

# Native Son

**Richard Wright**

**Curriculum Unit**  
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Cover illustration of scales of justice © iStockphoto.com/-Oxford-

### **About the Cover**

*Native Son* poses many levels of questions about justice and injustice. Despite Bigger’s appalling crimes, one cannot help but think that the scales of justice were rigged against him from the outset.

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# Contents

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	Page	Handouts
<b>Introduction</b>	v	
<b>Teacher Notes</b>	vii	
<b>Lessons</b>		
1 Prereading: Focus on the Law	1	1, 2
2 Focus on the Setting	7	3, 4
3 Meet Bigger Thomas	13	5, 6, 7
4 Bigger Enters the White World	19	8, 9, 10, 11
5 After the Homicide	27	12, 13, 14
6 Bigger in Flight	35	15, 16, 17
7 Bigger in Prison	43	18, 19
8 The Trial and Its Outcome	49	20, 21
9 Symbolism and Themes	55	22, 23
10 Comparing Abridged and Restored Versions of <i>Native Son</i>	61	24
11 The Movie and the Novel	65	25
12 Who Was Richard Wright?	71	26, 27, 28, 29
<b>Supplementary Materials</b>		
Journal Prompts	79	
Cumulative Projects	81	
Test: <i>Native Son</i>	82	
Answer Key	86	
<b>Bibliography</b>	87	



# Introduction

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Richard Wright's *Native Son* was published in 1940, decades before the civil rights movement revolutionized American society, and was an immediate although controversial best seller. Bigger Thomas commits heinous crimes, but by the end, it is hard to hate him. A young black man living in poverty in a crowded apartment on Chicago's South Side, he has dreams, but no way to achieve them. Instead, he engages in a life of aimless petty crime. When opportunity finally comes his way in the form of a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy family, it takes less than one day on the job for things to go horribly wrong, and by the end, Bigger is on death row.

This is not a novel for the faint of heart or slow of intellect. It challenges preconceptions and raises serious issues with both historical and universal ramifications. It evokes reminders of the notorious miscarriages of justice in the Scottsboro Trials in 1931 and the impassioned responses of the public to the idea of a white woman being raped by a black man. It also elicits questions about the justice of capital punishment and the long-term effects of the slavery system that was the backbone of the economy in the pre-Civil War South.

The novel depicts the effects of poverty, degradation, and hopelessness on a young man. Bigger is neither a saint nor a hero. He is deeply angry and resentful, as well as profoundly selfish. When he feels trapped in Mary Dalton's room, he desperately tries to silence her. To him, she is not really a person, more like an object to keep quiet. When he realizes she is dead, his main goal is to hide the evidence. Later he tries for ransom money.

Only when he is in prison and on trial does he develop a sense of the individuality of people on both sides of the color line and a desire to make connections with them. It is too late for him to join fully in the community of humankind. In the end, thanks to the words and actions of Jan and Max, we recognize that basic deprivations cripple individuals and threaten society.

Richard Wright stands along with Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and others as one of the great twentieth-century African-American writers. His work is sometimes criticized for explicit violence and sex. The 1940 edition was significantly expurgated for the Book-of-the-Month Club and is now often labeled as "abridged." A more recent edition is advertised as "fully restored." The authors of this unit used the restored edition, but also consulted the original for purposes of comparison and contrast.

Two movie adaptations have been produced, both to mixed reviews. You may want to use one or both for clips. The first, produced in 1951, is perhaps most interesting because Richard Wright plays the role of Bigger Thomas, thus conveying his own take on the protagonist. The 1986 movie won considerable praise for Victor Love's performance as Bigger; Oprah Winfrey played the role of his mother. Lesson 11 focuses on the later version.

# Teacher Notes

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*Native Son* is an excellent choice for Advanced Placement English classes and for American studies programs. It is often an effective base to respond to the open-ended question on the Literature and Composition Examination. The novel invites in-depth examination of themes, characterization, structure, point of view, and textual ambiguity. It also connects profoundly with U.S. history between Reconstruction and the civil rights era. Appreciation of the novel's artistry and themes requires emotional and intellectual maturity.

*Native Son* is divided into three sections: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." This unit approaches the text chronologically according to the following schedule.

Lessons 1 and 2	Prereading
Lesson 3	"Fear" up to Bigger's trip to the Daltons' home
Lesson 4	The rest of "Fear"
Lesson 5	"Flight" up to the discovery of bones in the furnace
Lesson 6	The rest of "Flight"
Lesson 7	"Fate" up to Bigger throwing away his cross
Lesson 8	The rest of "Fate"
Lessons 9–12	The entire novel

Lesson 11 focuses on the 1986 movie adaptation and challenges students to compare and contrast techniques of the written word with those of cinema. Lesson 12 deals with Richard Wright, including his famous "How Bigger Was Born" lecture, delivered in 1940 at Columbia University. It also includes a culminating discussion.

You will find in the supplementary materials an extensive list of journal topics. For this novel, journaling is an effective tool to record the reader's shifting attitudes toward the protagonist. You will also find a test and answer key, as well as a list of cumulative projects.

Materials in this unit address state and national standards that challenge students to encounter a variety of texts, including classic works, and to derive insight into life and human nature. Procedures involve students in multiple learning strategies and draw on personal experiences to enhance understanding. Internet research is also included. The unit emphasizes students' responsible and informed participation in the learning community.

Answers to handouts will vary unless otherwise indicated. Students may need additional paper to complete some handouts.





## Lesson 1

# Prereading: Focus on the Law

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### Objectives

- To respond to several actual law cases and the sentences given to people found guilty
- To reflect on aspects of the case that is the focus of *Native Son*

### Notes to the Teacher

This lesson should be used before students begin to read *Native Son*. Before you begin the procedures, you may find it necessary to review the key roles in legal proceedings: judges, defense attorneys, prosecuting attorneys, jury members, and witnesses. The first procedure directs students to learn about four actual court cases involving young defendants. Students think about the crimes involved, the evidence, and the convictions and sentences that resulted.

The next procedure introduces the scenario that leads to the arrest and conviction of Bigger Thomas in the novel. Students consider factors that might affect the level of innocence or guilt of the defendant, possible strategies for the prosecution team, and approaches for the defense.

If your school has a mock trial team, you may want to use participants as leaders in the discussions. In the cases under discussion, sensitive topics arise: racial biases, gender issues, religious beliefs, and legal loopholes, to name a few. Emotions can run high in situations that come close to those experienced by the students or their families. You will want to be alert and prepared to maintain order just as a judge must do in a courtroom.

Students conclude the lesson with writings about their views of the extent to which a person's age should be a mitigating factor in courts of law. Their responses can serve as exit tickets at the end of the class session.

### Procedure

1. Ask students to define the following terms: *death row*, *district attorney*, and *parole*.

### Suggested Responses

- *Death row* refers to prisoners for whom the sentence is capital punishment.
- A *district attorney* is a lawyer responsible for organizing the prosecution in criminal cases.
- *Parole* means conditional release from prison, usually based on good behavior.

2. Distribute **Handout 1**, and ask students to complete the exercise. (Note: Students will find Internet access useful.)

### Suggested Responses

1. The cases all involve crimes committed by young people with no criminal records; they all resulted in convictions and serious sentences.
  2. Students may argue that what Randy Arroyo did was wrong, but since he had no hand in the murder itself and it seems to have shocked him, his sentence should be commuted to something less severe. The evidence against Justin Wolfe seems to be mainly hearsay and may reflect responses to alleged but unproved drug connections. A life sentence for a fourteen-year-old who did not handle weapons in the robberies seems extreme but may have something to do with the attitudes he displayed in the courtroom. Of the four prisoners, Christa Pike seems the least deserving of clemency.
  3. The first three all have a chance of clemency and some help in seeking a change in their sentences. Christa Pike may never be executed, but her obvious guilt and her behavior in prison make it seem both unlikely and undesirable that she will ever be released from prison.
  4. Perhaps younger people have a better chance of changing and becoming assets to society than do hardened criminals.
3. Distribute **Handout 2**, and read both the directions and the scenario aloud with the students. Then divide the class into two groups and direct one to work for the prosecution, the other for the defense, as they formulate both strategies and questions for witnesses. Follow with group discussion.

### Suggested Responses

The prosecutors may assume that the defense will plead guilty but emphasize mitigating circumstances. It will be important to convince everyone not to accept a plea of temporary insanity. What actions of the accused man indicate that he should be punished with the full force of the law? How can the prosecutors capitalize on his minority status and on probable public bias?

The defense team will recognize that it will be impossible to convince anyone that the accused did not commit the crime. What aspects of his life can elicit sympathy from the jury and/or judge? How can the fact that the crime was not premeditated be a mitigating factor? Can his youth and the fact that he is not a hardened criminal help? Are there experts who can testify about the effects of fear and panic on an otherwise sane person? Is there any way to avoid the death penalty?

4. Ask students to respond to the following writing prompt: Do you think an accused person's youth and lack of a previous criminal record should affect the verdict and sentence in a court case? Why or why not?
5. Assign students to write three prose paragraphs or poetic stanzas on the topics of fear, flight, and fate. You will also want to assign them to begin reading *Native Son*, but Lesson 2 does not require knowledge about the novel.

## A Look at the Legal System

**Directions:** Read the descriptions of actual cases in U.S. courts. If you wish, use the Internet to discover additional information and updates on the status of each case. Then answer the questions.

### Case 1

In 1997, a seventeen-year-old Texas youth named Randy Arroyo and a friend carjacked a U.S. Air Force officer. Arroyo drove; his friend shot the victim and ejected the body into traffic. Although Arroyo did not shoot the man, he and his friend were tried together, found guilty, and sentenced to death.

### Case 2

In 2001 in Virginia, twenty-one-year-old Owen Barber shot and killed a man. He admitted this in court but also claimed that a friend, twenty-year-old Justin Wolfe, paid him to commit the crime, which was allegedly drug-related. Even though there was little evidence to prove Wolfe's connection to the crime, he was tried and found guilty. Barber got a long sentence, but Wolfe was sentenced to death row.

### Case 3

In 2000, a fourteen-year-old Florida youth named Kenneth Young participated in armed robberies of hotels with a twenty-five-year-old man. No one was shot during the robberies, but the two were caught, arrested, and tried. Young exhibited no remorse and was sentenced to life in prison. Since his incarceration, he has been described as a model prisoner.

### Case 4

In 1995, eighteen-year-old Christa Gail Pike, a participant in Job Corps in Tennessee, led and participated in the premeditated torture and murder of another young participant, Colleen Slemmer. The motive seems to have been jealousy over a boyfriend, fueled by dabbling in Satanism. Pike was found guilty and sentenced to death row.

1. What do the cases have in common?
2. To what extent do you agree with the sentences and the verdicts?
3. All four cases led to later appeals. What extenuating circumstances could lead to reduced sentences or to pardons?
4. In your opinion, should men and women in their teens and early twenties be treated the same way as older people charged with crimes? Explain your view.

## Working on a Legal Team

**Directions:** Read the description of the following fictional court case. Then devise questions and strategies for both the prosecution and the defense team. Remember that the lawyers have very clear responsibilities. The prosecution must do everything it ethically can to convince the jury and/or judge that the accused is guilty and to get the appropriate penalty. The defense team must try to prove that the person is innocent, should not be held legally responsible for the crime, or should receive a reduced sentence.

### Scenario

A poor young man from a minority ethnic group is hired by a wealthy family as a chauffeur. On his first night, he drives the twenty-year-old daughter and her boyfriend for their date. By the end of the evening, she is so drunk that she cannot make it to her bedroom. The chauffeur takes her there and panics when her mother, who is blind, comes to the door. What will she think if she finds the newly hired chauffeur in her daughter's bedroom? To keep the girl quiet, he puts a pillow over her face; she struggles at first but then becomes quiet. When he removes the pillow, he realizes that the girl is dead. He panics, disposes of the body in the basement furnace, and continues working for the family. Then her bones are discovered, and he runs in fear.

### Prosecution Team

Questions

Strategies

### Defense Team

Questions

Strategies



## Lesson 2

# Focus on the Setting

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### Objectives

- To analyze the evolution of race relations in the United States
- To become familiar with the environment of Chicago during the 1930s

### Notes to the Teacher

The experiences of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* result at least partly from the climate of race relations in the country as a whole and in Chicago in particular. The notion of white superiority has been instrumental in the development of the United States, with only slow development of the universality of the concept that all humans are created equal. In this lesson, students consider the history of white, black, and Asian interactions from the colonial period to the present.

The novel takes place in Chicago in the 1930s. The Great Depression was in full swing, so poverty, sometimes desperate poverty, was the norm for many people, especially people of color. After Reconstruction, large numbers of black Americans moved north to urban areas, where there was hope of obtaining employment in one of the industries. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the South made life dangerous, especially for black men.

Students follow the overview of the history of race relations with research about the city in which Bigger lives and with class presentations.

### Procedure

1. Have students share their creative pieces on fear, flight, and fate. (See procedure 5 of Lesson 1.)
2. Distribute **Handout 3**, and have students examine the time line. Then ask students to offer conclusions based on the information in the time line. (It has been a long road to equality for all races in the United States. There have been continual efforts to limit the presence and rights of blacks, Native Americans, and Asians. There has long been a xenophobic quality in American culture.)
3. Explain that the novel the students will be reading and discussing, *Native Son*, takes place in Chicago in the 1930s. Ask students to relate that fact to the time line. (The Scottsboro Trials took place in 1931; the idea of a black man raping a white woman was a highly explosive issue in discussion all over the country. “Separate but equal,” the norm

imposed by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was in effect. Students may know that after Reconstruction, many Southern blacks moved north to settle in cities and become manual workers in industries.)

4. Distribute **Handout 4**, and review the research topics with students. Divide the class into small groups, and assign a topic to each group. Ask students to find information and to prepare presentations for the rest of the class.

### Suggested Responses

1. For most of the 1930s, the Democratic Party prevailed under Mayor Edward J. Kelly. The history of politics in Chicago is filled with scandals involving all kinds of corruption and political machinations. Political favors were the norm, not the exception.
2. The Scottsboro Trials are notorious today for their obvious miscarriage of justice. Groups of both blacks and whites were hobnobbing, sometimes for the fun of it, sometimes in search of jobs. In 1931, nine black teenage boys were accused of raping two white girls on a train. In retrospect, it is clear that the charges were trumped up after a conflict between whites and blacks. Rape of a white woman by a black man was an explosive topic. All nine were arrested and quickly tried with an extremely inadequate defense team. Eight were convicted and sentenced to death. The Communist Party became involved in their defense as a way of encouraging new membership. Despite numerous appeals and strong evidence that the charges were false, eight of the Scottsboro defendants were sent to prison. Eventually, all of them got out through either parole or escape.
3. In many ways, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were the opposite of the Scottsboro boys. Wealthy and well educated, they lived in Chicago and were both extremely intelligent. They were intrigued by Nietzschean ideas and the desire to commit the perfect crime. The victim, chosen more by accident than by plan, was a boy named Bobby Franks, whom they murdered in 1924. The perfect crime proved imperfect; they were caught, and their defense attorney was the famous Clarence Darrow. Since their guilt was obvious, Darrow devoted his efforts to evading capital punishment, which he abhorred. He succeeded. Loeb was later murdered in prison. Leopold was released in 1958.



4. Chicago began as a small city but experienced explosive growth that quickly placed it among the largest urban areas in the country. The reason for this was industrial expansion that drew masses of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, participants in the black exodus from the South, and white migrants looking for work. The ethnic groups tended to segregate themselves, and in the 1920s, there arose a strong movement among whites toward restricted housing communities. (This is the subject of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*.) As white families moved out of the city's South Side, black families moved into a crowded tenement area filled with impoverished and poorly educated people during a serious economic downturn after 1929.
  5. No part of the country was untouched by the Great Depression. Chicago was especially hard hit because of its nature as a manufacturing city. The impact of the Depression left the city and the schools unable to meet their payrolls. By 1932, almost half of the black working population was unemployed. Private charities were in a state of economic crisis. There were settlement houses, but there was little they could do to stem the disaster. The Depression was actually the cause of government programs that would aid later generations; it also intensified pressures toward unionization.
  6. The American Communist Party originated in Chicago. (Some of its roots are explored in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.) The headquarters were there until the party relocated to New York City in 1927. The hardships imposed by the Depression created a flourishing atmosphere for the development of the party, which supports the well-being of the proletariat, the working people. The party attracted the poor and helped to organize the unemployed, link up with other community groups, and protest evictions.
5. Assign students to read the first section of *Native Son*, "Fear," from the beginning to just before Bigger leaves for his interview with Mr. Dalton.

## A Time Line of Race Relations in America

**Directions:** Carefully read the time line of events in American history.

- 1619 The first Africans arrive in Virginia to be sold as slaves.
- 1637 Massachusetts colonists attempt to enslave Native Americans, deport some, and massacre others.
- 1709 Slave market near New York's Wall Street sells blacks and Native Americans.
- 1793 Fugitive Slave Law orders return of escaped slaves.
- 1807 Congress bans importation of slaves from Africa.
- 1830 Indian Removal Act mandates relocation west of the Mississippi.
- 1831 William Lloyd Garrison publishes *The Liberator* to promote abolition of slavery.
- 1838 The Cherokee Trail of Tears begins.
- 1858 California law bans entry of Chinese.
- 1862 President Abraham Lincoln issues the first Emancipation Proclamation.  
Homestead Act offers Native American lands to white settlers.
- 1868 The Fourteenth Amendment grants citizenship to everyone born in the United States except for Native Americans.
- 1870 The Sixteenth Amendment gives black citizens the right to vote.
- 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law suspends immigration of Chinese workers.
- 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* declares segregation constitutional.
- 1922 Japanese are declared ineligible for naturalized citizenship.
- 1924 Immigration Act bars immigration from Asia.  
Native Americans in the United States are granted citizenship.
- 1931 Scottsboro Trials in Alabama accuse black youths of raping white women and receive national attention.
- 1941 Pacific Coast Japanese are interned in camps.
- 1948 President Harry Truman orders integration of armed forces.
- 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* declares school segregation illegal.
- 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits all discrimination.
- 2008 Barack Obama is elected to be the first African-American president of the United States.

## Chicago in the 1930s

**Directions:** Research and report on one of the following topics related to the setting of Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

1. What political party or parties governed Chicago during the 1930s? Was there corruption in the government? Was justice handed out equally to people of all religions and races?
2. The Scottsboro Trials in 1931 took place in Alabama, but people all over the country were aware of them. What issues were involved? What was the outcome? Why are the trials notorious today?
3. The Leopold and Loeb trials took place in Chicago in 1924 and were a national media event. What issues were involved? What were the personal qualities of the defendants? What was the outcome? Why did that outcome occur?
4. What were the demographics of Chicago in the 1930s? Was there a "black belt"? What were the conditions there? What other ethnic groups resided in or near the city?
5. How did the Great Depression affect Chicago? What was the unemployment rate? Did unemployment and poverty affect any one group of people more than others? What types of relief programs were available?
6. What is the history of the Communist Party in Chicago? What were its principles? Was it active during the 1930s? What groups of people did it attract?



## Lesson 3

# Meet Bigger Thomas

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### Objectives

- To understand events and characters in the first half of “Fear”
- To analyze the character of Bigger Thomas

### Notes to the Teacher

The first half of book 1 in *Native Son* acquaints readers with Bigger’s world. He lives with his mother and two siblings in a rat-infested one-room apartment in a tenement in Chicago’s South Side. He never went past the eighth grade, is unemployed, and spends his time playing pool and engaging in petty theft. Even his mother thinks he is pretty useless. He has a girlfriend. He also has the possibility of a job working for a wealthy white family, the Daltons.

Richard Wright does a masterful job of creating this atypical protagonist. Bigger is enough to frighten anyone, regardless of race, gender, or age. He is that scary because he is so scared. That is why the first section of the novel is entitled “Fear.”

Bigger is profoundly frustrated and given to radical swings in mood. He hides his fears even from himself and parades behind the mask of a brutal and tough façade. He is amoral, completely selfish, and filled with a combustible combination of anger, fear, and hatred. This is not all his fault. He is a poor, black, young man in Chicago in the 1930s; life has offered him few opportunities; he can dream idly of becoming an airplane pilot, but that is simply not possible.

In this lesson, students first discuss the main characters and events in this part of the novel; students also discuss the nature of fear. They then analyze Bigger’s character and consider Richard Wright’s use of figurative language.

### Procedure

1. Ask students how Bigger Thomas differs from the protagonists of other novels they have read. (He is a young criminal with very few redeeming features.)
2. Distribute **Handout 5**, and ask students to answer the questions individually or in small groups. Follow with whole-class discussion.

### Suggested Responses

1. Mrs. Thomas is tired and almost without hope for a decent life for her children. Her oldest, Bigger, is a real disappointment. Vera seems to care for Bigger, but she does not really understand him; she is taking a sewing class, so she must have some goals. Buddy has a certain amount of respect for his older brother but also tries to protect his mother and sister from Bigger's foul moods. Bigger feels hatred for his family, mostly because he feels powerless.
  2. Bigger thinks that he would like to fly a plane and that he would be good at it. This leads to acute realizations of the uncrossable color line.
  3. Bigger wants to meet the challenge and get the money, but he is terrified of crossing the boundary involved in robbing a white person's store.
  4. Bigger takes out his anger and fear on Gus in order to avoid doing the robbery without incurring shame for being a coward.
  5. Bigger claims he does not want the job but then realizes the good things it might bring his way. Taking the job offends his pride; working for the Daltons would put him in close contact with people whom he does not understand.
3. Distribute **Handout 6**, have students complete it individually, and follow with class discussion. (Fear is highly subjective and is not always rational. Fear arises from a sense of danger; anxiety is a kind of chronic fear; terror is an intense version; panic results from a fear so great that one loses the ability to think and act rationally; dread involves fear of something looming in the future.)
  4. Point out that Bigger Thomas is the focal point of the novel and that the first half of "Fear" introduces him in detail. Distribute **Handout 7**, and have small groups respond to and draw implications from the quotations.

### Suggested Responses

1. There is irony. In a sense, Bigger hates his family because he loves them. They live in cramped squalor, and what he really hates is his own helplessness. For most of the novel, we see Bigger as a seething cauldron of hatred, fear, and anger; he is unpredictable and prone to strike out at random, often without thought.
2. Bigger tries to hide from the reality of his life; the author compares it to drawing behind a curtain. The rage that reality would evoke in him would be uncontrollable and destructive. Bigger is a young man with powerful passions.

3. This simile captures Bigger and his people's marginalization in 1930s America. From his perspective, it seems that white people have many advantages and opportunities which he is denied. As the novel will continue to demonstrate, to him the white race is one gigantic and amorphous enemy, simultaneously hostile, powerful, distant, and threatening. He does not perceive whites as individuals.
  4. This passage is clearly strong foreshadowing. It also depicts the rigid separation between black and white people and Bigger's profound sense that the racial situation is dangerous to him as an individual.
  5. Fear is a primary motivating factor in Bigger's life, but pride compels him to act as if he were fearless. He hates his own fearfulness and projects that hatred onto others.
5. Ask students to reflect on their own attitude toward Bigger and to describe it in a single word (fear, understanding, admiration, hatred, confusion, pity, for example.) Assign a paragraph explaining this reaction. Collect writings as tickets out of class.
  6. Assign students to read the rest of "Fear."





## The Nature of Fear

**Directions:** Richard Wright entitled the first section of *Native Son* “Fear,” and fear plays a critical role in the novel as a whole. Use the following questions to reflect on your fears.

1. In which situation would you experience the most fear?  
 At the edge of a towering mountain cliff  
 Deep in the bowels of a cave  
 Submerged in a submarine
2. Which creature would be most likely to arouse fear in you?  
 A spider dropping in front of your face when you open your eyes in the morning  
 Encountering several large snakes on a park path  
 Being chased by a snarling dog
3. How would you describe yourself?  
 Fearful  
 Prudent  
 Fearless
4. Animals respond to fear in several basic ways. Which is most characteristic of you?  
 Fight—the animal goes into an aggressive mode  
 Flight—the animal tries to escape  
 Playing dead—the animal hopes the threat will give up and go away  
 Giving up—the animal surrenders
5. What color would you be most likely to associate with fear?  
 Red  
 Black  
 Green  
 Yellow  
 White
6. Compare and contrast the following feelings: fear, dread, panic, anxiety, terror.

## Bigger Thomas

**Directions:** The first half of “Fear” lets readers know a lot about the protagonist. Use the following quotations as springboards to discuss his personality, motivation, and character.

1. “He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them.”
2. “He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else.”
3. “Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence.”
4. “Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me.”
5. “He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was.”

## Lesson 4

# Bigger Enters the White World

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### Objectives

- To reflect on Bigger’s brief employment experience with the Daltons
- To consider the role that chance plays in what happens
- To understand the concept of double-consciousness
- To reflect on a poem and relate it to some characters in *Native Son*

### Notes to the Teacher

The first half of “Fear” shows Bigger among his own people—fearful and angry, yes, but not totally alienated. This all changes when he goes to the Daltons’ elegant home to be interviewed for a job. Here he is a different person—shy, subservient, polite, unassuming. He is to be a chauffeur and something of a handyman, responsible for the furnace. For once in his life, he seems to have an opportunity, but one that is soon ruined.

Mary and Jan mean well, but they also act blindly. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton mean well, too, but they are equally blind. The enormity of the damage caused by slavery and culturally sanctioned bigotry is invisible to them; Bigger is the living image of that damage. When he finds himself trapped in Mary’s room, his one and only thought is that he must not be detected. The result is Mary’s death, and that in turn results in his panicked decision to get rid of the evidence by burning the body. If Mrs. Dalton, who is physically blind and who is always described in terms of whiteness, had not come into the room, the murder would not have happened.

For the first procedure, you will want to use four or five of the writings students submitted at the conclusion of the previous lesson. Students then discuss events from Bigger’s interview with Mr. Dalton to the end of “Fear.” They consider some what-if questions that illustrate the role that chance plays in what happens to Bigger Thomas. Finally, they examine W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness and discuss the way it is reflected in the novel, and they reflect on a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

### Procedure

1. Read aloud four or five of the comments about Bigger that students wrote during the previous lesson. Ask students whether their views changed by the time they were finished with “Fear.” (The events are so extreme that readers’ attitudes almost inevitably change.)

2. Distribute **Handout 8**, and ask small groups to discuss the questions.

### Suggested Responses

1. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton are extremely wealthy people who seem to feel a desire to help African Americans. They are benefactors, but they do not cross the great divide between the races. Later readers see that part of the Daltons' wealth comes from the rents they charge on the South Side and that they have no idea how puny their efforts are in the light of the depth and magnitude of the problem.
  2. Jan and Mary seem naively to think that they can erase the differences and separation between their world and Bigger's just because they want to. They are liberals and do-gooders who mean no harm.
  3. Mary and Jan force Bigger into physical proximity with them, and they invade his world by insisting on eating with him in the restaurant. They are in his space in more ways than one, and he cannot get away from them because they are the boss and he is just the chauffeur.
  4. Jan does not accompany Mary home; when Bigger drives her there, he finds that she is so intoxicated that she cannot get herself to her room. Instead of just leaving her in a downstairs room or summoning help, he carries her to her bedroom.
  5. Mrs. Dalton comes to Mary's bedroom, and Mary is making noises. Bigger fears that Mrs. Dalton will discover that he is there, so he tries to quiet Mary by putting a pillow over her face instead of making his presence known and explaining the situation. After Mrs. Dalton leaves, Bigger removes the pillow and finds that Mary has died.
  6. Answers can vary, but the death itself seems very much an accident, a product of fear and a failure to think about alternatives. The dismemberment and burning of the body also result from fear, but they are so macabre that they distance the reader from feelings of empathy for Bigger. They demonstrate his capacity for horrifying deeds.
3. Distribute **Handout 9**, and work through the what-if situations as a whole class.

### Suggested Responses

1. Bigger would not have been in the house that night, and the next morning Mary would have left for Detroit with a fully packed trunk. The events in the novel would have been avoided or at least delayed. Bigger would have had an opportunity to adjust to his new job.

2. Mary, a very small woman, would not have been so drunk and would have been able to get herself to her room without assistance, averting the situation that leads to the murder.
  3. It would have been natural for Jan to see to Mary and for Bigger to put the car in the garage and go home or to his room.
  4. This might have been the best choice available to Bigger, but it does not seem to occur to him.
  5. Bigger would not have panicked. Would he have gone further than kissing and fondling Mary?
  6. Mrs. Dalton would have seen right away that Bigger was in her daughter's bedroom, and the reason why would have been obvious.
  7. Mary is a bold girl, and the results of this what-if could go in all kinds of directions.
4. Distribute **Handout 10**, and have students read the information aloud. Ask students to apply the concept to *Native Son*. (In the Daltons' world, Bigger is preoccupied with how he appears to them: shy, polite, unassuming. His level of self-awareness is nonexistent or very low; he is constantly in the position of giving a performance and wondering what the audience thinks of the performance and the performer. Later in the novel when Bigger is asked how he feels, he cannot answer the question because he simply does not know. His education has been very limited, and he is not by nature an intellectual. He responds from instincts and emotions that he often does not understand. By the end of the novel, readers see him grasping for true self-awareness as he nears the end of his life.)
  5. Distribute **Handout 11**, and ask students to read the poem several times. Then conduct a discussion based on the questions.

### Suggested Responses

1. Dunbar is speaking for African-American people, but many others can also find their situations reflected in the poem.
2. The mask is a façade to hide suffering and true feelings.
3. We hear both sorrow and pain in the speaker's voice, but also a kind of pride. The speaker does not want pity and does not want the sorrow and pain to be evident to the outside world.
4. Jan and Mary want to see the South Side from the inside out; in a sense, they want to get behind the mask. Bigger is very uncomfortable with this.

5. We can imagine Mrs. Thomas or Bessie reading this poem with a heartfelt sigh; Reverend Hammond might also like it and see a spiritual meaning in it. Whether they know it or not, all of the residents of the South Side are represented in the voice of the poem.
  6. Many people can identify with the feeling of wearing a mask or persona to protect their private feelings and experiences.
6. Assign students to read part 2, “Flight,” up to the point that reporters find bones in the furnace. (Note: This is a substantial reading assignment, so you will want to allow sufficient time for students to complete it.)

## Bigger as a Chauffeur

**Directions:** Use the following questions to reflect on Bigger's brief employment by the Daltons.

1. What seem to be Mr. and Mrs. Dalton's attitudes toward African Americans?
2. What seem to be Jan's and Mary's motives during their night out on the town with Bigger?
3. Why is Bigger so uncomfortable with Mary and Jan?
4. What circumstances place Bigger in Mary Dalton's bedroom? What alternatives did he have?
5. What circumstances surround Mary Dalton's death?
6. Which seems worse to you—the scene in the bedroom or the subsequent scene in the basement? Why?

## What If?

**Directions:** To some extent, what happens to Bigger Thomas results from circumstances beyond his control. How would the story line change in the following what-if situations?

1. What if Mr. Dalton had told Bigger to start work the next morning instead of that evening?
2. What if Jan had not bought that bottle of rum?
3. What if Jan had accompanied Mary home?
4. What if Bigger had simply left Mary asleep on a downstairs sofa?
5. What if Mrs. Dalton had not come to Mary's room to check on her?
6. What if Mrs. Dalton had not been blind?
7. What if Bigger had not been so forceful and Mary had lived?



## W. E. B. Du Bois and Double-Consciousness

**Directions:** Read the following information, and write a paragraph in which you relate the concept of double-consciousness to Bigger Thomas.

W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the most influential and important figures in African-American history. He was born in 1868, just a few years after the end of the Civil War, and he died in 1963. Along the way, he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A brilliant man with a Ph.D. from Harvard University, Du Bois spent a lifetime thinking about and trying to resolve the situations of the black descendants of slaves in the United States.

He is often contrasted with his peer, Booker T. Washington, another important leader, who believed that black people should take a slow approach of acculturation into mainstream American life. Washington thought education was the key to elevating the people's status toward full equality. Du Bois was less docile and patient.

In one of Du Bois's most celebrated publications, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he writes of a phenomenon that he saw as unique to African Americans, especially African-American men:

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 two-ness,—an 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.

## “We Wear the Mask”

**Directions:** Read the following poem by African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), and answer the questions.

### **We Wear the Mask**

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
    We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
    We wear the mask!

1. For whom is Dunbar speaking in this poem?
2. What is the purpose of the mask?
3. What tones do you hear in the speaker’s voice?
4. In terms of this poem, what are Jan and Mary trying to do when they go out to dinner on the South Side?
5. What characters in *Native Son* would be able to identify with the sentiments in the poem?
6. Can you identify with the poem? Why or why not?

## Lesson 5

# After the Homicide

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### Objectives

- To note Bigger’s actions and reactions after his first homicide
- To identify alternatives that Bigger does not consider

### Notes to the Teacher

After stuffing Mary Dalton’s body in the furnace, Bigger returns home, away from the threatening presence of the Daltons’ home. His family, of course, know him well, and they seem to sense something strange about him. Bigger has alternatives. With the money he took from Mary Dalton’s purse, he could escape and hide in a kind of anonymity. He decides to stay at his job and see what happens; when Bessie mentions the Leopold and Loeb case, he gets the idea of blackmailing the Daltons. He hopes to bring this plan to fruition with Bessie’s help.

Ultimately, reporters gathered in the basement, hoping for a statement from the missing girl’s parents, help with removing ashes from the furnace, which is clogged. They discover bone fragments in the refuse. In the confusion, Bigger slips out of the house.

In this lesson, students first consider Bigger’s actions and reactions and the responses of those around him. They then try to identify alternative behaviors.

### Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 12**, and ask small groups to use it to clarify their understanding of the first part of “Flight.”

### Suggested Responses

1. Bigger’s mother is concerned that he returned home so late, but he insists that she is wrong about the time. All three seem to sense something different about him, and he is his usual surly self. Vera reacts strongly to the mere fact that he looks at her. When he leaves, Buddy follows him with the money that Bigger did not realize he had dropped. The reader senses that Bigger is inadequate to complete his own plans—too prone to neglect important details.
2. Bigger is generous to them, and perhaps he is showing off. There is a feeling that he is saying goodbye, whether or not he knows it. Perhaps he is fonder of the gang than he would ever admit.

3. Bessie seems completely preoccupied with the question of where Bigger got such a large sum of money. She badgers him for the information. He tells her part of the truth.
  4. Bessie mentions the Leopold and Loeb case, and Bigger jumps on the idea of using blackmail to get more money. Eventually, he writes a ransom note, ascribes it to the Communist Party, and delivers it to the Daltons' door.
  5. Bigger wants Bessie to hide in an abandoned building and pick up the ransom money when it is dropped off.
  6. Bigger decides to put the blame for the crime on Jan. He knows that the authorities will be suspicious of Jan's communist activities, and Jan could be accused of going to Mary's bedroom after they returned home.
  7. Mr. Britten is a private detective whom Mr. Dalton hired to find out what happened to Mary. Britten seems suspicious of Bigger; ironically, Mr. Dalton intervenes, insisting that Bigger knows nothing about Mary's disappearance.
  8. Bigger is not really at ease with blaming Jan for the crime; he gets rid of Jan by threatening him with a gun.
  9. The furnace badly needs to have the excess ashes emptied, but Bigger is reluctant to do this until he is alone. Smoke billows into the basement, and a reporter grabs the shovel to clear ashes. He sees in the detritus what appear to be bone fragments and an earring. In fear, Bigger flees.
2. Point out that Bigger is in a desperate position, more dangerous than he can even imagine. If there was any hope of him escaping the legal consequences for his actions, he seems to eradicate each possibility with his own choices. His view of his own cleverness may be over-inflated. He thinks the Daltons can see him only as a dumb, shy, polite black boy.
  3. Distribute **Handout 13**, and have students complete it.

### Suggested Responses

1. The first suspicion about Mary arises because Mrs. Dalton discovers that the trunk was not completely packed. It seems unlikely that Mary would send it to the station without items she purchased for the trip to Detroit. If Bigger had left the trunk in her room, there might have been no immediate suspicion. After all, Mary has been known to run off.

2. These items may be discovered in a garbage can very near the apartment he shares with his mother, brother, and sister. He would, in that case, be an obvious suspect. It would have been better to dispose of them far from home, perhaps in a swiftly flowing river, where they could not be traced to him.
  3. If the trunk arrives in Detroit and Mary does not, it will be sent back. Will something inside reveal that she was once stuffed inside it? He could have left the trunk in the basement with the idea that Mary planned to bring the last few things to be packed the next morning so that they would not become wrinkled.
  4. Bessie has evidence that Bigger has done something wrong; already she knows too much. Bigger does not have with him the money he could use to escape. If he had money the moment the bones were discovered, he could have gotten on a train to almost anywhere and simply disappeared into crowds.
  5. Jan may well be able to produce witnesses to his presence the previous night, thus disproving Bigger's account of events. If Bigger had simply kept silent, this avenue would not have opened up.
  6. Pulling a gun demonstrates a kind of desperation; it might lead Jan to suspect what really happened. If Bigger had simply walked away, Jan might have felt merely befuddled by events.
  7. If Bigger had anticipated this duty or managed to carry it out, the reporters might not have become involved; he might have been able to dispose of the evidence, at least temporarily.
  8. The flight seems clear evidence of his guilt, although it might also have signified fear that it would be ascribed to him simply because of his race. If he had just gone upstairs to lie on his bed, if he demonstrated grief and confusion, would Mr. Dalton have believed him?
4. Ask students, working individually, to write descriptions of what they want to happen to Bigger in the rest of the book.
  5. Distribute **Handout 14**, and ask students to complete the exercise individually and then to discuss their ideas in small groups. Responses to the questions can vary broadly, and these topics emerge as the novel continues. Be careful not to give away future events before students complete their reading of the book.
  6. Ask students to look again at the paragraphs they wrote for procedure 4, to make revisions, and to hand in the results. You can use these as tickets out of the class.
  7. Assign students to finish reading "Flight."



5. What does Bigger want Bessie to do? How does he carry his plan forward?

6. Whom does Bigger try to implicate for the crime? Why?

7. Who is Mr. Britten? What does he do?

8. What happens when Jan tries to confront Bigger?

9. What circumstances lead Bigger to flee the scene?

## Looking for Alternatives

**Directions:** Bigger seems bent on courses of action that are unlikely to end well. Indicate a possible alternative for each of the following choices, and imagine possible consequences of that change in his actions.

Choice	Alternative	Probable Consequences
1. Bigger drags Mary's trunk downstairs.		
2. Bigger puts his knife and Mary's purse in a garbage can.		
3. Bigger takes Mary's trunk to the station.		
4. Bigger lets Bessie hold on to the money he took from Mary's purse.		



<b>Choice</b>	<b>Alternative</b>	<b>Probable Consequences</b>
5. Bigger tries to cast suspicion on Jan.		
6. Bigger pulls a gun on Jan.		
7. Bigger delays emptying ashes from the furnace.		
8. Bigger flees the house after the reporters discover the bones in the furnace.		

## In My Opinion

**Directions:** Indicate whether you agree (A) or disagree (D) with each of the following statements. Also record reasons for your responses.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Everything that has happened to Bigger is Mary Dalton's fault because of her foolish and naïve thoughts and actions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. To Bigger Thomas, white people are not individual human beings, but part of a gigantic white force that has oppressed him all his life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. If Mrs. Dalton had not come into Mary's room, Bigger would probably have raped Mary Dalton.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Bigger's overly inflated view of his own cleverness and power is at the root of all of his problems.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Bigger's love for Bessie is a possible source for saving him from his own perfidy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Bigger should have taken the money and left for Harlem immediately.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Bigger is like a loose cannon that must be stopped before causing even more trouble and damage.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. If the white authorities of Chicago catch Bigger, they cannot possibly give him a fair trial.

## Lesson 6

# Bigger in Flight

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### Objectives

- To understand events between Bigger's flight from the Daltons' home and his apprehension by the police
- To appreciate the use of black and white imagery and symbolism in the novel

### Notes to the Teacher

After Bigger flees from the Daltons' home, he is desperate to find Bessie and let her know that the kidnap plan is over. Bessie, who did not want any part in it anyway, flees with him, and they go to an abandoned building. Certain that he cannot trust her, Bigger attacks her and drops her body down an air shaft. Later, at the trial, the prosecution will allege that she was not yet dead when he did this, but actually froze to death.

Meanwhile, the entire South Side is besieged with police; innocent men, women, and children find themselves in extreme danger. Fanned by irresponsible journalism, angry crowds clamor for Bigger's death, preferably by mob rule. It is winter; Bigger races across snow-covered roofs and finally climbs to the top of the water tower. Eventually, the authorities use a powerful fire hose to wash him off the tower and into police custody.

This is a long chase scene; for the first time in a while in the novel, readers often find themselves sympathizing with Bigger. It is evident that the authorities view him more as a beast than as a man, and the hunt is ruthless.

Throughout the book, Bigger views the white world as his enemy, and he is not wrong in that view. White society made it impossible for him to aspire toward any real achievements. A white couple got him into a tense situation. Mrs. Dalton appears in the bedroom doorway as a white blur. A white cat jumps on his shoulder. As he flees, he is surrounded by a harsh, white world of snow, and crowds of white faces look at him with hatred.

Once Bigger has been arrested, he is in the hands of the legal system. We the readers know exactly what happened at both crime scenes, but officials have the job of finding evidence for a trial. In this lesson, students revisit the murder scenes and conduct a close examination of the murders of both Mary and Bessie; they note the facts of what really happened, and they recommend appropriate legal responses. This will be important material for later comparison and contrast with what actually happens at the trial. In addition, students discuss characters and events and reflect on Richard Wright's uses of black and white.

## Procedure

1. Ask students what has happened to Bigger Thomas by the end of “Flight.” (Nearly frozen, he is washed off the top of a water tower with a hose and taken into custody. White mobs are shouting for his execution.)
2. Distribute **Handout 15**, and ask small groups to discuss responses to the questions.

## Suggested Responses

1. Bessie finds the mere idea of trying to get the ransom money to be terrifying. She is certain they cannot get away with it and will get in terrible trouble. She does not want to do it.
2. After having sexual intercourse with Bessie, Bigger takes a brick and staves in her head. Certain that she is dead, he drops her body down an air shaft. Too late he realizes that his money is still in her pocket.
3. Police are combing the South Side, the only area of the city where blacks can rent apartments, in a search for Bigger. They are ruthless, invading the privacy of innocent black families and terrorizing them.
4. Bigger is like a trapped or hunted animal, attacking and/or fleeing as possible. He cannot really think at this point.
5. Only a miracle of some sort could save Bigger, and there are no miracles forthcoming. Ultimately, he is powerless, and the white authorities are powerful.
6. Crowds of angry white people are watching the chase, and they want only to see Bigger killed or to kill him themselves. The crowds appear to give no thought to justice and are blood-thirsty.
7. Bigger climbs to the top of a water tower; there is nowhere else to go. After a while, the authorities get a powerful hose and wash him off the tower. By this time, Bigger is practically frozen.
8. The police place Bigger in a crucifixion position with his arms extended to both sides. This seems to establish him as some kind of Jesus figure. To what extent is Bigger a sacrificial victim? Has he been betrayed and mistreated just as much as Jesus is in the stories in the Scriptures? These questions merit discussion and admit many possible responses. They will come up again after students have finished reading the novel.

3. Point out that the differences between black and white dominate the novel. Distribute **Handout 16**, and have small groups read the directions. If necessary, remind students that a symbol differs from a metaphor. A symbol is what it is, but it also stands for something else. Ask small groups to complete the chart.

### Suggested Responses

1. Throughout the novel, we see that black and white societies are totally separated. Mary and Jan naively try to cross the boundary, but the problem is far too deeply entrenched for a few individuals to solve it. Black people are basically restricted to housing in the South Side; if they enter the white world, they do so as servants.
  2. The black iron fence seems to protect the rich and powerful from the encroachments of those with less. In the novel, it does not serve that purpose.
  3. Mrs. Dalton, for all her good intentions, always appears as a white miasma—white clothing, white hair, white face, even white eyes. She seems to symbolize the omnipresent white power that has restricted Bigger from long before his birth.
  4. Even the Daltons' cat is white, and it seems to point a finger of accusation at Bigger in the basement.
  5. The darkness of night veils both murders, and it is night when Bigger flees across the rooftops. Night can be Bigger's protective friend for a time.
  6. As Bigger flees, he is surrounded by cold white snow, as inimical to him as the white society around him. His dark skin shows up against the white background. Even the water tower looms as a white presence, more a snare than a place of safety.
4. Point out that by the end of "Flight," Bigger Thomas has been arrested for the murder of Mary Dalton. He has also murdered Bessie, and he has attacked and injured a police officer. Before the trial, a major effort must be made by both the prosecution and the defense to find evidence. Distribute **Handout 17**, and ask students to complete the exercise.

### Suggested Responses

Mary Dalton was killed between 2:00 and 3:00 A.M. by Bigger Thomas. Mary's blind mother was also present part of the time. Bigger took the intoxicated Mary to her bedroom and placed her on the bed; he kissed her and fondled her. Mrs. Dalton entered the room, and Bigger, fearful, roughly placed a pillow

over Mary's face to quiet her; she suffocated. He carried the body to the basement and endeavored to burn the evidence in the furnace; in the process, he cut off the girl's head to fit her in the furnace. He also took the girl's purse, which contained a substantial amount of cash. The main motives at work seem to have been fear and greed.

Bessie Mears was also killed late at night, but in an abandoned building; she resisted having sexual intercourse with Bigger, but whether this should be called rape is debatable in light of the relationship between them. They were the only persons present. Fearful and certain that he could not trust Bessie, he beat her over the head with a brick and dropped her down an air shaft; his money was in her dress and went with her. The main motives were fear and desperate selfishness.

5. Ask students the following questions.
  - Based on the evidence in the text, what crimes has Bigger actually committed? (accidental homicide, theft, tampering with evidence, premeditated murder, assault)
  - What would be a fair and just legal punishment for these crimes? (In the racial climate of Chicago at that time, a sentence to life in prison would be reasonable.)
  - What problems complicate the case? (Mary's burned body provides little evidence except for the fact that she was beheaded at some point. It would be necessary to track down Bigger's movements from the time of the crime to the present.)
6. Ask students what approach a defense attorney could take. (The mitigating circumstances include the Thomas family's poverty and the level of fear Bigger might have experienced. Another factor might be the chasm between blacks and whites in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States.)
7. Assign students to read "Fate" up to the point that Bigger throws away the cross the preacher gave him and the preacher leaves.

## A Desperate Attempt to Evade Capture

**Directions:** Use the following questions to clarify your understanding of events after Bigger flees the Daltons' house.

1. What are Bessie's thoughts and feelings about the proposed ransom plan?
2. How and why does Bigger kill Bessie?
3. What have police been doing on the South Side of Chicago? Why have they been doing this?
4. What is Bigger's frame of mind as he flees across the rooftops?
5. Is there any reasonable possibility that Bigger can escape? Why does he keep trying?
6. What people are present besides the police and Bigger? What do they want?
7. What is Bigger's final place of refuge? Why does he go there?
8. Is there any symbolism in the closing paragraph?

## Black and White Images and Symbols

**Directions:** *Native Son* presents a society in which black people and white people are rigidly segregated from each other. Throughout the novel, references to black and white recur frequently. Identify the literal and symbolic meanings of each of the following.

Image/Symbol	Literal Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
1. Black and white people		
2. The fence around the Daltons' property		
3. Mrs. Dalton		
4. The Daltons' cat		
5. Night		
6. Snow		



## A Murder Investigation

**Directions:** Bigger Thomas has been arrested and taken into custody. He will be tried for two murders. As a reader, you know more than the police can ever learn, perhaps even more than Bigger knows. Reexamine both crime scenes, and record the facts in the columns below; use the questions most often asked by reporters to guide your investigation.

Questions	Mary Dalton	Bessie Mears
Who?		
What?		
Where?		
When?		
Why?		
How?		



## Lesson 7

# Bigger in Prison

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### Objectives

- To understand events and characters after Bigger is caught and taken to prison
- To recognize the newspapers' role in fanning the fire of public rage
- To assess the level of punishment Bigger deserves for his crimes

### Notes to the Teacher

In prison, Bigger is unresponsive at first; he is doomed to die, and he knows it. At the first attempt at an inquest, Bigger faints. He has visitors. Reverend Hammond, his mother's pastor, comes with the hope of leading Bigger to the consolation of religion. Jan visits, and he brings Max, who becomes Bigger's defense attorney. Mr. Buckley, the prosecutor, comes to the prison. So do Bigger's mother, brother, and sister, as well as his three friends, Jack, G. H., and Gus. The scene is not realistic, as it would probably never happen in a real prison, but it places Bigger momentarily in a community.

The official proceedings highlight the chasm separating black and white societies. Newspapers and white spectators clamor for death and constantly refer to Bigger as a rapist. Spectators compare his appearance to that of an ape. When Bigger emerges from the inquest, he sees the Ku Klux Klan symbol of a burning cross on top of a building; this seals his resolute stance against religion as a source of comfort.

In this lesson, students discuss events and characters in the first part of "Fate." They also consider the role that journalism plays in the novel.

### Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 18**, and have small groups discuss the questions.

### Suggested Responses

1. Bigger is in custody of the white world. The one thing he can control is whether or not he eats. In addition, he must be weak and perhaps ill from his icy experiences on the rooftops.
2. Bigger is weakened from hunger, and the stress of seeing Mrs. Dalton again is enough to make him lose consciousness. Perhaps he is beginning to realize fully what he has done.

3. Jan is a very idealistic socialist. Although deeply grieved by Mary's death, he has tried to understand Bigger and wants to help him. Jan is thinking about the heritage that resulted from the cruelties of slavery.
  4. One reason for Max's decision to be the defense attorney is the officials' effort to link Mary's death to the Communist Party. Another is probably the accused person's right to defense in a court of law.
  5. To Reverend Hammond, the cross signifies redemption through Jesus Christ. The burning cross on top of the building represents white superiority and racial hatred. It causes Bigger to reject religion altogether.
  6. Probably such a scene could never really happen because of the threat to security. We see the separation of black and white, and we glimpse the fact that some love exists between Bigger and his family and Bigger and his gang.
  7. Except for a small pile of bones, nothing remains of Mary Dalton to show the jury and others in the courtroom; Bessie's body, on the other hand, shows the savagery of her beating. The coroner aims to convince everyone of Bigger's bestiality. Bigger resents this use of Bessie, and he believes that she, too, would have resented it.
  8. The burning cross is an emblem of the Ku Klux Klan. It shows the level of hatred focused on Bigger. Bigger realizes its significance; when he returns to his cell, he throws away the cross given to him by Reverend Hammond. He refuses to accept religion as a source of hope.
2. Point out that newspapers come up frequently in the novel. Bigger buys and steals them, and he asks for access to them in prison. Distribute **Handout 19**, and have students complete the exercise.

### Suggested Responses

1. Hoping for news about the missing heiress, the basis for a story, the newspapermen hang around the Dalton house. That is why they are present to see the bone fragments in the furnace.
2. The newspapers enable Bigger to know what is happening in the investigation of the crime that he committed and the police search for him. He is, in a way, proud of what he did.
3. The newspapers present Bigger as a monster and a predator; they consistently refer to him as "the rapist" and appeal to mob mentalities.

4. A fair trial would probably be impossible in any circumstances; however, the newspapers exacerbate the situation by demonizing Bigger.
  5. In today's society, newspaper writers have to be more careful to distinguish facts from suppositions. Members of the media still have the power to sway public opinion. For example, the media can convince an entire city that an immobilizing snowstorm is on the horizon when the actual direction of the storm is far from clear.
  6. Good journalism is careful to stick to the facts. Good reporters check their data scrupulously for consistency and accuracy.
3. Point out that Bigger has confessed to the crimes, but there must still be a trial with both prosecuting and defense attorneys. Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group to prepare the prosecution, including opening statement, list of witnesses, and closing statement. Ask the other group to do the same for the defense. If you wish, follow with an actual trial, with students playing the roles of judge, attorneys, and witnesses; otherwise, follow with general discussion. (There is little possibility of questioning Bigger's guilt, but the court can decide on various levels of severity of punishment. The prosecution in this case wants the full extent of the law; the lawyer will argue both emotionally and logically for the death penalty. Witnesses may include the Daltons, Jan, Doc, Bigger's friends, police involved in the chase and arrest, and others who had contact with Bigger along the way. The defense will aim for a less severe punishment. A plea of temporary insanity might be one possibility. A mental health expert might testify to the effects of fear on an individual. The Thomas family's poverty and lack of opportunity could also be cited as mitigating factors. Someone with knowledge of history and sociology might emphasize the long-term effects of slavery and institutionalized racism.)
  4. Have students individually write paragraphs in which they respond to the following prompt: I believe that the most just penalty for Bigger Thomas is . . . Collect writings as students' tickets out of the classroom.
  5. Assign students to finish reading the novel.

## **Bigger's Prison Experiences before the Trial**

**Directions:** Use the following questions to discuss characters and events in the first half of "Fate."

1. When Bigger is first in prison, why does he refuse to eat?
2. Why does Bigger faint during the first attempt at an inquest?
3. How would you describe Jan's attitudes toward Bigger?
4. Why does Max agree to serve as the defense attorney when it is virtually impossible for him to succeed?
5. What role do crosses seem to play in the novel?
6. Is the scene in which a crowd of people come to Bigger's prison cell realistic? What function does it serve?
7. Why does the coroner have Bessie's body brought into the inquest? How does Bigger react?
8. What is the significance of the burning cross on top of the building? How does it affect Bigger?

## Roles of the Media

**Directions:** Consider the roles that the media, especially newspapers, play in *Native Son*.

1. What role do newspapermen play in discovering the death of Mary Dalton?
2. Why does Bigger so frequently want access to a newspaper?
3. What picture of Bigger do the newspapers convey to the public?
4. Do the newspapers make it impossible for Bigger to get a fair trial in Chicago?
5. What roles do newspapers and other media play in today's society?
6. What constitutes good journalism?





## Lesson 8

# The Trial and Its Outcome

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### Objectives

- To compare and contrast the strategies of the defense and prosecuting attorneys
- To analyze the changes in Bigger Thomas's character

### Notes to the Teacher

Bigger's trial is in some ways a formality; there is a signed confession to the killing of both Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears. Despite this, Mr. Buckley, the prosecutor, is determined to call many witnesses. He creates a media event, and the courtroom is full of the angry and the curious. Mr. Max, on the other hand, plans to call no witnesses and to simply present compelling arguments to spare his client the death penalty. No jury is involved; the sentence will be the judge's decision.

In their closing arguments, both attorneys use both logic and emotion. Max endeavors to convince the judge that what Bigger has become is not really his fault; he is the product of poverty and endemic racism, one of many such young men throughout the country, seething with resentment and rage. Max simply asks the judge not to opt for the strongest penalty possible, capital punishment by electrocution. Max views Bigger as a human being.

Buckley, on the other hand, portrays Bigger as nothing less than a monster, not really a human being at all. His argument is filled with racist innuendo and political machinations. He insists adamantly on the death penalty. The leniency that won out in Chicago's historic Leopold and Loeb trials does not prevail in Richard Wright's fictional world.

In this lesson, students first compare and contrast the strategies of Max and Buckley. They then discuss their own changing attitudes toward Bigger from the beginning of the novel to the end. Finally, they focus on ways the protagonist changes because of his severe experiences.

### Procedure

1. Ask students to describe Bigger's situation at the very end of the novel. (He is going to the electric chair; he hopes to do this with bravery; he is trying to reach some kind of understanding and peace.)

2. Distribute **Handout 20**, and ask students to complete the exercise. (Mr. Buckley will settle for nothing less than the death penalty; Mr. Max pleads for a less severe sentence. Few witnesses are really necessary because of Bigger’s signed confession. Buckley, however, calls for many in an effort to demonstrate the heinous nature of the murders. Max will rely only on his own defense plea. Buckley’s vitriolic racism alienates most readers. Max enables many readers to acquire a new perspective on Bigger. As the prosecutor, Buckley wants the full extent of the law; Max believes that mitigating circumstances should affect the verdict and sentence. Max uses respectful language, and his tone is one of both challenge and pleading; he views Bigger as a human being. Buckley’s closing argument is full of emotion, and he often refers to Bigger with derogatory and racist language. Readers know that Max is correct; they know that Buckley is wrong but will nevertheless probably win the case.)
3. Ask students to look back through their notes and think about their responses as they read *Native Son*. Did their attitudes toward the protagonist change along the way? Why or why not? (Answers can, of course, vary. For many readers, the comments of Jan and Max have a clarifying effect; the historical perspective makes it clear that Bigger, while crude and selfish, is largely not responsible for what he has become. Society has inflicted stringent limits on his life, and the result is a young man with stunted and deformed psychological and moral development.)
4. Have students refer to **Handout 17** (Lesson 6), and conduct a discussion about the extent to which their own knowledge about the crimes and plans for defense/prosecution reflect those in the novel. To what extent do Max and Buckley know what exactly happened and why the events occurred? (Because Mary Dalton’s body was burned, there is only limited physical evidence. Buckley imagines all kinds of lurid events that did not happen. Max makes a genuine effort to understand Bigger but still has only limited insights into his client’s feelings about his family and about Bessie. Max’s views are filtered through his communist beliefs; Buckley’s reflect his essentially racist political ambitions.)
5. Distribute **Handout 21**, and ask small groups to discuss the questions.

### **Suggested Responses**

1. The Bigger at the beginning of “Fear” is selfish, shiftless, and restless.

2. At the end of "Fate," Bigger is trapped, reflective, and frightened.
3. Bigger goes through severe experiences—two murders, a harrowing police chase, and the taunting of hostile crowds. He has been sentenced to death. For perhaps the first time in his life, he tries to think, to make sense of his own thoughts and experiences.
4. Bigger rejects hope, which is what religion is all about. He does not want what seem to him to be false promises.
5. Bigger wants to minimize his mother's suffering; this demonstrates his love for her.
6. Max previously asked Bigger questions no one had ever asked him before. Somehow, the attorney is a source of comfort and consolation, although Bigger himself could not possibly explain why. Because of Max, the Bigger we see at the end tries to be brave and demonstrates concern about both his mother and Jan.
7. Perhaps, released back to the deprivations of the South Side of Chicago, Bigger would revert to his old ways. Perhaps he would join the American Communist Party and begin to fight for the dignity of his people.

## The Defense vs. the Prosecution

**Directions:** Fill in the columns with information pertaining to Max’s defense strategy and Buckley’s prosecution strategy.

Topic	Defense	Prosecution
1. Purpose		
2. Witnesses		
3. Judicial philosophy		
4. Language choices		
5. Attitude toward Bigger		
6. Reader responses		

## **Bigger, from Beginning to End**

**Directions:** Use the following questions to reflect on Bigger Thomas's dynamism as a character.

1. Give three words or phrases to sum up Bigger's character at the beginning of "Fear."
2. Give three words or phrases to describe Bigger at the end of "Fate."
3. Has Bigger changed? If so, what caused the change?
4. Why does Bigger resist religion?
5. What is Bigger's attitude toward his mother?
6. What effect does Mr. Max have on Bigger?
7. Suppose that the governor intervened with a stay of execution and that Bigger spent time in prison and eventually was released on parole. What kind of a man do you think he would be? What do you think he would do?



## Lesson 9

# Symbolism and Themes

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### Objectives

- To identify and interpret symbols in *Native Son*
- To recognize the importance of motifs in the novel
- To articulate central themes

### Notes to the Teacher

Previously, students considered the significance of references to black and white in *Native Son*. Now they will expand the consideration of symbols to include other images that pervade the novel. In the text, the symbols and motifs weave closely together to lead toward an understanding of meaning. Encourage the class to avoid resorting to study guides, which tend to flatten meanings rather than to follow them to their fullest development.

In this lesson, students begin by examining symbols and motifs. The topics suggested are by no means exhaustive, but they provide a catalyst to discussion. Students then look at the novel's central themes. Racism is certainly a prime target; Richard Wright insists that the consequences of slavery are deep, destructive, and not easily eradicated. He also shows the corrosive effects of poverty, the inherent dignity of the human spirit, and the desire of all people to be linked to one another in community, as well as the power of fear.

### Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 22**, and conduct a general class discussion to explore the symbols and motifs.

### Suggested Responses

1. Black and white are obvious contrasts in the skin colors of characters. Bigger commits his crimes in the dark of night, the buildings he passes are dark, and his mood is often dark. White, including snow, impedes Bigger. Red relates to the blood of both killings; the color red also links to the Communist Party.

2. The South Side seems to be replete with empty or nearly empty buildings. Bigger hides in empty buildings, Bessie is supposed to use one to help with the ransom, and she is murdered in one. The buildings present the city as a kind of ghost town on the edge of extinction. At least some of these buildings are owned by Mr. Dalton's company, suggesting that he and others like him hold the South Side in captivity.
  3. Answers can vary widely. "Bigger" is an exact rhyme for the n-word. Vera's name denotes truth. Buddy, Bigger believes, is reliable. Bessie's last name (Mears) may suggest her insignificance.
  4. The rat that Bigger kills at the beginning is an emblem of the abject poverty of the tenements; like Bigger in flight, the rat is trapped and fights for its life, only to be defeated.
  5. The furnace at first represents the safe warmth of home; later it becomes hellish in its significance. The furnace reveals the crime that has been committed and leads ultimately to Bigger's death sentence.
  6. The snow seems to represent the alienating and oppressive white society that constricts the lives of black people in the city and the post-slavery, post-Reconstruction United States.
  7. Mrs. Dalton is physically blind; the idea of mental blindness permeates the novel. Bigger thinks that his family and friends are blind. There is a kind of blindness in the courtroom. During the concluding pages of the novel, Bigger gropes for insight.
  8. Communism, represented by Max and Jan, is bitterly despised by capitalist society, which is eager to pin criminal activity on "red" adherents. The socialist philosophy voiced by Mr. Max at Bigger's trial is undeniably more humanistic than the impassioned plea made by Mr. Buckley.
  9. Bigger eschews the religion to which his mother adheres. The novel includes scraps of Negro spirituals, clerical figures, a wooden cross meant to be worn around a person's neck, and a burning cross. Bigger himself is at one point arranged in the figure of a cross. The novel seems to reject a religion that blinds people to reality and makes injustice possible.
2. Remind students that the themes of a literary work are its statements or implication about human beings or about life in general. They abstract from the novel's characters and plots and constitute conclusions the author intends readers to reach after completing the story. Distribute **Handout 23**, and have students complete the exercise. Follow with discussion, and extend the discussion to include applications to life today.



## Suggested Responses

1. Max's closing argument at the trial constitutes the most overt statement of this theme. Centuries of subjugation of black people and their continuing marginalization have corrosive effects on both races. The unavoidable consequence is violence. Since Richard Wright wrote this novel, giant strides have been made in civil rights, but prejudice based on one trait or another is far from absent in American society.
2. Racism results in fear and hatred on both sides and prevents multicultural understanding and appreciation.
3. Individual violence is seldom random; it has a cause or multiple causes that need to be considered.
4. The media can easily stir a mob into mindless and heartless bloodthirsty violence that may or may not be based on facts.
5. Fear is a powerful force that can move people to panic and to do things that are antithetical to their own welfare. Fear can also lead some people to become bullies or to become deeply angry and vengeful.
6. The novel makes it clear that individual altruism and liberality are puny tools against the colossus of the effects of slavery. These efforts are often based on assumptions of superiority and on a total lack of understanding of the issues involved. Mob violence and powerful leaders were part of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. Equal rights are far more a reality now than they were when Richard Wright wrote *Native Son*, but events in cities and towns across the country make it clear that fear, suspicion, and misunderstanding often underlie relationships among diverse races and ethnic groups.

## Symbols and Motifs

**Directions:** Complete the chart with specific examples and with interpretations.

Symbol/Motif	Examples	Interpretation
1. Colors		
2. Deserted buildings		
3. Characters' names		
4. Rats		

<b>Symbol/Motif</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
5. The furnace		
6. Snow		
7. Blindness		
8. Communism		
9. Religion		

## Themes in *Native Son*

**Directions:** Indicate what theme(s) the novel either states or implies about the following topics.

1. Effects of slavery
2. Racism
3. Individual violence
4. Mob psychology
5. Fear
6. Do-gooder responses

## Lesson 10

# Comparing Abridged and Restored Versions of *Native Son*

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### Objectives

- To understand the practicalities involved in being a professional writer
- To compare and contrast the 1940 edition with the restored version that is widely preferred today

### Notes to the Teacher

Selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club is not something a writer can take lightly. It guarantees a wide reading audience and serious discussion. In 1939, the Book Club was interested in *Native Son* but had reservations about some of its content, particularly in the movie theater scene in “Fear.” Richard Wright rewrote sections of the novel to meet the objections. More than half a century later, critics examined Wright’s original manuscripts and found them to be superior to the version used by the Book-of-the-Month Club. While the 1940 edition is still available today, the restored text is now preferred.

In this lesson, students first consider the relationship between a publishing house and a person who aspires to be a novelist. They then complete a comparative study of the two editions of the novel. Students will need access to both editions.

### Procedure

1. Ask students what they think a professional writer of novels must do in order to be published and thereby earn a living. (The aspiring writer sends plans for stories and books to publishing companies, where editors decide whether they want a proposed work. Once a writer has an established relationship with a company, publication becomes less difficult. Editors can make corrections and request authors to revise sections of a manuscript. Sometimes writers receive an advance payment, and the more books that are sold, the more a writer can earn for a publication. Income can also come from stage and screen adaptations.)

2. Explain that Richard Wright was dealing with Harper and Brothers as the publisher for *Native Son*. The Book-of-the-Month Club was very interested in the novel—a great opportunity for both the writer and the publisher—but also wanted a few changes. Ask students whether they have any idea what material might have seemed offensive to the club. (The editors objected to the roughness of the scene in the movie theater near the beginning of the novel.)
3. Explain that Richard Wright agreed to modify the scene and to make other changes necessitated by that modification. The edition published in 1940 includes those changes. Later, after studying Wright's original final draft, critics decided that it was superior, and the restored version that he originally intended for publication has since been preferred.
4. Distribute **Handout 24**, and ask small groups to complete the comparison/contrast. (In the 1940 edition, Jack and Bigger arrive just minutes before the movie will begin; the half hour they pass with masturbation does not happen. Instead, Bigger looks at movie posters. The abridged version focuses their attention on the robbery they have planned for Blum. The pipe organ is present in both, but some of the descriptive wording is changed. No newsreel is described in the abridged version, so Bigger does not see Jan and Mary until later, when he acts as chauffeur. Thus Mary is not established as wild and willful long before the reader actually meets her. In the original, the movie deals with Africa; the abridged version presents a story about white people. In both, Bigger emerges with an understanding that working for the Daltons can be very advantageous to him; both versions segue neatly into the rest of the novel.)
5. Ask students why the Book-of-the-Month Club wanted changes in the scene. (The movie scene is shocking to many people today and would have been even more so in 1940. Public indecency is in itself a crime; such behavior in a place like a movie theater is crude, even bestial.)
6. Ask students why Richard Wright would have been willing to make changes in the book to suit other people's preferences. (He wanted to have the book published; he wanted it to sell well; perhaps he did not view the scene as essential to his main purposes.)
7. Ask whether the changes would have necessitated any additional alterations in the text. (Minor changes would have been needed when Bigger first sees Mary at the Daltons' home and in the trial scene near the end.)

8. Ask students what reasons Wright might have had in creating the scene in the first place and why the American Library Association decided that his original intentions constitute the better version of the novel. (The scene is crude because the two young men are crude; they delight in defying the rules of polite society. Bigger as we see him in the first half of “Fear” is surly, resentful, selfish, and sensate. Petty crimes are a way of life for him. Richard Wright presents a protagonist who is far from heroic in stature. While the scene is extreme, it seems very much what Bigger would actually do if he had a short wait before a movie would begin.)
9. Point out that the Book-of-the-Month Club’s actions are an example of censorship. Ask students what issues tend to provoke censorship today in both print and visual media (sexual content, violence, offensive language, political politeness). Conduct a general discussion of the positive and negative aspects of censorship. (Censorship aims to protect shared values and promote the common moral good; it can also preserve the status quo, whether that is bad or good; it can deny freedom of speech.)
10. Ask students to write a brief description of similarities and differences between the two versions of the novel and to take a stand on which they prefer and why. Use the writings as tickets out of class.

## Abridged and Restored Versions of *Native Son*

**Directions:** Give a close reading to the movie theater scene in both versions of the novel, beginning with Bigger saying that he would like to see a movie. Then fill in the columns.

Element from Scene	1940 Edition	Restored Edition
1. Arrival at the theater		
2. Before the movie starts		
3. The pipe organ		
4. The newsreel		
5. The movie		
6. Bigger's decision about working for Mr. Dalton		



## Lesson 11

# The Movie and the Novel

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### Objectives

- To compare a film adaptation of the novel to the novel itself
- To write an informed film review
- To identify differences between the written word and the film

### Notes to the Teacher

For this lesson, you will need a movie adaptation of *Native Son*. The 1986 version stars Victor Love and features Oprah Winfrey as Mrs. Thomas. In the 1951 version, Richard Wright himself plays the role of Bigger Thomas. You may have to hunt around a bit to find either video; the Internet is a good place to look. This lesson is based on the more recent movie, but you can adapt it for use with the earlier one.

Students begin by discussing the challenges involved in adapting this novel to cinema. The novel includes a substantial amount of violence and sex; it would be easy for the movie to degenerate to mere sensationalism. In addition, the text deals with serious and sensitive issues. Nuances of the actors' interpretation could easily alienate significant parts of the viewing audience. The role of Bigger Thomas is particularly challenging; he does such terrible things, and yet the novel does not condemn him, nor did Richard Wright want his audience to sit back in complaisant judgment or satisfaction.

As you watch the movie with the students, you may want to stop it at the point at which the end of each book occurs and invite spontaneous reactions. By now, having finished the novel and examined it in depth, students should have a sense of ownership and authority. The key question is one of evaluation: To what extent does the film do justice to the novel?

**Handout 25** provides questions for follow-up discussion. Students then discuss approaches used by film reviewers and write their own reviews of the movie adaptation of *Native Son*. In preparation for this lesson, you will want to ask students to bring in samples of current movie reviews. You may want to recommend varied sources: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, your local newspaper, *Time* magazine, and *Rolling Stone*, for example.

## Procedure

1. Ask students why movie viewers sometimes complain about film adaptations of novels. (A movie version may change or leave out elements of the book; it may not match what the reader visualized; it may not do justice to the text.)
2. Point out difficulties involved in transforming *Native Son* into a video. (The novel is very intense and serious. Some of the plot actions would be difficult to act out and equally difficult to watch. A great deal of the story takes place inside of Bigger's feelings and thoughts. The movie could easily reinforce stereotypes.)
3. Have students view the movie; take occasional breaks for free and spontaneous responses and questions.
4. Distribute **Handout 25**, and have small groups discuss the questions. Follow with whole-class discussion.

## Suggested Responses

1. The novel and the film begin similarly; students' opinions will vary about the intensity of this beginning.
2. The music may be a bit too remote from the novel's time setting.
3. The movie theater scene is not as shocking as it is in the novel, nor is it as necessary, and it was necessary to modify it.
4. For example, should Bigger have cut up the felt pool table or fought more with Gus?
5. The nuns appear at a time when Bigger is at a turning point in his life and deciding to get a job to support his family. They represent a different world from the one in which he lives.
6. Camera angles are often used to show power. Sometimes this can be straightforward; at other times, it can be ironic. The angles may suggest that Bigger in other circumstances could have been a powerful figure.
7. Mrs. Dalton does not seem as frail as she is in the novel, nor does she seem as ghostlike.
8. The movie cannot, obviously, be the entire novel on screen; students may feel that the tension is lost a bit since many of the events move very quickly and there is not much time to digest each one.
9. There is a level of the extent of the crime that is missing from this scene because the dismemberment of Mary is not included; however, if it were included, the gory nature of Bigger's action might have overpowered the real significance of the story.

10. The director of the film chose to omit the scene. Something may be missing, but the realism may be felt more strongly because that scene is omitted.
  11. Max's statement on Bigger's behalf is really the most important scene in "Fate," and yet it is minimized in the film. This seems to limit the level of empathy felt for Bigger.
  12. Responses to this question will be totally subjective. For audiences to whom only a happy ending is satisfactory, this one falls short. On the other hand, real life does not promise happy endings.
5. Ask small groups to share sample contemporary film reviews. Then ask volunteers to read aloud paragraphs that are especially well written or interesting. Point out that there are many ways to begin a film review. Possibilities include a quote from the film, a surprising assertion, a strongly expressed overall opinion, a humorous statement, or an intriguing question. Ask students to summarize commonalities of movie reviews (names of main actors and director; plot line without spoiling the ending; the movie's best points; perhaps areas needing improvement; the author's recommendation about whether or not to see the film). Note that film reviews can be positive or negative, sincere or devastatingly sarcastic.
  6. Assign students to write reviews of the movie adaptation of *Native Son*. Remind the class of the importance of two factors in all writing: audience and purpose. Before writing, it is essential for students to determine what they want audiences to do regarding this movie and what persons comprise the audience. Suggest that students might find it interesting to adopt strategies used in the sample movie reviews they studied in small groups.

## Movie Study Guide: *Native Son* (1986)

**Directions:** Use the following questions as springboards to discuss the film.

1. Does the beginning of the film have the same intensity as the beginning of the novel?
2. Does the soundtrack in the film work with the story, or does it detract from the story?
3. Does the movie theater scene work the way it does in the novel?
4. What would you have included in the poolroom scene with Gus, G. H., and Jack?
5. What is the purpose of the nuns sitting behind Bigger on the train?
6. Bigger looks tall and imposing when Peggy opens the door of the Daltons' house. Similar camera angles later in the movie achieve the same effect. Is there symbolism present in this?





## Lesson 12

# Who Was Richard Wright?

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### Objectives

- To learn about the life and work of the author of *Native Son*
- To relate Richard Wright's life to themes in the novel

### Notes to the Teacher

*Black Boy* is autobiographical in nature; *Native Son* is not, but it nonetheless reflects aspects of Richard Wright's life and much of his thinking. Wright was born in the South in 1908 and grew up in poverty. In time, he moved to Chicago. Later he moved to New York City, where he became friendly with Langston Hughes and other celebrities of the Harlem Renaissance. After World War II, completely disillusioned with the United States, he and his family moved to France. He travelled extensively and died in Paris in 1960.

Despite limited formal education, Wright was an avid reader and determined writer. With *Native Son*, he became the first African-American writer to attain a wide cross-cultural reading audience. *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are his two most widely read books today. He also wrote other books, as well as short stories and poems. He was fascinated with the power of the haiku form.

Wright joined the American Communist Party and worked for its newspaper in New York for a time. He, like many other intellectuals and writers of his time, was attracted to socialist ideals. He did not live to see the decisive changes wrought by leaders of the civil rights era and the evolution of a country that is closer to providing equal rights for all regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion.

In *Native Son*, we hear some of Richard Wright's thoughts about communism, racism, and the death penalty. Most important of all, we see the strain of being a black man in America in the years between the start of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II.

For the first procedure, students will need access to "How Bigger Was Born," Richard Wright's speech at Columbia University in 1940. It is often included in editions of *Native Son*, and it is readily available on the Internet. After analyzing the lecture, students learn about Wright's life and discuss his convictions as well as their own about both individuals and societies.

## Procedure

1. Point out that Richard Wright was a genuine landmark in the history of American literature. The son of an illiterate Southern sharecropper, he grew up to become a noted author and intellectual. He was the first African-American writer to have a work chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the popularity of *Native Son* made him a celebrity. He began to pave the way for later literary giants such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison.
2. Distribute copies of “How Bigger Was Born,” or have students access it in their texts or on the Internet. Explain that Wright delivered the lecture at Columbia University in New York City in 1940, the same year that *Native Son* was published.
3. Distribute **Handout 26**, and ask small groups to discuss the questions.

## Suggested Responses

1. The audience would have consisted mainly of well-educated people who had many economic and social advantages. They probably prided themselves on having open minds. Richard Wright was probably keenly aware of the near impossibility of leading them to understand either the author talking to them or the protagonist of the novel.
2. The creative process is not a simple linear experience that can be easily conveyed. Bigger Thomas emerged from the totality of Richard Wright’s experience, not all of which was part of his consciousness.
3. All of the Biggers were angry men who resented their exclusion; their anger got them into serious trouble.
4. In 1940, the world was aware of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler’s goals and policies and of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s actions. Wright recognized that the plight of blacks in America was not anomalous.
5. The language is conversational, totally without pedantry. Wright uses rhetorical questions, parallels, and repetitions.
6. The tone is even and logical; Wright seems humble about his accomplishment. He is unflinching about the status of blacks in the United States, and there is bitterness, even sarcasm, in his comments about the South. Toward the end, we can hear anger and even disgust.
7. Bigger was one of a large number of disenfranchised Americans, and, like the others, he was full of anger and resentment and totally unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings. Wright makes it clear that he did not want readers to leave the book feeling complacent.



4. Distribute **Handout 27**, and have students use the Internet and print materials as tools in thinking through answers to the questions.

### Suggested Responses

1. Wright's childhood was far from privileged. He grew up in poverty; his father left the family when Richard was only five; frequent moves caused interrupted and limited formal education. His mother eventually moved the children into the repressive home of her parents.
  2. When he was nineteen, Wright took a train to Chicago because he wanted to get away from Jim Crow laws.
  3. Richard Wright was a socialist and an active member of the American Communist Party.
  4. Despite a limited formal education and a home in which fiction was viewed as sinful, Wright seems to have always been determined to be a writer. He was helped in this by the Federal Writers' Project, part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs to alleviate the effects of the Depression.
  5. Wright took his family to live abroad to get away from the racism that seemed ubiquitous in the United States.
  6. The most famous books are *Black Boy*, which is semiautobiographical, and *Native Son*, which made him the wealthiest black writer in the United States.
  7. After the move to France, Wright travelled extensively, including both Africa and Asia. He got dysentery, which enervated him, and died, apparently of a heart attack, in Paris at the age of fifty-two.
  8. Richard Wright wrote thousands of haiku. You can find examples online.
5. Use the Internet to show the class photographs of Richard Wright. Ask for general impressions (strength, mildness, sophistication, intelligence). Point out that if he had lived today, he would have had a very different experience of American life. Ask students to think about his life and about *Native Son* and to write responses to the following prompt: What do you see as the main message that Richard Wright was trying to convey to his reading audience?
  6. Distribute **Handout 28**, and give students time to reflect on and write about the quotations. Follow with whole-class discussion.

## Suggested Responses

1. The quote is a clear example of foreshadowing and demonstrates Bigger's sense of impending doom before even meeting the Dalton family. The racist society in which he lives has convinced him that he is worthless. This is a contributing factor to his feeling more alive than ever before after he has killed. At least he has had the power to do something.
  2. Toni Morrison's comment is very optimistic; she points out that centuries of slavery did not turn America's black people into brutes. If it had, murder and mayhem would have ruled in the South, and white people would have been the losers. On the other hand, Bigger, before his arrest, seems little more than a beast in his actions and reactions.
  3. Wright knew that there were no easy answers to the deep and long-term consequences of slavery. Tears of sympathy were useless gestures. Many decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, black people were, in effect, still held in chains in both the South and the North. Decades after *Native Son* first appeared, cities across the nation erupted in violence, just as Mr. Max predicts in his attempt to defend Bigger.
  4. Prisons even look somewhat like zoos, except they lack the natural habitat emphasis of today's major zoos. Prison gives a person no privacy and very little freedom of choice. It can reduce a person to little more than an animal. On the other hand, it can provide a time-out from surroundings that led the person to prison. Bigger, it seems, does more genuine thinking in prison than ever before in his life—sadly, too late.
  5. *Native Son* presents two sincere white men—Jan and Max—but they are fictional characters. Malcolm X felt that gestures of apparent generosity were most often motivated at heart by greed. Mr. Dalton has a reputation for trying to help black people, but much of his fortune is derived from his role as a landlord who rents out substandard housing for more than its worth to people who have no choice about where they can live. The cynicism created by personal experience complicates efforts in interracial communication and understanding.
7. Distribute **Handout 29**, and review the list with students. (Note: This list is far from exhaustive; many other names, especially of poets and short-story writers, could be added. In addition, some important books are not included because of content beyond the maturity level of many high school students.) Set a due date for final drafts of students' essays.

## “How Bigger Was Born”

**Directions:** Shortly after the publication of *Native Son*, Richard Wright delivered a lecture, “How Bigger Was Born,” at Columbia University. Read his comments, and use the following questions as springboards for discussion.

1. Who were the people in Richard Wright’s audience? How might that have affected him as a speaker?
2. Why was it almost impossible for Wright to explain where Bigger originated?
3. What do the Biggers he mentions have in common?
4. What world events does Wright mention? Why?
5. What rhetorical devices are at work in this lecture?
6. What tones do you hear in the lecture?
7. What do Wright’s comments reveal about the protagonist of *Native Son*?

## Richard Wright's Life

**Directions:** Use research and reflection to answer the following questions.

1. How privileged was Richard Wright's childhood?
2. How did Wright come to live in Chicago? What did he do there?
3. What were Wright's political convictions?
4. How did someone with a very limited formal education become a well-known and highly respected author?
5. When and why did Richard Wright and his family leave the United States?
6. What are Wright's most famous writings?
7. Where and how did Wright die?
8. Richard Wright wrote many haiku. Read some of them, and choose one that appeals to you for presentation to the class.

## Culminating Discussion

**Directions:** Reflect on the following quotations, and relate them to characters, events, and themes in *Native Son*.

1. Near the beginning of *Native Son*, Bigger says to Gus, “Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me.”
2. Toni Morrison, African-American novelist and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, stated the following: “What is curious to me is that the bestial treatment of human beings never produces a race of beasts.”
3. Richard Wright said this about *Uncle Tom’s Children*: “I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”
4. Angela Davis, African-American human rights activist who was imprisoned for a year and a half before going on trial and being acquitted, made the following statement: “Jails and prisons are designed to break human beings, to convert the population into specimens in a zoo—obedient to our keepers, but dangerous to each other.”
5. Malcolm X, radical civil rights leader, said the following in an interview: “I’ve never seen a sincere white man, not when it comes to helping black people.”

## Comparative Reading and Writing

**Directions:** Richard Wright was among the first great African-American writers, but he was by no means the only one. Select from the following list of readings, and then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the author's treatment of the African-American experience with the view conveyed in *Native Son*.

- Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
Memoir of childhood events that helped to make this esteemed author what she became
- James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*  
Semiautobiographical novel by a towering literary figure
- Toni Cade Bambara, short fiction and a novel, *The Salt Eaters*  
A variety of works with diverse characters and situations
- Gwendolyn Brooks, poems  
Chicago poet who was the first African-American poet to receive a Pulitzer Prize
- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*  
Autobiography of a slave who escaped and became a great abolition leader
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*  
Groundbreaking novel that explores the effects of racism
- Mari Evans, poems  
A variety of poems on both racial and universal topics
- Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*  
Fictional story that spans the African-American experience
- Alex Haley, *Roots*  
A saga of the African-American experience
- Langston Hughes, poems, stories, and essays  
The great leader of the Harlem Renaissance
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
A moving novel about a feisty African-American heroine
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*  
Nobel-Prize-winning novelist
- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*  
Powerful story of an abused young girl who grows into self-confidence and maturity

## Journal Prompts

**Directions:** Journaling is one way of interacting with a text as you read. As you read, select from the following prompts, and record responses that will help you to monitor shifts in your insights and your attitudes regarding the plot, characters, and themes.

### Before beginning to read

1. Consider the title of the book—*Native Son*—and the titles of the three books within—“Fear,” “Flight,” and “Fate.” What do they suggest to you?

### As you read “Fear”

2. What are your first impressions of Bigger’s home and family?
3. What are your thoughts about Bigger’s response to seeing the billboard of Buckley?
4. Describe Bigger’s friendship with Jack, Gus, and G. H.
5. Why does Bigger become so angry toward Gus?
6. What does Bigger’s mother feel and think about him?
7. Describe your responses to the interview of Bigger by Mr. Dalton.
8. What is Bigger’s impression of Mary Dalton in person as compared to Mary Dalton in the newsreel?
9. What is Bigger’s understanding of communism? Are his attitudes toward it positive?
10. What are Bigger’s first impressions of the Daltons’ home?
11. What were your responses to the evening Bigger spends with Mary and Jan?
12. Respond to the scene in which Jan and Mary sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”
13. What is your attitude toward Bigger at the end of the first section of the novel?
14. Why did Richard Wright use the title “Fear” for this section of the novel? Rethink and revisit your original impressions.

### As you read “Flight”

15. How does the opening scene of “Flight” compare to the opening scene of “Fear”?
16. What are your thoughts about Bigger’s decision to frame Jan?
17. Why does Bigger react so strongly to his mother’s disagreement with him about the time he got home?
18. How has Bigger changed since the beginning of the novel? Consider his interactions with his family and his friends.

19. How does Bigger react when he sees the furnace for the first time after the crime? Are his reactions understandable?
20. What are your thoughts about Bigger's dialogue and actions around Peggy? Are you surprised at his composure?
21. Describe the relationship of Bigger and Bessie.
22. Why does Bessie mention Leopold and Loeb?
23. Describe your responses to the interactions between Bigger and Britten.
24. What are your insights into Jan's character? Give textual evidence to support your ideas.
25. Why does Bigger have such a strong need to read newspapers?
26. What were your thoughts and feelings as you read about Bigger's flight over the rooftops?
27. What is the significance of the men stretching Bigger's arms out at the end of "Flight"?
28. What are your attitudes toward Bigger as you complete the second section of the novel? Do you empathize with him? Are you glad he has been caught?
29. Revisit and rethink your original impressions of the title, "Flight."

**As you read "Fate"**

30. Does Bigger understand the seriousness of his crimes? Is he remorseful? Should he be?
31. How does Bigger react to facing Mr. and Mrs. Dalton? How did you respond to his reactions?
32. Why does Bigger reject Reverend Hammond?
33. How would you describe Jan's visit to Bigger?
34. What role do the Communist Party and its principles play in this novel?
35. What are your personal reactions to Max and Buckley?
36. How does Bigger react to the sight of Bessie's body at the inquest? How did the scene affect you?
37. How does Bigger react when he is brought back to the scene of the crime? What are your responses to the scene?
38. Does Max understand Bigger? Do you?
39. Revisit and rethink your original impression of the title, "Fate."

**After you have read the entire novel**

40. As the novel concludes, how has Bigger changed? What are your attitudes toward him and his experiences?



## Cumulative Projects

**Directions:** Choose one or more of the following activities to complete your study of *Native Son*.

1. Create a dramatic version of Bigger's trial, and draft some friends to help you present it either live or in video format.
2. Create a scrapbook of photographs of the Chicago in which Bigger lived. Include brief explanatory captions.
3. Read Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and compare and contrast the male characters with Bigger Thomas.
4. Research the Harlem Renaissance, and report on its major figures and achievements.
5. Research and report on the evolution and role of the Communist Party in the United States.
6. Write an essay or create a multimedia project in which you compare and contrast the Leopold and Loeb case with the trial of Bigger Thomas.
7. Research the Scottsboro boys and their trials, and compare and contrast them with the experiences of Bigger Thomas.
8. Write an essay in which you analyze Jan's attitudes toward Bigger.
9. Write an essay about the division between black and white people as it is shown in the novel.
10. Write a series of journal entries from the point of view of Bigger's sister.
11. Create a series of drawings of key moments in the novel.
12. Write an original story in which you use Richard Wright's three topical divisions: fear, flight, and fate.
13. Analyze Max's defense of Bigger, and assess the accuracy and effectiveness of his comments.
14. Write an essay in which you relate comments in Richard Wright's "How Bigger Was Born" to the character in the novel.
15. Use your journal entries as the source of information to write an essay about how your attitudes toward Bigger changed in the course of reading the novel.

## Test: *Native Son*

### Part A.

**Directions:** Choose the best answers.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The novel takes place in
- New York City.
  - Detroit.
  - Cleveland.
  - Chicago.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What kind of lessons does Vera take?
- sewing
  - typing
  - cooking
  - Spanish
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Bigger tells Gus that he would like to be
- a racehorse jockey.
  - an airplane pilot.
  - a police officer.
  - a movie actor.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Bigger and his gang have a plan to rob the store of a man named
- Rosenthal.
  - O'Reilly.
  - Blum.
  - Baker.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. To pass the time before the planned robbery, Bigger and Jack go to
- the movies.
  - a pool hall.
  - a bar.
  - a department store.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Mrs. Thomas wants Bigger to take a job with a family named
- Buckley.
  - Wilson.
  - Rourke.
  - Dalton.

- 
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Instead of going to school, Mary meets with her friend named
- Jan.
  - Paul.
  - Jack.
  - Nathan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Jan gives Bigger
- communist pamphlets.
  - a large tip.
  - advice not to work for the white family.
  - directions to the train station.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Mary gets more than a little drunk from drinking beer and
- bourbon.
  - tequila.
  - rum.
  - vodka.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Mary plans to take a trip to
- Detroit.
  - Washington, D.C.
  - New Orleans.
  - Indianapolis.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. What emotion in Bigger leads to Mary's death?
- hatred
  - lust
  - fear
  - jealousy
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Bigger gets the blackmail idea from
- a movie.
  - Bessie.
  - a book.
  - Gus.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Who first notices that there are bones in the furnace?
- Peggy
  - a news reporter
  - Britten
  - Jan
-

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. To kill Bessie, Bigger uses
- his knife.
  - his gun.
  - a pillow.
  - a brick.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Bigger's flight from the police finally takes him to
- the shores of Lake Superior.
  - the top of a water tower.
  - an abandoned salt mine.
  - his mother's church.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. The evidence at the inquest that the bones are Mary's is
- her head.
  - a wristwatch.
  - a letter in her bedroom.
  - an earring.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Bigger refuses to
- sign a confession.
  - let his mother see him in jail.
  - reenact the murder of Mary.
  - do all of these.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Mrs. Thomas begs her son to
- pray.
  - tell the truth.
  - try to escape.
  - get a lawyer.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Bigger's lawyer's name is
- Orleone.
  - Buckley.
  - Dalton.
  - Max.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. At the end of the novel, Bigger
- falls on his knees in prayer.
  - knows he is going to die.
  - manages to escape from jail and is again in flight.
  - begins to write his autobiography.
-



## Answer Key

### Part A.

- |      |       |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. d | 6. d  | 11. c | 16. d |
| 2. a | 7. a  | 12. b | 17. c |
| 3. b | 8. a  | 13. b | 18. a |
| 4. c | 9. c  | 14. d | 19. d |
| 5. a | 10. a | 15. b | 20. b |

### Part B.

1. Richard Wright wants readers to understand that Bigger Thomas is a direct result of endemic American racism. Trapped in poverty with no realistic way of achieving the American Dream, Bigger is self-centered and focused mainly on his own physical needs. To him, white people are an oppressive collective force, not individual human beings. Bigger is not an anomaly, but one of many black people full of resentment, fear, and anger.
2. Black and white dominate the novel, which continually juxtaposes black and white skin. Bigger kills under the dark cover of night, and his skin is very dark. Mrs. Dalton is always a white miasma; many faces in the novel are starkly white; even the Dalton's cat is white, and it seems to point a finger of accusation at Bigger. In his flight over rooftops, Bigger is surrounded by white snow, and he seeks refuge atop a white water tower. Against all of this whiteness, it is easy to spot Bigger.
3. *Native Son* is divided into three sections: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." There are no smaller chapter divisions. The point of view is third person, and readers are limited to the thoughts and perceptions of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas. The dialogue reflects the realistic voices of black and white people in Chicago in the 1930s. The narrative voice, however, is educated and often studded with imagery and figurative language. The novel demonstrates the sure command of a talented writer with a strong message.

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