5-1-1975

The existential journey of Bigger Thomas: A critical examination of Richard Wright's "Native Son"

Marcia Speth

THE EXISTENTIAL JOURNEY OF BIGGER THOMAS

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Marcia Speth

May 1975

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	FEAR	29
III.	FLIGHT	43
IV.	FATE	66
V.	CONCLUSION	86
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY		91

THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Thesis Committee

Name	Department
Bruce A. Baker	English
Dale A. Stover	Philosophy and Religion

Robert D. Harper
Chairman

May 20, 1975
Date

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The 1940 publication of Richard Wright's Native Son was a major event in the literary history of the United States. The first widely published novel by and about a black man became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, subject of voluminous critical response. The popularity with white audiences of a work that is vehemently critical of white society was due in part to the sensational advertising campaign attached to it. Promoted as an exciting crime story,[1] the novel was undoubtedly a shocking experience for racially unsophisticated segments of the white reading public and press.

Some popular reviews expressed a deeply engrained bigotry that provides ironic vindication for Wright's literary indictment in Native Son of the American mass media for widespread, blatant racism. Reverend Joseph McSorley stated of black Bigger in his review that appeared in Catholic World (151, May 1940), 84: "He is bestial, treacherous, utterly unlovable, with no redeeming trait. . . . Why if Mr. Wright's description is true to life, then every healthy young Negro male must be regarded with justifiable suspicion and carefully barred from opportunities of crime which are open to the average American citizen." Even some of the more temperate reviewers assumed a paternalistic tone toward Wright's accomplishment. One such discussion concludes that, among Wright's other stylistic flaws, there is "a bookish quality, often encountered in

[1] Henry Seidel Canby, Book-of-the-Month-Club News, Feb. 1940, pp.2-3.

the self-educated writer, which should be weeded out."[2] It has been observed that writers who possess a high degree of formal education more often tend to produce "bookish" prose.

Undue background criticism has been devoted to Wright's affiliation with the Communist Party of that era. The novel has been viewed as unsuccessful propaganda,[3] even though black rejection of white Communism is an obvious theme of the novel. One critic has even suggested that Wright had "allowed his statement as a Communist to overwhelm his statement as an artist."[4] To the major Communist reviewers, however, Wright's statement as a Communist was not exactly overwhelming. Large-scale recruiting of blacks undertaken by the Party in that era led the organization to welcome a literate, widely published black writer to their numbers, but the denunciation of the hollow idealism of the Communist Party contained in his best-selling novel could never have been written by a loyal Party member. The circuitous reviews that finally appeared in Party organs reflected an indecisive attitude toward the "Communist" novel.[5]

Although critical appraisals of Native Son appeared in the major literary journals, there was an obvious reluctance among white literary historians to recognize the artistic achievement of an American black writer: "On the literary front, the initial critical enthusiasm for

[2] Margaret Marshall, rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright, Nation, 150 (1940), 368.

[3] Gloria Bramwell, "Articulated Nightmare," Midstream, 7, No. 2 (1961), 110, and others.

[4] Robert Bone, Richard Wright, Univ. of Minn. Pamphlets on American Writers, 74 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1969), p. 23.

[5] Ben Davis, Jr., rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright, New York Sunday Worker, 14 April 1940, pp. 4-6, and others.

Native Son did not mean that Wright had won a permanent place in literary history. . . . Having thus disposed of Native Son, the critics could write books such as The American Novel and Its Tradition and The Novel of Violence in America without even mentioning Wright and produce a voluminous Literary History of the United States in which Jack London got four pages, Hamlin Garland three, and Booth Tarkington two, while Richard Wright was mentioned only in passing."[6]

Of course white reactions of this kind were undoubtedly anticipated by the Southern black who completed his underground education by tricking white librarians into lending him books.[7] In Black Boy, his literary autobiography, Wright graphically depicted his early memories of white brutality to blacks. Wright's militancy was rooted in his growing up black in a whitewashed land; in spite of his mild exterior, Wright carried Bigger Thomas within him. An irritatingly sermonistic article by a Jewish critic in which he urged Wright to abandon his black militancy prompted Wright's public rebuttal. Cohn suggested that Wright take "the long view of history" and emulate the passive endurance of the Jew through centuries of oppression.[8] Wright responded that his own historical perspective suggested to him that, "Only the strong are free;" he preferred to model his political action after "that great Jewish revolutionist, Karl Marx." In a rare display of his sardonic humor, he entitled his counter-attack,

[6] Richard Abcarian, "Preface," Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1970), v.

[7] Richard Wright, Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 269.

[8] David Cohn, "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright," Atlantic Monthly, 165 (1940), 661.

"I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me."[9]

Wright predicted the negative reaction to his novel among educated blacks in his own background essay on the novel which originally appeared in 1940.[10] Blacks who had gained acceptance in white society were unwilling to acknowledge Wright's artistic achievement because of his militancy. Bigger Thomas posed a threat not only to racially biased whites, but also to black reconciliationists who coveted their relative status in the white world. (This prevalent tendency among affluent blacks is described in contemporary black street culture as "wanting to be the only one on the block.")[11]

While the preceding discussion emphasizes the more extreme reactions to Native Son, it is not intended to imply that insightful studies have not appeared from time to time.[12] However, the bulk of criticism relates the novel to Wright's personal life and philosophy. Biographical and sociological critiques do not reveal the remarkable unity of plot, theme, and symbol that renders the work so powerful. And the many early critics who evaluated the novel with naturalistic criteria tend to ignore the broader artistic significance of the work. A recent appraisal views

[9] Richard Wright, "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me," Atlantic Monthly, 155 (1940), 828.

[10] Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Native Son, A Perennial Classic (1940; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966), xxiii.

[11] James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (1951; rpt. New York: Dial Press, 1969), pp. 13-42, and J. Redding, "The Alien Land of Richard Wright," Soon One Morning (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963), pp. 50-59, exemplify this attitude.

[12] Abcarian's Handbook provides an excellent overview of the range of criticism pertaining to the novel.

Native Son in a larger context: "It is a prototype of the modern existentialist novel and a link between the fiction of the 1930's and a good deal of more modern fiction."[13]

The obvious similarities between Native Son and the early existential fiction of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have gone largely unnoticed, perhaps because little formalist criticism of the novel has been done. A detailed examination of the text of the novel reveals that Bigger Thomas moves from his entrapment within his naturalistic environment to a final awareness and acceptance of his existence that is characteristic of the French existential heroes.

Wright's relationship to the literary existentialism of France has often been misunderstood. To presume that his use of existential themes and literary techniques grew out of his associations with Sartre and Camus in France after World War II is to misinterpret the basic evolution of Wright's philosophy as evidenced in his writings. Even his biographer's attempt to establish the original and separate development of Wright's existentialism refers to "The Man Who Lived Underground" as his first existential work, while overlooking the place of Native Son in the tradition of the existential novel.[14] The existential belief in the value and meaning of individual human life is projected in Native Son; his later work reflects his movement away from the growingly

[13] Donald Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," Amer. Quarterly, 21 (1969), 737.

[14] Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, trans. I. Barzun (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), p. 241.

intellectualized French version of existentialism. In The Outsider, the first novel published after Wright's expatriation, there is a rejection of existentialism that is as definite as his rejection of Communism in Native Son. Cross Damon is the degenerate existential hero whose morbid intellectual introspection and mental alienation from other men lead him to abandon his authentic responsibilities and identity and to then embark on a futile search for meaning in a meaningless world.

In the 1950's, Wright's determined political militancy led to his close associations with exiled African liberationists, many of whom were openly critical of Sartre.[15] Sartre seemed to have moved away from his revolutionary activism of the Resistance toward a growing intellectualization that abstracted him from the real existence of the people. In Pagan Spain, a non-fiction work, Wright recorded his shock at the primitive conditions of poverty, ignorance, and squalor he encountered in his European travels;[16] the common people cried out for sustenance while their natural leaders disputed points of doctrines in cafes. Simone de Beauvoir unintentionally verified this assessment in an interview that appeared in a special issue on Wright, Studies in Black Literature, 1 (Autumn 1970), 3-5. In recalling Wright's failure to enlist Sartre's support in his attempt to force the integration of the NATO forces, de Beauvoir proudly explained that Sartre had refused to commit himself to Wright's social activism "purely out of principle" (p.4), the principle being his abstract refusal to acknowledge the existence of NATO.

[15] Fabre, p. 376.

[16] Richard Wright, Pagan Spain (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 68.

In his later works, Wright retained a closer literary and philosophical tie with the writings of Albert Camus, who disavowed his own association with the existentialist movement for similar reasons.[17] There was, however, between these two men an unbridgeable personal gap caused by their ethnic backgrounds. Camus, the white revolutionary, was also a French Algerian who opposed the Algerian liberation movement; his sense of racial identity was deeper than his political philosophy. Camus, with his customary clarity of expression, defended the authenticity of his stand against the French withdrawal from his native land: "'Do you expect me to be against my own mother?'"[18] Wright, in his growing involvement with the African liberation movement, remained firmly committed to the plight of dark-skinned people everywhere.

The period during which Wright, Sartre, and Camus were producing authentic existential fiction was in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Native Son, written before Wright's intellectual encounter with the ideas of existentialism, is perhaps more authentic in that it was drawn not from philosophical concepts but from the existential realities of the black man's life in the United States. When viewed in the context of French literary existentialism, the authentic artistic merit of Native Son becomes apparent.

While the works that have been used to frame an existential context for the novel are limited to the World War II era, many of the themes

[17] See Camus' discussion of existentialism in The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien, A Vintage Book (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 99-101.

[18] Lionel Abel, "Seven Heroes of the New Left," Molders of Modern Thought, ed. Ben Seligman (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p.335.

and ideas discussed are traceable to earlier writers. The existential affirmation of the meaningfulness of individual, authentic existence originated as a late nineteenth century reaction against the abstract idealism of Hegelian rationalism and the depersonalization engendered by the Industrial Revolution. Many thoughtful men came to realize that society's traditional value system was no longer relevant to modern man. The alienation of the authentic individual from his inauthentic society is a recurrent theme in both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, two major forerunners of the existential movement. The mob as the grotesque symbol of a collective humanity that still adheres to societal values was also developed in the works of both men. Novelists of the era, such as Dostoevsky, introduced the idea of the extreme situation, i. e., facing a death sentence, as crucial to the development of existential consciousness.[19] The rejection of traditional values in a conscious acceptance of personal existence as the source of meaning became a central theme in French existential literature.

The inadequacy of abstract terminology to convey the meaningfulness of individual human existence led to the development of existential fiction as a vehicle of expression. In the art form of fiction, the existentialist found the freedom to recreate rather than explicate his world view. Sartre and Camus have published philosophical treatises that speak to the basic ideas of the movement, but it is in their imaginative literature that a layperson can best acquire a sense of the existential essence. As illustrated in their early works, existential

[19] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Existentialism," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), III, 147-54. This source has been used for general background on philosophical existentialism.

fiction fuses naturalism, psychological realism, and symbolism in a rendering of classic existential themes. The naturalistic element is the hostile, overpowering environment that surrounds the existential character, while the development of his consciousness often constitutes the plot. The existential writer relies heavily upon symbolism to delineate his basic themes and to reflect the interaction between the character and his environment.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, Nausea, he explores the nature of the existence that is the source of meaning to the existentialist. Although the novel provides an interesting exploration of many existential ideas and themes, Sartre's central character is not a fully developed existential hero; he is an intellectual who has spent most of his life hiding from existence in libraries. Roquentin, traditional humanist and historian by profession, has no authentic existence of his own, having expended his life force to animate the dead past.

In a first-person narrative, the timid scholar reveals his insight into the nature of existence, an awareness that has generated the "nausea" of the title. His awareness of the disgustingly animate quality of every existent thing is heightened to paranoia by his habit of dwelling in the static past. He now sees that everything exists without past or absolute essence; the only meaning rests in the present existence of each and every thing. The inactive intellectual is disgusted by the nature of existence as he perceives it. He feels a physical repugnance generated by the closeness of other existents: "Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable.

I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts."[20]

Sartre has developed in Roquentin a character that exists in a position almost diametrically opposed to Bigger Thomas' as he first appears in Native Son. Bigger is in a deterministic environment where he cannot refrain from acting in the manner that has been proscribed by the dominant society, but he has no real awareness of the nature of his existence. Roquentin, who has remained aloof from existence in his intellectual ivory tower, is faced with the awareness that the existence that he has shunned is the only reality. He recognizes that he has erroneously identified with his mental processes, which have little significance in the real world: "I have never before had such a strong feeling that I was devoid of secret demensions, confined within the limits of my body, from which airy thoughts float up like bubbles. I build memories with my present self. I am cast out, forsaken in the present: I vainly try to rejoin the past: I cannot escape" (p.49).

Roquentin is not a strongly existent man who acts purposefully. He spends his days in a library doing research, insulated by mounds of books from the real existence in the streets. He comes closest to real existence at random times when he is gripped by impulses of intense excitement. They are what pass in his dormant life for emotional, instinctual reactions on the level of other existents. After being overcome by one of these exciting feelings that something is about to happen, the lonely little historian races through the streets of

[20] Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, trans. Lloyd Alexander (1938; rpt. 1949 tr. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p. 19. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Bouville toward his rendezvous with adventure, his experience of life.

He is brought by his impulse finally to the front of his habitually frequented restaurant. He stares through the windows, becoming absorbed in the contemplation of the sweet, interesting face of the young cashier who sits placidly at her post while slowly dying of some rotting disease. He then realizes that the feeling and the moment have passed. This arbitrary, meaningless sequence of events constitute Roquentin's total adventure. The impulse toward life and action is pointless and fruitless, leaving no satisfaction: "When I found myself on the Boulevard de la Redoute again nothing was left but bitter regret. I said to myself; perhaps there is nothing in the world I cling to as much as this feeling of adventure; but it comes when it pleases; it is gone so quickly and how empty I am once it has left. Does it, ironically, pay me these short visits in order to show me that I have wasted my life?" (p.78). Sartre adds a touch of irony by placing his character on a street called "Dread;" Roquentin faces the existential dread that there is nothing more to life than this meaningless energy.

Sartre develops his existential rejection of classical humanism by demonstrating that Roquentin's own authentic existence has been drained by his humanistic studies of the past. Roquentin's sense of his own insignificance is revealed in his encounter with the portrait of a city father that hangs in the local museum. Roquentin is defeated by the painted stare of the self-assured, historically vindicated capitalist. The timid scholar accepts the portrait's judgment of his own comparative worthlessness: "And it was true, I had always realized it; I hadn't the right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant

or a microbe. My life put out feelers towards small pleasures in every direction. Sometimes it sent out vague signals; at other times I felt nothing more than a harmless buzzing" (p.115-16).

From the traditional humanistic point of view, the individual man has no value beyond his contribution to the traditions of his society, which renders the common man powerless to wrest authentic meaning from his own existence. In his lecture, "Existentialism," Sartre differentiates between traditional humanism and his own existential humanism. He replaces the classical emphasis upon the exceptional man as an abstract source of human value with the existentialist belief in "human subjectivity" as the ultimate but concrete source of meaning.[21]

Sartre dramatizes the existential disregard for these traditions of the past through Roquentin's startled awareness that his attempt to reconstruct the historical past through his writing is an exercise in futility:

> I looked anxiously around me: the present, nothing but the present. Furniture light and solid, rooted in its present, a table, a bed, a closet with a mirror--and me. The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts. It is true that I had realized a long time ago that mine had escaped me. But until then I believed that it had simply gone out of my range. For me the past was only a pensioning off: it was another way of existing, a state of vacation and inaction; each event, when it had played its part, put itself politely into a box and became an honorary event: we have so much difficulty imagining nothingness. Now I knew: things are entirely what they appear to be--behind them . . . there is nothing. (pp.130-31)

Roquentin experiences the more pleasurable aspects of this immediate,

[21] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, A Meridian Book (New York: World Pub. Co., 1956), p. 310.

intensely present kind of existence when he abandons his biography of the long dead minister of state and feels the life energy that has formerly been used up in animating the past surge within him once again. He escapes the deadening effect of his futile attempt to actualize a nonexistent past and experiences the flesh-and-blood intensity of passionate existence when he chooses life over abstract studies. Momentarily, at least, Roquentin finds existence pleasurable: "I exist. It's sweet, so sweet, so slow. And light: you'd think it floated all by itself. It stirs. It brushes by me, melts and vanishes. Gently, gently. There is bubbling water in my mouth. I swallow. It slides down my throat, it caresses me--and now it comes up again into my mouth. For ever I shall have a little pool of whitish water in my mouth--lying low--grazing my tongue. And this pool is still me. And the tongue. And the throat is me" (p.134). He has come finally to identify with the conscious and unconscious acts of his existence rather than his abstracted thoughts.

The author introduces the existential theme of violence, even murder, as a positive force to expand the area of one's existence. Roquentin senses the aggressive, combative nature of existence in the world, the natural tendency of existents to struggle and press against each other. A newspaper account of the rape-murder of a young girl prompts within the gentle scholar an impulse toward rape as a way to overcome the rigid boundaries of his existence: "She no longer exists. . . . Raped. A soft, criminal desire to rape catches me from behind . . . existence is imperfection" (p.137).

Sartre places his character within the larger context of society

to contrast the existentialist's awareness of his condition with the blindness of his fellows. Roquentin sits in a restaurant physically in the midst of the crowd yet mentally alienated. He knows that he alone is aware of the true nature of existence. The others participate in a specious social interaction that is based upon mutual self-deception, each inventing a series of pompous lies to justify his petty life. He escapes from the stifling complicity of the crowd that his solitary consciousness renders intolerable:

> I could no longer stand things being so close. I push open a gate, go in, airy creatures are bounding and leaping and perching on the peaks. Now I recognize myself, I know where I am: I'm in the park. I drop onto a bench between great black tree-trunks, between the black knotty hands reaching towards the sky. A tree scrapes at the earth under my feet with a black nail. I would so like to let myself go, forget myself, sleep. But I can't, I'm suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth. . . . And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have <u>seen</u>" (p.170).

The existential moment that Roquentin experiences, his perception of the true nature of existence, is so bleak and devoid of meaning as to induce physical illness. The actual progression of the nausea that symbolizes his growing awareness culminates when Roquentin fully experiences and accepts the fact of his sickness. He says of the nausea, "It is I" (p.170).

There is a whimsical humor in Roquentin's horrified awareness of oppressive, over-ripe existence and the helplessness of the existents trapped within its context. Roquentin senses that none of the existents, even inanimate ones, wish to participate in this sticky, oozing existence, but they are powerless to refrain. The irony inherent in his intense intellectualization of the process of existence suggests, however, that

he is perhaps only projecting his own unwillingness to participate actively in existence outward in a form of mental deception.

Roquentin's final decision to seek the possibility of immortality through a dedication to art makes him other than a true existential hero, but the novel is important because it demonstrates the existential insistence upon the individual human being in his most ordinary aspect as the ultimate source of meaning in the universe. Sartre expresses the view that each man is trapped within the context of an existence he cannot refrain from living; intellectualization and the attempt to abstract his existence are futile. But the passive nature of his central character, the uneventfulness and safety of his life, seem to negate the possibility of positive, purposeful action in such an existential context.

In a story published the following year, however, Sartre introduces the existential context of the extreme situation to dramatize the possibilities as well as the limitations of human freedom and meaning. Published at a time when his country was in social and political turmoil, "The Wall" develops the existential belief in the possibility of human freedom in the most determined environment while introducing the existential hero as condemned prisoner.

To the existential thinker who believes in no afterlife, the condemned prisoner faces the most poignant of life situations. The isolation of his cell parallels the mental alienation of the existential man from the society of his fellows. There is a pervasive irony in the condemned prisoner as existential hero, a man who recognizes the value and possibilities of life only when faced with the certainty of his own death.

"The Wall" has been called "a classic treatment of the central existentialist motif of confrontation with death."[22] The death that Pablo, the Spanish insurgent, faces is symbolized by the title, the wall at which the existential hero must relinquish his existence.

Pablo and his two companions have been sentenced by a military tribunal to be shot at dawn. Unlike the condemned prisoners of Camus and Wright, Pablo does not wait for his execution physically alone. He had been kept in solitary confinement since his capture by the soldiers of the fascist state, but he is taken to spend his last night in an unheated basement with the other two condemned men. He has received no real trial, and his death sentence is read to him off a roster by a bureaucrat. His place in the social context of the resistance has determined that he not die alone, but the companionship of the other two men that he at first welcomed becomes intolerable to him finally for he knows that he must die alone.

The symbol for the average inauthentic man who never questions the facts of his own existence is introduced in the Belgian doctor who has been sent to observe the physiological reactions of the prisoners to the terror induced by their approaching deaths. Pablo is at first outraged by the presence of the man who views his death as statistical material for pseudo-scientific investigation, but his rage is suddenly drained by his profound indifference to the living engendered by his awareness of death. Against the foil of the overtly solicitous doctor who surreptitiously makes notes, Pablo is able to observe both in himself and the

[22] Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 41.

other condemned men the physical, instinctual reactions to impending death, that peculiar agony that is possible only for beings who both exist and are separately conscious of that existence. Pablo shares with the other condemned men the physical symptoms of terror, but his conscious perception is personal and unique. His mind perceives his body as "an enormous vermin."[23]

He is alone among these men, alienated by his consciousness. None of the three men believes in a deity or seeks the solace of religion, but Pablo succumbs to neither the hysterical fear of the young skeptic nor the morbid curiosity of the materialist Tom. He sits waiting to die split between his conscious intention to die honorably and his physiological state of extreme terror. Even though he has gone for a long period of time without sleep, he directs his will toward maintaining his conscious control: " . . . I didn't want to die like an animal, I wanted to understand" (p.233).

As he contemplates the certainty of death, he loses interest in all that has formerly occupied his life. He no longer cares about the outcome of his political struggle for freedom nor feels any attachment to his former friends. He has lost the desire to hold his mistress again and does not even care what happens to Ramon Gris, the man he is dying to protect. He rebuffs Tom's attempt at last-minute fellowship in his refusal to feel pity for himself or the others. He is certain that the hysterical terror of the young coward is sufficient protection for

[23] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Wall," trans. Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 235. All subsequent references are to this edition.

him from the futile awareness that encompasses Pablo. When the other two are led out to be shot and Pablo is kept waiting in the cellar, he is unconcerned, having already faced his death: "Several hours or several years of waiting is all the same when you have lost the illusion of being eternal" (p.235).

When he is taken to be questioned again, he is presented with the option of informing on the hiding place of his friend Ramon or being executed at once. He realizes that even though he no longer cares about Ramon or the movement, he still will not inform on his friend. He is amused by his own "stubborn" refusal because there is no longer any logical reason for him to maintain his integrity. In a frivolous mood, he fabricates a hiding place for Ramon in the cemetery, enjoying the mental image of the uniformed men swarming fruitlessly through the vaults of the dead. When he is later released into the general prison yard instead of shot against the wall, he finds that Ramon had left his secure hiding place and gone to the cemetery, where the soldiers killed him.

Pablo has chosen to act purposefully in an heroic manner, but the only value of his action was in itself. He has made the moral choice to sacrifice his own life to save Ramon while unwittingly initiating the sequence of events that lead to Ramon's death and his own reprieve. Sartre, like Camus, defines the narrowness of the area of human freedom. A man may consciously direct his actions with meaningful purpose, but he cannot control the results of those actions. Pablo decided to protect his comrade and die honorably; the knowledge of his integrity to that decision is all that can be expected of existence. The human will can operate either to accept or to reject the facts of one's existence, but

the irrational element of chance can never be predicted or controlled.

A fuller development of the existential character in the context of his society is presented in Albert Camus' The Stranger which appeared in 1942. Camus places his hero in a wider social environment than Pablo's cellar, but Meursault's social intercourse only intensifies his mental alienation from other men. Like the other existential characters, he is an ordinary man, leading a seemingly secure, somewhat boring existence. He differs from other men not in his actions but in his authentic consciousness. Like Sartre's scholar in the crowded restaurant and Pablo in the cellar, he is alone in his perception of the existential reality. Camus' stranger is the detached observer of his society who is aware of his essential isolation. There is no place in a regimented society for a man who attempts to be honest with himself and others. Meursault's basic curiosity about his own motivations and feelings spurs his foolish tendency to respond honestly to the dishonest questions of society. He is an outcast in his refusal to seek shelter in the authentic traditions of society.

Camus develops the contrast between the authentic existential man and the inauthentic behavior patterns that form the core of most social interaction. The novel opens with the death of Meursault's mother in a distant institution for the aged. Meursault has never had a close relationship with his mother; his decision to place her in a home was based upon their life together as strangers in the same apartment. But society expects that he display the customary filial grief at the death of a parent. When he realizes that he is expected to take part in the death ritual, he borrows a mourning band that is symbolic of the inauthenticity

of grief. Meursault sits at his mother's coffin with the other mourners, untouched by the meaningless ritual. He remains emotionally detached and objective, but is mildly startled by the incessant sobs of grief emanating from a woman he does not even recognize. In a final ironic symbol of inauthentic grief for the dead, his mother's friend Perez grieves copiously, but, instead of flowing naturally, his tears are diffused over his face by the wrinkles of age.

Meursault returns to his lonely life in the town and the apartment he had once shared with his mother. The flat is unoccupied except for the one room he now uses for eating and sleeping, imaging his isolated, solitary existence. Camus symbolically develops the existential man's position as an outsider. He sits on his balcony and observes the life in the streets below. A mismatched family on a Sunday stroll and a gang of youths off to cheer a team pass by, representative of the inauthentic social peer groups that Meursault rejects.

Camus satirizes the most intimate of social units, marriage, in the relationship of old Salamano and his miserable dog. In their years of cohabitation, they have come to ressemble each other--both are old, balding scabrous, and ill tempered. Salamano viciously abuses his animal with a hatred that is reflected in the dog's abject terror; but with the dog's disappearance, he is overcome with grief. Salamano, like most people who find shelter in self-debasing relationships, does not understand that he grieves for the loss of his victim. To hide from his failure to wrest a personal meaning from existence, he transfers his identity to the dog; to the animal he is the omnipotent tyrant, without him he is but a lonely old man.

In Meursault's world, personal liaisons are inauthentic and detrimental to the development of individual consciousness. His chance encounter with Marie and the casual affair that develops illustrates that Meursault's alienation from society is only mental. He does not manifest his individuality in antisocial acts; rather, he allows himself to be led by the wishes of others to act inauthentically. His sense of integrity is operant in his refusal to lie about his lack of real emotional involvement. Camus asserts that romantic love, like grief and marital fidelity, is a meaningless social convention. Just as Meursault refrains from publically displaying a grief that he does not feel at his mother's death, he refuses to lie to Marie about his lack of romantic love for her: "A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't."[24]

His authentic perceptions and naive honesty make him the enemy of a society that is based on deception even before his fatal involvement with Raymond, the underworld character. Meursault's basic indifference toward circumstances of his own existence precipitates his willingness to be directed by the passions of others. Just as he agreed to Marie's suggestion of marriage because he holds no deep prejudice against it, he becomes involved in the machinations of Raymond simply because his aid is solicited. Meursault drifts into a friendship with Raymond without considering the moral ambiguities inherent in the situation. He becomes Raymond's accomplice in his terrorization of his Arab girlfriend by

[24] Albert Camus, The Stranger, trans. Stuart Gilbert (1942; tr. New York: Vintage Books, 1946), p. 44. All subsequent references are to this edition.

agreeing to write a letter to the girl and later making a formal statement in Raymond's defense to the authorities.

When Raymond is wounded in an encounter with relatives of the girl he has abused, Meursault unwittingly commits himself to his friend's inauthentic vendetta. Thinking to prevent further violence and longing to escape from the confusion and turmoil of the social milieu he has drifted into, he takes Raymond's gun from him and walks alone across the sun-scorched, deserted beach. As Meursault walks along the dazzling sand, he is gradually enveloped in the fierce heat and light. When he sees the Arab appear before him in the distance, he rejects his impulse to flee. He moves instead toward the distant Arab and the large rock that promises a momentary shade from the naturalistic forces that assault his body.

Camus has carefully developed the context of the killing to demonstrate that Meursault's shooting of the Arab was unpremeditated and involuntary, not a murder in the eyes of the law. When the native pulls a knife, Meursault, momentarily blinded by sweat and glare, fires at him once and then blankly fires four more shots. In the setting of racially divided colonial Algeria, Meursault's having killed a native rather than another white further mitigates his crime. Clearly Meursault will be tried by society not for his act but for his dangerous ideas.

Meursault's mental alienation from his society becomes a physical reality; he is a prisoner who must stand trial for his life. His interrogation by the fanatically Christian magistrate illustrates the total disparity between the authentic individual and an inauthentic society. To the agent of society, the important facts of the case are Meursault's motive for pausing between shots, his remorse for his

crime, and, most importantly, his belief in the Christian God. Meursault characteristically refuses to mouth the responses society expects. He admits that he is an atheist, points out the utter futility of remorse for anything, and insists that his pause between shots was insignificant.

As Meursault's trial opens, he is calm and detached, struck only by the unexpectedly large crowd of spectators and the stifling heat of the chamber. Meursault knows that he is innocent of premeditated murder, but his security in his blamelessness is shattered by the realization that he is actually being tried for a different crime: "Replying to the questions, he said that I'd declined to see Mother's body, I'd smoked cigarettes and slept, and drunk cafe au lait. It was then I felt a sort of wave of indignation spreading through the courtroom, and for the first time I understood that I was guilty" (p.112). His real crime against society is his failure to conform to its inauthentic standards of thought and behavior.

During his months in prison awaiting trial, Meursault had grown accustomed to his solitary existence. His awareness of his own isolation becomes intensified during the trial, however, as he is transported in the prison van back and forth between the courthouse and the prison. The familiar sounds of the streets awaken his longing for freedom, but his desire to mingle again with other people is tempered by the realization that he is an object of hatred to the hostile crowd that surrounds him. The existential man as nonconformist poses a grave threat to the mindless will of the herd who anticipate his extermination. The jury, official representatives of inauthentic society, having deliberated for less than an hour, find him guilty as charged.

Society's casual death verdict is intensely ironic to the existential thinker who perceives existence as the only essence. The condemned prisoner in his cell provides a highly suitable fictional context for the ultimate existential decision, recognition and acceptance of individual, authentic existence as the essential source of meaning. As Meursault waits in his cell, he is in the classic existential position; he must come to terms with the fact that his only essence is the existence that will soon be terminated. He has not yet relinquished the hope of escape, and he is doubly obsessed by thoughts of dawn, the time when executions are performed, and of his appeal, the agonizing possibility of freedom. He exists in a limbo of indecision where he will remain until he accepts the inevitability of his death.

Camus, in his detailed description of the guillotine, renders a chilling symbol for a death without honor. Meursault contemplates the machine that will kill him in an attempt to prepare himself for the end: "This business of climbing a scaffold, leaving the world below, so to speak, gave something for a man's imagination to get hold of. But, as it was, the machine dominated everything; they killed you discreetly, with a hint of shame and much efficiency" (p.140-41). Meursault even imagines himself escaping from the inexorable machine to be shot down in flight; any death is preferable to execution by decree which forces a man to be an accomplice in his own murder.

As Meursault's hope for reprieve dwindles, he recognizes, like Pablo in "The Wall," that his doom has severed his former ties with the living. He seeks no further communication with his fellows; nevertheless, the prison chaplain forces his presence upon the condemned man. The

trite plea of the priest, servant of the state, is designed to force Meursault to act out the final inauthentic role that society expects. He rejects society's last attempt to crush his individual consciousness: "I told him that I wasn't conscious of any 'sin;' all I knew was that I'd been guilty of a criminal offense. Well, I was paying the penalty for that offense, and no one had the right to expect anything more of me" (p.148).

Meursault's certain knowledge that his death is near renders the priest's complacent ignorance intolerable finally. He lays hold of the man and screams out his rage and frustration at all the lies that inauthentic people live by until the jailers release the man. Meursault's outburst of feeling that symbolizes his final rejection of inauthentic religion leaves him at peace. Washed of all hope, he feels a certain happiness as he accepts "the benign indifference of the universe" (p.154). He makes his death his own by choosing to become the willing victim of society, wishing only that he should be greeted at his execution by the hateful mob's "howls of execration" (p.154).

Camus' existential hero is engulfed in the same deterministic environment that confronts a naturalistic character, but his tragedy and his heroism are rooted in his consciousness of the acts of his life and his acceptance of responsibility for them. This existential awareness and acceptance provides the philosophical foundation for the distinction between literary existentialism and naturalism.

In a brief essay originally published the same year as L' Etranger, Camus adapts the traditional myth of the Greek Sisyphus to further illustrate his existential perspective. Sisyphus has been thrust into

hell by vengeful gods who have decreed that for all eternity he must continually push a large rock up a mountain. Although Camus mentions various legends of Sisyphus' life in the world, he is basically interested in the nature of Sisyphus' punishment: ceaseless and futile labor for an indeterminate offense. He draws on the obvious parallels between Sisyphus trapped in the underworld and the existential man enclosed in the naturalistic environment of modern Western society.

Sisyphus' solitary existence, entirely without companionship, images the mental alienation of the existential hero from the other members of society. A man's existence must be lived out alone; no fellowship can alter the basic facts of one's life. Camus uses the role of the gods in the myth to illustrate the irrelevance of any superior power to the existential dilemma of individual man. Sisyphus' world is governed by anthropomorphic deities who have created the features of his environment and predetermined the actions he will perform there. For Camus, the meaningful area of human freedom rests in the individual's perceptions and attitudes.

The crucial portion of Sisyphus' existence for Camus is the moment when he pauses at the top of his mountain and contemplates his fate, "the hour of consciousness."[25] The conscious awareness of existence distinguishes Sisyphus and the other fictional existential heroes from the helpless pawns of naturalistic fiction and elevates their repressed actions to the heroic level: "But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless

[25] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien, A Vintage Book (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 90. All subsequent references are to this edition.

and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (p.90).

Camus asserts that the existential hero, although trapped in a deterministic environment, can experience the happiness engendered by freedom. Sorrow is caused by yearning for escape from the inescapable and is "the rock's victory . . . the rock itself" (p.90). Man hopes because he has not yet accepted the inevitability of his existence. Once he has accepted what the cruel gods have decreed as his own personal fate, the existential hero exercises his human will in the only way open to him. To illustrate the nature of the existential victory, Camus introduces the figure of Oedipus, decrepit, blind, and utterly dependent upon his daughter's guiding hand. Even though he has been virtually destroyed by the vengeance of the gods, he graciously accepts his fate and is content. His acceptance of his fate and his refusal to remain tortured and miserable thwarts the vengeance of the gods and banishes them from the area of human existence.

Camus emphasizes the absurdity of intermingling positivism and determinism in the existential victory. Sisyphus at the top of the mountain knows that he must return to the rock, but when he accepts the responsibility for the rock as his own and wills to go back down, he has made his existence authentically his own: "His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing" (p.91).

Camus' Myth demonstrates that existentialism is not a philosophy of despair based on the death of God. There is no environment too

hostile nor labor too futile to be conquered by man's conscious perception and acceptance. When a man truly accepts his fate, he defeats the powers that have ordained it and makes his existence his own and wholly human. Sisyphus is the prototype of the existential hero who exists in an honest relationship to his environment, freed from outmoded beliefs and traditions, secure in his own authentic existence. "One must," as Camus suggests, "imagine Sisyphus happy" (p.91).

With his characteristic clarity and economy of style, Camus in a few brief pages not only provides the underlying mythos for the existential literature of the period but also defines the limits of existentialism. In his preface to the work, he states that: "Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amid the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism" (Myth, v).

CHAPTER II

FEAR

The existential heroes of Sartre and Camus ultimately face a situation where their right to exist is challenged, but all of them begin with some measure of personal awareness and identity. White America's native son, black Bigger Thomas, has been conditioned by his impoverished and segregated world to believe that he is less than human. His deep sense of inferiority, constantly reinforced by the racist system. blinds him to his human right to individual, freely willed existence. Before Bigger can begin his existential journey beyond nihilism, he must first construct for himself a human identity.

In contrast to the passive, introspective Roquentin whose understanding has led to inaction, Bigger's mentally conditioned negative self-image renders him ignorant of his own right to exist. When he arrives finally in the end at a perspective akin to that of Meursault in The Stranger, the magnitude of Bigger's victory is evidenced by the distance he has travelled.

Bigger as he appears in the opening of the novel is a man who has been prevented from living like a man, forced to subsist in a hostile environment where meaningful existence is forbidden by law. He is a twenty-year-old American black man who has been robbed of his essential human rights by a white racist power structure. Bigger in Book 1 presents a striking fictional representation of man in a

naturalistic universe.[1] The product of almost total mental and physical repression, Bigger acts and even thinks in patterns that have been predetermined by the alien ruling class. For most of his young life, he has done exactly what was expected of a poor ignorant black boy.[2] Even his few abortive acts of violent rebellion were predictable and served to reinforce his identification with a racial stereotype. His occasional outbursts of nonproductive violence are but instinctual expressions of animal rage, untempered by reason. Nothing that Bigger had ever done was truly his own; he has arrived at manhood without ever performing an authentic act. He is, at the beginning of his existential journey to selfhood, exactly what society dictates: a subhuman who must be kept in his "natural" place.

The various elements of Bigger's mental and physical environment reinforce his negative self-image. Bigger and his family are forced into degrading living conditions that make the possibility of genuine human relationships remote. Enclosed with his mother, sister, and brother within a shabby tenement room, dependent for the food he eats upon the prying charity of the white welfare department, robbed of all mental and physical privacy, Bigger habitually retreats behind a curtain of indifference to escape the horrible misery and shame of daily life with his impoverished family.

When Bigger awakes each morning in the same bed with his brother,

[1] Clifton Fadiman, rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright, New Yorker, 2 Mar. 1940, pp. 52-53, and others analyze the entire novel from this perspective.

[2] In Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), Wright records his own nightmarish youth as a poor black in the United States.

across the room from his mother and sister, he is repressed by the mental as well as physical factors of his surroundings. As Bigger and Buddy lower their eyes while the women dress, the family shares a mute recognition of their degraded, subhuman living conditions. But what Bigger does not share with his defeated family is the barely repressed hatred and fierce anger at those who keep him as he is. He has been prevented from functioning in his rightful role as provider for his destitute family, and his sense of shame and guilt at their humiliating poverty makes him appear sullen and uncommunicative. In spite of his alien environment, he has not lost the aggressive force of his latent manhood.

A foreshadowing of the destructive power of Bigger's long repressed life force comes when a rat invades the Thomas room. The symbol of the rat has another meaning for Bigger during his flight, but in the context of the opening scene, the rat is the existential challenge of life. The Thomas women, like many of their race, have been defeated by the harsh realities of ghetto life. They flee to the specious safety of the bed that is like the escapism of Mrs. Thomas' religion. Bigger, in contrast to the women, responds to the intense fear he feels by killing the rat in a frenzy of blows. That he is unable, even after the rat is dead, to control his frenzied attack is an indication that his will to exist has been stifled too long.

Bigger himself is not aware of the precise source of his pent-up rage; it is expressed consciously as a vague longing to escape the narrow enclosure of his world. His family's passive resignation and acceptance of its intolerable life makes Bigger feel even more alienated from them. The whites could force him to do anything--to starve, to freeze, to die

a hundred different ways--but they could never make him accept his subjugation.

His mother constantly warns Bigger that he will come to no good. His failure to assume the expected attitude of subservience and humility foreshadows his violent end. Bigger knows that his attitude frightens his mother, but he is ashamed that she has demanded so little of life. Although he has been as physically trapped by his environment as his mother, his will to assert himself has never been destroyed. Thus, he remains totally alienated from his own mother. To Mrs. Thomas, who has found refuge from the burdens of life in Christianity, her son's rebellious attitude is frightening and bewildering.

The disparity between the viewpoints of mother and child is objectified as the mother prepares the family's meager breakfast. Standing behind the curtain that separates the cooking facilities from the rest of the room, she sings a song whose lyrics irritate Bigger in a way he cannot articulate:

> Life is like a mountain railroad
> With an engineer that's brave
> We must make the run successful
> From the cradle to the grave. . . . 3

Filled with a nameless hatred and pain, he cannot at this point consciously understand the ironic contrast between the cheerful positivism of the song and his own total lack of control over his destiny.

Mrs. Thomas' evident anxiety that Bigger will not take the welfare job contributes to Bigger's impotent rage. The welfare department has advised the family that if Bigger does not accept the job designated for

[3] Richard Wright, Native Son, A Perennial Classic (1940; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966) p. 14. All subsequent references are to this edition.

him, the Thomas food supply will be cancelled. Bigger himself cannot fully understand his unwillingness to take the job; he feels only that he has been forced once again to obey the superior white force that has effectively nullified his free will by limiting the options open to him: "Yes, he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him that he did not have a wider choice of action" (p.16). His sense of frustration at being unable to exercise his free will suggests again that his conditioning has not been complete.

As he walks the streets of the Black Belt in search of a way to pass the hours until his job interview, he finds continual reminders of the pervasive dominance of the white owners. When Bigger pauses for a moment before a campaign poster soliciting votes for Buckley, the district attorney, the fleeting image of the solitary young black dwarfed by the gigantic white face of the law forms a striking symbol of Bigger's relative importance in the white world.

Although Bigger expresses himself more freely among his friends than his family, he remains alienated from them also. As he stands on the corner with Gus, Bigger gazes into the distance at the shining outlines of the white man's territory. A skywriting airplane that appears in the sky stirs a bitter memory of his thwarted childhood desire to be a pilot. He envies the pilot of the airplane and even a passing bird because both have the ability to soar up away from his own cramped imprisonment within the narrow bounds of the ghetto. Bigger and Gus find a momentary diversion in "playing white," acting out roles in the glamourous white world that they have been exposed to in the cinema.

But when Bigger thinks about the limitless choices and options available to whites, his rage and frustration ruin the game. He attempts to articulate his feelings to Gus: "'We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence . . . (p.23).[4]

Even though Gus shares Bigger's sense of exclusion from meaningful living, he fails to understand Bigger's violent reaction. To many blacks of the era, racism became an irrefutable reality to be patiently tolerated. To Bigger's friends as well as his family his violent reaction to oppression represents a very real threat. Since rebellion by individuals against the system was usually followed by reprisals against the total black population, most black people had become conditioned to fear and reject their own natural leaders--those Biggers of their number who challenge the authority of the ruling class.

On a subtler plane, both Bigger and his friends were conditioned by the mass media of the day to hate and fear themselves. Motion pictures were prominent influences upon the thoughts and feelings of Bigger. Since movies of the era were both cheap and time consuming, it was natural that Bigger would spend long hours sitting in a darkened theater where he could forget his own blackness and live instead in the gigantic flickering images projected on the screen before him.

[4] Gloria Bramwell, "Articulated Nightmare," Midstream, 7, No.2 (1961), 111, views the image of Bigger as an outsider as a proof that the novel is not in the existential tradition, her thesis being that Bigger is outside trying to get in, while the existential man is trapped on the inside and struggles to get out.

The two features that Bigger and his friend see while awaiting their planned robbery project the standard racial stereotypes of the era. While both races are represented on the screen, the audience viewpoint is always white. In The Gay Woman, whites are portrayed as idle rich, playing at life; the only common people in the film are servants and a bearded, insane Communist who is a prospective mass-assasin. In Trader Horn, blacks appear as fierce savages ominously threatening the white stars with their animalistic bloodlust. Even Bigger and Gus cannot help feeling vaguely frightened by the menacing, ferocious blackness portrayed on the screen. While Bigger consciously abandons himself to the white perspective, he unconsciously receives at least three messages--rich white people rule by right of possession, Communists are dangerous, destructive madmen, and blacks are naturally bloodthirsty savages who must be controlled by the guns of the white men.

Thus, while Bigger consciously proceeds with the plan to rob the white man's store, unconsciously he remains cowed by the white man's guns. Rather than invade the white man's territory, he starts a diversionary fight with Gus that disrupts the robbery. He expresses his impotent rage at the vast white power that holds him in his place in another abortive act of meaningless violence toward his own kind, the slashing of Doc's pool table. Bigger has been so thoroughly conditioned that he fears the thought of challenging white Blum, the old Jewish shopkeeper, more than the physical presence of black Doc and his loaded gun. The threat of the law and the guile of the media combine with Bigger's total lack of social intercourse with whites to lock him into his passive position in relation to the larger society.

Bigger, as he approaches his first real contact with the white world, is the potential existent man who has been legally denied any authentic existence. He remains intimidated by the vast white power that regulates and defines the terms of his misery because his only encounters with the white world have been in terms that define his own lack of control and identity. "They" are the landlords and owners of everything. Because he has never known any white people on a personal basis, Bigger cannot think of whites as human beings any more than the racist whites can accept him as a coequal being.

As Bigger stands on the threshold of his entrance into the larger society, the central symbolism of the novel emerges. As is characteristic of symbols in the existential fiction of Sartre and Camus, the features of Bigger's environment are reflections of his psyche. For Bigger, the single most pervasive fact of his environment is his blackness in a whitewashed land; thus, while the dominant white society has inevitably imposed its cultural symbols upon Bigger's black psyche, it has been unable to instill its value system. That Bigger and his kind attach an inverted value to the symbols of the white culture reflects the total disparity in viewpoint between black and white in the novel. To Bigger, white, the traditional symbol in the Anglo-Saxon culture of transcendence, goodness, and light, represents the overpowering force of oppression. White is the color of the force that holds him captive in his naturalistic universe--hostile, all powerful, unreachable. Feelings of repressed rage and hatred become associated with the color that defines Bigger's lack of identity and renders him powerless to act in an authentic manner. He equates fighting the Caucasian power structure with battling a great

white mountain or a raging blizzard.

As Bigger stands before the Dalton mansion that is the embodiment of imaginary movie dwellings, he is so awed by his imminent interview with one of the mysterious overlords that he cannot decide which entrance to use. Because he has never had any personal, authentic experience in dealing with white people, he is totally intimidated by the white force he must meet. His will paralyzed by dread, he remains throughout his interview with the Daltons in a schizophrenic state where his consciousness watches imprisoned as he helplessly acts the abject, ignorant black boy that he senses Mr. Dalton expects.

The Daltons are as abstractly white and distant as their film counterparts; but in Bigger's encounter with them he must face an added dimension of painful awareness, his own lack of significance in the context of the larger society. To the detached, aristocratic whites, Bigger is not a human being--he is a laboratory specimen of a subhuman life form. As Mrs. Dalton speaks to her husband of the need to "'inject him into his new environment'" (p.48), Bigger suffers a severe identity crisis. He realizes his inability to relate on an inter-personal basis with elements of the great, nameless force that has denied his own right to exist. As he listens uncomprehendingly to the Daltons discussing him in words he has never before heard, it is as if he had been sent to cohabit with alien beings on another planet.

Although the flat, one-dimensional characterizations of the Daltons have been seen by some critics as an artistic flaw,[5] the Daltons do not

[5] Charles Glicksberg, "Negro Fiction in America," South Atlantic Quarterly, 45 (1946), 486, and others.

function as characters in the novel. The unbridgeable gap between black and white perceptions makes character interaction impossible. The Daltons are not human beings to Bigger--they are physical embodiments of the forces of oppression. Mr. Dalton, immensely rich and totally detached, is the physical embodiment of the capitalistic ideal. He takes no interest at all in Bigger on the personal level. He deals with blacks on the institutional level: his large contributions to organizations purported to help blacks are but tax-shelter donations, abstract figures on a ledger sheet.

Mr. Dalton represents the physical strength of white capitalism in the United States, but Mrs. Dalton, with her pale sightless eyes and flowing white hair and garments, is the enervated, ailing spirit of white America. With Mrs. Dalton's sightless eyes, the central theme of blindness is introduced. To Bigger, Mrs. Dalton represents a whole race of people that remain blind to his existence as a man. Her blindness and coldness symbolize his existential alienation. In Bigger's black and white world, there is no real human contact. Human beings do not recognize each other as brothers. Both blacks and whites turn sightless eyes upon their fellow men, seeing with inner vision the misshapen forms of racial stereotypes.

Bigger cannot possibly understand or relate to the aging, aloof Daltons, but the real enormity of the gap between white and black perceptions is best illustrated in the encounter between Bigger and Mary Dalton. Both are native Americans of the same generation, residents of the same city, products of the same educational system. And yet they fail to communicate as miserably as beings worlds apart. Mary is the

naive, sheltered, rich girl whose work in the labor movement is motivated at least in part by a pettish desire to anger her father. When she finds her father interviewing Bigger, a member of the oppressed race her Communist friends are trying to organize, she is delighted. She teasingly attempts to unionize Bigger.

In her eagerness to ruffle her father's composure, she fails to see the terror her advances awaken in Bigger. Although Mary feels that she is sincere, she is as blind to Bigger's reactions and fears as her parents. Bigger does not see Mary's advances as friendly: she is an insane, bold, white woman whose dangerous and unpredictable actions could cause him harm. She does not act the way he has been conditioned to expect. He remains terror stricken by her forward behavior that violates at least two of the taboos the Daltons of the world have set up for the Biggers: organizing into bargaining groups and socializing with white women. When she offers as a basis for their friendship her own willingness to forget Bigger's blackness, she fails to realize that Bigger can never forget her whiteness.

When Bigger assumes his duties as chauffeur and is ordered to drive Mary to her night class at the university, she takes him instead to meet her Communist boyfriend, Jan. Bigger struggles to remain impersonal and distant; he wants no part of the interracial friendship that Mary and Jan offer. When Jan forces Bigger to shake hands, he attempts to actualize the image of white and black hands clasped in friendship that is the emblem on the Communist pamphlets he distributes. Jan does not perceive that Bigger's reaction to the handshake is in direct opposition to his own idealism. Bigger recoils in dread from Jan's symbol of hope because,

if he were to admit to himself that blacks were equal to whites, he would be forced to acknowledge his own passive subjugation to a force no more formidable than another man. Even though Jan belongs to a persecuted white minority, he remains as blind as the rich capitalists to Bigger's internal turmoil. He, like Mary, erroneously assumes that his own consent is all that is required to eradicate racial guilt.

Bigger experiences a surge of nameless hatred toward Mary when she ingenuously remarks that she would like to know how his people live. Shame and dread cause him to recoil from personal contact with the crazy young whites who presume that sharing fried chicken and beer with him in a ghetto restaurant compensates for the experiences of a lifetime. The intense, friendly scrutiny of Jan and Mary serves to drive Bigger further behind his curtain of alienation. The intimacy that the young whites force upon him intensifies his sense of impotence and exclusion. He eagerly gulps the liquor that Jan offers in an attempt to escape from a situation he is powerless to deal with.

Bigger, as he is thrust into the tangle of circumstances that end in Mary's death, is the classic naturalistic character, "the victim of environmental forces and the product of social and economic factors beyond his control or his full understanding."[6]

Jan leaves Bigger with Mary, blind to the young black's inability to cope with the sudden responsibility of caring for a helpless, drunken, white woman. The sudden, unsought intimacy with Mary creates an

[6] C. Hugh Holman, A Critical Handbook to Literature, 3rd ed. (1936; rpt. New York: Odyssey Press, 1972), p. 339.

existential situation for which Bigger has not been conditioned. As he struggles to guide the drunken, semi-conscious young woman safely to her bedroom, their close physical contact arouses a momentary passion in him, a passion that carries unconscious associations of the white racist myth of black rapacity.

His conscious desire vanishes in a rush of panic when Mrs. Dalton appears in the doorway. As she moves toward the bed where Bigger kneels over Mary, he sees the old woman not as a person but as a symbol of the lynch mob that punishes black sexual transgressions. When Mary stirs, he presses a pillow upon the girl's face to prevent her calling out and revealing his presence. Bigger remains rigid with terror while Mrs. Dalton kneels at the bedside, unaware that he slowly squeezes the life from the frail body of the young white woman.

While Bigger's crime eventually leads him to an expanded awareness of his existential position, he reacts during the actual killing on a purely instinctive level. Because he acts without conscious control or awareness, the murder act has no real personal meaning for him. His function in the murder scene is not personal but symbolic. He is the mindless agent of a judgment upon white America. His instinctive murder of Mary is actually the ironic inversion of the white myth of brutish black sexuality. Bigger smothers a young white woman in her bed not in brutal lust but in paralyzing fear. Fear engendered by the unconscious knowledge of the vicious enforcement of the social taboo against miscegenation is the force that kills Mary.

It is only when Mrs. Dalton has withdrawn from the room and the immediate danger has passed that Bigger regains conscious control and

realizes that Mary is dead. As his mind gradually absorbs the implications of what he has done, he realizes that he has entered a new area of existence. Up to this point in his life, his every action has been a predetermined response to externally imposed pressures. Faced with the body of Mary and his own identity in society as a murderer, he must plan a course of action that will conceal his crime. Although he is still terrified, his will is no longer paralyzed.

He acts with conscious purpose as he successfully transports the body to the furnace room and, overcoming his revulsion, severs the head to fit into the furnace; but his hysterical reaction to the appearance of the white cat in the basement reveals the tenuousness of Bigger's conscious control over the factors of his enlarged environment. Bigger naively assumes that, because he has acted consciously for the first time, he is in control of his fate. But as he walks toward his ghetto, the first flakes of snow begin to fall upon him, the snow that is symbolic of the vast, white, unconquerable power that surrounds and threatens to engulf him.

CHAPTER III

FLIGHT

Bigger's killing of Mary has freed him from the restraints of his predetermined environment. For the first time in his fear-ridden life, he has acted in a way that was not expected of him. He must now begin to consciously decide how he will act, but the area before him is an uncharted wilderness and he has no authentic awareness of his existential position. His mind is still controlled largely by the forces that have shaped it. Throughout the period of his flight, his actions are erratic and largely beyond his control. He wavers between confident, aggressive actions and appalling blunders as he struggles to consciously direct his new life as a murderer.

Bigger's conscious mind is not at this point an authentic reflection of his interior state. Beneath the conscious surface of his mind, there still lurks the deep fear that he has carried within him all his life. When he awakens in a stupor later in the morning, his vague, amorphous fear gradually crystalizes into the bloody image of Mary's severed head. Since Bigger's killing of Mary was unintentional and instinctive, he feels no authentic guilt or responsibility for the murder act. It is the conscious act of decapitating and burning the body that is symbolic to Bigger of his guilt.

A rush of panic seizes Bigger when he suddenly recognizes Mary's purse in plain sight. He went to sleep believing that he had protected

himself, but the purse and bloody knifeblade ominously reveal the speciousness of his control. After he disposes of the incriminating objects without disturbing the others, he relaxes and regains a measure of control. In spite of his appalling blunders, Bigger resists the desire to flee immediately, to run from the inevitable white fury before it strikes. He is filled with a keen excitement at the thought of returning to the Dalton household, the scene of his crime, to witness the unfolding of his fate: "The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (p.101).

Bigger has arrived at some sense of identity, but it is not a personal, authentic essence. Bigger does not turn inward at this point to the repressed emotions and thwarted intellect that prompted his violent over-reaction to a crisis. Rather he accepts as his essence the Hollywood caricature of the gangster-murderer, a fierce rebel against society. Unaware that the role has been suggested to him by the media, he accepts personal responsibility for the accidental killing because the deep hatred and fear that he has carried within him all his life seem so fittingly expressed in the bloody image of Mary's mutilated body: "It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed" (p.101).

As he sits at the table with his family, he observes the shabby

room and its pitiful inhabitants as if from a great distance. With the killing he has at least escaped from the narrow mental confines of his family's ignorant poverty. They sit in the same shabby little room, worrying where their next meal might come from, totally unaware that Bigger has entered a new realm of existence. With an expanded consciousness, he sees his blind family truly for the first time. His sister Vera captures his attention: " . . . she seemed to be shrinking from life in every gesture she made. The very manner in which she sat showed a fear so deep as to be an organic part of her" (p.104).

Satisfied that his blind family poses no threat to him, he prepares to return to the Dalton house. But his sporadic control is once again shattered when his brother confronts him in the hallway with the roll of money from Mary's purse. He gradually overcomes an impulse to kill Buddy, an impulse prompted by the same paralyzing fear that caused Mary's death. Buddy's loyalty reassures him, but Bigger remains shaken by the evidence of his own blindness and carelessness.

In Bigger's chance meeting with his friends, he regains the secret sense of power he felt with his family. He realizes that his murder has freed him from the constraints of his friends' environment. For the first time, he is no longer afraid in their presence, no longer impelled toward violent acts to disguise his fear. He has moved into a new area of existence where the pressures and traumas of the other young blacks are no longer his own. He has mentally scaled the barriers erected by the white world around his ghetto. He reminds himself that he has the money to escape, but he feels drawn to a further exploration of his new identity: "He was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves were

hungry to see where it led" (p.107).

On the streetcar, Bigger finds that he is no longer intimidated by the impassive white faces around him. He is exhilarated by the awareness that these people could never guess the secret carried by the unassuming black boy in their midst. They might think him guilty of some petty crime, but never the murder of a white woman. He tells himself that the whole white world is as blind as Mrs. Dalton to his presence. None of them would ever suspect the ignorant, subhuman, black servant of killing the white millionaire's daughter. He was much too insignificant to figure as a suspect. The very image of himself that he had formerly despised, the shuffling, inarticulate lackey, now becomes for him a disguise to protect his new identity.

Bigger feels no conscious guilt or remorse over Mary's death because he does not think of her as a fellow human being. His memory of Mary's insensitivity fills him with a hatred that makes it easy to accept the responsibility for the rich girl's murder. The shame and fear that Mary's alien gaze engendered in Bigger's black soul become his conscious justification for the killing. Even before the actual killing, Bigger's sense of exclusion and alienation from the dominant race made him its potential murderer. Thinking himself freed at last from his stereotyped existence by the act of murder, he eagerly grasps the possibilities of his new role.

But when he enters the Dalton basement and finds the housekeeper peering into the furnace, Bigger plunges once again into a state of mindless panic. He stifles his instinctive impulse to kill the woman and flee when he realizes the source of Peggy's nervousness. She had

not discovered Mary's body; she was merely embarrassed at being seen by a black in her nightclothes. After she goes upstairs, Bigger anxiously searches for evidence of his act, horrified to find a scrap of bloody newspaper on the floor in front of the furnace. Even though Peggy has told him that the furnace was exceptionally hot the night before, Bigger, frantic that all traces of the body be destroyed, ignores the warning and drops more coal into the blaze.

Bigger feels no authentic sense of guilt for the killing because it was done unconsciously, but he is not devoid of human sensibilities. He can rationalize the murder, but he cannot erase the image of Mary's severed head from his memory. The red and black shadows of the furnace room recall the ghoulish nightmare. Although Bigger tells himself that he should shake down the ashes and empty them, he is overcome by a wave of fear and guilt that forces him from the furnace room. His total paralysis of will when confronted with the symbol of his guilt foreshadows the manner of his eventual discovery.

When Mrs. Dalton later comes to his room to question him, Bigger finds himself responding in the expected manner, but with a new consciousness. The image of Mary's head that erupts into his conscious mind forms a wedge for him against the crushing weight of white oppression. He feels a new sense of power in the presence of the rich whites, armed with the private image of their dead child. His consciousness assimilates the bloody image that has formerly tortured him, and he longs to use it as a weapon. Later, among the anonymous white faces on the streetcar that carries him back to his ghetto, he articulates his desire: "He wished that he had the power to say what he had done without fear of

being arrested; he wished that he could be an idea in their minds; that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy" (p.123).

For the first time in his life, Bigger has something to fight back with. His taut, ungratified senses, eager for some experience of conscious living, seize upon the violent deed, this act of reprisal, as a source of meaning. Repressing the accidental nature of the crime, he tries to assume the conscious identity of murderer. Now in addition to his occasional instinctive impulses to kill, he begins to speculate about future murders for profit. He fears no further consequences, for he knows that Mary's death has already condemned him.

He goes to his woman in his overwrought state, seeking release and momentary escape in the "warm night sea" (p.128) of sex. There is little communication and almost no human tenderness between Bigger and Bessie. They share a "part-time" relationship that is characteristic of the servant class of the era, who were allowed but a few hours of freedom each week. After working long hours to earn enough money to survive, Bessie's pleasure is not Bigger but whiskey that will let her sleep for awhile and forget the white man's kitchen. The basis for their relationship is simple: "She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her the liquor and she would give him herself" (p.132). And Bigger wants no more from Bessie than the use of her body. Even in the most intimate of acts between human beings, Bigger remains mentally alone on his sea of sensation. Bigger's woman is not a human being to him; she is an object to be used.

As he speculates about how he might use Bessie to further his new career of crime, he assures himself that she is as blind as the Daltons. Her sudden intuitive grasp of his trouble momentarily shakes his composure but does not alter his attitude toward her. He exists alone in his own frame of reference, alienated from other human beings. He cannot communicate with Bessie, a mere tool of convenience. He remains oblivious to her wishes and feelings because she is no more human to Bigger than the whites. Blind toward Bessie as a human being, Bigger has no sense of social responsibility toward her.

With Bessie's reference to Leopold and Loeb, Bigger eagerly seizes the possibility of ransom as a way to get enough money to begin his new life. As he leads the unwilling Bessie through the white-enshrouded streets that image the white retribution that will soon envelop him, his mind races wildly through a half-formed plan to gain a large sum of money from the vastly wealthy Daltons. His confidence is shattered once more, however, when Bessie asks suddenly what he has done to Mary: "He stiffened with fear. He felt suddenly that he wanted something in his hand, something solid and heavy: his gun, a knife, a brick" (p.137).[1] Bigger, his head crowded with images of murder weapons, is an existent without fellows who must fight all the aliens that threaten his right to exist.

[1] Wright's skillful control of his imagery to reflect Bigger's psyche is demonstrated by this passage. The gun and knife recall Mary's death, and the brick foreshadows Bessie's killing. For a detailed study of the patterns of imagery in the novel, see James Emanuel, "Fever and Feeling: Notes on the Imagery in Native Son," Negro Digest 18 (Dec. 1968), 16-26.

Although mentally alienated from his fellow human beings, Bigger pulls Bessie into the plan because he craves the creature comfort of having someone with him. Because he takes no interest in her beyond his physical need, he fails to recognize Bessie's paralyzing fear that renders her useless as an accomplice. He leaves his money with her as security, speciously assuring himself that she will bend to his wishes and do whatever he tells her. Bigger chooses to ignore the evidence of his precarious hold upon the forces of his destiny in a keen appreciation of his position of apparent power in relation to the larger society. He begins to think that perhaps he can actually challenge the white world, his groundless optimism forewarning disaster: "As long as he could take his life into his own hands and dispose of it as he pleased, as long as he could decide just when and where he would run to, he need not be afraid" (p.141). He thinks himself free from the strangulating white force that constricted his former life, unaware that he is still powerless to escape it.

The snow has begun to fall steadily as Bigger approaches the Dalton mansion. In the home of his enemy, he feels himself constantly on the edge of murder. He vows to himself that he will kill anyone who threatens him. In the red and black gloom of the basement furnace room, Bigger is confronted by Mr. Dalton and Britten, his private investigator. Bigger fearfully answers the detective's questions, attempting to implicate Jan, the Communist. Britten's physical and verbal abuse arouses his momentary rage, but Mr. Dalton intervenes and dismisses Bigger.

Alone in his room, Bigger listens to the white men in the kitchen below discussing him through the closet opening that is symbolic to him

of his expanded awareness in relation to the whites. His confidence in his ransom plan returns as he realizes that the whites suspect Jan. For the first time in his life, Bigger thinks there are real options open to him: "Because he could go now, run off if he wanted to and leave it all behind, he felt a certain sense of power, a power born of a latent capacity to live" (p.155). In his elated state of mind, Bigger believes that he is in control of his fate.

But Bigger does not consciously perceive the truth of his existential position; he hides from reality behind his stereotyped vision of himself as a dangerous criminal. His mental control dissolves as he slips into a dream above the hot, roaring furnace. The deep, relentless dread and fear that he consciously represses surface as disturbing nightmare images. He runs down a street paved in coal, the almost total darkness illuminated only by a red furnace glare. He is pursued by throngs of white people who converge upon him, forcing him in final desperation to hurl the blood-soaked package that contains his own severed head at the crowd. Bigger's unconscious creates the symbolic representation of his inevitable fate. He has just murdered the only daughter of a rich and powerful white man; it is only a matter of time until he is caught and punished.

Bigger shakes off the ominous vision as he is called for another interrogation. In his eagerness to seize the opportunity to act purposefully for the first time in his life, he ignores the futility of his plan to incriminate Jan. He thinks that he has found a meaningful, authentic identity in the marginal existence of a criminal: "It was not fear he felt, but a tension, a supreme gathering of all the forces

of his body for a showdown" (p.157). Bigger holds to his story in Jan's presence, convincing the ignorant Britten of his shuffling, stupid innocence; but the shrewd Mr. Dalton senses Jan's sincerity and begins to doubt Bigger's story. Bigger ignores the visible warning presented by the scene that not all whites are as imperceptive as Britten.

When Jan attempts to speak with Bigger alone outside, he panics and pulls a gun on the startled young Communist. Jan, in spite of his friendly manner, is as blind to the real Bigger as the bigot Britten. It would seem natural for Jan to suspect Bigger, since he was with Mary when she was last seen alive and has lied about the events of the night. Bigger is not, however, a possible suspect to Jan; he is the frightened black pawn of a capitalistic plot to incriminate the Party. Bigger shuns his attempt to communicate, forcing Jan to retreat. When he resists the impulse to kill Jan to save himself, he feels for the first time that his conscious will is in opposition to the murderous instinct for self-preservation at any cost. His previous impulses to kill were instinctual and natural to Bigger, but he now feels the impetus toward killing is an alien force: "He was coming back into possession of himself; for the past three minutes it seemed he had been under a strange spell, possessed by a force which he hated but which he had to obey" (p.162). Although he images himself a murderer, his conscious will opposes his murderous impulse.

His overpowering desire to shape his own destiny propels Bigger toward the consummation of his plan. He buys the paper and pencil with which to write the ransom note to the Daltons and then walks the lonely streets of the ghetto in search of the building from which the money

might be claimed. He is so determined to succeed in his impossible plan to liberate himself that he fails to see the reality of the situation. In his blindness toward Bessie, he ignores the obvious fact that the terrified young woman could never perform her complicated role in the ransom plan. The pitiful, defeated black woman who has already been beaten into total submission by the harsh reality of her life could never defy her oppressors in the sensational crime that Bigger has planned. As she begins to be aware of the seriousness of Bigger's crime against the omnipotent ruling force, she comes to fear Bigger also to a paralyzing depth that renders her helpless. Unlike Bigger, who strikes back in his fear, Bessie escapes into her whiskey world of total passivity. Bigger, who overestimates his own growing sense of power, thinks that the force of his will can impel the drunken, terrified Bessie to function.

He returns to the Dalton house determined to deliver the ransom note, but as he stands in the cold before the silent white mansion, he is frozen for a moment in the grip of the vast white force he seeks to defy: "So deeply conscious was he of violating dangerous taboo, that he felt that the very air or sky would suddenly speak, commanding him to stop" (p.173). Although filled with dread and foreboding, he delivers the note and enters the house. In his room over the basement, he suddenly realizes that the incriminating paper and pencil with which he wrote the ransom note remain in his coat pocket. Bigger experiences a stabbing fear at the sudden awareness of his real lack of control. In his conscious mind he has conceived and executed what he had thought was a brilliant ransom plot, and yet he finds himself at the scene of the crime in possession of damning evidence. At a time when he desperately needs

to control all the variables, Bigger commits another blunder comparable to leaving Mary's purse on the chair, suggesting, perhaps, that he unconsciously seeks expiation of his guilt through exposure. He reels from consciousness in the grip of a deep, organic dread that can no longer be repressed.

Because his fainting spell reminds Bigger that he has not eaten in a long time, he goes to the kitchen. As he stands in the deserted room gazing at the covered dishes of food, yet fearful of taking them without permission, he experiences a moment of ironic self awareness: " . . . he saw himself for a split second in a lurid objective light: he had killed a rich white girl and had burned her body after cutting her head off and had lied to throw the blame on someone else and had written a kidnap note demanding ten thousand dollars and yet he stood here afraid to touch the food on the table, food which undoubtedly was his own" (p.175). Bigger's consciousness has expanded to the point where he can objectively identify his formerly compulsive subservience.

In a foreshadowing of his discovery, Bigger fails to heed Peggy's admonition to empty the ashes. The paradox of Bigger, the self-proclaimed murderer, afraid to look at the ashes, is resolved in the source of Bigger's unconscious guilt. Bigger accepted the role of murderer so readily because he felt no responsibility for the act of murder which was unconscious and accidental. But he cannot escape his deep and haunting sense of guilt at the bloody deed in the basement. The red and black images of horror in the furnace are the psychic symbols of Bigger's authentic guilt that he cannot face even to save his life.

In spite of his perilous position at the scene of his crime, Bigger

experiences a keen satisfaction amid the crisis precipitated by the discovery of the ransom note. Bigger, now aware of the positive value in the blindness of the white race toward him, appreciates his formerly despised position as a menial in the Dalton household because it is a barrier of protection for the real Bigger. He eagerly awaits the arrival of Britten, sure of his power to delude the stupid detective. In his mentally elated state, he again overestimates his own ability to make the decisions that will shape his destiny: "He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands" (p.179). But in reality there are no options at all for Bigger; his inability to empty the ashes has already precipitated his fate. Fleeing, staying, and confessing would all ultimately lead to his discovery and capture.

Bigger, as he stands at his window gazing out into the snow and rising wind, seems to sense that the blizzard images the relentless white force that will inevitably destroy him. But his strong determination to escape his mental and physical ghetto will not allow him to passively surrender to his fate. Before leaving his room, he examines the window as a possible source of escape if he is forced to flee.

When Bigger is summoned to the basement for further interrogation, he responds to Britten's predictable questions in the halting, cringing manner that he knows will satisfy the white man. He can mentally control Britten, who is totally blinded by his stereotyped image of blacks. During the remainder of the scene in the basement, however, Bigger's conscious control is gradually eroded by the rapid succession of events. He watches helplessly as a horde of white newspaper reporters converges on the

furnace room in search of a sensational story. As they prowl about aimlessly searching for something of interest, Bigger realizes that these white men are blind to nothing; they are sharp-eyed scavengers pawing the dirt for some filthy scrap of scandal. Bigger struggles to maintain his composure as the bold, prying men with their rapid-fire questions close in upon him. When he learns that Jan has established an alibi, he completely relinquishes control, wondering wildly what will happen next. As the reporters snap pictures, the white cat ominously leaps onto Bigger's shoulder, silently signalling his guilt. At the symbolic moment when Bigger's will is totally paralyzed, the sepulchral Daltons appear dramatically on the stairs. They stand poised at the head of the staircase as Mr. Dalton delivers his statement to the press, a striking portrait of the real force that controls Bigger's destiny.

After the Daltons withdraw, the reporters continue to probe Britten and Bigger for additional bits of information. The housekeeper then tells Bigger that he must clean out the ashes and make a new fire, but he is terrified at the thought of exposing the ashes to the prying eyes of the press. Instead, he pours more coal into the already choked furnace, causing clouds of black smoke to billow out into the room. As Bigger stands before the furnace paralyzed by his insurmountable dread, a reporter snatches the shovel from his immobile hands and begins to dig into the ashes. As the pile accumulates upon the floor and the initial bone fragment is uncovered, Bigger realizes that ignoring the furnace had been a fatal mistake: "He had trapped himself" (p.205).

As the men burrow into the pile, Bigger flees up the stairs and leaps from the window of his room into the freezing blizzard. The

force of his fall completely buries Bigger in the snow; the young black is literally and metaphorically buried in cold whiteness. As he hurries through the driving cold to escape from the white neighborhood, he feels almost relieved to be a fugitive: "But it was familiar, this running away. All his life he had been knowing that sooner or later something like this would come to him. And now, here it was. He had always felt outside of this white world, and now it was true. It made things simple" (p.207).

Bigger stops to buy a newspaper that contains a lengthy, lurid account of Mary's disappearance. The sordid treatment foreshadows the grotesque, monstrous image of Bigger that is later developed by the news media.[2] Bigger, who even now is only vaguely aware of the magnitude of the force that pursues him, estimates that as many as a thousand white policemen will track him through the South Side, enhancing the irony of the actual eight thousand volunteers and uniformed policemen who righteously invade the Black Belt in search of one frightened boy.

Bigger, trembling with excitement and fear, yet determined to save himself, flees to Bessie and his money. He has formulated no definite plan of escape; he returns to Bessie because she has his money and because he does not want to be alone. He tells Bessie how he smothered Mary to bind the girl to him as an accomplice. Bessie astounds Bigger when she tells him what he has failed to realize; the whites would say he raped Mary, and he could not prove them wrong. As Bigger speculates upon the nature of rape, he concludes that on an elemental level he is guilty of

[2] See Keneth Kinnamon, "Native Son: The Personal, Social, and Political Background," Phylon, 30 (Spring 1969), 66-72, for a detailed discussion of the parallels between press accounts in the novel and the media treatment of the Robert Dixon trial of the era.

rape: "But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face" (p.214).

Bigger has convinced himself that he must take Bessie with him because she would betray him if left behind. But Bessie's frightened, hysterical behavior convinces Bigger that she would never be able to endure the tensions of the coming days of flight. Bigger's blindness to the real, human Bessie precludes any sense of compassion for her. He thinks only of saving himself as he considers the options and dispassionately reasons that it will be necessary for him to kill Bessie: "He thought of it calmly, as if the decision were being handed down to him by some logic not his own, over which he had no control, but which he had to obey" (p.215).

Bigger's killing of Bessie, although premeditated, is not an authentic, freely willed act. The "logic" that decrees Bessie's fate has been developed by the racist power structure that tacitly encourages blacks to vent their hostilities against each other rather than against whites through a police force that customarily ignores black crimes against other blacks. Since he is already being sought for the murder of a white woman, his killing of the black girl carries no further threat of punishment.

Bigger's mentality has been warped by his dehumanizing environment to the extent that he is conscious of no bond of affection or compassion with other human beings. He is an alien among aliens and self-preservation is his sole concern. Unmoved by Bessie's pitiful helplessness,

he forces her to flee with him. Driven by the conscious hope that he might save himself, he leads the drunken, tearful girl through the cold, deserted streets in search of a temporary hiding place. He brings her finally to an old abandoned mansion where he forces her to lie with him upon a pallet that will be her death bed. He finds momentary release from the terrible tension that grips him in a brief sexual encounter with the reluctant young woman. Afterward, he lies in the darkness beside Bessie, conscious that the time has come to kill her.

He mentally prepares himself to perform the act that he instinctively recoils from by repressing the image of Bessie as a living person and thinking of her instead as a thing that must be disposed of. When he feels certain that she is asleep, he grasps a brick and batters her head with it again and again until he thinks that she is finally dead. In a state of numbed consciousness, he drags the body across the room and then pushes the thing down an air shaft. He suddenly remembers that all of his money is in Bessie's pocket, but he is so overwhelmed by unconscious dread that he cannot bring himself to face the horrible image of his brutal act even to save himself. Bigger goes out into the world a hunted fugitive with only a few cents in his pocket, his only possible hope of escape collapsed with the death of Bessie and the loss of the money.

In spite of the futility of his flight, Bigger prefers his present marginal existence to his former constricted subsistence in the ghetto. For the first time in his life, he has an identity of his own, a purpose to his existence: "In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their

blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight" (p.225).

Bigger accepts responsibility for the murders because he thinks that they provide an existence that is truly his own. In his former life of fragmentation and alienation, his mind was shaped and controlled by the racist society; only his feelings were his own. Thought and feeling were essentially separate; he achieved no measure of integration in his repressed state and expected none. Now, because he mentally challenges the larger society, he erroneously presumes that his mind has been liberated. He fails to realize that his mental image of himself as a murderer that is the model for his actions during the period of his flight is but the inauthentic reproduction of a mass-media stereotype. Bigger does not possess the gross sensibilities of the natural murderer. His inability to face Bessie's corpse, like his aversion to the furnace, indicates that his inner feelings oppose his conscious directives. He has escaped from the total passivity of his former life, but his mind and feelings remain unintegrated.

Bigger has not yet completed his existential journey toward selfhood, but his awareness is continuously expanded by the events of his flight. He steals a newspaper from a stand and hides in another abandoned building. He reads with amazement of the incredible force that has been marshaled to hunt him down. Thousands of armed white men have formed a human wall around the entire perimeter of the Black Belt. Under a blanket warrant, they are systematically searching every inch of Bigger's world. A map of the South Side with a shaded border designating the

area already searched reveals graphically to Bigger that he is trapped like the rat within the shrinking area yet to be searched.

As he huddles in the icy temperature, he gazes into the cold morning sun at another old building that has been subdivided into the familiar one-room kitchenettes. He looks through a shadeless window at a shabby room containing two beds. A man and woman copulate on one bed while their children sit watching on the other. Bigger is reminded of similar scenes from his own childhood before his father left. Bigger is struck by the brutal image of the naked black bodies crammed into the small room beside a huge empty building--the way of life that Mary Dalton longed to see. In Bigger's hours as a fugitive, he is physically trapped within the crowded ghetto yet mentally alienated from its inhabitants, a position that enables him to become a detached observer of the environment that has warped and dehumanized him.

The fierce cold and his gnawing hunger drive Bigger from the building in search of warmth and nourishment. He hurries through the streets lined with tenements, intent upon finding an empty room in a heated building; but there are few vacancies in the overcrowded slums of the South Side. Captive tenants, squalid, cramped quarters, and exhorbitant rents combine to form the nightmare world of the ghetto. Bigger forgets his own peril in a burst of altruistic rage at the horrible injustice of a system that allows men like Dalton to profit from the misery of his people. For a moment Bigger transcends his self-absorbed isolation, but his fear of being recognized in the street soon returns. He watches a rat scurry to the safety of a hole and desires the same

creature comfort for himself.

He purchases a loaf of bread and walks on until he comes to a vacant apartment. Safely inside, Bigger is drawn to a thin partition by the sound of loud voices; in the next apartment, two black men are engaged in an argument about him. The first man blames Bigger for the white terrorism that has cost him his job and would gladly turn him over to the whites to end the reign of terror. His more enlightened companion insists that all blacks are guilty in the eyes of the white man and their only hope of overcoming is racial solidarity.[3] Bigger knows that most blacks of his era would agree with the first man and that in his flight his own people as well as the whites are his enemies.

As Bigger's hunger and thirst abate and the warmth begins to seep into his nearly frozen body, the mentally and physically exhausted young man slips into a few moments of troubled sleep. He is awakened by the rhythmic singing and shouting in a nearby church. In spite of his conscious disdain for the church people, his emotions are touched by the familiar music. But Bigger has rejected his mother's passive Christianity long ago, and in the brief hours since the murder of Mary, Bigger has glimpsed the possibilities inherent in a freely willed existence. He feels now more strongly than ever that to lay his burden on the Lord would be to acknowledge defeat. He runs from the apartment to escape the magnetic attraction of the group, telling himself that he must buy a newspaper to find out where the searchers are.

[3] See Malcolm X, "Definition of a Revolution," Malcolm X: The Man and His Times, ed. John H. Clark (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1969), pp. 276-79, for a discussion of the two attitudes depicted in this scene and their origin in the house servant and the field hand of the slavery period.

Bigger spends his last pennies for a newspaper and ducks into another vacant flat to read it. His fleeting hope that his area has already been searched vanishes as he gazes at the latest map of the South Side. He stares long at the tiny square of white in the middle of the vast black area of the map, knowing that it marks his position. Yet even the knowledge that eight thousand armed men will converge upon him at any moment does not move him to surrender. With a growing certainty that his death is near, he promises himself that he will die fighting. Bigger's courage at this point is rooted in his image of himself as the enemy of society. Like his movie counterparts, he will die with his gun in his hand, defiant and unrepentent: "Whatever happened, he wanted to go down looking into the faces of those that would kill him" (p.243). He would make them know that they had shot down a man.

Unwilling to sit passively waiting for the end, he goes into the hallway to locate the roof exit. At that moment he hears the first sirens that shriek his doom. Driven forward by the awareness that the relentless hunters will search every room in the building, Bigger retreats through a trapdoor to the roof. The icy blast of night air that assaults Bigger as he steps out on the roof makes him feel that even the forces of nature are in league with his pursuers: "Above his head the sky stretched in a cold, dark-blue oval, cupping the city like an iron palm covered with silk. The wind blew, hard, icy, without ceasing" (p.243). As the army of vengeance converges upon him, Bigger resists until the end, spurred by his unwillingness to be cast as a sacrificial offering to the angry white mob that has gathered in the street below to demand his blood: " . . . deep down below was a sea of white faces and he saw

himself falling spinning straight down into that ocean of boiling hate" (p.249).

As the signal is given that he has been found and his pursuers converge on the roof, he is driven still further up until he rests upon the platform of a protruding water tank. Knowing that there is no place left to run, he waits for them clutching his gun, the emblem of his manhood. He has planned out what he thinks are the last moments of his life; he will resist until the end and reserve his last bullet for himself. Fearing only that the paralyzing cold which has frozen all sensation from his skin will prevent his pulling the trigger, he stiffens in concentration, firing at any who come within range. As more and more men pour out onto the rooftops, Bigger, sensing that all will soon be over, mentally retreats behind his protective curtain. Feeling no fear himself, he watches with amused disdain as the fearful, scurrying whites attempt sporadically to reach him.

Bigger hears but fails to understand an order for a hose until the bone-chilling force of a fire hose rips the gun from his hand and leaves him defenseless. He is physically swept away by the unexpected torrent of icy water that is symbolic of the awesome power of the white society that he has so foolishly underestimated. He is overwhelmed and totally defeated by the awesome power that has defined the narrow limits of his life and now robs him even of his right to die. From behind his curtain he watches himself being dragged down flights of stairs by his feet and feels the pain of his head pounding against the steps until at last he slips into unconsciousness.

He surrenders totally as he recognizes that his brief existence

beyond the narrow bounds of his repressed environment is over. The fleeting sense of freedom and control over his fate vanishes as he is once again the passive victim, awaiting the whim of his masters who will decide when he must die. Like Meursault when he imagines himself being shot down rather than executed, he does not wish to be an accomplice in his own cold-blooded murder. In his instinctive retreat from painful consciousness, he relinquishes the inauthentic identity that he had constructed for himself.

CHAPTER IV

FATE

Bigger, as he sits in his cell waiting to die, is physically in the classic existential context, but he has yet to develop the conscious awareness and acceptance that constitute the existential victory. In the first days after Bigger's capture, he remains passive and silent behind his protective curtain of indifference; he cannot face the humiliating anticlimax of imprisonment and public trial, the awareness that he must die without really having lived. In his brief existence as an outlaw, Bigger had begun to recognize for the first time his own latent capacity to live purposefully, but now all of his hopes are shattered as he sits in a prison cell waiting to die. He exists in a vacuum where he is prevented from dying until his captors have had their sport, yet restrained by the narrow concrete bounds of his solitary cell from participating in life.

Yet even in the throes of complete mental despair, Bigger cannot kill his own will to live. He yearns for some revelation that will allow him to go to his death without fear: "There would have to hover above him, like the stars in a full sky, a vast configuration of images and symbols whose magic and power could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dread of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that it would be a victory" (p.256).

Because he recoils from further pain and disappointment, he struggles to suppress his life force and remain totally passive. He is led one

morning from his solitary confinement to a large, brightly lit room that is filled with angry whites. Bigger suddenly sees himself through the perspective of the noisy white mob and realizes that to these monomaniacs he is a symbol of his twelve million fellow blacks. The conviction that he is to be used as a symbol of dread and fear to his people, an object lesson in what happens to a black who dares to enter the white world and act, drives Bigger from behind his curtain of indifference. Even rendered helpless by the awesome power of the white machine, Bigger cannot relinquish his awakening image of himself as a man, the equal of all human beings. He comes out from behind his protective curtain of inertia and apathy to save his pride, not his life. He cannot bear to be made a helpless object of sport for the crowd.

When his excitement and lack of food cause him to faint, he is returned to his cell where he eats for the first time in days. As his mind begins to function again, he asks for a newspaper; he is curious to know his public image, his alter ego born of the mass media. The "Negro sex-slayer" realizes that the press has accentuated the lurid, sensational aspects of his case in an obvious attempt to incite mob violence. In an attempt to dramatize and extend their castigation of Bigger, the newspaper quotes bogus scientific evidence of the inferiority of blacks along with specious advice from a southern editor on the proper treatment of blacks. He solemnly warns northerners that total segregation is the only way to prevent crimes like Bigger's. The tragic irony of the southerner's pompous ignorance lies in the fact that his proposed solution is actually the primary cause of Bigger's killing of Mary--his segregated, restricted environment that prevented any social intercourse with whites.

As Bigger's consciousness absorbs the implications of the newspaper coverage of his crime, he recognizes the depth of his impotence. At the moment when he realizes that he has lost all control over his fate, the forces who have shaped him converge upon the narrow gray world of his prison cell.

Pastor Hammond comes to Bigger from his mother offering the religious solace that will resign him to his fate. Although Bigger is momentarily tempted by the black preacher's eloquent appeal, like Pablo and Meursault, he ultimately rejects the specious comfort that would mean a final abdication of his human will. When the minister urges Bigger to, "'Be like Jesus. Don't resist'" (p.265), Bigger instinctively senses that the old black Christian's philosophy suits the white man's aims too well to be embraced. Lulled by his lengthy withdrawal into the habit of passivity and inaction, however, he allows the man to place a wooden cross about his neck, symbol of the otherworldly submission and resignation of Jesus. But the traditional symbols of religion hold no positive meaning for Bigger.

He comes closer to a genuine religious experience when Jan, the Communist he had attempted to blame for his crime, enters the cell and offers to help him. In Jan's forgiveness and attempted understanding, Bigger makes his first real human contact with the white world: "Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him; a particle of white rock had detached itself from the looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet" (p.268).

But the moment of meaningful communication with the vast, white,

impenetrable wall that Bigger has longed for is filled with conscious pain. For the first time, Bigger sees himself as a human being in relation to other humans. In recognizing Jan's humanity, Bigger must also accept the depth of his own guilt. This man loved the girl he murdered, and Jan's loving her makes her now seem human to Bigger. With a consciousness based in reality, Bigger sees that he is truly a murderer. Filled with shame and guilt, he accepts the offer of Jan's friend Max to remain by his side as his lawyer during the coming ordeal.

As Buckley, the politically astute prosecutor whose re-election will be assured by his speedy conviction of Bigger, enters the cell and begins a dialogue with Max, Bigger is overwhelmed by the forces that vie for control of his fate. When Buckley ushers the Daltons into his cell, Bigger sits mutely on his cot, impotent in the face of the myriad white forces that have shaped his destiny. The Daltons stand before him accusingly, willing tools of the prosecutor who wishes to terrify the guilty boy into confessing immediately. As Bigger hears capitalist and communist clash ideologically over the incidental issue of his life, he feels as outside of their context as when he was totally nonexistent to them.

When Bigger's own family and friends are admitted to the cell, however, he is unable to remain immobile any longer. He is overcome by embarrassment as his mother, cringing in fear and shame, comes with her other children to pay her human respects to the son that is the cause of their misery. As he contemplates his shabby, dark-skinned family and timid friends before the backdrop of the whites assembled along the

wall,[1] he puzzles over the sorrow and shame manifest in the blacks. He feels that in some obscure way they should be happy because he had assumed full guilt for the crime of being black, had expiated some of their own guilt for them.

When his mother begs him to pray, Bigger assents as he feels the first real stirrings of compassion for his desperately poor family. He has yet another reason to feel guilt and remorse: "He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer" (p.277). In agreeing to pray only because he knows that it will comfort his mother, Bigger consciously acts for the first time in a compassionate manner. His awareness has expanded to the point where he recognizes his moral responsibility to his fellow humans, black and white.

As the cell is gradually cleared of all but Buckley, Bigger is left to ponder his new awareness of his human identity. As he begins to trust his own feelings, the need grows in him to communicate some sense of himself to another human being. But Buckley, like the magistrate who questions Meursault, officially represents inauthentic society; he is interested only in his own stereotyped perceptions of the young black. When the prosecutor mechanically extracts his confession, Bigger is motivated to speak by an inarticulate need to communicate the essence of his actions, the unvoiced thoughts and emotions that motivated his crimes. He feels the confession might satisfy his urge to wrest some meaning from life in the face of death, but he is able to recite only

[1] See Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Native Son, A Perennial Classic (1940; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966), xxxi, for Wright's discussion of thematic truth superceding verisimilitude in this scene.

the bare facts of his actions before the insensitive Buckley and the nameless white man who transcribes his words. When he is finally left alone in his cell, he collapses on the floor, hollow and defeated. He has failed to articulate his inner nature; he has only given them what they wanted to speed his death.

When he is returned to the inquest, he listens impassively as the grisly evidence of his crime is amassed, thinking himself impervious to further assaults. He cannot contain his emotions, however, when the state presents its main "evidence" against Bigger in the murder of Mary Dalton, the corpse of Bessie. He had almost forgotten Bessie. When he killed her, he had weighed his own life against hers and killed to save himself. He felt no conscious pity or remorse at the cold-blooded deed; he acted as he had thought he must. But the final indignity to Bessie, using her body as mere evidence to convict him of raping and killing the white woman, awakens Bigger's unwilling compassion. He must now accept the responsibility for killing yet another human being, Bessie Mears. Paralyzed with dread, he forces himself not to look upon the thing under the sheet.

Bigger is led by heavy police guard out into the vast, hate-filled mob of whites who seek to obliterate him. During the period of his imprisonment, the representative blizzard that raged about him earlier is replaced literally by thousands of enraged whites screaming for his death. It is ironic that when Bigger begins for the first time to recognize the humanity of his fellows, he is engulfed by masses of whites who have abdicated their human wills to become part of the bloodthirsty mob that converges upon him wherever he is taken. The mob, traditional

existential symbol of inauthentic society, is rendered even more powerful by the previous symbolic development of the blizzard.

En route to the jail he will occupy during his trial, the official cars stop at the Dalton mansion where Bigger is led up the stairway to Mary's bedroom. He is confused by the mob of policemen and reporters with cameras in the room until they ask him to demonstrate how he raped and killed the girl. He is filled with disgust by the eagerly expectant faces: "He would go to his death without ever trying to tell men like these what he had felt that night" (p.311). When the impatient whites threaten him, he responds with no trace of his former subservience: "'You can't make me do nothing but die!'" (p.312). He has unwittingly defined his own area of meaningful existence, in an expression that is later echoed by Meursault to the priest.

His impending death becomes the central fact of his life as he labors to wrest some meaningful justification for his existence out of the brief time that remains. His final rejection of Christianity comes when he realizes the significance of the burning cross on the building across from the Dalton house. Bigger's unconscious emotional response to the Christian symbol of the cross the preacher had tied around his neck is obliterated by the burning racist cross of hatred and terror. The double significance of the cross symbol, like the clasped black and white hands, graphically depicts the inverted value system thrust upon the black man by the dominant white society. Since Bigger is denied the option of electing societal values, he must look elsewhere for ultimate meaning.

When the black preacher returns to visit, Bigger slams the door

viciously in the old man's face after tossing away the lying symbol of the cross. He examines his unexpected violence and realizes what the preacher had offered him with the cross: "Never again did he want to feel anything like hope. That was what was wrong; he had let that preacher talk to him until somewhere in him he had begun to feel that maybe something could happen" (p.315). Certain of nothing but his own unfulfilled existence, Bigger vows to master living with despair rather than to be tricked again by false hope.

When the guards momentarily place a madman in his cell, Bigger is terrified by the frenzy of the educated young black who has been driven to violent fits of insanity by his contemplation of the vast inequities of the system. The man serves as a foil to Bigger, a man whose revolt has been intellectual rather than physical; they had come from vastly different beginnings to the same end--the white man's prison. Bigger, who unconsciously empathizes with the madman's frantic psychic energy, finds his presence intolerable. Even after the man has been taken in a straight jacket to the mental ward, Bigger cannot banish his uneasiness. He seems to sense that the same driving force that had impelled the crazed college student to publically scream accusations at the white world in his underwear had also caused him to murder rather than be discovered violating the white establishment's strongest taboo.

When Bigger is taken to speak with his lawyer, he attempts at first to drive Max away. His unwillingness to allow Max to awaken any specious hope in him finds expression in his sullen, monosyllabic replies to the lawyer's concerned questions. But finally his compassion for the disappointed Max moves Bigger to attempt to articulate his motivation for

killing two women. Prompted by Max's interest and concern, Bigger honestly attempts to explain his rationale for killing, but he finds there is no logical explanation for what he has done. His hatred for Mary is not logical; it is rooted in his fear and hatred for the alien race that has ostracized his kind from their society. His powerful, long repressed feelings that prompted his otherwise inexplicable actions become to him the only possible source of meaning in his existence.

Dalton and his kind have grown rich on the degrading filth and poverty of black people while maintaining a lifestyle for themselves that is so insulated from the impoverished masses that one of their children could express the naive desire to see how black people live. Bigger did not intend to kill Mary, but her total ignorance of her own racial guilt becomes a moral justification to him for her death. Bigger admits to Max and to himself that at the time of Mary's death he had no control over his actions. Gripped by a dreadful fear of discovery on the bed of the white girl, he had instinctively pressed the pillow over her face to keep her silent. He examines and describes his feelings about Bessie--the nature of their spurious relationship on the fringes of society that made real love and communication impossible. He had killed Bessie to save himself; he feared no consequences for murdering the black girl once Mary was dead.

In an attempt to summarize for Max the conditions that made him kill, he articulates his consciousness of the peculiar kind of nonexistence he had been forced to live as an outcast in the white man's country: "'They kill you before you die!'" (p.327). Bigger expresses a certain pride in his refusal to accept his lot. He tells the lawyer

that he feels no remorse because Mary's death had thrust him into an area of existence where he felt the first measure of freedom that he had ever known. Before the killing, he had but acted out a stereotype, releasing pent-up pressure in occasional acts of meaningless violence. Mary's murder was an act of violence embedded with a meaning so awesome that it struck at the very roots of the chauvinistic society, and it became a vehicle of liberation from his deterministic environment.

The other existential characters had consciously divorced themselves from inauthentic human fellowship. Bigger, whose forcible exclusion from society has allowed him no opportunity to develop a sense of identity, erroneously expects Max, the friendly, educated white to provide meaning for Bigger's own life. But in ironic contrast to Bigger's anguished search for a meaningful personal identity, Max views Bigger as a collective symbol for the black man in America. Seeking to establish the sociological perspective upon Bigger's life, Max questions him about features of his community purported to serve black interests. The boys' club that provided recreational facilities for ghetto youth was a place for them to plan their attempts to wrench a few dollars from the tightly clenched white fists. Church was a place where poor people got happy. Bigger had never heard of the supposed black leaders of his day, and his vote was worth a few dollars from corrupt politicians on election day.

But Bigger is not a symbol for the oppressed masses; ultimately, he is a unique human being and he senses, even though he does not consciously know, that any authentic justification for his existence must come from himself. When Bigger reflects upon his inner state, the violent emotions that led him to act in a totally instinctive manner, he realizes his dying like this in the electric chair is the natural, obvious result

of the rage he had long carried within him. As Max assures Bigger that he will try to mitigate his sentence, Bigger sees the flame of hope again extended to him: "He had to make a decision; in order to walk to that chair he had to weave his feelings into a hard shield of either hope or hate. To fall between them would mean living and dying in a fog of fear" (p.333).

As Bigger lies alone on his cot awaiting the trial and the end, he is trapped within "a thin, hard core of consciousness" (p.333), alone with himself. For the first time in his limited existence, he recognizes the possibility of communicating in a deep, meaningful manner with other men. But the realization comes ironically when he is trapped within a solitary cage, denied all companionship save his own.

Moved by Max's insistence that all men act out of ignorance and fear, Bigger contemplates the universal implication of his own existential position. The entire human race might exist in narrow and hostile squares of territory like his own. The futility and pathos of individual human life overcomes Bigger as he sees a dark vision of mankind: "Standing trembling in his cell, he saw a dark vast fluid image rise and float; he saw a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells in which people lived; each cell had its stone jar of water and crust of bread and no one could go from cell to cell and there were screams and curses and yells of suffering and nobody heard them, for the walls were thick and darkness was everywhere" (pp.334-35).

The horrible nightmare becomes for him almost a vision of hope. Bigger, who has always felt trapped and alone, is comforted by the vision of other men sharing the same existential hell. If the vision is true, he is no longer alone in the dark. He has let himself be tricked out of

his safe despair by the hope for collective humanity. Now that he has felt the possibility of a human solidarity of existence, he yearns for the recognition of other human beings that will confirm his own position in relation to other men. Feeling that he cannot die until he has experientially verified the vision, Bigger resents his new consciousness of the human condition that makes him afraid to die. Like Meursault, Bigger experiences the agony of hope.

Bigger had tried to protect himself from the pain of further disillusion by vowing never again to hope, but he is seduced by Max's belief in the brotherhood of man. As Bigger's cynical awareness of the certainty of his own execution vies with his new consciousness of a common bond between all men, his vision is split: "He looked out upon the world and the people about him with a double vision: one vision pictured death, an image of him, alone, sitting strapped in the electric chair and waiting for the hot current to leap through his body; and the other vision pictured life, an image of himself standing amid throngs of men, lost in the welter of their lives with the hope of emerging again, different, unafraid" (p.337).

As Bigger's awareness of his own existential position grows, he sees the irony of his recognizing the possibilities of human interaction only in the face of his imminent death. Bigger has never related as a human being equal to other human beings before, but his eagerness to reach out and share his welled-up feelings with others is tempered by the knowledge that his life might be cut off before he can succeed. In an attempt to avoid all human contact until the confusion of ideas and images in his

mind cleared, as his trial begins he cuts himself off from his family by ordering his lawyer to keep them at home.

The possibility that Bigger might join the brotherhood of man is shattered by the force of circumstances. At the very moment that Bigger has finally begun to understand his own individuality and yearn for contact with other individuals, he is suddenly thrust into the lurid public courtroom where he is immersed in a collective sea of white hatred. The newspapers have in a flood of yellow journalism aroused the bloodthirsty mob who collect around Bigger wherever he is taken. He has become for them a symbol of a whole race of people they hate and fear. Bigger, appalled by the senseless and total hatred directed at him, clings in disbelief to Max, the one friendly face among the angry hordes. Bigger's vision of the huge prison images the equality of all men, but the fierce, brutish hatred that now engulfs him negates that vision.

During the trial, Bigger's guilt is never an issue. Since he pled guilty, the only issue is the severity of the punishment. Max's plea is directed to the judge, asking that he spare Bigger's life.[2] As Max rises to speak, Bigger tries to shut hope out of his heart. It had been Max who awakened the unrealistic desire in him to communicate on an equal basis with all humanity, to reach out and relate to fragments of that white wall of hatred he faces. His instincts tell Bigger not to trust Max, but he is consciously flattered by the high-sounding yet incomprehensible language that Max uses in his defense. Even though

[2] James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (1951; rpt. New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 38, and others assert that Max's speech is too abstract for a jury.

Bigger fails to comprehend much of Max's speech, he does feel proud that someone as eloquent as Max defends him.

Bigger does not consciously realize that Max has actually abstracted and stereotyped him, robbed him of a unique personal identity in the same manner as the prosecutor Buckley, but with a different set of symbols. To Max, he is the oppressed black man in America, not Bigger Thomas, the young man who had tried so desperately to communicate to Max a sense of his own authentic feelings and impulses. He has listened to Bigger speak and has generalized Bigger's emotions and actions to represent a whole class of people. Bigger stands for twelve million blacks who have suffered the same oppression. He describes Bigger in the same behaviorist terminology as Mrs. Dalton, classifying him as a product of a warped social environment, conditioned by his being denied any form of authentic existence to kill instinctively.

Max indicts the racially biased mainstream society for Bigger's crime. The repressed guilt and fear of white Americans has caused them to perpetrate such atrocities to keep blacks in their place that reprisals were due. The Daltons of the world and their paid underlings are the real criminals. Bigger remains the passive victim of a brutalizing environment to the socialist lawyer.[3]

Max, in his naive optimism, has extended to Bigger the hope that a white representative of the American legal system might spare the life of a black who had confessedly killed a white woman. Bigger's

[3] Although Max's speech is not directly related to the development of Bigger's consciousness, it is important to the thematic and symbolic unity of the novel. For a detailed examination of the speech as well as a valuable summary of earlier criticism, see Paul Siegel's "The Conclusion of Richard Wright's Native Son," PMLA, 89 (1974), 517-23.

perceptions are based in the reality of his life in a racially polarized society. He knows better than to expect Max's words to move the judge; he has seen before what the white law did to his kind. The prosecutor reiterates the sordid details of Bigger's crimes, the judge retires for less than an hour and returns to tell Bigger that he must die. The juxtaposition of Max's eloquent, lengthy appeal for understanding and racial tolerance and the judge's impassive and summary death sentence further enhances the pervasive irony of Bigger's existential development.

As Bigger hears the verdict, he is seized with dread in spite of his conscious resistance to hope. In the brief days that follow, he must search for a way out of the despair that his rapidly approaching execution engenders. When the limitations upon his freedom of choice are most severe, he yearns to experience the rich possibilities of a freely willed existence. The hope of a common bond with his fellow men, the possibility of meaningful communication with them that Max had promised, causes Bigger to experience a mental anguish like Meursault's agonizing contemplation of the reprieve. Bigger must now accept his destiny and abandon all hope, for he is finally faced with a narrow, rigidly defined existence within an allotted time period before the state will kill him. He would live out this time essentially alone. Bigger realizes too late that unconsciously he had hoped that something might come to his rescue, some person or idea that would finally lend meaning to his violent, destructive young life.

Instead of transcendent symbols that would lift Bigger out of his existential dilemma, all he is finally left with is himself. In the days of flight, Bigger had believed that he was sufficient unto himself,

but he was acting under a delusion regarding his true position in relation to the rest of society. He had thought of himself as a fierce gangster who would die fighting in a blaze of glory, but now he sees that there is no glory to be won. Like Pablo in "The Wall," Bigger has been robbed of his chance to die bravely. He is a condemned black slayer who must sit out the balance of his existence in a steel cage. He cannot tolerate the intense mental anguish of his solitary confinement when for the first time in his life he senses the possibilities of human action and relationships.

Bigger's natural defense mechanism operates for a time to free him from the anguished awareness of his impending death: "In self-defense he shut out the night and day from his mind, for if he had thought of the sun's rising and setting, of the moon or the stars, of clouds or rain, he would have died a thousand deaths before they took him to the chair. To accustom his mind to death as much as possible, he made all the world beyond his cell a vast gray land where neither night nor day was, peopled by strange men and women whom he could not understand, but with whose lives he longed to mingle once before he went" (p.382).

Bigger's existential confrontation with death forces him, like Meursault and Pablo, to turn from the living human world, but he must turn away without ever having truly experienced it. In his impending execution, no fellowship will aid him. He must die alone, and thus ultimately turn away from human companionship and communication as a context for meaningful existence. The meaning, if indeed there is any meaning at all, must come from within Bigger's consciousness of himself and his own essence: "If there were any sure and firm knowledge for

him, it would have to come from himself" (p.382). But he cannot yet bear to accept himself as the measure and meaning of existence. Bigger, conditioned to feel inferior and subhuman, cannot accept being a poor black in a rich white land as a meaningful existence. Bigger perceives himself and other blacks as deformed, prevented from becoming their essential selves by their restrictive environment. Bigger craves his own unique identity with which to face death, but he can see nothing within himself that is authentically his own.

The days allotted to him before his execution drift by with little change. He wishes to remain passive and detached, to leave everything behind. He tries, in effect, to die before his death. He resents any effort to draw him out of his narcotic withdrawal, asking only to be left alone. When he violently repels a further attempt by Reverand Hammond to provide last minute solace, a white priest feels it his duty to try to reach Bigger's unrepentant soul. The priest's leaving him alone after Bigger dashes hot coffee in his face pleases Bigger in an oblique way. Bigger has forced the priest to look at him as a unique person, someone who requires special treatment. Like Meursault's violent tirade, Bigger's final rejection of inauthentic traditional religion carries satisfaction. The existential hero violently rebuffs the minister of organized religion and servant of the state who attempts to standardize the condemned criminal's final acts and thoughts among the living from his own secure position.

Bigger's search for meaning vies finally in his consciousness with images of his approaching death. Bigger attempts to plan his actions at his own execution to provide some internal prop to help him get through

the most difficult part of his existence, the conscious end of it: "He had in his mind a plan; he would flex his muscles and shut his eyes and hold his breath and think of absolutely nothing while they were handling him. And when the current struck him, it would be all over" (p.384). Like Sartre's wall and Camus' guillotine, the electric chair images the void that waits at the end of life for the existential atheist.

When Max comes to pay a final visit, Bigger feels compelled once more to communicate with another human being, to make Max, at least, understand him:

> "I know I'm going to get it. I'm going to die. Well, that's all right now. But really I never wanted to hurt nobody. That's the truth, Mr. Max. I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room. Lots of times I tried to forget 'em, but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me. . . ." Bigger's eyes were wide and unseeing; his voice rushed on: "Mr. Max, I didn't mean to do what I did. I was trying to do something else. But it seems like I never could. I was always wanting something and I was feeling that nobody would let me have it. So I fought 'em. I thought they was hard and I acted hard." He paused, then whimpered in confession, "But I ain't hard, Mr. Max. I ain't hard even a little bit. . . ." He rose to his feet. "But . . . I--I won't be crying none when they take me to that chair. But I'll b-b-be feeling inside of me like I was crying. . . . I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them. . . ." (p.388).

Thus Bigger must ultimately reject the possibility of meaning transmitted through communication with his fellow human beings. He is left finally with only himself and the short, brutal life he has lived as a source of meaning. When he first spoke with Max about his feelings and actions, the idealistic lawyer's apparent concern and interest enabled him to speak honestly about himself. Bigger had erroneously assumed that his feeling of satisfaction and release stemmed from the communication

with another man, but Max never understood the real, authentic Bigger. As he faces the young black who will soon be dead, he is overcome with pity for him. Feeling that Bigger's instincts toward meaningful life were twisted and perverted into negative forces of destruction, he tries to instill in the condemned boy his own belief that in the collective struggle that will be carried on after his death, others like him will channel their rebellion more constructively.

But for Bigger, the class struggle is meaningless. He has lived alone and now he must die alone, the existential man whose only possible source of meaning is himself. Although Max does not understand Bigger, he unwittingly gives him the reassurance he needs to make the ultimate existential decision. Max has made him feel that the repressed emotions that finally led him to break out of his naturalistic environment were justified. If it was right for him to want what every other man had, then it was also right for him to kill to get it: "'Sounds funny, Mr. Max, but when I think about what you say I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right. . . . I ain't trying to forgive nobody and I ain't asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain't going to cry. They wouldn't let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain't fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn't want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am. . . .'" (p.391).

Bigger's acceptance of his existence as his essence is even more complete than that of Camus' murderer. Meursault accepts as his essence the role of victim that he will enact at his execution while remaining essentially untouched by the actions of his previous life. Bigger, in

a total realization and acceptance of his violent actions in the context of his environment, assumes responsibility for his murders because they are authentic reflections of his repressed emotions. He becomes in his final stand a totally realized existential man, accepting the limited choices and sporadic actions of his brief life as his intended essence. In a culmination of the symbolic development of Bigger's inverted value system, he asserts that, "'What I killed for must've been good!'" (p.392).

Bigger comes at last to the core of his being, finding within himself the strength he will need to die unafraid. He looks back upon his life much as Sisyphus gazes down upon his rock: "At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death."[4]

Leaving Bigger gazing through the prison bars with a faint, ironic smile upon his face, one must imagine him, like Sisyphus, happy.

[4] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien, A Vintage Book (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 91.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Although the purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate the independent artistic merit of Native Son as an example of the existential novel, the suggestion does arise that perhaps Native Son fits so well into the philosophical context of The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus because it is a source for both works. Since Wright's novel was first introduced into France as underground literature during the Resistance, it is possible that Camus read the work before he wrote The Stranger. Even though there has been a recent trend among critics to reassess the artistic merit of Wright's work, no study has yet appeared of the striking similarities between Native Son and The Stranger. One hesitates to speculate that racial prejudice is still so deeply engrained in the literary establishment that it prevents recognition of the possibility that black Wright is the original and white Camus the imitator. Yet even Wright's French biographer becomes entangled in the chronological difficulties of tracing Camus' influence on Wright when he says that "The Man Who Lived Underground," published in 1941, "evinces characteristic features of Camus' Etranger (although this book had not yet been written). . . ."[1]

Although there is a difference of tone and emphasis between

[1] Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, trans. I. Barzun (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), p. 241.

Native Son and The Stranger, the similarities of theme, symbol, and plot are striking enough to suggest a possible influence. The surface incongruity of black Bigger, passionate and inarticulate, being the literary father of Meursault, the passive, introspective white Algerian, might be attributed to Camus' working from a literary concept while Wright based his work on his own emotional experience as a black man in a white society.

In the opening scenes of both works, there is a symbolic death followed by a journey. Meursault, like Bigger, has no close emotional ties with family or friends. His purely physical involvement in his affair with Marie parallels Bigger's one-dimensional relationship with Bessie. When Meursault kills the Arab, he is as much the mindless agent of environmental forces as is Bigger. Later at his trial, he is as mentally alienated from the complicated ritual of the courtroom as Bigger. Bigger's exclusion is based on his segregated education that has not provided him with a knowledge of the abstract terminology of the law; Camus, by introducing the French legal convention of the defense lawyer speaking formally to the court in the first person as if he were his client, demonstrates his own character's alienation from the proceedings that will determine his fate.

During Meursault's period in prison, the parallels with Bigger are especially obvious. He, like Bigger, finds that he is the object of hatred to the crowd that fills the courtroom. Like the judge who deliberates for less than an hour before telling Bigger that he must die, the jury entrusted with Meursault's life takes less than an hour to decide his guilt and punishment. Meursault's vacillation during

his imprisonment between agonizing hope and futile depression also parallels Bigger's experience. He too violently attacks God's representative who attempts to sway him from his existential belief in himself. And again like Bigger, he comes to a full awareness and acceptance of his existence only when he has banished all hope of escape or transcendent meaning.

Still other parallels could be suggested, but there is also a crucial difference between the two works. This basic dissimilarity was noted by Wright himself who observed in a journal entry made after he first read The Stranger in 1947: "'I finished the book and found it interesting. It is a neat job, but devoid of passion. . . . In America a book like this would not attract much attention for it would be said that he lacks feeling.'"[2] The Stranger is like an artistic distillation of the emotional raw material of Native Son. Camus' hero, characteristically devoid of all emotion except boredom, does not involve the reader's feelings; one can only appreciate intellectually Camus' flawless execution of his idea.

The powerful emotional appeal of Native Son is based in the vivid characterization of Bigger Thomas. Nelson Algren, in his recent review of the latest Wright biography, refers to the unique, individual essence of Bigger that emerges from the novel and its source in Wright's own personality: "But Wright was, himself, the underground man. Bigger Thomas lived in Richard Wright as intensely as Raskolnikov lived in Dostoevski or as Bill Sykes lived in Dickens. That is why we remember

[2] Fabre, p. 321.

Bigger Thomas by name but not the names of Baldwin's or Ellison's heroes. For Wright, like Dickens and Dostoevski, contained a murderer."[3]

Perhaps because Wright's existentialism was based upon his own experiential awareness of the black man's alienation from the dominant society, Native Son conveys the emotional impact of the existential perspective better than the fiction of either Camus or Sartre. In Meursault, Roquentin, and even Pablo, there is a basic ennui and detachment from life that fails to convey the emotional poignancy of intensely experienced existence. Their mental alienation from the mainstream society is somewhat contrived, a matter of choice rather than necessity. Bigger's existence as a murderer more closely paralells Camus' interpretation of Sisyphus in his environment. Everything in Bigger's life has been predetermined. The forces of white society decreed his position of subservience and repressed his authentic emotions and drives, thus precipitating the violent explosion that resulted in two killings. In the acts of his existence, Bigger had no choice at all, but when he consciously accepts responsibility for his murders, he makes his fate his own.

Much of the poignancy of Native Son comes from the contrast between Bigger's brutal environment and his deep human emotions and sensibilities. The scope of Bigger's journey from a total mental debasement to a final stance as the self-accepted outlaw, unrepentant and courageous on the eve of his death, involves the reader's emotions

[3] Nelson Algren, rev. of The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, by Michel Fabre, Los Angeles Times Book Review, 24 Feb. 1974, p. 2.

in an authentically existential experience. Wright has created an unforgettable and moving existential hero in "Bigger Thomas of Native Son, the black rebel of the ghetto and a man."[4]

[4] Eldridge Cleaver, Soul On Ice, A Ramparts Book (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1968), p. 106.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abcarian, Richard. Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., Inc., 1970.

Abel, Lionel. "Seven Heroes of the New Left." Molders of Modern Thought. Ed. Ben Seligman. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970. pp. 334-49.

Algren, Nelson. Rev. of The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, by Michel Fabre. Los Angeles Times Book Review, 24 Feb. 1974, pp. 1-2, 9-11.

Baldwin, James. Notes of a Native Son. 1951; rpt. New York: Dial Press, 1969.

de Beauvoir, Simone. "Impressions of Richard Wright." Studies in Black Literature, 1 (Autumn 1970), 3-5.

Bone, Robert. Richard Wright. Univ. of Minn. Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 74. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1969.

Bramwell, Gloria. "Articulated Nightmare." Midstream, 7 (1961), 110-12.

Camus, Albert. The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays. Trans. Justin O'Brien. A Vintage Book. 1942; tr. New York: Random House, 1955.

Camus, Albert. The Stranger. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. A Vintage Book. 1942; tr. New York: Random House, 1946.

Canby, Henry Seidel. Rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright. Book-of-the-Month Club News, Feb. 1940, pp. 2-3.

Cleaver, Eldridge. Soul On Ice. A Ramparts Book. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1968.

Cohn, David L. "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright." Atlantic Monthly, 165 (1940), 659-61.

Davis, Ben Jr. Rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright. New York Sunday Worker, 14 April 1940, pp. 4-6.

Emanuel, James A. "Fever and Feeling: Notes on the Imagery in Native Son." Negro Digest, 18 (Dec. 1968), 16-26.

Fabre, Michel. The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright. Trans. I. Barzun. New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1973.

Fadiman, Clifton. Rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright. New Yorker, 2 Mar. 1940, pp. 52-53.

Gibson, Donald B. "Wright's Invisible Native Son." American Quarterly, 21 (1969), 728-738.

Glicksberg, Charles I. "Negro Fiction in America." South Atlantic Quarterly, 45 (1946), 477-88.

Holman, C. Hugh. A Handbook to Literature. 3rd ed., 1936; rpt. New York: Odyssey Press, 1972.

Kaufmann, Walter. Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. A Meridian Book. New York: World Pub. Co., 1956.

Kinnamon, Keneth. "Native Son: The Personal, Social, and Political Background." Phylon, 30 (Spring 1969), 66-72.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Existentialism." The Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Ed. Paul Edwards. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967. III, 147-54.

Malcolm X. "Definition of a Revolution." Malcolm X: The Man and His Times. Ed. John H. Clark. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1969, pp. 273-81.

Marshall, Margaret. Rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright. Nation, 150 (1940), 367-68.

McSorley, Rev. Joseph. Rev. of Native Son, by Richard Wright. Catholic World, 151 (1940), 243-44.

Redding, J. Saunders. "The Alien Land of Richard Wright." Soon One Morning. Ed. Herbert Hill. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963, pp. 50-59.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism." Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. A Meridian Book. New York: World Pub. Co., 1956, pp. 287-311.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Nausea. Trans. Lloyd Alexander. 1938; tr. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Wall." Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. A Meridian Book. New York: World Pub. Co., 1956, pp. 222-40.

Siegel, Paul N. "The Conclusion of Richard Wright's Native Son." PMLA, 89 (1974), 517-23.

Wright, Richard. Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth. New York: Harper and Row, 1945.

Wright, Richard. "How Bigger Was Born." Native Son. A Perennial Classic. 1940; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966, vii-xxxiv.

Wright, Richard. "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me." Atlantic Monthly, 155 (1940), 826-28.

Wright, Richard. "The Man Who Lived Underground." Accent, 2 (Spring 1942), 170-76.

Wright, Richard. Native Son. A Perennial Classic. 1940; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

Wright, Richard. Pagan Spain. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957.

Wright, Richard. The Outsider. Perennial Library. 1953; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.