

Understanding the Black Male's Quest for Identity as Illustrated through *Native Son*

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The history of African-American writing is a complex subject. Since the foregrounding of this literary canon there have been writers who have attempted to present African-Americans as agents of their social realities. These writers have literally had to write Black people into history because societal norms, historically, dehumanized this group into anonymity. Some of the first writings of African-Americans that gained national attention are the ex-slave narratives which offer the reader some clues as to what the human experience of suffering was like for these people. In many ways Black writers have mimicked the tradition of depicting Black characters battling human experiences. Richard Wright is no different in these literary pursuits as he also, expressly, humanizes his characters. Nonetheless, some scholars contend that Black marginalization in literature will continue to reverberate because the Black characters exist in a White world and they are on an everlasting quest for identity. In many ways, Wright's character Bigger Thomas elucidates this argument because throughout the novel he, too, is on a quest for identity.

Social scientist, Ali Poordaryaei Nejad, is a scholar who has written on the identity crisis that Black characters face in literature. Nejad's article entitled, *Foregrounding the Quest for Lost Identity in Wright's Native Son*, offers a contemporary understanding of the novel. Of Black characters, Nejad writes, "they will be marginalized and racial

merger will make them quest their own real identity, because they have become the emptied out shell." He contends that because Blackness is so diverse and Whiteness is so sovereign that Black people are becoming lost in the White world because their various character traits are suppressed by the oppressive presence of Whiteness. His argument is one in which he presents Blacks as an "emptied-out shell" and another in which he echoes the sentiment that Whites are "sovereign," meaning they reign supreme, even in Black literature.

One might contend that Nejad does not take into account that this "emptied-out shell" to which he refers is not influenced first by White sovereignty but by that of a Black parental figure. This is true in many African-American writings. The main character in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates this through the earlier teaching of the grandfather. Similarly, *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas is influenced heavily by his mother in the beginning of the novel. It is this interaction that forges the foregrounding for Bigger's continuous search for identity in the novel.

The quest for identity can be seen in the opening scene of *Native Son* in which Bigger is the father-like figure of his home and is tasked with the responsibility of ridding his home of the big Black rat. In those earlier moments he is the savior of his home. During those same moments his child-like nature resonates when he plays on his sister's fear

of the rat. In the beginning Bigger's mother screams, "There he is again, Bigger!" Thus, the parent is depending on her child for protection. In a later breath, after Bigger begins to act child-like again, she scolds him, "Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do." One could contend that it is situations similar to this that confuses Bigger. Is he an adult that can save his family in times of great peril? Or is he an immature teenager that still requires scolding for bad behavior? This psychological issue could quite possibly be viewed as his first identity crisis. Surely, it is plausible that Bigger is forced to be whoever people need him to be at any given moment. However, how does this personality shift impact Bigger?

One other way that the quest for identity presents itself is in Bigger's gang affiliations. In his article, Nejad writes, "In this sense, Aime J. Ellis claims that 'social grouping among poor urban black males was a strategy meant to ease psychological anxiety and to make a sense of a world filled with racial terror'...it is for the same reason that Bigger joins the gang." The claim that social grouping is a coping mechanism used "to ease psychological anxiety" is definitely legitimate. However, this argument fails to account for the mental confusion that social groups can also cause. There are a few instances in the novel in which Bigger's friends add to his psychological trauma. Also, instead of "making sense of a world filled with racial terror" they further exacerbate this worldly understanding.

Concomitantly, there are several examples of friends adding to psychological trauma as we explore the scenes in the novel that depict Bigger Thomas with his friends. A great illumination of this relationship is present when Bigger asks Gus

to play "White." Although, Gus rejects Bigger's request in the beginning he soon acquiesces to Bigger's will and plays the game. Whiteness for Bigger, at first, is a military captain who is well versed in military strategy. However, for Gus, Whiteness represents money, power, and industrial control. Gus states, "This is Mr. J.P. Morgan speaking.....I want to sell twenty thousand shares of U.S. Steele in the market this morning." And Bigger replies, "At what price, suh?" This line confirms that Bigger believes that no matter what is being sold, White people, at a whim, simply ask the price. In many ways Gus has just added to Bigger's identity crisis because he made a statement about economics, industry, and capital and Bigger accepts it as the dominant reality. Clearly, there exists an issue when two Black boys feel that the only way they can ever feel powerful is to play "White." Playing White allows them to create a new identity one of which is more powerful, intelligent, and richer than their own.

Thus, Nejad's claim that the sovereignty of Whiteness presented in Black literature is to blame for the identity crisis is not holistically true. In fact, the real culprit for this crisis is Black perceptions of Whiteness not necessarily Whiteness itself. There is a scene from the novel in which the perceptions of Whiteness presents itself through a song that Gus and Bigger sing, the lyrics are: "Zoooooom.....They got everything.....They own the world." It is thoughts such as these that play out in the grand scheme of Bigger's life, circumstances, and consequences. Also, one might even argue that it is the depreciation of Blackness that really plagues Bigger in his quest for identity.

One common reading of *Native Son* suggests that the search for identity revolves

completely around the search for power. Many scholars argue that Whiteness, in the novel, is seen as this “great natural force” arguably Whiteness is power and Blackness is powerlessness. This assessment is very questionable. It would be ignorant to disagree that there is not a preoccupation with the color White in the novel but one must note that White is the contrast color to Black. In that regard White does not serve as the representation of this looming power, yet, simply as a presence to expose what is Black.

Thus, Bigger discovers himself when he loses his perceptions of Whiteness as more powerful than him. There is one incident that leads to this new discovery of self. It is the scene in which Bigger is taking the drunk, Mary Dalton, to her room and in an attempt to keep her quiet he mistakenly suffocates her to death. Then the fear of what he had just done overcomes him and he decapitates Mary and throws her body in the furnace to get rid of any evidence. The first part of Mary’s murder is purely accidental but the events that follow are clearly well thought out and executed. Thus, Bigger for the first time has committed a crime against a White person.

In this new found discovery of self that comes with facing his fears, Bigger concocts a plan to receive a ransom for the missing Mary Dalton. His plan, for a while, goes off seamlessly, however, after a while pieces of Bigger’s story begin to unravel and he finds himself in a situation where he needs to run. Bigger at this point is on such of a power high that he decides that he wants to see how it will all unfold before he leaves. Here is where it can be argued that Bigger’s sense of Blackness—power—comes into the equation. He actually feels that he can get away with what he has done. Wright writes, “Again the thought that he had the chance

to walk out of here and be clear of it all came to him, and again he brushed it aside. He was tensely eager to...see how it would all end, even if that end swallowed him in [B]lackness.” At this point Bigger does not care if he gets away with his crime, the fact that he has out-witted all these White people is prize enough for him. Arguably, this is an allusion to those who sacrifice themselves for their people. While Bigger does not view himself as a hero he does see himself as powerful. The argument can surely be made that Bigger Thomas could fit into the conceptualization of a sacrificial lamb. Hence, Bigger Thomas’s identity lies in his self-sacrifice and surrender.

So how is Bigger Thomas on a quest for identity and does he ever find it? While it is not expressively possible to conclude that Bigger “finds” himself, he might be viewed as a sacrificial lamb by some. Surely, Ali Poordaryaei Nejad’s *Foregrounding the Quest for Lost Identity in Wright's Native Son* does offer some contemporary understanding of a classic novel, but the overall scheme of things is somewhat neglected in a few instances of the work. Nejad suggests that “White sovereignty” and the idea of this Black “empty shell” marginalizes Black characters but one could contend, as this research does, that those Black character’s marginalization begins even before any interaction with a White presence. Their marginality starts with a parental Black figure that offers them some advice about coping in society. Another important part of the identity quest involves friends. Nejad argues that social grouping is a coping mechanism that offers Bigger Thomas a sense of sanity in a racialized society; however, one could contend that social grouping can further confound one’s understanding of society. *Native Son* presents this bewilderment in the scene in

which Bigger and Gus play “White.” However, this identity quest comes to an end when bigger faces his fears about the “all powerful” White presence. Thus, Bigger understands his power when he tricks

the White characters into believing his story. His power high cause him to act irrational and in many ways bigger loses himself again in a psychosis of power.

References:

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