

Racial Identity in African American  
Literature:  
The Portrayal of Racial Identity in Richard Wright's  
*Black Boy* and *Native Son*

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Literature:  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how racial identity is portrayed in two of Richard Wright's novels: *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. The two main chapters are each structured on one of the literary works by Wright, and how they portray racial identity. *Black Boy* is an autobiography, telling the story of Richard Wright's own experiences of growing up during the Jim Crow era, and how this affected him mentally and emotionally. In *Native Son* Wright tells the story of a young African American man struggling to find his place in society due to the harsh living conditions he is born into. This thesis will analyse the different works to see if there are any common factors in how Richard Wright portrays racial identity. In order to investigate these questions this thesis will include information from critical race studies, specifically African American studies, and critics of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. I will also examine what is meant by the term "race" and how one can define it.



## **Acknowledgements**

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# Introduction

In this thesis I will explore issues of the African American race, and identity. My methodology for this thesis is to examine African American literary texts, in particular novels, to show that the history of violence and racism in the United States has given a negative outcome for African Americans, and their identity. By stating that the history of violence in the United States had a negative outcome on racial identity regarding African Americans I am referring to the many years of being alienated from society, and labelled as outcasts that have no meaning or value to society in general. Having a feeling of alienation and no sense of belonging goes against human nature, seeing as we are social beings. This will have a massive impact on one's mental, and emotional, experience which in turn also affects ones identity, which will be the main focus of this thesis; the portrayal of racial identity in two of Richard Wright's literary works. In addition to being alienated, African Americans were also massively oppressed, had little to none human rights, and opportunity for any form of education and work. This usually resulted in poverty, starvation, and homelessness. A positive outcome for the African American population would be the polar opposite, where their rights would be maintained, and they would live a life within society, without being alienated by it. This would give African Americans the same opportunities as white people, which again would mean a different way of living and working. I believe that if there had been a positive outcome from the race issue, racial tensions in the United States would be a completely different topic even today.

The thesis will primarily use Richard Wright's novels *Black Boy* and *Native Son* to explore the issues of racial identity. Seeing as my main sources for theory and information will be the two chosen novels, in addition to articles written on my chosen topic, my overall approach will be a close reading of the two chosen literary works by Richard Wright, one novel and one autobiography. From these works I will examine a few key scenes that reflect my thesis topic. In this examination I will include criticism from other scholars, and issues relating to racism. This approach is therefore interpretative.

Seeing as this thesis is based on racial identity I have also included theory in the field of identity and race. Furthermore, because my chosen novels were published in the 40s and 50s I have also incorporated some relevant history on race in America during that time period, as well as critical race studies, specifically African American studies.

## Racial identity and race

When talking about racial identity it is also important to have a clear understanding of what lies in the term “race”. To describe race I will use Glenn C. Loury’s definition of the term,

*a cluster of inheritable bodily markings carried by a largely endogamous group of individuals, markings that can be observed by others with ease, that can be changed or misrepresented only with great difficulty, and that have come to be invested in a particular society at a given historical moment with social meaning.*<sup>1</sup>

Loury’s definition is divided into three parts: race makes it easier to identify, it is immutable, and there is a social significance. Loury further states, “*what is “essential” here is that these physical traits are taken to signify something of import within an historical context*”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Loury’s emphasis is on the social aspect when talking about race. Racial identity, and racial oppression is something that is affected by the social environment one lives in, and for African Americans it is this aspect of race that has defined their living conditions. It is therefore important to investigate how the social structures in society contribute to defining race.

It is common to refer to a person’s race, black or white, when talking about racial identity. According to Janet E. Helms this is however wrong. Helms refers to racial identity as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group”.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this Helms draws on M. Krogman’s definition of race, “a sub-group of peoples possessing a definite combination of physical characters, of genetic origin, the combination of which to varying degrees distinguishes the sub-group from other sub-groups of mankind” when explaining the issue of race and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Krogman’s definition of race focuses mainly on the biologically factors contributing to a person’s physical appearance, seeing as “genetic origin” and “physical characters” lay the grounds for his definition. One can state that the cultural construction of

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 20-21

<sup>2</sup> Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 21

<sup>3</sup> Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993), 3

<sup>4</sup> Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993), 3

race and racial identity has been left out. In addition to this, Helms states that racial identity “refers to the quality or manner of one’s identification with the respective racial groups”.<sup>5</sup> Helms further explains this statement by saying that, because if this racial identity theories describe different modes of identification. In other words, Theories try to decipher the different ways Black people can, or cannot, identify with other Blacks and adopt or abandon certain identities as a result of racial victimisation. When it comes to White racial identity theories try to give account of the different ways that White people can, or cannot, identify with other Whites and continue evolving, or avoid evolving, a non-oppressive White identity.<sup>6</sup>

According to human DNA research there is originally only one race, known as Homo Sapiens, also referred to as the human race, which traces back 300 000 years. However, when leaving Africa and populating elsewhere around the world, appearances changed in order to suit the different environments. Differences, as well as similarities, are then likely caused by cultural changes in perspectives, developments and experiences.<sup>7</sup> This is a way to biologically understand race, and the differences and similarities, found in our physical appearance. However, when exploring race as a cultural construction a different perception of race, developed throughout history, can be found. Culture can be defined as something “human created”. It is something we strive to be a part of in order to have meaning and affiliation in our lives. Further, culture also affects the way we behave in situations, but also our mind-set. In other words, culture connects people together, giving us a sense of belonging. Lastly, it should be noted that that race is generally dismissed as a meaningful category among biologists. This makes it harder to analyse and examine race as something biological.

Glenn C. Loury states “that racial identity in America is inherently a social and cultural construct, not simply a biological one – that it necessarily involves an irreducible element of choice”.<sup>8</sup> He accounts for this definition of racial identity by describing what he himself witnessed and experienced growing up in the United States.

Ever since the 1700s European academics have through numerous attempts tried to prove that humans are different, by mainly focusing on the colour of our skin. The colour of your skin would determine one’s ranking in society based on intelligence, skills, linguistics,

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<sup>5</sup> Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993), 5

<sup>6</sup> Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993), 5

<sup>7</sup> Nah Dove, *Race Revisited: Against a Cultural Construction bearing Significant Implications* (Unisa Press 2018), 129-130

<sup>8</sup> Glenn C. Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 2

and so on. White people, Caucasians, were placed at the top of a created race hierarchy, followed by yellow, red, brown and black. This belief, that both white men and women were superior to all other races, gave grounds for the cruelty imposed on enslaved African people.<sup>9</sup> This race hierarchy is culturally constructed, and has to some extent been maintained since the 1700s to this day.

Glenn C. Loury argues that human classification is inevitable, and is a main part of our social-cognitive behaviour. The only question to be raised is how individuals choose to classify the different subjects.<sup>10</sup> A common way individuals have classified subjects over the years has been based on race, and the different stereotypes that go hand in hand with it. A group of people that have been highly alienated, and oppressed, in the United States are black people, being placed on the bottom of the race hierarchy since the 1700s. During the 1700s the tobacco industry in the United States bloomed. Along with the tobacco bloom, slavery became a common commodity. Along with slaves came “masters”, the ones who owned slaves. During this period different stereotypes for the African-American slaves were created. In a sense they were forced to take on certain identities, based on their race.

According to Sylvia Wynter, the creation of Sambo, and the rebellious Nat, was essential for self-conception, both for the master and all whites in the South who followed the master-model of self-conception.<sup>11</sup> In other words, these stereotypes were critical to white people in order to place the African-American people into self-made identities, because the new and “unknown” was perceived as something intimidating that they did not want to associate with. It was therefore better to create “new” identities for the slaves taken from their own self-conception. Wynter further argues that the master-model followed by poor white, with no slaves, “gives insights into the power that the bourgeois control of the means of socialization had in fashioning the attitudes and responses of the nonowning classes”. Wynter further argues that it is perhaps in this notion that we find the issue of white racism. A pathology so deep that Richard Wright saw the problem of the United States as a White problem, and not as a Negro problem.<sup>12</sup> This is relevant in regards to Wright seeing as Wynter

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<sup>9</sup> Nah Dove, *Race Revisited: Against a Cultural Construction bearing Significant Implications* (Unisa Press 2018), 130-131

<sup>10</sup> Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 19

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Wynter, *Sambos and Minstrels* (Duke University Press, 1979), 150

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Wynter, *Sambos and Minstrels* (Duke University Press, 1979), 150

brings forth some of the main points Wright tries to elaborate in his literary works. Society is one of the leading forces that made it impossible for African Americans to attain any sort of self, being forced to follow their guidelines on how they should act. This also caused a white hatred, and racism across all races.

Wright was born in 1908 on a plantation in the South, and therefore experienced the brutality of racism happening around him. The plantation order is one of the leading factors in the contribution for making it illegal for slaves to learn how to read and attain an education. Even though Wright was more several decades after slavery was made illegal, there were still segregation rules and certain behaviour that had to be maintained. Because of this differentiation between the races African Americans had to work extremely hard, up to the point of exhaustion. Seeing as they were illiterate and uneducated they were labelled as individuals with lacking intellectual faculties. Individuals lacking intellect were perceived as the lack of the human, or non-human. The “negro” with his stereotypes then creates this “lacking” quality.<sup>13</sup> However, slavery has been a part of American history far earlier than the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Racial inequality blossomed in the United States during the 1700s. The United States is built on the perception of freedom for men and women, with equal rights and responsibilities of citizenship. However, for African Americans the concept of freedom and equality is a common theme in their history. According to Loury, this has played a big role in shaping the current American social and political conscience. Many factors throughout history, including the trauma of slavery, the Civil War, and the civil rights movement, have shaped Americans into the people they are. From the mid- 1950s and peaking a decade later, the civil rights movement resulted in a great change in American race relations. This revolution, among other things, successfully eliminated the second-class citizenship for blacks, which had been legally enforced earlier. However, even though there was great success the hope that the Movement would create a truly equal society between the races is still unfulfilled.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned, this change did not start until the mid-1950s when the civil rights movement blossomed. For Wright, the reality of life was different, being born in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

A central topic in this thesis will concern the term “alienation”, and how this affects a person’s identity development, and mental state. The concept of alienation has multiple

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<sup>13</sup> Sylvia Wynter, *Sambos and Minstrels* (Duke University Press, 1979), 152

<sup>14</sup> Glenn C. Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 14

meanings attached to it. Russell Middleton quotes Seeman and suggests that there are five significant meanings: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. These meanings are closely connected to each other. Further, one can argue that each meaning is related to damaged social conditions that hinder the realisation of culturally meaningful goals.<sup>15</sup>

### **Being African American during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Identity Issues**

What we find in both literary works by Richard Wright examined in this thesis, is the topic of oppression, however, the identity crisis and what it does to a person's psyche is of great importance. Being African American also brought with it struggles in daily life, regarding how one views oneself and how one is viewed by others. There was a certain code you had to follow in order to gain some acceptance, even if these behavioural codes went against your own personal beliefs and thoughts. This is similar to what Du Bois presents as problems dealing with black identity.

W. E. B. Du Bois discusses this idea of a double mind-set, and the identity troubles that went hand in hand with issues concerning ones race. In his essay *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois defines the Negro as,

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- and American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Russel Middleton, *Alienation, Race, and Education* (Washington: American Sociological Association, 1963), 973

<sup>16</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903), 2



Du Bois further states that the Negro therefore has a double-consciousness, and that the Negro is always observing himself through the eyes of others, measuring oneself through pity. Always haunted by his sense of twoness, an American and a Negro, two souls and thoughts in one black body.<sup>17</sup> What Du Bois states here is relevant when reading Wright, and examining his works and its thematics, especially in regards to *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. In both these works Wright clearly draws a line between African American life and the white community and society. The African American always stands on the outside of the white society, looking in, but is never granted permission to take part in it in any other form than labour. The African Americans presented in *Black Boy* and *Native Son* are also measured by others looking down at them with pity or hatred. This two-consciousness can be perceived as a way of viewing oneself by your own perceptions, but also by other people, in this case white people. Wright in *Black Boy* is a boy, growing up to be a man, always in search of affiliation, and a place of acceptance and belonging, in society. When growing up he realises that there is a great difference in being African American as opposed to being white. This builds up anger and frustration inside of him, and makes him feel out of place and without any freedom and a consciousness of his own. He is constantly looking at himself through the eyes of a white person, but also judging himself through the eyes of people in his own community, this causes great frustration and confusion for him mentally. In *Native Son* we are introduced to Bigger. Unlike Wright, Bigger interacts with society differently than Richard in *Black Boy*. Whereas Wright tries to find solutions for his situation, and keeps his head down and out of white people's business, Bigger follows a more criminal path, and ends up taking the life of a white privileged young woman. By feeling left out of society, and not being able to find a good job to earn the kind of money he longs for he too builds up anger. Always feeling observed and judged by white people, Bigger too is viewing himself through the eyes of others.

## **Jim Crow**

Richard Wright was born in 1908 in Mississippi. During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century a new form of white supremacy dominated the southern states of America. Jim Crow was introduced a new era of American race relations. Even though Jim Crow was represented as a natural order of interaction between races it was more a strategic way to strengthen white patriarchy and supremacy. With no regards to class it united the

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<sup>17</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903), 2

white men of America by giving them something in common, their superiority over African Americans. This led white women to have a lesser status in society; however, this cannot be compared with the oppression the African American people faced. Regardless of class or gender, African Americans were looked upon as being unqualified of obtaining full rights of citizenship.<sup>18</sup>

African Americans had few economic opportunities, and the rights they obtained during Reconstruction deteriorated at great speed in the late nineteenth century. This left them vulnerable to the Jim Crow era. When Reconstruction collapsed it did not however eliminate all political rights of the African Americans living in the south. They were still able to vote and hold public office. Nonetheless, during the 1890s and 1900s the southern states one after one endorsed reforms that oppressed African Americans, due to independent political parties that threatened the dominance of the white elite.<sup>19</sup> Not only did Jim Crow limit the physical spaces shared between white and black people, it also determined how African Americans should behave publically towards whites. African Americans were expected to behave after certain racial codes that emphasised their subordinate status in society. Black parents started to teach their young children how to behave when accompanied by whites. If any of the racial codes were disregarded, or behaviour that the white person disagreed with took place, it could end up with violent retaliation. Whereas the African Americans had to behave in a certain manner, the white people had to show no consideration. They avoided any sort of behaviour that implied social equality between the races.<sup>20</sup>

These explanations of the Jim Crow era and how it shaped and affected African Americans is clearly portrayed in Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. Wright experienced that he was not allowed to follow his passion and dreams, especially regarding his interest for literature, because it went against the racial etiquette he was supposed to follow. Reading literature also went against his family's beliefs, especially his grandmothers. As a result he experienced several beatings within his family home. Wright also experienced his uncle being murdered by white people who sought after his business. These experiences also shaped

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<sup>18</sup> David Brown & Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 180-181

<sup>19</sup> David Brown & Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 185

<sup>20</sup> David Brown & Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 195-196

Wright's book and outlook on society. Wright grew up in the aftermaths of slavery, and in a society where white people had absolute supremacy and wanted to reinstate their power. Wright wanted no part in this, which evolved into a conflict with society. Because of these massive differences between the races Wright became engaged in the race war, and grew angry due to the feeling of being unjustly treated as a black man in a country that promised equal justice. This is clearly portrayed in his literary works with their American racial topics, and strong protest. *Native Son* is a great example of American-Negro protest fiction.<sup>21</sup>

## **Richard Wright**

Being born in 1908 on a plantation, close to Natchez, Mississippi, Wright had the odds against him right from the start. His father left his family when Wright was only five years of age, causing his mother to struggle taking care of him and his brother financially. However, a few years later, his mother went through several paralytic strokes, and chronic illness, forcing them to move in with his grandparents. One of Wright's main characteristics in his literary works is agony, and much of it stems from his mother's illness. The racial situation in the world he grew up in caused him a great deal of agony, always watching his people being treated wrongfully, without any justice. In addition to this, his mother, a single parent, also suffered from illness. This too caused Wright a great deal of agony witnessing. Hunger and violence were the main elements of his life growing up. Another factor that dominated Wright's life closely linked to agony and suffering, was hunger. This hunger dominated most of Wright's childhood memories, which eventually grew into bitterness and an interest in the Communist party. In addition to hunger, there was violence in his family life growing up. However, this violence stemmed from the larger violence found in the South.<sup>22</sup>

Wright's grandmother's home was strongly affected by a strict evangelism. Being a non-believer Wright placed himself "outside" of the family, and their values, and was now perceived as a deserter and beaten by his family members to drive the dangerous assertiveness out. All of this, in addition to the strict ways of life in his grandmother's home where boyish recreations were forbidden, in addition to books, took part in shaping Wright into the man he was to become. In his later years Wright gained an interest in humanist philosophy. He became an enthusiast for the non-religious and opposed any form of otherworldliness. To

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<sup>21</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 4

<sup>22</sup> Robert Bone, *Richard Wright* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969), 5

Wright the human individual was the main focus. Another essential part of Wright's life worth mentioning is the fact that because of his constant moving around between relatives, Wright was rarely able to complete a full year of unbroken study. He also graduated ninth grade when he was sixteen years old, without taking any sort of high school education. This lack of education should be considered when reading his literature, giving him the appraisal he deserves for his efforts.<sup>23</sup>

Wright's journey out of the South of America began in 1927 when he set out for Chicago. The heaviest baggage he carried with him was his black skin colour. Being African American affected his life in many ways, but also his way of thought, as well as his writing. Even though Wright became a well-travelled man, his thoughts would always return to the American racial issues that were buried within him since childhood. Despite being raised in the South, Wright was not formed into a submissive Negro by the Southern culture, like it did to so many others. Rather, Wright challenged and questioned the American society surrounding him, whether he was in the South or in the North he demanded justifications for the society in question. Because of his upbringing Wright's image of the racial issues in America were split into two worlds, one black and safe, one white and intimidating. His image of these worlds were influenced by his inner anger, which was intensified by him feeling unfairly and wrongly treated, because of his skin tone, in the land of promise and freedom. However, when he described black and white people in the Northern states he was relying on optimistic hopes based on his connection to Marxism. With that being said, his texts that bring up racial topics are in a tone of protest.<sup>24</sup>

### *Black Boy*

*Black Boy* is a personal memoir of Wright's pre-Marxist and Southern days. With a narrative that portrays fear, frustration, and internal anger, it is an autobiography giving account of chronological events from Wright's own experiences and social encounters. Russell Brignano states that *Black Boy* is an angry reaction to the American society, but also a search for self-discovery. Brignano further states that for Wright, and black people in general, the search for a place in American Society goes hand in hand with a profound need for a father and a career. Wright also learns that he is not quite American, not fully a human being,

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Bone, *Richard Wright* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969), 5-6

<sup>24</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 3-4

but a Negro. The hope that the narrative relies on is the fact that Wright can escape to the North to live in a more peaceful environment.<sup>25</sup>

We learn throughout the narrative of *Black Boy* that Wright's awareness of a split black and white world took place in a colour vacuum. Wright did notice that there were some differences, seeing as he never identified with white people, except for his relatives who looked white. It was not until he took a train from Mississippi to Arkansas that he was introduced to the Jim Crow laws for the first time. After white men murdered his uncle, he soon learnt what white people will, and can, do to black people if they feel threatened. During his childhood, and growing up, Wright also learnt about the dynamics between the two races, and was told tragic and sad stories about how interracial encounters were dangerous. He was told the gruesome tales as to what a white person would do to black men if they felt threatened. It was during his youth that Wright began to categorise whites as part of a force rather than real people. This realisation of a social structure based upon race had a great impact on Wright. "Non-human whites", suddenly threatened his life and wellbeing. His vision of the brutal South, and its white culture, only strengthened over time. Especially after he gained new experiences through various jobs in Jackson, Mississippi, and Memphis during the 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

Wright also took notice of the fact that the Negro man, and woman, had to hide their frustrations behind a mask of cheerfulness in order to keep their jobs, and place in society. The Negro living in the South also took on a role that was assigned to him and created by the white. One could say that the life of the Negro was stunted, because he was prevented from developing and growing in society. In addition to this black people had to shut off their emotions and personal thoughts from what the white people saw as forbidden. Because of this, black people had to find ways to trick the whites behind their backs, mostly through illegal activities such as stealing. In *Black Boy* Wright tells a story where he himself engaged in illegal activities when he was younger, by stealing from his place of work. By engaging in illegal activities the Negro conformed the white man's conception of their natural nature.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 5

<sup>26</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 8-9

<sup>27</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 10

## Native Son

*Native Son* was published in 1940. The plot of the narrative is set in the black belt of Chicago during the Great Depression. The novel tells the story of a young twenty-year-old African American man named Bigger. The novel is centred on the negatives aspects of politics, and how it affects the black community. Bigger's living conditions, and his family's poverty gives us a great context of the Great Depression, also making it one of the leading themes of the novel. Further, *Native Son* explores how African Americans struggle economically, and how this is closely linked to the political domination of society.

Unlike *Black Boy*, *Native Son* is set in the North, Chicago. This clearly illustrates that Wright does not think that the racial issues in the US simply lie in the Southern states, but are also problematic in the Northern states, illustrating that African Americans share the same oppression and disadvantages in the two different parts of the country.

*Native Son* is split into three parts, "Fear", "Flight", and "Fate". According to Brignano these three parts trace three things, firstly; the social and mental frames that build up to Bigger's crime, killing a white, privileged, girl, secondly; Bigger's flight from the police, and being caught, and thirdly; Bigger's trial.<sup>28</sup> Brignano brings forth that early critics of the novel stated that *Native Son* was devoted to, and encouraged, increasing black people's hate of whites. To this criticism Wright responded with articles and letters to the public. In these articles and letters Wright stated that he did not defend the protagonist's, Bigger, actions. He was simply trying to illustrate the story of the young Negro who feared and hated white people. He further stated that Bigger's hatred was a reaction to his overwhelming fear. The theme of the novel can then be understood as a combination of fear and hate, which can also be found in Wright's earlier short stories with Southern settings.<sup>29</sup>

The beginning of the novel starts with Bigger chasing a rat in his family's one-room apartment in the slum, and killing it. Brignano brings forth the symbolic meaning of this action. In this scene Bigger is chasing an animal, whereas later in the novel Bigger will take on the role as a hunted animal himself, and Negroes will take shape as a rat in the white mind. I believe that this is a great symbolic meaning to bring forth. Not only does it illustrate how

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<sup>28</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 30

<sup>29</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 30-31

Bigger is portrayed to the readers in the beginning of the novel, ruthless, but it also tells how the white society is superior to African Americans, and will eventually “hunt” those they fear or look down on. When reading the scene myself I noticed the chaos of the whole setting. Jumping around in a cramped one-room apartment, almost suffocating with fear and desperation. This can be entwined with the actual living conditions for Bigger and his family, as well as the whole African American community.

Already at the beginning of the narrative Wright removes Bigger from any form of warm relations with his family as well as his gang companions. Wright places the focus of the novel on how Bigger interacts with the white world, and how they interact with him. James Baldwin criticised this by stating that by avoiding these relationships, Wright had eliminated an important aspect of the Negro life, mainly the relationships, bond and shared experiences they have with one another. Baldwin argues “the relationship Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life.”<sup>30</sup> This particular statement by Baldwin I choose to disagree with in this thesis. Mostly because even though an important part of the Negroes life is the connections and relationships they share with one another, it is not given that every African American is granted this gift. Bigger is one of these people who, because of his personal issues, have a hard time connecting with others, and in addition to this his family situation is not ideal. I believe that this is a realistic portrayal of alienation, not only from society, but within ones own circuit as well. By showing this side to what relationships can be like within the African American society, I believe Wright makes the novel more realistic and credible. This is because having a troublesome psyche or a hard time connection with others will, in some situation, make you pull away and alienate from other and society.

In contrast to Wright in *Black Boy* Bigger is alienated from religion and the African American culture. However, *Native Son* still portrays the Negro in the American society, by placing him outside of the society and out of reach for the American Dream.<sup>31</sup> Brignano brings forth the point Wright makes in his essay “*How “Bigger” Was Born*” that

he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere

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<sup>30</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 35

<sup>31</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 32

imposing sight and sound of daily American life. In many respects his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable.<sup>32</sup>

Bigger is in other words closed off from taking part in white society because of his racial background.<sup>33</sup> The wealth he sees, and desires, is only found in the white society, and out of reach for him. This is one of the main reasons for his character's development.

## Structure

This thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter provides an analysis of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, where I have picked out a few scenes from the novel that reflect the thematics of this thesis. These scenes will be the main focus of Chapter one, and will serve as a basis for my investigation. Chapter two of this thesis will give an analysis based on a few chosen scenes from *Native Son*. Finally a conclusion, and short summary will be provided. Here there is also included a suggestion for further research on the topic.

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son, Introduction: How "Bigger" Was Born*, xiii

<sup>33</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 32



## Chapter One: Racial identity in *Black Boy*

*Black Boy* provides the reader with an understanding of how Richard Wright viewed the world and society that surrounded him in life. *Black Boy* can be understood as Wright's own reflections on race issues in the US, and how they affect African American identity. The autobiography is written in past tense, and from a grown up Wright's mind-set. Throughout the autobiography we are exposed to numerous scenes and experiences on how racism affects the relationships between the races, but also how it affects relations within the African American community as well. Already by reading the title of *Black Boy*, the reader is made aware of the protagonist's race. It is not just the story of a boy growing up; it is the story of a boy growing up black. In other words, the title of the autobiography could also be a reference to Wright's own label as well. He is just a black boy.

One of the autobiography's main themes is alienation. In this thesis I refer to alienation as being an "outsider", and not having a sense of belonging. You are in other words alienated from everything surrounding you, and alone. This theme is developed thoroughly through the novel, especially when Wright has his first encounter with white society. In the first chapters of the autobiography Wright is a young boy. Already here we sense that he feels alienated not only by society, but also primarily by his family at first. He tries to avoid annoying his father, and is scared of his mother and her harsh beatings. In chapter one we are introduced to a four-year-old Wright. Wright is standing by a fireplace, and sets fire to the curtains. What was meant to be a small act of rebellion quickly escalates into something far more serious when his house sets on fire. He tries to avoid being punished and beaten, so he hides under the house. However, he is found and almost beaten to death.

Wright's feeling of alienation and isolation from everything surrounding him comes out in rebellious actions, perhaps in a desperate way to try and gain some attention. This theme is explored thoroughly throughout the autobiography, and the next rebellious act can already be found a couple of pages later. His family has now moved to Memphis, and live in a one-story brick tenement. His father worked as a night porter, so Wright could not make a noise when he was asleep during the daytime. One day, when he and his brother were playing, a stray kitten started to make loud noises. His father tells the boys to keep quiet, and eventually yells "Kill that damn thing!"<sup>34</sup> Wright hated it when his father yelled, and he

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 9

wanted him to feel the same kind of resentment to get back at him. He knows that he is not to take his father's word literally, but he does and kills the kitten. His mother, mortified at what he had done, crushes him "with the moral horror involved in taking a life."<sup>35</sup> In this scene we clearly see Wright's resentment of obeying the authority, as well as the oppression going on in his own family household. These are a few of the factors that lead to Wright's feelings of alienation and isolation. It seems as if his rebellious acts are more a cry for attention and help from his closest family, rather than him taking revenge over his father's behaviour.

A critic that examines how alienation is connected to rebellious acts is Sidonie Ann Smith in her article "*Richard Wright's 'Black Boy': The Creative Impulse as Rebellion*". She argues that Wright, an African American living in the South during the early decades of the twentieth century when racial suppression, segregation and subordination were a part of everyday life, struggled personally. Smith states that as an impulse due to despair, acting out came through openly rebellious behaviour. However, by rebelling you would also risk your own life. For Wright there was an even greater risk than death, and that was to accept, or even to pretend to accept, the submissiveness the Southern society demanded. To do so would mean psychological suicide, which to him was an even worse fate than death. Being unable to mask his feelings, Wright therefore chose a path of rebellion.<sup>36</sup> This backs up my previously mentioned statement that Wright's frustrations are illustrated through rebellion. However, Smith does not mention that these acts are a cry for help and attention, but rather a way to openly show that psychological submission is a worse outcome than death. I agree with this analysis, seeing as Wright's thoughts and beliefs suggest that in order for him to fully evolve as a person freedom of speech is required as he does not cope with isolation and obeying the authorities as well as his family seems to.

Smith further suggests that Wright's domestic environment also deprives him of a natural self-fulfilment. Smith states, "that the source of this deprivation should be the "old, white, wrinkled, grim face" of his grandmother is doubly significant". Smith argues that this is "doubly significant": firstly because his feelings of suppression and fear is closely linked to "whiteness", and secondly, Smith argues, "black" turns into "white", making both races

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 10

<sup>36</sup> Sidonie Ann Smith, *Richard Wright's "Black Boy": The Creative Impulse as Rebellion* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 124

possibly oppressive.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Wright is constantly reminded of the oppressive world he lives in, and even in his own domestic environment he cannot escape it. Throughout his whole childhood, as narrated in the autobiography, he was dealing with his family's protective nature to frighten the young who continuously challenged them. The family would turn to beatings if disobedience occurred. Wright finds this punishment to be unfair and out of place, so he refuses to be silenced and continues to challenge their way of living. These beatings can be described as a reflection of a system full of frustrations. Its intention is to protect, and they are therefore an act of love. However, this act of love being as violent as it is, it also destructs ones personality, and in this case Wright's.

Similar as what we see in chapter one, chapter three explores the same identity struggles of being African American in a white society, and the alienation and isolation that goes hand in hand with this identity crisis. As a black American living in a white society, Wright is isolated from the world that lies before his eyes. In addition to feeling like an outsider in society, he is also isolated from his own race and family. He is never able to acquire a close friend, and keeps his emotions to himself. He comes into contact with a gang, and it seems like he is able to build some relationships with his fellow gang members,

Having grown taller and older, I now associated with older boys and I had to pay for my admittance into their company by subscribing to certain racial sentiments. The touchstone of fraternity was my feeling toward white people, how much hostility I held toward them, what degrees of value and honor I assigned to race. None of this was premeditated, but sprang spontaneously out of the talk of black boys who met at the crossroads.<sup>38</sup>

However, these bonds are more based on their common race prejudices rather than emotional connection, and therefore appear shallow. This prejudice and anger consumes Wright, and his way of thought, and is the leading factor in his violent behaviour. One can easily conclude that this plays a role in Wright's loss of identity. He is isolated, and does not have a place of belonging. He has to wear a mask, and follow the groups' way of thought, in order to be accepted and become a part of their community. This violent behaviour, and getting the

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<sup>37</sup> Sidonie Ann Smith, *Richard Wright's "Black Boy": The Creative Impulse as Rebellion* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 125

<sup>38</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 76

respect and acceptance by his peers can also be found later in chapter three. This violent behaviour can also be found in *Native Son* when it comes to Bigger and his relationship to his friends. Wright has started at a new school, and in order for him to gain his classmates respect he has to fight. “This was my test. If I failed now, I would have failed at school, for the first trial came not in books, but in how one’s fellows took one, what value they placed upon one’s willingness to fight.”<sup>39</sup> This sentence backs up the suggestion that the bonds he was able to create within his race were superficial and shallow. The only thing they were built on was their shared violence and racial prejudice. In other words, he was completely isolated from everything and everyone else, lacking a feeling of identity and purpose.

These racial tensions, and the racism amongst both the black community and the white are clear representations of how Wright reflects on the world around him, and how it has impacted his life. We get a clear glance into how racism not only affected the relations between the whites and blacks, but also between the blacks. It seems as if the latter is something that Wright clearly wanted to express in *Black Boy*, that racism also clearly penetrated his personal relations, and his sense of identity. In *Black Boy* Wright gives the message that he is surrounded by white people who do not accept him because of his skin colour. In addition to this, he is also surrounded by his own race who themselves have opinions on how he should think and behave. Any thought or behaviour beyond these beliefs is not welcome. This alienation is something Wright clearly struggles with throughout the whole novel.

Alienation is a central theme in *Black Boy*, and another factor worth mentioning when examining this subject is folklore, and how this has an impact on Wright throughout his life. Folklore and alienation are connected to each when it comes to behaviour and communication, and how this can fail within a community. In Jay Mechling’s criticism “The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*” he discusses how Wright explains ways in which folklore fails the individual. With his criticism Mechling wants to discuss and examine Wright’s autobiography with a question in mind, “how does folklore fail the protagonist of this autobiography, and why does this failure occur?” Mechling further writes that in-between the age of four and nineteen, when Wright decides to move north, he lives an unstable life dealing with an abusive father who diserts his family, and a stoic pragmatic mother, a childhood living with numerous relatives, and a society structured around Jim Crow laws. According to Mechling *Black Boy* “reads like a folklorist’s ethnography” several times.

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 89

Wright has dedicated two whole pages of the autobiography to numerous folk beliefs he acquired knowledge of when growing up.<sup>40</sup> A couple of these folk beliefs included in *Black Boy* are,

If I passed a Catholic sister or mother dressed in black and smiled and allowed her to see my teeth, I would surely die.

If I heard a voice and no human being was near, then either God or the Devil was trying to talk to me.

Whenever I made urine, I should spit into it for good luck.<sup>41</sup>

These examples are just a few of the many listed by Wright. The first passage after these folk beliefs reads as follows “Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible, because I wanted everything to be possible ... Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, these folk beliefs can be analysed as Wright’s way of retaliating on the organised religion he is surrounded by, that he himself finds no meaning in. This can again be translated in his distrust and isolation from his family, their religious beliefs, and society as a whole. Mechling’s point of folklore is also that folklore illustrates how powerless Wright actually is in a world dominated by white supremacy. Mechling argues that language games will not have an effect on the superior race, and also fail in an intercultural encounter, making the African American person, in this case Wright, speechless, and masking his behaviour. Mechling further states, ““Masking” may be a form of resistance, but it is a form unlikely to change the situation. Folklore, in short, may be a force for *pacification* rather than *resistance*”.<sup>43</sup>

As mentioned, Wright’s family was extremely religious, however, Wright felt no connection to this whatsoever, and it was one of the leading factors in his feeling of alienation from his family. Sylvester Johnson’s article “Tribalism and Religious Identity in the Work of Richard Wright” states that several critics have concluded that Wright downgrades religion in

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<sup>40</sup> Jay Mechling, *The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright’s Black Boy* (The Journal of American Folklore, 1991), 275-277

<sup>41</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 69

<sup>42</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 70

<sup>43</sup> Jay Mechling, *The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright’s Black Boy* (The Journal of American Folklore, 1991), 292

a category of primitivism or backwardness, and that this indicates Wright's failure to question the assumptions of positivism and progress of Western consciousness. As one can see in *Black Boy* Wright, on several occasions, refuses to consider "the thought-world of religions claims". Being an adult writing *Black Boy* it is adult Wright who still view religious beliefs as cultural backwardness and irrational.<sup>44</sup> As a response to this criticism I find it important to ask why and how Wright has acquired these attitudes to the religion, Christianity, which has been passed down through his racial heritage, and is an important part of their traditions and attitudes. One can argue that his view has been formed by him not fitting in and getting along with his extremely religious family members, and that he associates Christianity to alienation and suppression.

In order to properly analyse how Wright develops as an individual throughout the autobiography one needs to examine how he views himself, but also society, and how this affects his mind-set. Chapter three brings forth numerous passages and scenes that give the reader a glance into Wright's thoughts and beliefs. An important passage that gives away he train of thought can be found on the last page of chapter three, here Wright writes,

At the age of twelve, before I had had one full year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase, a predilection for what was real that no argument could ever gainsay, a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering.<sup>45</sup>

In this paragraph the writer is permitted a glimpse of Wright's ideas about life. One of his most important beliefs is that life only becomes meaningful when one is struggling to make it so. Here Wright shows that his character is critical, intelligent, and seeking. This can also be translated to the African American way of life in society. In order for them to have a meaning and purpose they had to struggle to make it so on their own. They did not have any meaning if they did not claim it for themselves. Brignano writes that,

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<sup>44</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *Tribalism and Religious Identity in the Work of Richard Wright* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 172

<sup>45</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 99

The youthful Wright began to perceive whites not as real persons but as parts of a general, abhorrent, and potentially destructive force. --- The effects of such a seemingly senseless social structure were profound for Wright. His entire being was challenged by the hate and the threats stemming from what, by now, had become a group of almost unreal people, of “invisible whites”.<sup>46</sup>

This passage by Brignano strengthens the thoughts and beliefs Wright had about finding a meaning in life. The reality of being coloured, in a white society, made it hard, but also important, to create a meaningful life, and meaning out of meaningless suffering. The social structure would challenge Wright’s thoughts, and would eventually be viewed as a destructive force, which threatened his thoughts and beliefs. This again brings us back to what Wright calls a meaningless suffering, and the struggle of finding a purpose of your own within this suffering. In order to maintain, and create, an identity of your own, a meaningful life with purpose is necessary. Because of his black skin, Wright views whiteness as a force, and in order to create meaningful purpose in his life he has to struggle with this force.

One scene that particularly stands out in *Black Boy* takes place when Wright has developed from being a child into a young man, and moved to Memphis. He applies for an optical company, thinking it would be different than working in Jackson, being more urban and not as close-minded. He acquired the job, but it did not take long before he was confronted with the harsh reality of being African American in a still very white society. One day whilst at work Wright is pressured to start a fight with another black boy called Harrison, working at a rival optical house across the street. Mr. Olin, his white foreman approaches Wright, clearly with an agenda,

‘Well, you better watch that nigger Harrison,’ Mr. Olin said in a low, confidential tone. ‘A little while ago I went down to get a Coca-Cola and Harrison was waiting for you at the door of the building with a knife. He asked me when you were coming down. Said he was going to get you. Said you called him a dirty name. Now, we don’t want any fighting or bloodshed on the job.’<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 9

<sup>47</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 237

However, later that same day Wright seeks out Harrison, and it turns out they had both been told the same story, in hopes of egging up a fight between the two. They agreed to keep silence about their encounter, and ignore any further statements. However, the provocations still continued for a week, and being afraid of what would happen if they told their white superiors they knew their statements were not true, they finally indulged and gave the white men what they wanted, seeing as there was money to be earned. “The shame and anger we felt for having allowed ourselves to be duped crept into our blows and blood ran into our eyes, half blinding us.”<sup>48</sup> The boys were finally pulled apart and Wright writes “I clutched my five dollars in my fist and walked home. Harrison and I avoided each other after that and we rarely spoke”.<sup>49</sup> Again, society had failed Wright; he was merely a puppet in a white man’s world, there for entertainment if they needed him. Other than that, he had no purpose. The feeling of shame he felt during the fight could be understood as him not bearing the thought that he had finally caved, showing no rebellion, and followed the expectations society had given him. This is a great example of my previous point about white people fostering violent tendencies between black people. This fight would never have happened if it had not been for the white foremen egging them on, just for their own satisfaction and entertainment.

Constantly being put down by society, and being forced into something you do not want to partake, will affect the psyche. This is probably the leading factor to why Wright believed it to be crucial that one finds a true purpose in life, in order to “numb” out some of the pain and constant terror. The idea that a life with purpose is important is explored throughout the novel. Almost at the very end of the novel, at the beginning of chapter thirteen Wright read an article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* about a man called H. L. Mencken. This article clearly awoke emotions in him,

I knew by hearsay that he was the editor of the *American Mercury*, but aside from that I knew nothing about him. The article was a furious denunciation of Mencken, concluding with one hot, short sentence: Mencken is a fool. --- I wondered what on earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn of the South. The only people I had ever heard denounced in the South were Negroes, and this man was not a Negro.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 245

<sup>49</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 245

<sup>50</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 246



A few pages later in chapter thirteen Wright has gotten a hold of some books written by H. L. Mencken, and starts reading them when he is alone in his rented room. Here Wright expresses what emotions he went through when reading, and how these changed him,

I concluded the book with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different.<sup>51</sup>

Both these scenes serve almost as a turning point for Wright, and therefore chapter thirteen could be described as *Black Boy's* climax. At first when he came across the name H. L. Mencken an interest sparked up in him, which led him into borrowing books from the library. Once he started reading the literature he had picked out for himself, alone in his rented room, it was as if he had a revelation: that what he had searched for throughout his whole life, a meaning and a purpose, had finally been revealed to him. Before this Wright had been going through life without having a clear purpose, or idea of what he wanted to do. In a way this reduces his feeling of alienation, because now he finally had something of his own. Literature and writing had been mentioned a few times earlier in the novel, but nothing ever came out of it. After the scene takes place Wright becomes more focused on literature, and has developed a great interest in the field. His life has finally started to come into place, and he has finally found a purpose. What should be mentioned here is that if Wright had been a white person, his dream, and purpose, would have been fulfilled far earlier. Due to his skin colour he was deprived a full education, and his fields of employment were low in standard. This goes to show that African Americans living in a white society filled with oppression struggle psychologically when it comes to exploring their own identity.

Another force, other than literature, that gave Wright's life a meaning later in adulthood was Marxism. It was during the nineteenth century that Karl Marx produced a program for the working class based on the philosophical dialectics of the Hegelian triad.

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 251

During this time period an African American person living in the South was still a slave in society. By the year Wright was born, in 1908, the South was no longer allowed to continue with its slavery. In *Black Boy* Wright portrays himself as a black American living in a white world. These thoughts turn into fears and frustrations. He was also very familiar with poverty, and the feeling of being hungry, and often wondered why society was built on difference, why some people had enough food whereas others had nothing.<sup>52</sup> These thoughts, fears, and frustrations alone do not make a person follow the Marxist doctrine. However, a known fact about Wright is that he embraced the hope he found in the Marxist Doctrine. Interestingly enough, his encounter with the doctrine only began when he had fled the South and moved to Chicago. During the Great Depression Wright became fascinated by literature, and came across the John Reed Chicago Club of Chicago.<sup>53</sup> Although Marxism is not deliberately discussed in *Black Boy* it is mentioned in other works by Wright, one of which is *Native Son*, another is *American Hunger*. In 1977 Wright published a second part and final section to the autobiography *Black Boy* called *American Hunger*. Gerian Steve Moore states that *American Hunger* portrays one of the clearest views of Wright's alienation from the black community. The book gives an analysis of the psychological dilemma as a result of oppression; however, Moore argues that Wright is naïve by placing too much faith in the white liberal establishment, as well as its radical allies.<sup>54</sup> Moore further argues that this naivety is clearly brought to light in Wright's short encounter with the Communist Party. The Communist Party saw itself as a revolutionary organisation that supported black people; it turned out to be a white liberal organisation that placed black people's interest secondary. Even though *American Hunger* was written after Wright's break with the Party he still expressed some indecision about his relationship with Communism. According to Moore this ambivalence illustrates Wright's wish to be accepted and validated by white people.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 50

<sup>53</sup> Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 51

<sup>54</sup> Gerian Steve Moore, *Richard Wright's "American Hunger"* (Memphis: College Language Association, 1977), 79

<sup>55</sup> Gerian Steve Moore, *Richard Wright's "American Hunger"* (Memphis: College Language Association, 1977), 79

When analysing Wright's work it is important to give Marxism some attention, seeing as it was one of the most important forces in Wright's adult life that shaped his mind-set and identity, and made him into the man he became. As mentioned, Wright had experience with the Communist Party, and was quite passionate about its topics. It was also through the Party that Wright framed some of his most important relationships, in addition to making it possible for him to leave the ghetto he grew up in. Most importantly, the Communist Party gave Wright a perspective to understand his own experience, which in turn enabled him to connect his own experiences to other oppressed people worldwide.<sup>56</sup>

*Black Boy* gives the reader a great insight into how Wright reflected upon race issues in the US, and how they had a massive impact on the African American community. One of the autobiography's main themes is alienation, and how this affects a person's mental state. One of the leading factors for Wright's feeling of alienation was the constant oppression he experienced when facing white society, but also within his own household and community. Not fitting in caused for a great deal of tensions when dealing with both the black and white race. These tensions only forced Wright to alienate himself even more. This was something he struggled with for a long time.

Oppression, and alienation from society, does something to a person's mental state. *Black Boy* illustrates how constantly being but down affects a person's identity. Not being able to fulfil one's dreams and create a meaning in life will prevent a person from maintaining, and creating, a personal identity. *Black Boy* shows us how it is essential to find a true purpose in order to fully develop as a person, and feel accepted and validated.

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<sup>56</sup> Gerian Steve Moore, *Richard Wright's "American Hunger"* (Memphis: College Language Association, 1977), 80

## Chapter Two: Racial identity in *Native Son*

*Native Son* was published in 1940, and is one of Wright's most successful and famous novels. The novel is divided into three books, Fear, Flight and Fate, providing the reader a narrative about the novel's protagonist Bigger, and his disastrous fate. The overall mood of the text is depressing, and being set in the depression-era, in Chicago's Black Belt, does not make it any more light hearted. Chicago's Black Belt refers to a ghetto area in Chicago populated with black residents. One of the biggest topics brought forth in *Native Son* is the focus on how African Americans experienced life, their economic disadvantages, and how this is linked to the political oppression. Throughout the novel Wright makes the reader aware that the treatment of black people in a northern state like Chicago is not much better than in the south, and that they still experience similar oppression, segregation, and racism.

Already at the very beginning of the novel Wright sets the depressive and dark mood, which continues throughout the whole narrative. The opening scene is set early in the morning. The very first line of the novel is the sound of an alarm going off, and Bigger's mother rushes the family out of bed. However, it turns out that the family is not alone in the room, they are in company of a rat, who it seems, had been there before,

There he is again, Bigger!" the woman screamed, and the tiny one-room apartment galvanized into violent action. A chair toppled as the woman, half-dressed and in her stocking feet, scrambled breathlessly upon the bed. Her two sons, barefoot, stood tense and motionless, their eyes searching anxiously under the bed and chairs. The girl ran into a corner, half-stopped and gathered the hem of her slip into both of her hands and held it tightly over her knees.<sup>57</sup>

This scene is a great illustration of how the living conditions were for Bigger and his family. How the space is described gives the reader a feeling of claustrophobia, and the perception of being trapped with nowhere to go. The African American race is alienated from the white society, yet trapped in it at the same time. They have nowhere to escape to, and nowhere to hide. One can say that the room serves as a metaphor for their tragic situation, giving us a glimpse into what hopelessness feels like. Finally Bigger is able to catch the rat, and ends up

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 8

killing it with a heavy iron skillet. As mentioned earlier in the introduction of this thesis, this rat has a symbolic meaning; that Bigger, a black person, will take shape as a rat in a white person's mind. He will then later on become the hunted animal.

This paragraph from the beginning of the novel quickly provides the reader with a glimpse of the harsh reality of being African American in a white society. Wright clearly wants to expose just how bad living conditions were. Harold T. McCarthy mentions in his article that Wright's family and his acquaintances in the South, as well as the Communists who he associated with, questioned and feared Wright due to his irrepressible persona. Supposedly he left the Party because he believed that the Party manipulated the Negro in order to strengthen its international policies. However, the motivation behind him leaving the Party turned out to be emotional. In most of Wright's literary works the theme of Negroes struggles is a common factor, and *Native Son* is no exception. Wright wanted to expose the humanity of the Negro to the rest of the American society, to show that they too were equal. However, his corrupted image of the Negro forced him to construct the Negro in its worst and brutal condition.<sup>58</sup> I can agree with this statement, particularly when it comes to Wright's *Native Son*. In *Native Son* Wright presents the reader with a young black man, Bigger, who is struggling on all fronts in life. He has a hard time finding and maintaining a job, his living situation is poor, and his relationship with his family and friends seem somewhat hostile. Bigger's situation throughout the novel only seems to get worse by each page turn, and his outcome in life seems inevitable once we are introduced to his criminal side. One could argue that Bigger's life situation, and the environment he is surrounded by constructs the Negro in its worst and brutal condition. Wright holds nothing back, and gives the illusion that Bigger is a perfect example of the African American race in general, and that Bigger's troubles and fate are a common denominator within the African American community.

Wright thoroughly portrays the brutal reality of being black in a white society throughout the whole novel. In addition to this Wright also illustrates how popular culture, for example movies, magazines and newspaper, and television, is one of the leading contributors to racism in American society. Pop-culture is a non-stop contributor and reinforces the ideas of racial hierarchy and white supremacy. In the first part of the novel Bigger goes to the movie theatre with one of his friends. This scene is a great example of how the white population of the American society are portrayed as well educated, glamorous, beautiful and

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<sup>58</sup> Harold T. McCarthy, *Ricard Wright: The Expatriate as Native Son* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 101

privileged, whereas the black people playing in the movie are portrayed as creatures, or savages, from the jungle, with a purpose of serving the whites. This is not something that is only present in this particular movie, but can be found in most of the popular culture society offers. The following passage is taken from the scene when Bigger is at the movies with his friend Jack,

He looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it. He would see just how they did it. Sure, it was all a game and white people knew how to play it. And rich white people were not so hard on Negroes; it was the poor whites who hated Negroes.<sup>59</sup>

This particular passage shows the contrasts of being white and black. The white are portrayed as the ultimate race, and what Bigger strives to become. It is apparent that Bigger looks up to the white rich people, he even states that “Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money”, and what Bigger wants more than ever is to get hold of money and acquire the image of being successful, because with success comes power. Bigger also emphasises in this passage that it was not the rich white people who hated Negroes, but rather the poor white people. However, this statement contradicts itself later in the narrative when Bigger has been introduced to the Dalton family. Bigger arrives at the Dalton’s family home for an interview with Mr Dalton, to become his personal driver. During this conversation the reader gets a view into how Bigger’s emotions are triggered when he is around white people, especially rich,

“Now, you have a mother, a brother, and a sister?”

“Yessuh.”

“There are four of you?”

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 36-36

“Yessuh, there’s four of us,” he stammered, trying to show that he was not as stupid as he might appear. He felt a need to speak more, for he felt that maybe Mr. Dalton expected it. And he suddenly remembered the many times his mother had told him not to look at the floor when talking with white folks or asking for a job. He lifted his eyes and saw Mr. Dalton watching him closely. He dropped his eyes again.<sup>60</sup>

This particular passage is a great example of the shame Bigger feels when talking to a person he feels is superior to himself. It is this shame that comes out in bursts of anger, quite similar to Wright’s rebellious behaviour in *Black Boy*. It is obvious Bigger feels ashamed in the appearance of Mr Dalton, seeing as he has a hard time maintaining eye contact. This feeling of awkwardness and insecurity is explored multiple times throughout the novel. Another scene where we get a clear illustration of Bigger’s insecurity is when he is driving around Mary, Mr Dalton’s daughter, and is introduced to her communist boyfriend, Jan,

He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin?<sup>61</sup>

A critic who backs up my statement regarding this particular passage is Amy E. Carreiro; she describes this passage as important and states “highlighting the isolation of African Americans from white social reformers, is Bigger’s awareness of his blackness upon meeting the young communist Jan Erlone.”<sup>62</sup> Carreiro further explains that by trying to diminish the importance of one’s skin colour, Jan and Mary emphasised Bigger’s blackness even more. Furthermore, Jan and Mary are the first white people Bigger has met who behave and react towards Bigger like his black skin is irrelevant. Their behaviour towards him is unfamiliar and upsetting, putting Bigger in an uncomfortable and unexplored territory. This is worth mentioning because even when Bigger is granted an invitation to ignore the boundaries and

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 51

<sup>61</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 67

<sup>62</sup> Amy E. Carreiro, *Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: “Negrotarians” in Richard Wright’s Native Son* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 251

segregation created by the white society, he is still hesitant and afraid.<sup>63</sup> This goes to show the massive effect racial oppression has on a person's behaviour, and in turn their identity. If it had not been for Bigger's fears, his life could have ended up differently, and given him greater possibilities in life that would have enhanced and developed his identity and personal thoughts and beliefs.

Bigger is constantly suspicious of white people's behaviour, and their motives behind their actions, always thinking they have a vendetta against him, or are playing with his emotions. This is because during this time period, where *Native Son* is set, there were certain racial codes, or rules, in social settings that prohibited any sort of social contact across the races. In the scenes that Mary and Jan take part of we entertain the idea that even though they are committed to equal racial rights, and associate with the CPUSA (The Communist Party USA), they are uneducated about the black community and its conditions. Amy E. Carreiro ties this to Wright's own criticism of white social reformers and their efforts to eliminate racial oppression. Wright specifically criticised the CPUSA, and was sceptical to their commitment to equality and African American rights. In *Native Son* Wright expresses his views through the protagonist Bigger, and his experiences. Being constantly suspicious of white people's behaviour, Jan and Mary's friendliness frightened Bigger. This fear, that later turned into desperation is one of the leading reasons for why Bigger ended up murdering Mary.<sup>64</sup> The scene when Bigger commits murder is set in Mary's bedroom.

Frenzy dominated him. He held his hand over her mouth and his head was cocked at an angle that enabled him to see Mary and Mrs. Dalton by merely shifting his eyes. Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught.<sup>65</sup>

Out of fear of being caught with a drunk white girl in her bedroom by her mother, Bigger ends up killing her. The action itself was an accident seeing as he was simply trying to keep

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<sup>63</sup> Amy E. Carreiro, *Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: "Negrotarians" in Richard Wright's Native Son* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 251

<sup>64</sup> Amy E. Carreiro, *Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: "Negrotarians" in Richard Wright's Native Son* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 249

<sup>65</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 84



her quiet so that her mother would leave the room and not come over to the bed she was laying on.

Sheldon Brivic claims that in order to fully understand the meaning of Bigger murdering Mary, one must understand the division of Bigger's mind. Bigger's divided mind is a result of the social situation he finds himself in, being a black man in a racist white America. Bigger's rational side has to adjust to the outside world which gives him false hopes of happiness and success, but at the same time it refuses to let him fulfil these hopes and dreams. Because his rationality has to conceal his biggest dreams, a conflict between his rational and emotional side develops. These suppressed thoughts are closely linked to Bigger's feeling of fear, but also hatred, which again is built on fear. Bigger is constantly reminded of the part of his mind that suppresses and holds back his inner desires, and is certain that this will eventually lead him to do something terrible.<sup>66</sup>

Constantly having to fight back inner desires, and not being able to live out dreams will take a toll on a person's mind, causing great frustration, and anger. Analysing Bigger's murder of Mary, while recognising Bigger's two-sided mind provides us with a deeper understanding of what went through his mind. Brivic states that during the action in Mary's bedroom Bigger is described as out of control, irrational, and controlled by desperation. Brivic further argues that at the time of the murder Bigger is bound by forces out of his control and awareness. The external parts of the book explain these actions as an accident resulted by Bigger's desperation in the situation he found himself in when Mary's mother entered the room. Brivic states, if we believe the incident was an accident then we must also believe that Bigger had no idea what would happen when he presses down the pillow on Mary's face; that he only wanted to silence her. However, in the novel Bigger states that the action was in fact no accident. We are then presented with a paradox, if it was an accident or not. These sides can be translated as Bigger's two-sided mind. The murder is then a contributing factor to Bigger's inner conflict escalating. On one side the murder is forced upon Bigger due to his situation and society, and he is therefore a victim. On the other side, Bigger takes responsibilities for his actions, and finally creates an identity for himself.<sup>67</sup> This is another example of how being African American in a racist white society can lead to

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<sup>66</sup> Sheldon Brivic, *Conflict of Values: Richard Wright's "Native Son"* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1974), 232-233

<sup>67</sup> Sheldon Brivic, *Conflict of Values: Richard Wright's "Native Son"* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1974), 233-234

horrific circumstances. One could state that Bigger's frustrations and confusion about who he is, is what forced this crime to happen. It is the environment that Bigger is surrounded by that constructed this scenario, and failed the individual. Bigger is constantly on the search for a deeper connection with himself, but also to people and his surroundings.

Carreiro argues that it is the societal conditions that keeps Bigger from being capable of forming a genuine friendship with white people, in this case Mary or Jan. They both seem to be unaware of Bigger's mind-set and his perspective on the situation, and unconcerned about his fear. Being an ideological and naïve young man Jan thinks he can neglect the social restrictions that have been enforced in society through centuries of racism by merely shaking his hand.<sup>68</sup> I agree with Carreiro's thoughts on this matter, that Jan and Mary both seem unaware of the black American's reality, and that they do not see the seriousness in the matter. Thinking that a simple handshake will solve the race issues in society, and show equality across the races. Carreiro carries on by stating that,

Wright captures more than just Bigger's confusion and fear. The author uncovers Jan's naivete. The racial etiquette imposed by whites upon blacks virtually forbade physical contact and civility. Jan's manners, more than bewildering, are appalling to Bigger. Jan is consumed with making Bigger comfortable but unknowingly makes Bigger even more ill at ease.<sup>69</sup>

Jan is inconsiderate about the fact that society's rules and expectations for the different races, and their behaviour, are still prevalent, and will not disappear by a simple handshake, making Jan and Mary's attempt at forming a friendship unrealistic. This is another example of how the black person is isolated and alienated from society, and how this in turn has an effect on one's behaviour. Bigger's identity is strongly simulated by the distress surrounding him, and the restrictions he is expected to follow. In *Native Son* Wright illustrates and draws attention to the racial prejudice that can be observed within the CPUSA, and its members. One of the leading problems is that they are not capable of getting rid of their own predispositions. They

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<sup>68</sup> Amy E. Carreiro, *Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: "Negrotarians" in Richard Wright's Native Son* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 251

<sup>69</sup> Amy E. Carreiro, *Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: "Negrotarians" in Richard Wright's Native Son* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 251

are incapable of looking past the racial stereotypes found in society, which makes Jan and Mary's cause almost meaningless.<sup>70</sup>

Being alienated and isolated from society takes a toll on one's mental state. Eventually one could end up feeling worthless and just wandering about with no true meaning, or value to society. This can also be seen in the character of Wright in *Black Boy*. He too felt out of place, striving for a true purpose in life. This is linked to the fact that both Bigger and Wright are black men living in a white society. Bigger is forced, and expected, to live in a certain manner due to his dark skin. This frustration of being "tossed around" gradually turns into anger, and as mentioned earlier is one of the leading reasons for him ending up committing murder. In book II of *Native Son* the reader is given a glimpse into Bigger's thoughts after the act has taken place. One paragraph that stands out is,

The shame and fear and hate which Mary and Jan and Mr. Dalton and that huge rich house had made rise so hard and hot in him had now cooled and softened. Had he not done what they thought he never could? His being black and at the bottom of the world was something which he could take with a new-born strength. What his knife and gun had once meant to him, his knowledge of having secretly murdered Mary now meant. No matter how they laughed at him for his being black and clownlike, he could look them in the eyes and not feel angry.<sup>71</sup>

This passage conveys that by murdering Mary Bigger has finally taken a choice of his own, perhaps for the very first time in his whole life, or so he believes. This makes the reader question whether or not suffocating Mary was intentional or something that accidentally happened due to the situation Bigger found himself in. This passage could also be Bigger convincing himself that what he had done was justified by the fact that the world expected nothing of him, but now he has proven them wrong. Finally, Bigger made a name for himself; in a society he had been alienated from his whole life. With this action he had created his own destiny. Another paragraph that strengthens this statement is found later in book II,

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<sup>70</sup> Amy E. Carreiro, *Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: "Negrotarians" in Richard Wright's Native Son* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 251-252

<sup>71</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 141-142

*He* had done this. *He* had brought all this about. 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.<sup>72</sup>

This paragraph strengthens the idea that Bigger's crime has given him a new purpose in life. He now has something "of his own" and took his fate into his own hands. This was his doing, and his alone. By stating that these actions were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him, he is also stating that these events have also given him an identity, and a new way of life. He can now identify as a criminal, who no one can stand in the way of. Bigger's opportunities before this took place were always hindered by racism, but now he has been freed from this. Finally he can act freely, and also live with the consequences that follow. To Bigger it does not matter that these consequences entail imprisonment because it has granted him with a feeling of self-control.

This never-ending search for his identity and purpose can be a result of him wanting to escape the reality of his own life. Edward Kearns confirms that Bigger wants to escape his own reality, and stresses, "If Bigger allows himself to *feel* the reality of his family's circumstances, he will be "swept out of himself". If he becomes fully aware of the *meaning* of his life, he may destroy himself."<sup>73</sup> Kearns further states that by hiding away from this awareness will also be unsatisfying, seeing as Bigger will then be denying who he is. Therefore, by getting caught up in the dreams he sees at the movies, or hears from stories, he will also denying who he is.<sup>74</sup> I agree with Kearns statement, in the way that accepting who he is will be a failure to Bigger's mind-set, and getting caught up in a wish-scenario does not help with the evolvement of one's identity. However, I do not believe that Bigger may destroy himself once he allows himself to feel the reality of his family's circumstances. It will however force him to face his reality, instead of being caught between two different realities; the one he wishes for, and the one he lives in.

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 224-225

<sup>73</sup> Edward Kearns, *The "Fate" Section of "Native Son"* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), 148

<sup>74</sup> Edward Kearns, *The "Fate" Section of "Native Son"* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), 148

Bigger's need for self-control, a meaningful purpose, and freedom, is also a result of the fact that he felt alienated and isolated from society due to his racial background. This has in turn also has a negative effect on Bigger's own perception of his identity, who he is, and where he belongs. In book II Bigger states,

There was something he *knew* and something he *felt*; something the *world* gave him and something he *himself* had; something spread out in *front* of him and something spread out in *back*; and never all his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness.<sup>75</sup>

This passage illustrates that Bigger feels alienated from his family and friends, but also from himself as well. Kearns also discusses this passage in his article *The "Fate" of "Native Son"*. He argues that from the point when Mary's body is dismembered, and Bigger has to keep an impersonal and indifferent attitude, his attitude toward himself shifts due to the surroundings shifting as well. In the beginning the white society views him merely as the low-status Uncle Tom, which is a vision he takes advantage of. Later, the newspapers describe Bigger as the black ape, sex-crazed and monstrous. Kearns states that it is this specific pattern of shifting identities that is significant.<sup>76</sup> *The Souls of Black Folks* by Du Bois, brought to light in the introduction part of this thesis can also be connected to this particular paragraph. Here Du Bois talks about how racism has an effect on the black community's mental health. Du Bois states "One ever feels his twoness, -- and American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>77</sup> This can be closely connected to Bigger. Even though Bigger is one person, in one body, his mind is split into two parts. This makes him incapable of interacting with his surroundings, but it also makes him incapable of understanding himself. Bigger's split mind hinders him from interacting with his surroundings because he is confused about how to behave, and how his behaviour is perceived. More importantly, it also

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<sup>75</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 225

<sup>76</sup> Edward Kearns, *The "Fate" Section of "Native Son"* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), 150

<sup>77</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903), 2

makes him incapable of getting to know his true persona and identity. One could state that it this yearning for one mind that drives Bigger, and dominates his life. Bigger wants to feel complete, and discover his true identity and who he is. What makes the situation even more tragic is that Bigger does not achieve this completeness until he had committed two murders. By then it was too late for Bigger, seeing as he was sentenced to death for his crimes and therefore had little time left of his life.

In *Notes of a Native Son* Baldwin states that Bigger “wants to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers, like Lucifer, rather to rule in hell than serve in heaven.”<sup>78</sup> This can be interpreted as stating that because Bigger finally has found himself and created an identity that is self-made and goes against the role he was assigned by everyone surrounding him, he can die a free man. At the same time, he will also have left a mark on society, illustrating that even though his skin was black he could not be forced and oppressed into a role that he felt alienated from. Donald B. Gibson disagrees with Baldwin on this statement and argues “The many instances in the last of the three sections of the novel which show him exploring his deepest thoughts, feelings and emotions reveal Baldwin’s statement to be patently false”.<sup>79</sup> Gibson brings forth a passage from when Bigger is laying in his prison cell thinking to back up this claim,

And, under and above it all, there was the fear of death before he was naked and without defense; he had to go forward and meet his end like any other living thing upon the earth --- 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. This would have to happen before he could look them in the face again: a new pride and a new humility would have to be born in him, a humility springing from a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived, and this identification forming the basis for a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955, 44

<sup>79</sup> Donald B. Gibson, *Wright’s Invisible Native Son* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 729

<sup>80</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 256

Gibson claims that this particular passage debunks Baldwin's statement, that Bigger wanted to die because he glories in hatred, and it also shows that the novel's main focus from this point on is on Bigger's private persona. The attention is on the problems Bigger faces as an isolated person, and how this is worsened by his race. After this passage there occurs a reversion in Bigger's attitude, and he moves toward a new identification. Bigger also realises that his salvation can only come within, and from his own knowledge and efforts.<sup>81</sup> I agree with Gibson on this matter, seeing as Baldwin's statement mainly focuses on the events that led up to Bigger's arrest, and not how he evolves as a person in the last book, and where he experiences a shift in his attitude. Baldwin's statement also does not take into consideration the fact that Bigger is an African American person, living in a white society from which he is completely isolated from and how this can have an effect on one's actions and identification. The passage Gibson brought to light is a great example of the start of Bigger's shifting identity, and him realising that his fate ultimately was in his hands. Only he could take away his suffering and hatred. He realises that he has to accept himself as well as his actions. In the last couple of pages of the novel Bigger says to Max "'I didn't want to kill!" Bigger shouted. "But what I killed for, I *am*! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder...."<sup>82</sup> This shows us that Bigger has come to terms with what is about to happen, but he has also come to terms with the fact that he has taken two lives, and what this entails. Gibson states, "he no longer hates and despises himself as he has during most of his life, it is no longer necessary for him to feel hatred".<sup>83</sup> Bigger is finally free, and at ease. He has finally accepted who he is, in addition to what he has done. The only way to save his humanity is to face death as the isolated person he is, and has been all his life. Would his life have had a different outcome if his skin was white? Probably.

One could argue that in the end Bigger accepted his alienation from society, and the person he was. The ending does not describe a scared person, in contrast to the rat being chased to death in the beginning of the novel. Gibson argues that in the end Bigger is not in a prideful and self-assertion mood as he was from when he disposed of Mary's body till he is

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<sup>81</sup> Donald B. Gibson, *Wright's Invisible Native Son* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 730

<sup>82</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 391-392

<sup>83</sup> Donald B. Gibson, *Wright's Invisible Native Son* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 731

caught. In the conclusion of the novel we rather find a Bigger feeling self-acceptance and calm assurance. There is no hint of hatred and fear as we often find earlier in the story.<sup>84</sup>

*Native Son* provides us with the harsh reality of what life was like for the average African American during the Great Depression, in Chicago's black belt. Their economical disadvantages due to political oppression had a massive impact on the African American community, and caused a great deal of suffering, suppression and alienation. Bigger is no exception. Due to his skin colour, and life situation he was faced with numerous challenges.

Like we see with Wright in *Black Boy* Bigger too became frustrated over his situation. This frustration was the main reason for his hatred and fear, and why he found himself in the situation he ended up in. Alienation and isolation are big themes in the novel, similar to *Black Boy*, and are a result of the constant suppression African Americans face in white society. Alienation leads to identity issues, which takes a toll on a person's mental state. Bigger's outcome is a great example of how things could end up when a person is prohibited from finding a purposeful meaning in life, and developing one's identity.

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<sup>84</sup> Donald B. Gibson, *Wright's Invisible Native Son* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 732



## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the issues of African American race and identity by focusing on African American literary texts. By reading these literary works I have analysed how being black in a white society can lead to alienation, and further, how this has an impact on a person's psychological and emotional experience. Through an examination of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, this thesis has discussed and analysed the portrayal of racial identity in these two literary works. Being born in the South in the early twentieth century Wright grew up in a world where white supremacy dominated the everyday life. This would later have a great influence on his literary works, as one can see in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. The content of each of the two previous chapters show that *Black Boy* and *Native Son* share a common theme and portrayal of racial issues and how these issues affects one's identity and perception of society.

Wright's *Black Boy* is an autobiography with Wright's own reflections on the race issues in the US, and how this has an affect on a person's identity. Wright gives the reader insight into how racism affects relations both within the same race, but also between different races, and how this has a massive impact on ones feeling of belonging. One of the main themes found in *Black Boy* is alienation. Throughout the whole autobiography Wright brings forth several scenes where he shows the effect of alienation and how the feeling of being isolated from society and your own race can affect your mind-set, and your identity. In *Black Boy* Wright's frustration due to this alienation comes out in rebellious acts, which again has a negative effect on himself as well as his surroundings. Wright is unable to express his thoughts, and has to suppress them. He is unable to form strong connections with the people surrounding him, causing him to always be suspicious of people's behaviour, and pull away from his community and society even more. What can be concluded after analysing and discussing *Black Boy* is the fact that being African American in a white society is strongly connected to alienation and isolation, which in turn will have an impact on a person's identity. It is no doubt that what race you have determines your identity, and how you are able, and allowed, to evolve as a person. In order to feel fulfilled or content it is necessary to feel you have a purpose and meaning in life, this is also strongly connected to identity, and what you identify with. In *Black Boy* Wright expresses how difficult it is being African American in a white society, and that one has to struggle and fight the many forces in order to evolve

internally, and externally. Being black means you are labelled as a person without any means or purpose, always the subordinate race. In this way society fails the individual.

In *Native Son* Wright focuses on how the African American experienced living in white society, their economical status, and how this is closely linked to oppression. The protagonist of the novel, Bigger, is a great example of how tough some African American people had it, even those living in Chicago, and how it affected their mental condition. Furthermore, as argued in the last chapter, Bigger's fate and personal issues is a common theme within the African American community in the US. This shows us that their racial background deeply affects their way in life, and what opportunities they are given by society. In *Native Son* Wright shows the reader how racism is everywhere, especially in popular culture, and how this influences a person's, black or white, outlook on how things should be. This in turn will again affect what an individual identifies with, but now based on one's skin colour.

In both *Black Boy* and *Native Son* Wright portrays racial identity as something that is, with no exception, influenced by its surroundings, and in particular white society. Both literary works share many similar factors, where the common denominator is the theme of alienation and isolation, and how this affects a person's psyche and identity. I can conclude from my findings that I have obtained by reading articles from numerous critics, in addition to a close reading of the two chosen works for this thesis, that Richard Wright portrays racial identity as something one must strive for, and something that does not come easily to the common black person. Therefore, when one talks about race in racial identity one does not mean the biological factors, but rather how society and a person's surroundings shapes ones individuality and identity. Overall, Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son* show that African Americans are failed by society when it comes to maintaining and evolving an identity, and finding a purpose and place of belonging.

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