

The immediate result of the Great Migration was a bitter disappointment for blacks, because their rapid infusion into northern cities soon produced teeming ghettos, such as the one depicted in *Native Son*. Rather than being integrated with the mainstream of northern life, where they could get a fair share of the tremendous prosperity in America brought on by World War I, blacks found themselves again segregated as second-class citizens. This segregating was done in a number of ways. On a personal level, blacks were kept out of white neighborhoods by violence directed at them in the form of beatings, stonings, and the bombing of their homes. White home owners also formed so-called neighborhood improvement associations for the purpose of excluding blacks, and real estate agencies like that owned by

Mr. Dalton in *Native Son* developed restrictive covenants that prevented blacks from renting apartments and buying homes in all-white sections of the city.

For people like Richard Wright and characters like Bigger Thomas, the problem was exacerbated because they migrated to Chicago at a time coinciding with the onset of the Great Depression. If racial discrimination made the northern city a harsh environment for blacks in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the widespread unemployment and economic deprivations brought on by the depression made city life even more difficult. And although unemployment rates during the depression were extraordinarily high for all Americans, they were even higher for blacks. By 1933 between 25 percent and 40 percent of blacks in major urban centers were on public assistance, a mode of life reducing them to the sort of marginal subsistence level depicted so powerfully in *Native Son*. In 1934 fully 38 percent of all black workers were "incapable of support in any occupation."[2] For the most part, the majority of black people who were able to get work during the depression could find only the kind of low-paying, dead-end jobs that would not keep them far above the bare subsistence level provided by public relief.

The response of many American intellectuals and artists to the widespread suffering brought on by the depression was to raise fundamental doubts about traditional American values and institutions and to commit themselves to radical left-wing politics promising a new order of things. Novelists like John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck, unlike the apolitical writers of the twenties, produced an important body of literature that was deeply grounded in social issues and cried out for basic political, economic, and social change. Richard Wright, who became seriously interested in Marxist ideas 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 for transforming American society. *Native Son* was begun just three years after Wright became a Communist and was intended to be a radical indictment of the American system that Wright felt had been brought to the verge of collapse by the depression.

The importance of Wright's involvement with communism cannot

be overemphasized, because it supplied him with what he would later call "the first total emotional commitment of my life," a new faith to replace the old beliefs shattered by the disappointments of the Great Migration and the shocks of the depression. Communism helped Wright develop as a man and as a writer, for it gave him a coherent philosophical vision, "an organized search for truth" that intellectually stabilized him in a world that seemed to be falling apart. It also gave him an imaginatively potent vision of human unity, "a common vision that bound us all together,"[3] which Wright needed for both his writing and his psychological well-being. Communism therefore endowed Wright with the same sense of identity it briefly supplied for Bigger Thomas, who toward the end of *Native Son* can feel stabilized "for the first time in his life" when Max's Communist vision helps him see "vague relations" between himself and others, leading to "a new sense of the value of himself " (334).

It is important to realize, however, that although *Native Son* was written while Wright was an active worker for the Communist party, the novel is much more than a propagandistic tract that oversimplifies human experience to promote Marxist ideas. While writing the novel Wright felt a healthy tension between his commitment to political ideology and his own sense of black American life arising from his personal experiences. Wright's novel thus enriches his personal outlook with a political vision that gives it unity, depth, and resonance, but at no point does political abstraction distort or compromise the integrity of what Wright as an individual black man knew. Wright's fierce devotion to portraying the realities of black life in America as he honestly felt them eventually created problems for him with the Communist party, from which he resigned in 1942, following several years of increasing doubt. He finally saw communism as depriving him of the independence and freedom he needed to reveal fully his vision of American black life. As he observed in *American Hunger,* communism ironically took on many of the repressive features of southern life against which he had earlier rebelled: "I had fled from men who did not like the color of my skin and now I was among men who did not like the color of my thoughts."[4]

Cultural Background

Alfred Kazin once described the thirties as a period that gave Americans "an education by shock."[5] *Native Son,* composed during the depths of this crucial decade, indeed provides its readers with a similar kind of "education." Written by a man who had directly experienced in his own personal life some of the decisive events and movements of modern American history, the novel is a remarkable mirror of its times. But Wright's masterwork is much more than a period piece providing dead footnotes to the past. Because Wright was a genuine artist, he was able to transform his record of his own era into a rich and compelling vision that transcended its times, addressing its readers in a universal way. *Native Son* therefore continues to "educate" us in shocking lessons that are as relevant today as they were in 1940.

2

The Importance of the Work

It is difficult even today to exaggerate the importance of Richard Wright's *Native Son,* a book that dramatically changed the ways in which American blacks and whites envision each other and represent themselves in literature. As Irving Howe has pointed out,

> The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. . . . Richard Wright's novel brought out in the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.
>
> A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission.[6]

Like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Dreiser's *Sister Carrie,* and other seminal works in American literary tradition, *Native Son* emphatically brought something new into American consciousness. First, it boldly presented a new black hero who was radically different from any of his predecessors in formal literature. It also told this hero's story from a fresh literary point of view. And this point of view allowed Wright to dramatize the world of urban blacks as no previous writer had been able to, meticulously detailing the hard facts of ghetto life from an insider's perspective.

Certainly no serious account is made of the black urban masses in previous white literature of the American city. Although the city was given a great deal of attention in American literature after the Civil War and assumed a prominent position in American fiction during the twenties and thirties, none of the many urban novels written by whites during these times focus on black people in any sustained or meaningful way. William Dean Howells's novels, several of which were strongly committed to a "realistic" portrayal of the social classes in the late nineteenth-century American city, either contain no black characters or give very marginal status to blacks, with the "darky" who silently and invisibly tends the furnace in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Even classic naturalistic novels, which were interested in revealing the harsher facts of American urban life, scarcely mention black people. Urban novels by Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser largely ignore blacks, and when blacks are noticed in books like James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (1935) they are vaguely described as an oncoming wave of intruders who will displace people from their ethnic neighborhoods.

Black fiction prior to *Native Son* is also noticeably lacking in detailed, realistic portraits of the impoverished masses of urban blacks. Although Charles W. Chestnutt lived for a considerable time in the urban North and wrote novels that can be considered "protest" novels, these books are set in the South and center on middle-class figures, such as Dr. Miller in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), or mulattoes aspiring to enter the white world, such as Rena Walden in *The House behind the Cedars* (1900). Paul Laurence Dunbar focused mainly on rural southern blacks who were content to avoid the corrupting influences of northern cities, and when he did write about urban blacks in *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) it was with considerable detachment and some disdain. James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927) clearly expresses a preference for

the city over the rural South; however, his city of preference is not a restrictive ghetto but a place of expanded possibility. Entering New York harbor, Johnson's middle-class protagonist envisions the city as an "enchanted spot," a place where he can rise in life. He condescendingly refers to poverty-stricken blacks as "the desperate class,"[7] and Johnson's novel provides only shadowy, oblique images of such people. Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) mainly tells the story of blacks living in the rural South, but when it does depict life in Washington, D.C., and Chicago it describes these cities in a lush, impressionistic manner, accentuating their poetic qualities. Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) likewise stresses the black city's exotic qualities, envisioning it mostly as a place of freedom, excitement, and pleasure.

But *Native Son* speaks with a new voice, one that provides an intimate and shockingly realistic account of the plight of poor blacks in a massive ghetto. From the dissonant ringing of the alarm clock that opens the novel to the harsh clanging of Bigger's cell door that concludes the book, Wright jars us with a fresh novelistic voice that calls us to a sharp awareness of the ravaged world of America's urban blacks. Filtering the novel through not the cultured mind of an omniscient author but the highly charged consciousness of an uneducated and embittered black man who has been radically cut off from the mainstream of American life, Wright makes the novel's perspective something altogether new in American literature, a view of the ghetto from the standpoint of one of its victims.

Native Son is also an important work in American and Afro-American tradition because of its enormous influence on subsequent literature. The immediate impact of the book was to create what Robert Bone has called "the Wright School"[8] of fiction in black literature. Throughout the forties and early fifties younger black writers regarded *Native Son* as a paradigm and molded their own work along the thematic and formal lines established by Wright's masterwork. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), for example, imitated Wright's scrupulous naturalism in his story of black workers in Pennsylvania steel mills. Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) owes much to Wright's depiction of the urban environment as a powerful force attacking the central character's basic aspirations. Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947), although centering on a white protagonist named Nick Romano, follows the plot line of *Native Son* nearly point by point. Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1947) and Lloyd Brown's *Iron City* (1951) also show the strong influence of *Native Son* in their descriptions of the violent pressures of a racist urban environment on black individuals.

In a broader sense, *Native Son* has continued to influence black literature well beyond those who counted themselves among "the Wright School." Even though James Baldwin went to great lengths to make it clear that his muses were quite different from those which inspired Wright, Wright's brutally honest depiction of the relationships between sex, race, and violence helped free Baldwin to ground much of his own work in those preoccupations. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) raises many of the same questions posed by *Native Son* even though it provides very different answers to those questions. Wright's example as a politically engaged writer who had a deep understanding of how the social environment affected individual black people inspired a whole generation of black activist writers of the sixties and seventies who read *Native Son* as a novel containing powerful "relevance" to their own situations. Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), with its gritty description of Harlem life, is clearly cut from the same bolt of cloth Wright wove for *Native Son,* and Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* (1968) characterizes himself as a native son moving in a direction Wright helped him define. Very recently, Clarence Major has listed *Native Son* as one of the novels that awakened him as a writer, and he described his first reading of the novel as "an overwhelming experience."[9]

Keneth Kinnamon has aptly observed that "with *Native Son* Wright became one of the important figures of twentieth century American fiction."[10] Wright's masterwork revolutionized American literature because it was courageous enough to attack old taboos that previous writers dared not approach and because it created startling new images about black experience that continue to inspire writers and disturb readers.

3

Critical Reception

The critical response to *Native Son* can be roughly divided into four main phases: the initial reviews, reactions to the novel from the forties to the midsixties, reassessments of the book from the midsixties to the late seventies, and continued reassessments in the eighties and nineties. From its publication in 1940 to the present, *Native Son* has sparked a vigorous critical debate involving a wide variety of critics who have approached the novel from many revealing perspectives.

The reviews of *Native Son* capture two crucial truths about the book: (1) the importance of the novel as a landmark work in American literature and (2) the immense controversy it evoked among a broad range of readers. The immediate impact of the book is evidenced not only by the intensity of its early reviews but also in the remarkable early sales. A Book-of-the-Month Club selection, the novel in its first printing was sold out within three hours of publication, and nearly 250,000 copies of the book were bought within six weeks.

Those reviewers who praised the book saw it as a seminal novel that promised to change the direction of American literature because it offered a new and disturbing view of the experience of blacks in America. Margaret Wallace, writing for the *New York Sun* a few days after

the novel's appearance, sensed "a peculiar vitality" in the the book and argued that it was likely "to father other books" (5 March 1940). Henry Seidel Canby, writing for *Book-of-the-Month Club News,* boldly asserted that *Native Son* was "the finest novel written by an American Negro," a book so deeply grounded in black American experience that "only a Negro could have written it" (February 1940).

Most of the reviewers who praised the book saw in it a new kind of central character, one whose story provided a fresh perspective on black life in America. Milton Rugoff, in the *New York Herald Tribune Review of Books,* stressed that the "first extraordinary aspect of *Native Son* is that it approaches the tragedy of race not through an 'average' member but through a criminal" and that such a character is skillfully probed by Wright to "connect one individual's pathology to the whole tragedy of the Negro spirit in a white world" (3 March 1940). Sterling Brown's *Crisis* review two months later described *Native Son* as a "literary phenomenon" because it was the first novel about American blacks that provided a "psychological probing of the consciousness of the outcast, the disinherited, the generation lost in the slum jungles of American civilization" (June 1940).

Some leftist critics, such as Samuel Sillen, praised the book for its "revolutionary view of life" and its portrayal of the hero's "emancipatory" struggles against a society intent on crushing him (*New Masses,* 5 March 1940). Several other reviewers were struck by the novel's extraordinary impact, its power to transform the reader's consciousness. May Cameron saw *Native Son* as an "intense and powerful" novel that moved with "tremendous force and speed" to shock the reader into a new awareness of the position of blacks in American society (*New York Post,* 1 March 1940). Henry Hansen observed that Wright's novel "packs a tremendous punch, something like a big fist through the windows of our complacent lives" (*New York World Telegram,* 2 March 1940).

But many reviewers were equally vigorous in their condemnation of the book. One day after its publication, Howard Mumford Jones strongly attacked *Native Son* on aesthetic grounds, describing its plot as melodramatic and its themes as "dull propaganda" (*Boston Evening*

Transcript, 2 March 1940). Burton Rascoe's review for *American Mercury* sharply criticized the initial positive reviews and concluded, "Sanely considered, it is impossible for me to conceive of a novel being worse" (May 1940). And Clifton Fadiman assessed Wright as something less than a "finished novelist," pointing out that *Native Son* suffered from a melodramatic plot and "paper-thin" characters (*New Yorker,* 16 March 1940).

A number of other reviewers faulted the book for a lack of realism, claiming that its vision of American life was overdrawn and unfair. David Cohn, for example, described *Native Son* as "a blinding and corrosive study in hate" and argued vehemently that the condition of blacks in America was considerably better than the book would allow (*Atlantic Monthly,* May 1940). David Daiches maintained that the novel failed in its attempt to be an "illustrative fable" of actual race relations in America because Bigger's violent actions are too extreme for him to be a representative figure. Alleging that "Mr. Wright is trying to prove a normal thesis with an abnormal case," Daiches felt that *Native Son* deteriorated into melodrama that destroyed its realism (*Partisan Review,* May–June 1940).

On an even more serious level, some reviewers sharply questioned Wright's conception of Bigger Thomas, arguing that the character actually reinforced the brutal stereotypes the author wanted to destroy. Reverend Joseph McSorley argued in *Catholic World* that Bigger Thomas was "a savage moron" whose portrayal had the unintended effect of "spreading and deepening distrust of the Negro" (May 1940). Jonathan Daniels likewise concluded that "the story of Bigger Thomas is the story of a rat," a dehumanized figure used by the writer to develop his political "tract" (*Saturday Review of Literature,* 2 March 1940).

This extraordinary flurry of reviewing, which took place over a very brief period of four months after the novel appeared, laid the groundwork for much of the critical debate that would develop over the next fifty years. Indeed, most of the following questions raised by the early reviewers have continued to dominate discussions of the novel:

- Is the novel an artistic success, or is it crude propaganda that is deeply flawed by the melodramatic action and stereotyped characterization required by the advancement of a political thesis?
- Does the book supply a believable vision of race relations in America?
- Does it provide an accurate image of Afro-American life?
- Is the central character a boldly conceived new hero, or is he an overdrawn, heavily exaggerated, symbolic monster?

Much of the subsequent discussion of *Native Son* returns repeatedly to these questions, and different critics in different periods have responded to these questions in a great variety of ways.

The critical commentary on *Native Son* from a few years after its publication to the midsixties, however, was generally negative in its reply to these questions. This negativity can be explained by the general decline of naturalism as a literary mode in favor of less doctrinaire, more expressive fictional styles and also by a pervasive disenchantment with leftist politics after World War II. In addition, a perceived improvement in race relations after the war and a hope for the rapid integration of blacks with the mainstream of American life produced a desire for a more "universal," less "race conscious" type of literature that would speak to the needs of a multiracial audience. William Gardner Smith, for example, urged the Afro-American novelist to move away from "propaganda" and toward an art centered in "universal" themes, and he especially warned black writers to avoid making their characters "an exaggerated Bigger Thomas with all the stereotyped characteristics three times over."[11] Hugh Gloster, who admired *Native Son* as "a masterpiece of proletarian fiction," nevertheless felt that such writing was too restrictive for the post–World War II Negro writer. Gloster faulted Wright for looking at American reality from too limited a perspective: "He sees only a segment of life, and even this limited part he views in its most violent and horrible aspects."[12] James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison put the case against Wright most pointedly in widely read essays that seriously diminished Wright's literary reputation. Baldwin in "Many Thousands Gone" argued that "protest" novels like *Native Son* were intended to advance the cause of racial justice for American blacks but

ironically had the reverse effect because they were populated by one-dimensional characters who reinforced all the stereotypes that trapped blacks in limited roles. He claimed that Bigger was a "monster created by the American republic" and a "social symbol revelatory of social disease,"[13] rather than a fully developed, realistic character who could adequately reflect the richness of Afro-American experience. Ellison in "The World and the Jug" and in interviews later collected in *Shadow and Act* likewise claimed that *Native Son* was artistically crude and that its vision of black life was too narrow because it was filtered through Bigger's limited perspective and Wright's excessive commitment to Marxist ideology.

One of the few major critics to come to Wright's defense during this period was Irving Howe, who in "Black Boys and Native Sons" sharply criticized the assessment of Wright made by Baldwin and Ellison. Howe argued that *Native Son* brought to a culmination the vital tradition of protest in black literature and chided Baldwin and Ellison for abandoning this tradition. He praised *Native Son* for its "superbly aggressive" tone, "apocalyptic" mood, and "clenched militancy" (Howe, 65, 69).

If this phase of criticism of *Native Son,* ranging from the early forties to the midsixties, provided a largely negative assessment of the novel, the next period of critical evaluation was almost uniformly positive. From the midsixties to the late seventies commentary on *Native Son* established it as a major American novel. Part of the reason for this development, of course, was the increasing militancy of the civil rights movement and a new interest in "black power," a phrase Wright himself had coined. Whereas post–World War II critics were likely to view Wright's aggressive politics as an asethetic liability, critics from the midsixties onward, especially those connected with the black arts movement, saw him as a model of the politically engaged writer. And while earlier critics were inclined to see Bigger Thomas disapprovingly as a dangerous stereotype of the "bad nigger," critics now were apt to hail Bigger as a prototype of the revolutionary black hero. Likewise, Wright's graphic portrayal of violence, which to critics like Baldwin was gratuitous and melodramatic, was to a newer genera-

tion of scholars a necessary part of Wright's vision of race relations in America.

Probably the work that most vividly illustrates this shift in sensibility is Eldridge Cleaver's "Notes on a Native Son," published in *Soul on Ice* (1968). Cleaver sharply criticized writers like Baldwin for ignoring the sociology of black experience and praised Wright for the depth of his social and political vision. Wright's political commitments to Marxism and black nationalism were viewed by Cleaver as artistic advantages, for they enabled him to envision more fully the condition of twentieth-century black people. Accordingly, Bigger becomes for Cleaver someone very different from the pathological monster Baldwin saw; on the contrary, he is regarded as "the black rebel of the ghetto and a man."[14] Edward Margolies's *Native Sons* (1968) likewise describes Bigger as a revolutionary figure rather than a sociological case study. Arthur P. Davis's *The Dark Tower* (1974) and Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World* (1975) are later studies that also make a strong link between Bigger Thomas and the tradition of black activism.

This dramatic reassessment of Wright as a social and political thinker led to an equally dramatic reevaluation of him as an artist. From the midsixties onward, much was writtten to challenge the earlier view that Wright was a "powerful" but artistically inept writer, and *Native Son* was the focus of the majority of these studies. George E. Kent in 1969 observed that Richard Wright "seems now all too prophetic, all too relevant, majestically waiting that close critical engagement which forms the greatest respect that can be paid to a great man and writer."[15] In the years that followed, Wright's books, especially *Native Son,* received in scores of articles and books the "close critical engagement" it deserved and for so long had been deprived of.

One of the best critical studies to appear at this time was Donald Gibson's "Wright's Invisible Native Son." Submitting *Native Son,* and especially book 3, to a close and sensitive reading, Gibson argued that critics who regard Bigger as a stereotyped monster fail to *see* the inward, personal self buried underneath Bigger's public mask. By the end of the novel, Bigger can transcend his outward environment and through "solitary hours of minute introspection and self analysis"

become a "private, isolated human" who is able to "face the consequences" of his life.[16] Dan McCall's *The Example of Richard Wright* (1969) is another penetrating study that first describes the extraordinary hatred and violence of the world Wright experienced as an American black man and then raises the crucial question, "How does one write about such a world and how is it to be interpreted in literary art?" Part of the answer is Wright's conscious desire in writing *Native Son* to move away from a dogmatically "realistic" style of fiction, with its emphasis on carefully depicting surface reality, and to use what McCall calls "psychodrama," a mode of fiction in the gothic tradition of Poe and Hawthorne that distorts outer reality as a way of dramatizing the mind through symbolism. Using this surrealistic technique, Wright was able to go to 'the center of the racial nightmare" as no previous writer had been able to. Bigger Thomas emerges from McCall's critical study as an archetypal rather than a stereotypical figure, a "legendary figure of the Western mind" who successfully embodies "the Myth of Race" just as figures like Robinson Crusoe embodied "the Myth of Individual Enterprise."[17]

McCall's book was followed three years later by another crucial study, Keneth Kinnamon's *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (1972). Kinnamon's discussion of *Native Son* stresses its roots in Wright's own experiences as well as the murder trial of Robert Nixon, a Chicago black man who was executed in 1938 for killing a white woman. He emphasizes, however, that Wright transformed actual experiences, adapting them for the purposes of his art. Carefully discussing the novel's structure, point of view, characterization, and symbolism, Kinnamon argues that each technique is artfully integrated to give full expression to "the theme of rebellion" that is the "central meaning of *Native Son.*" Although he admits that the novel is not without flaws, most notably an "uneveness in style" and a less-than-satisfactory book 3, Kinnamon finally assesses *Native Son* as not only "a major document of the American racial dilemma" but also a book whose "art makes it . . . an important American novel" (Kinnamon, 143).

Three influential studies of the cultural background of Wright's fiction also emerged during this time. Blyden Jackson's biographical

essay entitled "Richard Wright: Black Boy from America's Black Belt and Urban Ghettos" appeared in a 1969 special issue of *CLA Journal* devoted to Wright. Jackson placed Wright's fiction firmly in the context of his experience "deep within the world of the folk Negro," claiming that although Wright chose to live his adult life outside the South, his work is grounded in southern culture, which was both his "heart's home" and his "mind's tether."[18] George E. Kent's "Richard Wright: Blackness and the Adventures of Western Culture" appeared in the same special issue but approached Wright from another perspective, arguing that Wright's vision is centered in a broader context, his ambivalent response to the West. Kent sees Wright attracted in some ways to Western culture because of its tradition of Enlightenment rationalism that promises political freedom to oppressed people, but he also argues that Wright was deeply suspicious of other aspects of the West, especially its history of racism. Kent envisions Bigger Thomas as caught between these two opposite qualities of Western culture, for he both is victimized by Western racism and also achieves selfhood in a very Western way through "revolutionary will, individualism and self consciousness" (Kent, 341). Houston Baker, like Jackson, examines Wright's work in the context of black folk culture. His chapter on Wright in *Long Black Song* (1972) presents *Native Son* as a landmark work in American literature because it is the first novel to capture adequately the full force and richness of black folk experience. Baker draws revealing parallels between Bigger Thomas and trickster heroes like Brer Rabbit, bad-man heroes like Stackolee, and revolutionary figures like Nat Turner.

From the late sixties to the beginning of the eighties no less than four biographies of Wright were published. But by far the best biography for literary purposes is Michel Fabre's *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973), the product of nearly a dozen years of research and writing. Fabre's book sheds much revealing light on *Native Son,* not only for its detailed and accurate account of Wright's life prior to writing the novel but also because of its careful description of the circumstances surrounding the actual composition of the book, from 1937 to 1940. Wright's reading at this time is described, and the

importance of his friendship with novelists Ralph Ellison and Nelson Algren is also stressed. Moreover, by comparing various drafts of the book, Fabre gives valuable insights into the technical decisions Wright made while writing the novel.

The period between the late sixties and the end of the seventies also produced a number of important scholarly articles on *Native Son*. Several focused sharply on the novel's intricate patterns of imagery. James A. Emmanuel's "Fever and Feeling: Notes on the Imagery of Native Son" (1968) studies images of light, darkness, walls, and erasure, arguing convincingly that such images are Wright's way of dramatizing Bigger's subconscious and conscious minds. James Nagel's "Images of Vision in *Native Son*" (1969) carefully explores how Wright used ocular images to suggest how Bigger's social world fails to see him as a human being and how Bigger is also beset with "blindness" when attempting to visualize himself and his environment. Robert Felgar's "The Kingdom of the Beast: The Landscape of *Native Son*" (1974) focuses on animal imagery, arguing that Wright employs it effectively as a way of defining the white world's stereotypical vision of the black world.

Several excellent comparative studies also emerge in this period. Keneth Kinnamon's "Richard Wright's Use of *Othello*" (1969) points out a number of significant parallels between Wright's novel and Shakespeare's play. Stephen Corey's "The Avengers in *Light and August* and *Native Son*" (1979) compares William Faulkner's Percy Grimm with State Attorney Buckley from *Native Son,* demonstrating that both figures are used by their authors to portray the hatred and power of the white world. The most revealing comparative study, however, is Yoshinobu Hakutani's "*Native Son* and *An American Tragedy:* Two Different Interpretations of Crime and Guilt" (1979), which makes a number of subtle distinctions between Wright and Dreiser that were ignored by many earlier critics. Hakutani's analysis stresses that, however similar the two novels are in general situation, they are crucially different in structure and theme.

Strong interest in *Native Son* continues in the 1980s and 1990s, although with not quite the same emphasis as in the preceding four

decades. The focus of attention on the novel has shifted somewhat, with studies of Wright's political vision diminishing and analyses of his craftsmanship and literary sources increasing. Less is heard about Bigger as a revolutionary figure, and more is written about him as an existential hero, a tragic figure, or a modern antihero. The great majority of scholars and critics during this period are in general agreement about the artistic merit of *Native Son* and its importance as a major novel in American literature, although some reappraisal of a negative sort has also developed, especially among critics expressing dissatisfaction with Wright's portrayal of female characters.

Robert Felgar's *Richard Wright* (1980) asserts that Wright's fiction is "the most powerful to emerge to date in black literature." Felgar provides an antiheroic view of Bigger, claiming that he is a "monster" whose "life has not meant anything."[19] Jerry Bryant's "The Violence of *Native Son*" (1981) does a better job of exploring the novel's complexities because it makes a crucial distinction between Bigger's monstrous acts of violence and Wright's humane conception of the character. Agreeing with Felgar that Bigger is anything but a black activist hero, Bryant nevertheless insists that "he is not the brute of the newspaper stories."[20] Instead, Bryant sees Bigger as a "representative modern man" who is threatened by a dehumanizing social system but who, like Albert Camus's Meursault, can achieve a human identity through self-awareness. Michael Cooke's chapter on Wright in *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1984) likewise claims that while Bigger's self-destructive outer action leads to "self cancellation," his inner growth results in existential "self avowal," leading to his becoming "a participant in the life of the spirit."[21] This growth finally puts him on the verge of reconciliation with fellow human beings, a process tragically aborted when he is executed.

Joyce Ann Joyce's *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy* (1985) examines Wright's craftsmanship in *Native Son,* analyzing his meticulous use of language and rhetorical strategies. Her careful study of the novel's style reveals that Bigger Thomas is not a naturalistic victim but a tragic hero. Bernard Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1987), however, takes a decidely negative view of Wright and