

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Native Son (The Original 1940 Text) by Richard Wright

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## Book Information

Richard Wright, Native Son (The Original 1940 Text)

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Harper & Row, 1989

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398 Pages

Book Level: 6.1

Interest Level: UG

Bigger, a young black man in Chicago, kills his first victim in a moment of panic. He then goes on to kill again. The book describes the feelings of freedom and identity Bigger gains from these acts.

**Topics:** Behavior, Criminal; People, African American; Places, Cities; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

## Main Characters

Bessie Bigger's girlfriend, who is frustrated by her lot in life

Bigger Thomas a twenty-year-old black man filled with hate, who is the main character of the story

Boris A. Max Bigger's defense lawyer, who helps Bigger find a measure of self-worth

Buckley the state's attorney and prosecutor at Bigger's trial

Gus, G.H., and Jack Bigger's delinquent friends

Jan Erlone Mary's boyfriend and member of the Communist Party

Mary Dalton a twenty-three-year-old privileged but immature white woman who is determined to befriend Bigger and who is murdered as a result

Mr. Dalton a wealthy real-estate developer and businessman who owns the tenements of Bigger's neighborhood and is a philanthropist to the African-American causes

Mrs. Dalton Mary's blind mother, a sympathizer of the black underclass, who appeases her sympathy by working with relief agencies

Mrs. Thomas, Vera, and Buddy Bigger's religious mother, timid sister, and compliant brother

## Vocabulary

**change of venue** the change of place of a trial, as when the court is likely to be prejudiced

**incipient** in an initial or early stage; just beginning to appear

**mawkish** excessively and objectionably sentimental; "nauseating"

**mitigating** alleviating or moderating in force; to become milder

## Synopsis

*Native Son* is the story of Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black man who lives with his mother, sister, and brother in a rat-infested one-room tenement on Chicago's South Side. As the story begins, Bigger is unemployed and hanging out with three black youths much like himself. Bigger is different in one significant way, however; he refuses to accept the less-than-human manner in which white people treat him and all other blacks. It is this refusal that leads Bigger to commit two brutal murders, for which he is sentenced to die.

When Bigger first meets Mary, the daughter of his new, wealthy, and influential employers, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, he becomes upset with the way she treats him as if he is white. No white person has ever done so before, and he doesn't know how to act. That makes him angry, and the basis for murdering her is established.

The actual crime occurs after Mary, her Communist friend Jan, and Bigger have been drinking. Mary becomes inebriated and Bigger, who has chauffeured her for the evening, must take her quietly upstairs to her bedroom. While putting her to bed, he contemplates raping her, but Mrs. Dalton enters the room to investigate the noise. Mrs. Dalton is blind and does not see Bigger, but surmises that Mary is drunk. To prevent Mary from responding to her mother, Bigger puts a pillow over her mouth and accidentally suffocates her. He panics and then makes matters worse by burning her body in the basement furnace.

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Fearing that he will be blamed, he devises a clever plan to implicate Jan, Mary's friend. Bigger hopes that because Jan is a Communist, he will be charged with the crime.

Bigger, who feels empowered and freed by the murder, also decides to write a ransom note which he signs with the symbol of the Communist Party. Investigators are thrown off by the evidence, but a newspaper man inadvertently discovers pieces of unburned bones while helping Bigger clean the ashes from the furnace at the Dalton residence.

Bigger then runs away with his girlfriend, Bessie. He is forced to murder her because she knows too much, and he flees across Chicago's frozen roof tops. He is soon captured and the press declares him a "Negro murderer and rapist."

While enduring Chicago's flawed justice system, Bigger comes to realize a sense of hope and self-worth with the help of his lawyer, Boris Max. Max defends Bigger's actions as the only course Bigger could have taken because of the way black people in general, and Bigger in particular, were treated.

As the story ends, with Bigger awaiting death in the electric chair, he assures Max that he does believe in himself, which ironically may have kept Mary and Bessie alive if he had truly felt it at some earlier point in his life.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Why is the name "Bigger" used for the story's protagonist?

*Bigger truly is "bigger" than one black man committing double murders. The name may also have been chosen as a play on the word "nigger," which the author includes in the story whenever Bigger interacts with the white authorities or mob. Bigger represents all that the white community fears about blacks. He is also the embodiment of the backlash of oppression the black people endured for centuries. His trial becomes a symbol of the state of race relations in America at the time. Bigger becomes bigger than any man; he becomes a symbol.*

### Literary Analysis

Why do the symbols commonly associated with life and salvation symbolize death and destruction to Bigger?

*White Christianity holds little meaning to Bigger, for it is inadequate in meeting the needs of the oppressed Black. Water, a symbol of purification, does not wash away his sins, but captures him, as when he lay atop the tower on the roof. The cross does not inspire awe, but fear. Some white Christian groups over the centuries have used religion to control the black populace.*

### Inferential Comprehension

What is Wright's attitude toward Jews? Why do you come to this conclusion?

*Answers may vary. Wright seems to resent Jews as a group in society, as when he speaks of Jewish businessmen. But Bigger is able to trust and come to depend on Max, which shows an ability on Wright's part to evaluate Jews as individuals.*

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## Constructing Meaning

On the surface, Bigger responds in an "opposite" way when the Daltons offer him a job as their chauffeur. Instead of being "grateful," he becomes confused, resentful, and hateful. Has there been a time in your life when you responded in an "opposite" way? Why?

*Answers will vary, but may include a time when something was given to the person to "make up" for a past oversight or grievance. Instead of saying, "Thanks," the person may have been bitter, rejecting the offer while thinking, "This is too little, too late."*

poignant rendering of black sentiment towards their society after centuries of oppression. Richard Wright is able to tap into these feelings. Research his life and report on the insights gained and parallels found in regards to this work of fiction.

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Obtain a Chicago city map and locate the Hyde Park neighborhood on Chicago's near South side. Locate the University of Chicago and Drexel Boulevard. The Loop is named for the elevated train that loops around the downtown area. Find the other places mentioned in the story - Cottage Grove Avenue, Indiana Ave., Washington Park, etc. Estimate how far Bigger drove the night he murdered Mary and how far he walked or rode on a street car to get to and from his house and Bessie's from the Daltons'. Discuss the size and method of the manhunt needed to search the South Side neighborhoods in such a short period of time.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** Max defended Bigger during his murder trial, arguing that society was partially responsible because the conditions under which Bigger lived bred hate and fear. Choose a murder incident recently in the news and defend the murderer in light of the prevailing societal and environmental issues in that murderer's life.

**Comparing and Contrasting** *Native Son* and *Crime and Punishment* follow the perceptions of a killer both before and after his crime is committed. Compare and contrast Bigger and Raskolnikov according to their motives, victims, and environment.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** *Native Son* has become a piece of classic literature, a