

BOOK REVIEW of NATIVE SON by RICHARD WRIGHT

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Writing.

Literature is the result of human thought in works of art. Literature has various meanings according to experts, for example Wellek and Warren (1976 : 15) says that:the study of literature is a creative, a work of art.

The writer was interested in discussing the *Native Son* because in addition to analysis in the field of literature, the theme of the novel is also appropriate with the writer's major, American Studies. The novel tells about the lives of Blacks in America after the revolution. However, their life as a native does not change much. Bad stereotypes are still attached to them. Blacks are still regarded as a lower class and uneducated.

Related to the writer's study, the writer found the discussion of the American dreams in *Native Son*. The three basics of the American dreams are freedom, equality, and prosperity for all Americans. But, in *Native Son*, American social life is still on discrimination.

In *Native Son*, Wright tells that Black do not have freedom as the Whites do. It also describes Black movement to show their protest against the White policies in America.

Bigger Thomas is the main character of *Native Son*. The conflict inside the novel is institutionalized racism in the United States as reflected

in unequal education, unequal justice, and perpetuation of stereotypes of African-American people in the various media.

In the last part of the story, Bigger kills Mary Dalton accidentally. Yet, Bigger uses the political purpose as a motif to hide his crime. Although Bigger takes advantages during his unknown crime, still he is sent to death by White's court system.

B. The Purpose of Writing.

The purposes of the review are:

- a. To give summary of the *Native Son*.
- b. To analyze the strengths and the weaknesses of the *Native Son*.

C. Richard Wright and His Work.

Richard Nathaniel Wright, better known as Richard Wright is an African-American writer and poet who was born on September 4, 1908 in Roxie, Mississippi. He was educated in Blacks school. At the age of 16, Wright published his first short story. After that, he worked as a journalist.

After publishing his short story, Wright continued to write books. He had a dream as a writer. So, he moved to New York where he had better chance of getting his book published. His first book titled *Uncle's Tom Children*. This book is a collection of four stories that have proven his career.

In 1940, his book *Native Son* was published. This book was a regular top bestseller and became the first list book-of-month by African-

American writer. *Native Son* also staged in Broadway as a play. Because of that, Wright got many appreciations for his *Native Son*.

He continued writing his autobiography entitled *Black's Boy*, it tells about his childhood and his experiences of isolation and racial discrimination in New York. He also wrote a second part of *Black's Boy* entitled *American Hunger*. Yet, it was published after Wright died.

He moved to Paris because he could not bear to accept discrimination in New York. In Paris he began a new novel *A Father's Law*. Before finishing his new novel, Wright was seriously ill, he died because of heart attack in Paris. Later, the book was completed by his daughter. This short biography is adapted from web page in Google: Biography Richard Wright; www.famousauthors.org/richard-wright.html.

II. SUMMARY

Native Son begins in the small room of Bigger's family house, Mrs. Thomas and her children, Bigger, Buddy, and Vera. Buddy and Vera are quite and they obey their mother, only Bigger is the messy one. He always makes his mother angry. He is entering reform school several times. His case is accused of stealing a white man. His mother wants him to get a job to support his family and to prevent him from messing up. Bigger gets an offer from one of the wealthiest white man in his neighborhood, Mr. Dalton, to get a job interview.

When he was walking out, he meets Gus, one of his gang, and then they go to pool room and play shoot game. Yet, in the middle of games, Bigger remembers his late conversation about robbing a store of white man. Gus was afraid of that, because their victim has a gun. Bigger convinces him that it will be

safe. Gus wants to stay out of the store and give a sign if something suspicious happen, though Bigger and other will handle of the robbery.

In the robbery day, Bigger and Jack are going to a movie to spend the time. He knows from the movie how Whites and Blacks are different. Learning about that, he thinks that he will risk his life for robbery. He can get a better job from Mr. Dalton. Besides that, if this plan fails he will go to reform school again or maybe jail. Yet, Gus is late. Actually they still have time to rob, but Bigger extends the time by beating Gus to cover his fear and break the plan.

Bigger decides to go to the job interview at Mr. Dalton's house. He became a chauffeur for Mr. Dalton's family. Bigger's first duty is driving Mr. Dalton's daughter, Mary, to her university to meet her lecturers. Besides being a chauffeur, Bigger is also asked to keep the fire in furnace on. Peggy reminds him to check the car and garage before driving Mary out. At eight, Bigger drives Mary to the university as she says before to her father.

While he is driving, Mary changes her destination to pick up her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, who is a Communist. Mary tells Bigger to keep this situation from anyone. Jan replaces Bigger to drive and they are three sit together in the front seat. Because they are hungry, they suggest that Bigger recommend a dinner place. Bigger takes them to Ernie's Kitchen Snack, a place where Black shang out. The three of them eat and drink there. Jan and Mary get drunk so Bigger drives them home. At the back seat, they are kissing. Then, Bigger delivers Jan to his car and Jan gives him some Communist pamphlets to Bigger.

When they arrive at Mr. Dalton's house, Mary cannot get on her own power. Bigger carries her to her room with carefully. Bigger lays Mary on her bed, his lust rise, he starts to kiss and touch her breast. But, when he wants to leave Mary, Mrs. Dalton comes to her room. Bigger is panic and take a pillow beside him and cover Mary's face to make her quite. When Mrs. Dalton goes out of the room, Bigger realizes that he accidentally kills Mary.

To eliminate the trace, Bigger puts Mary's body into the trunk and creates an alibi so no one will suspect him. Bigger folds her up to fit in the trunk, but Mary's head cannot get in, then Bigger takes a knife from his pocket and cuts Mary's neck. Bigger lays the trunk containing Mary's body beside the furnace. And he returns home to sleep.

The next morning, Bigger wakes up and has breakfast with his family. After that he returns to the Dalton's house. Bigger tells Peggy that Mary tells him to carry her trunk downstairs. Naturally, he waits for Mary to come down. Because Mary does not come down, he drives Mary's trunk to the train station. When he arrives, Mrs. Dalton is questioning him about Mary. Bigger tells Mrs. Dalton that Jan asks him to leave the car outside and to take out Mary's trunk.

Later that day, Bigger goes to visit his girlfriend, Bessie. She is mentioning that there is a kidnapping case in which the kidnapper sends a ransom note to the family. Bigger gets the idea, so he decides to do the same, in order that he can get money from Mary's parents and go to Harlem to live well. Bessie feels uncomfortable with his plan. After discussing his plan, Bigger returns to the Dalton's house.

The next day, Bigger finds that Mr. Dalton hires a private investigator, Mr. Britten, to find his daughter. Mr. Britten finds the Communist pamphlets in Bigger's bedroom. He suspects Bigger and Jan work together. But, Bigger throws the suspicion on Jan. When Bigger returns to his home, Jan meets him and asks him why he tells a lie. But, Bigger pulls a gun on Jan and makes him run away.

Bigger goes back to Bessie's apartment and writes a ransom note. When he returns to the Daltons', he finds the house full of reporters. The reporters are stationed in the basement. Then, one of the reporters takes the shovel from Bigger and clears the furnace of dusts. When the dust clears, the reporter finds bone and earring.

Bigger escapes out his bedroom window and runs to Bessie's apartment. Yet, Bessie refuses to go with him. Then, Bigger rapes Bessie and hits her head with a brick. The next morning, he goes from building to building waiting to be captured. Finally, he is captured and sent to jail by the Whites' policeman.

Three days later, he wakes up and finds himself badly beaten. Jan visits him and brings him a lawyer, Mr. Boris Max, to defend him in the trial. The prosecutor is the State's Defender, David Buckley, who accuses Bigger as a rapist and murderer. Max argues that the social conditions of Bigger's life make him act as he did.

Bigger speaks to Max one last time before the judgment day. Max tries to make him see the context of his murders. And, Bigger finds that he is justified in the killings. Based on the statements in court, Bigger is convicted and sentenced to the death penalty.

III. REVIEW

A. The Strengths

The novel has an interesting theme about freedom and equality. Each book of the novel has different themes that illustrate the story. Book 1 is Fear. It tells the fears experienced by Bigger. The issue starts with Bigger's fear to get in reform school, his fear of robbing the Old Blum's store, his fear does not last long because he gets a job as a chauffeur at Dalton's family, his fear about the issues of Communism, and his most fear is that he had killed Mary and Bessie that lead him into death penalty.

Book 2 is Flight. It tells about the attitude of Bigger in creating a list to cover his crime. After that incident, Bigger becomes rather sensitive at the breakfast time. He gives an amount of money to Buddy to shut his

mouth. Bigger treats his gangs with Mary's money that night. He begins to compare him with Daltons'. He thinks about how people will treat him if they know what he has done. And, what his family and his gangs also treat him if they know about the killing accident. Yet in the end, his crime is uncovered by a reporter who accidentally cleans the furnace and finds Mary's bones and earrings.

Book 3 is Fate. It is the destiny that Bigger should take. Blacks are criminal and live close to the crime. It is proven in court, so as punishment, Bigger gets the death penalty.

Beside telling about Blacks, the novel was also written by a Black who lived in the time after the South revolution. Then the writer, Richard Wright, decided to progress his career by leaving America which was in a radical period and settled in France until his death. So, the novel writer really knows about Black conditions and the White treats toward them.

B. The Weaknesses

In the process of writing, *Native Son* uses several Black English words. The Black English itself is different from the Standard English. The differences are about pronunciation and spelling. The example of Blacks are words such as: 'gal' which means girl, 'yessur' and 'yessum' which mean yes sir and yes mom, 'ain't' which means am not, 'naw' which means no.

Symbols that is used to explain Bigger's condition is different in every theme of the book. I think the symbols are created in this book make the stereotype of Blacks seem to be true to White readers.

The symbol 'rat' is identical with Black color and dirty place. It shows that Black's life is unworthy because they live in the slum. The symbol of blindness has two meaning. First, Mrs. Dalton's 'blindness'

shows that although she cannot see, but she can feel the situation around her. Second, Bigger's 'blindness' shows that he can see, but he cannot feel the situation around him.

IV. CONCLUSION

The discussion of the American dream of freedom, equality, and prosperity for all American does not happen in *Native Son*. In *Native Son*, American social life still conducts discrimination, where all negative stereotypes are attached to Blacks. And, the issues about racialism and communism make the worse condition of Blacks.

The novel also has interesting themes for each book which are fear, flight and fate. Each theme tells about Bigger's life experiences. Bigger plans to rob and he accidentally kill Mary. Then, Bigger creates some alibis and ransom note to avoid his crime. In the end of the story, Bigger leads to jail and receives the death penalty.

Furthermore the novel tells about Blacks, it was also written by Black, Richard Wright. He actually knows the condition of Black's life. So, the novel is based on true story of Black life in America at that time. Besides that, the writer thinks there are weaknesses in this novel: it is written in Black English which is different from Standard English. So, the symbols are created in the novel to enforce the Whites negative stereotypes to Black.

The writer suggests the novel of *Native Son* to read by the teenagers and people who are interested in American history and social life. Because of the novel contains the Black experiences and acts to survive in White dominant environment.

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Cover of *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

