

SYSTEMIC RACISM, ECONOMIC OPPRESSION, AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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Abstract

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) remains one of the most powerful literary examinations of race, poverty, fear, violence, and institutional injustice in twentieth-century American fiction. The novel narrates the tragic life of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man living in segregated Chicago, whose experiences reveal the destructive relationship between systemic racism and economic oppression. This paper examines the ways in which Wright represents the criminal justice system not as an isolated institution but as part of a broader social structure that regulates housing, employment, education, public opinion, and racial identity. Bigger's tragedy is therefore studied as both an individual and a social phenomenon. While the novel does not excuse his violent actions, it compels readers to examine the historical and material conditions that shape his fears, choices, and psychological conflicts. The paper further explores the interconnected themes of racial segregation, economic deprivation, fear, identity, violence, and legal injustice. To broaden the discussion, *Native Son* is comparatively examined alongside Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. These works differ in style, setting, and characterization, yet all reveal how racism functions through institutions as well as through personal prejudice. The comparative analysis demonstrates that racial oppression produces different psychological consequences, including fear, anger, invisibility, self-alienation, and internalized self-hatred. The study argues that *Native Son* is particularly significant because Wright connects social inequality with psychological damage and criminalization. Bigger Thomas is neither presented simply as a monster nor as an innocent victim. Instead, he emerges as a deeply contradictory figure whose destructive actions are shaped within a society that has consistently denied him dignity, security, and meaningful opportunity. Ultimately, the paper contends that Wright's novel remains relevant because it exposes the continuing relationship between structural inequality, racial prejudice, economic exclusion, media representation, and unequal justice.

Keywords: Richard Wright, *Native Son*, systemic racism, economic oppression, criminal justice system, fear, identity, violence, racial inequality

Introduction

Richard Wright's *Native Son*, published in 1940, occupies a central place in African American literary history because of its uncompromising representation of racism and its psychological consequences. The novel tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young Black man living with his family in Chicago during the 1930s. Bigger's life is marked by poverty, racial segregation, restricted opportunity, fear, and an increasing sense of alienation from the society around him. His accidental killing of Mary Dalton and the subsequent murder of Bessie Mears lead to his arrest, trial, and execution. However, the significance of the novel extends far beyond the narrative of crime and punishment. Wright uses Bigger's experiences to investigate the social conditions that shape human behaviour.

The central concern of *Native Son* is the relationship between the individual and the social system. Bigger Thomas makes choices for which he must bear responsibility, yet Wright repeatedly asks whether those choices can be understood independently of the conditions in which Bigger has lived. Bigger is not born into a world of freedom and equal opportunity. He grows up in a society structured by racial segregation and economic inequality. His movements, ambitions, employment opportunities, and sense of personal identity are limited by the racial order of his environment. The novel therefore raises an uncomfortable question: what happens to an individual's personality when society consistently treats that individual as dangerous, inferior, or unworthy of full humanity?

The uploaded draft identifies this concern as central to Wright's novel, emphasizing that Bigger's life is shaped by systemic oppression and that the narrative connects racism with fear, psychological conflict, violence, poverty, and social injustice. This research paper develops those arguments through a more sustained literary and comparative analysis.

A major strength of *Native Son* is that it refuses simple explanations. Bigger cannot be described merely as an innocent victim because his actions cause profound suffering. At the same time, Wright refuses to present him as an isolated criminal whose behaviour can be understood only as the result of individual moral failure. Bigger's violence develops within a social environment that has already subjected him to fear, humiliation, deprivation, and restricted possibilities. His criminal actions therefore exist within a larger history of racial and economic oppression.

The novel's treatment of the criminal justice system is particularly important. After Bigger is identified as Mary's killer, he is immediately transformed into a public symbol of racial fear. The legal process does not occur in a neutral social environment. Public opinion, newspaper representation, racial prejudice, and the presumption of Black criminality influence the way in which Bigger is perceived. His trial consequently becomes an extension of the same racial system that has already limited his life.

This paper argues that *Native Son* presents racism as a structural force operating through multiple institutions. Housing discrimination confines Bigger's family to overcrowded and impoverished conditions. Economic inequality restricts his access to meaningful employment and social mobility. White authority creates an atmosphere of constant fear. The media constructs him as a racial monster, while the criminal justice system appears to confirm the assumptions already made about him. Wright's critique is therefore comprehensive: racism is not

represented merely as an attitude held by individual characters but as a system embedded within social institutions.

To deepen this discussion, the paper compares *Native Son* with three other important American novels: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. These texts provide distinct perspectives on racism and its consequences. *To Kill a Mockingbird* focuses on racial prejudice within the legal system and the failure of justice. *Invisible Man* examines racial invisibility and the struggle for identity. *The Bluest Eye* explores internalized racism and the destructive effect of racialized standards of beauty. Together, these novels demonstrate that racism affects both the external conditions of life and the internal construction of identity.

The paper therefore examines *Native Son* through five major areas: systemic racism and segregation; fear and psychological conflict; identity and self-realization; violence and social protest; and economic inequality and criminal justice. It then places these concerns within a comparative framework to demonstrate the different ways American fiction has represented racial oppression.

Systemic Racism and the Social World of *Native Son*

The concept of systemic racism is essential to understanding *Native Son*. Wright does not portray racism simply through individual acts of hatred or insult. Instead, he demonstrates how racial inequality is built into the organization of society. Bigger's life is limited long before he commits any crime. The social world he inhabits has already established boundaries concerning where he may live, what opportunities he may pursue, and how he is expected to behave in the presence of white people.

Bigger and his family live in the Black Belt of Chicago, an environment characterized by overcrowding and poverty. The living conditions are not represented as accidental. They are connected to larger structures of racial segregation and economic exploitation. Bigger's family does not possess the freedom to compete equally for housing or economic security. The space in which they live reflects the limited social space available to Black Americans.

The original draft similarly emphasizes that Bigger is trapped within a segregated society where housing, employment, and personal opportunity are severely restricted. This restriction is important because Wright presents it as psychological as well as material. Bigger's environment teaches him to anticipate danger. He is constantly aware that white authority possesses the power to control or punish him.

The Dalton family represents one of the novel's most significant contradictions. The Daltons appear charitable and socially respectable, yet their wealth is connected to a housing system that exploits Black tenants. Their philanthropy therefore exists alongside participation in economic inequality. Wright uses this contradiction to criticize liberal paternalism. Good intentions do not eliminate structural injustice when individuals continue to benefit from systems that produce inequality.

The Daltons' treatment of Bigger also reveals the limitations of racial liberalism. Mary and Jan believe that they are rejecting conventional racism because they attempt to treat Bigger as an equal. However, their behaviour fails to recognize his actual social position. Their attempts at friendliness place Bigger in situations for which the racial order has not prepared him. They do not fully understand that Bigger cannot simply forget the consequences of being a Black man in a white-controlled society.

Wright's representation of racism is therefore more complex than a simple opposition between openly racist and non-racist characters. Even those who consider themselves sympathetic may participate in systems they do not fully understand. The problem is structural. Individual kindness cannot easily remove the economic, legal, and psychological consequences of institutional racism.

Bigger's sense of confinement is thus central to the novel. He repeatedly experiences life as a series of boundaries. These boundaries are geographical, economic, racial, and psychological. He cannot imagine unlimited possibilities for himself because his environment has already defined the limits of what appears possible.

This does not mean that Wright presents Bigger as completely without agency. Rather, the novel examines the difficult relationship between agency and limitation. Bigger acts, makes decisions, and commits crimes. Yet the range of possibilities available to him has been shaped by a history of exclusion. Wright asks readers to consider whether individual responsibility can be understood adequately without examining the conditions that influence individual choices.

Fear as a Psychological Consequence of Oppression

Fear is one of the most powerful forces in Bigger Thomas's life. Before his encounter with the Dalton family, Bigger already experiences the world as threatening. His fear is not simply a personal weakness. It develops from a social environment in which racial boundaries are constantly enforced.

Fear affects Bigger's behaviour in contradictory ways. It makes him cautious and defensive, but it also produces anger. He often appears emotionally detached because emotional vulnerability is dangerous in a world where he expects humiliation. His hostility toward others can therefore be understood partly as a defensive response.

The original paper correctly identifies Bigger's fear of white authority, punishment, humiliation, and loss of control as central to his psychological development. A refined analysis must add that this fear is inseparable from social knowledge. Bigger understands that his body is already interpreted through racial stereotypes. He knows that an interaction with a white woman can become dangerous because the consequences are determined not only by his intentions but by the racial imagination of society.

This awareness becomes crucial during the episode involving Mary Dalton. Mary's accidental death produces immediate terror because Bigger recognizes the racial meaning that the event will acquire. The possibility of being discovered with a dead white woman is inseparable from the history of racial violence and stereotypes surrounding Black male sexuality. Bigger's panic leads him to conceal the crime, and his attempt to avoid punishment produces further violence. Wright thus demonstrates how fear can generate a destructive chain of decisions. Fear does not remove Bigger's responsibility, but it explains the psychological intensity of his actions.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the novel is Bigger's relationship with power. Throughout his life, he has experienced power as something possessed by others. His environment teaches him that he is controlled rather than controlling. After committing violence, he briefly experiences a disturbing sense of agency. He has acted in a way that changes the world around him, even though that action is criminal and destructive.

This experience is psychologically significant. Bigger's violence cannot be reduced to a political protest, yet Wright suggests that violence temporarily gives Bigger a sense of existence and

power that he has rarely experienced. The act becomes connected with his desire to escape invisibility and powerlessness.

Fear therefore has a paradoxical role in the novel. It restricts Bigger, but it also contributes to his violent attempt to overcome restriction. The result is tragic because the form of agency he discovers is inseparable from destruction.

Wright's psychological analysis is especially important here. The novel does not suggest that poverty automatically produces violence or that oppressed people are naturally violent. Instead, it examines one individual's response to a particular combination of fear, humiliation, social confinement, and personal circumstance.

Identity, Alienation, and Tragic Self-Realization

Bigger's struggle with identity is one of the deepest dimensions of *Native Son*. He lives in a society that has already created an image of what a Black man is supposed to be. He is expected to occupy a limited social position, and his individuality is frequently ignored.

This process produces alienation. Bigger does not possess a stable sense of who he is because he has learned to see himself through the expectations and fears of others. He is aware that white society sees him as dangerous, inferior, or threatening. Yet he cannot completely escape these definitions.

The uploaded draft emphasizes that Bigger is treated as a stereotype rather than as an individual and that even apparently liberal characters fail to understand his complex humanity. This observation can be extended through the concept of racial objectification. Bigger is constantly interpreted before he is understood. His identity is determined by social assumptions. His crimes create a tragic form of self-realization. After Mary's death, Bigger begins to feel that his actions possess consequences. For perhaps the first time, he experiences himself as someone capable of producing change. This realization is morally complicated because it emerges through violence.

The novel's tragedy lies partly in this contradiction. Bigger discovers a sense of agency through an act that destroys another human life and ultimately contributes to his own destruction. Wright therefore presents self-realization without romanticizing it.

Bigger's later conversations with Boris Max are significant because they provide an opportunity for reflection. In prison, Bigger begins to articulate some of the feelings that have previously remained confused and unexpressed. His consciousness develops as he confronts death.

The question of identity consequently becomes inseparable from the question of freedom. Can a person develop a healthy identity when society denies that person's full humanity? Wright does not provide an easy answer. Instead, he shows that Bigger's identity has developed under conditions that make healthy self-expression extremely difficult.

The novel therefore challenges readers to distinguish between explanation and justification. Understanding the social forces that shape Bigger does not mean excusing his actions. Rather, it means recognizing that moral judgment alone cannot explain the tragedy.

Violence as Expression, Destruction, and Social Symptom

Violence is unavoidable in any serious study of *Native Son*. Bigger commits acts of violence that cannot be ignored or defended. However, Wright insists that these acts must be placed within their social context.

Bigger's violence is connected with suppressed fear and anger. Years of humiliation and exclusion have produced emotional pressure that he has never been able to express

constructively. The uploaded draft describes his violence as an eruption of repressed frustration while also noting that Wright does not justify the murders.

This distinction is essential. Wright's purpose is not to transform Bigger into a heroic revolutionary. Bigger's violence is confused, destructive, and often directed toward those who are themselves vulnerable. His murder of Bessie is particularly important because it prevents readers from reducing him to a simple symbol of resistance.

Bessie's death reveals the destructive consequences of Bigger's desperation. She too is a victim of poverty and racial inequality, yet she becomes another victim of Bigger's violence. Wright thereby complicates any attempt to interpret Bigger's actions as a direct political rebellion.

Nevertheless, violence in the novel also exposes the violence of society. Bigger's crimes receive enormous public attention, but the structural violence that shaped his life is treated as normal. Segregation, poverty, exploitation, humiliation, and racial discrimination do not always appear as spectacular forms of violence, yet they produce lasting damage.

The novel therefore asks readers to recognize different forms of violence. Physical murder is visible and immediately condemned. Economic exploitation and racial exclusion may be less visible, but they also shape lives and restrict human possibilities.

The response to Bigger's crimes further demonstrates institutional violence. Public fear, media sensationalism, and legal punishment transform him into an object of collective hatred. His individuality disappears beneath the image of the racial criminal.

Wright's achievement lies in making the reader confront both forms of violence: the violence committed by Bigger and the violence of the society that produced the conditions of his life.

Economic Oppression and the Politics of Poverty

Economic inequality is inseparable from racial oppression in *Native Son*. Bigger's family experiences poverty not simply because of personal failure but because racial discrimination restricts access to housing, employment, and social mobility.

The original draft rightly emphasizes that Bigger's family depends upon limited resources and that the Daltons profit from the economic vulnerability of Black tenants. The economic structure of the novel therefore reinforces its racial structure.

Poverty affects Bigger's imagination. When an individual lacks access to meaningful opportunities, the future may appear already closed. Bigger's frustration is connected not only with what he possesses but with what he believes he can never become.

Economic oppression also produces dependency. The Black community is often forced to negotiate with institutions controlled by white economic power. Bigger's employment with the Dalton family illustrates this relationship. The job offers temporary financial improvement, but it does not provide equality.

The Daltons' economic position is especially revealing because they embody a contradiction between philanthropy and exploitation. They can support charitable causes while benefiting from a housing system that restricts Black families. Wright suggests that individual charity cannot substitute for structural justice.

This critique remains significant because economic inequality is frequently treated as separate from racial discrimination. *Native Son* demonstrates that the two systems reinforce one another. Racial segregation creates economic vulnerability, while economic vulnerability limits the ability to challenge racial oppression.

The novel therefore rejects explanations that blame Bigger's poverty entirely on personal choices. His choices exist within a social environment structured by inequality.

The Criminal Justice System and the Criminalization of Bigger Thomas

The criminal justice system in *Native Son* is not presented as an entirely impartial institution. By the time Bigger enters the courtroom, his identity has already been constructed by the media and public imagination.

The question is not simply whether Bigger committed crimes. He did. The deeper question concerns the meaning attached to his crimes and the process through which he is transformed into a racial symbol.

Bigger's trial occurs within an atmosphere of fear and prejudice. The public does not see only an individual accused of murder. It sees a figure onto whom existing racial anxieties can be projected.

The uploaded source argues that Bigger's fate appears to be influenced by a justice system shaped by racial bias and that Boris Max attempts to connect Bigger's actions with the social conditions that formed him.

Max's argument is important because it expands the meaning of responsibility. He does not claim that Bigger committed no crime. Instead, he asks whether a society that produces fear, segregation, poverty, and racial humiliation bears some responsibility for the conditions under which violence develops.

This argument challenges the conventional separation between the criminal and society. Wright suggests that society cannot simply punish the individual while refusing to examine the environment that shaped that individual.

The legal system therefore becomes part of the novel's larger critique of institutional racism. The same society that denied Bigger meaningful opportunities later judges him as though he developed outside that society.

This does not mean that the law should ignore crime. Rather, Wright exposes the limitations of a justice system that focuses entirely on punishment while ignoring structural causes.

Bigger's criminalization also reveals the power of racial stereotypes. His identity is simplified. The complexity of his fear, poverty, and psychological conflict is replaced by a single image: the Black criminal.

The transformation is politically significant. Once Bigger is viewed only as a monster, society no longer needs to ask difficult questions about its own role in creating the conditions of his life.

Comparison with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Both *Native Son* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* examine racism within the criminal justice system. However, the novels differ significantly in their treatment of crime, innocence, and social responsibility.

Tom Robinson is falsely accused of raping a white woman. Despite evidence that should create reasonable doubt, racial prejudice determines the outcome of his trial. The legal system fails because white supremacy is more powerful than justice.

Bigger Thomas, by contrast, is guilty of serious crimes. The injustice in *Native Son* therefore operates differently. Wright does not construct his argument around the wrongful conviction of an innocent man. Instead, he asks whether a guilty individual can still be understood as a product of an unjust society.

The uploaded comparative section identifies this important difference: Lee emphasizes moral courage through figures such as Atticus Finch, while Wright offers a darker vision of a system so deeply embedded that individual goodwill cannot easily transform it.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch represents the possibility of individual ethical resistance. His defence of Tom Robinson demonstrates moral courage in a prejudiced society. The novel therefore retains a degree of faith in personal integrity.

Native Son is more structurally pessimistic. Wright is less interested in finding an individual hero who can rescue the oppressed. Bigger does not encounter a figure capable of protecting him from the social forces surrounding him.

The comparison demonstrates two different literary approaches to racial injustice. Lee exposes the failure of legal justice when racial prejudice determines a verdict. Wright investigates the deeper historical and social conditions that may produce crime itself.

Both novels remain important because they reveal different dimensions of the same problem: justice cannot be genuinely impartial when society is structured by racial inequality.

Comparison with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

The comparison between *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is particularly useful because both novels explore the relationship between racism and identity.

Ellison's unnamed narrator experiences racial invisibility. He is not literally unseen; rather, society refuses to recognize his individuality. Others see him through stereotypes and ideological expectations.

Bigger experiences a similar form of reduction. He is also interpreted through racial stereotypes. However, his psychological response is different.

The uploaded draft accurately distinguishes Bigger's rage from the introspective development of Ellison's narrator. Bigger's anger often becomes external and destructive, whereas Ellison's narrator gradually moves toward reflection and self-understanding.

The difference in response demonstrates that oppression does not produce a single psychological outcome. Some individuals may respond through anger, others through withdrawal, reflection, accommodation, or resistance.

Both novels, however, reveal the destructive consequences of being denied individuality. Bigger is treated as a potential criminal before he becomes one. Ellison's narrator is treated as a symbol rather than as a complete human being.

In both texts, the struggle for identity involves resisting externally imposed definitions.

The difference lies in the narrative movement. *Invisible Man* moves toward introspection and the possibility of constructing a self beyond social expectations. *Native Son* moves toward tragedy. Bigger's attempt to establish a sense of existence occurs through destructive action and ultimately leads to death.

Together, the novels demonstrate the psychological consequences of racial oppression. Racism does not merely restrict material opportunity; it also influences the way individuals imagine themselves.

Comparison with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* provides another important perspective on the psychological consequences of racism. While *Native Son* focuses strongly on external structures such as housing, employment, and law, *The Bluest Eye* examines the internalization of racial values.

Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes reveals the destructive influence of a society that associates beauty, value, and acceptance with whiteness. She gradually internalizes the belief that her own identity is inadequate.

The uploaded draft notes that Bigger's psychological response becomes outwardly violent, whereas Pecola's oppression is internalized through self-hatred and psychological collapse. This comparison is particularly important because it expands the meaning of racial oppression. Racism can produce anger and rebellion, but it can also produce shame and self-rejection. Both Bigger and Pecola experience a world in which racial hierarchy influences their understanding of themselves. Bigger feels confined by a society that fears and criminalizes him. Pecola feels worthless because society defines beauty according to white standards. The psychological outcomes are different, but the underlying structure is similar: external systems become internal experiences. Morrison's novel therefore complements Wright's critique. *Native Son* reveals the explosive consequences of social confinement, while *The Bluest Eye* reveals the quieter but equally destructive consequences of internalized racism. Together, the two novels demonstrate that systemic oppression affects both behaviour and consciousness.

Shared Themes across the Four Novels

Although *Native Son*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Invisible Man*, and *The Bluest Eye* differ significantly in style and historical setting, several common themes emerge from a comparative reading.

First, racism is institutional. Housing systems, courts, schools, employment structures, and cultural values can all reinforce racial inequality. The uploaded draft similarly identifies institutional, psychological, and socially normalized racism as common concerns across these works.

Second, racism affects psychological identity. Bigger experiences fear and rage. Ellison's narrator experiences invisibility and confusion. Pecola internalizes feelings of inadequacy. Tom Robinson becomes a victim of a legal system that refuses to recognize his innocence because of racial prejudice.

Third, racism is frequently normalized. Social systems may present inequality as ordinary, traditional, or inevitable. This normalization makes oppression more difficult to challenge because it becomes embedded within everyday life.

Fourth, the novels demonstrate different responses to oppression. These responses include moral resistance, violence, introspection, withdrawal, and psychological collapse.

The comparative approach therefore reveals an important literary truth: racism does not create one universal experience. Its effects depend upon gender, class, social environment, personal history, and the particular institutions through which oppression operates.

Contemporary Relevance of *Native Son*

More than eight decades after its publication, *Native Son* continues to generate discussion because the issues it raises have not disappeared. Racial inequality, economic exclusion, residential segregation, media representation, and debates about criminal justice remain significant concerns.

The continuing relevance of the novel does not mean that contemporary society is identical to the America represented by Wright. Historical conditions have changed, and any serious analysis must recognize those differences. Nevertheless, the novel remains valuable because it provides a framework for examining the relationship between structural inequality and individual experience.

Wright's central insight is that social systems influence psychological life. A society that repeatedly communicates fear, inferiority, and exclusion does not merely create external inequality. It also affects the way individuals understand themselves and others.

The original draft concludes that *Native Son* remains relevant because racial injustice and inequality continue to shape social life and because the novel forces readers to confront the relationship between dignity, opportunity, fear, and destruction.

This relevance also explains why the novel remains controversial. *Native Son* does not provide a comfortable moral lesson. Bigger is difficult to defend, but Wright makes it equally difficult to dismiss him.

The reader must confront two realities at the same time: Bigger is responsible for terrible acts, and Bigger has been formed within a society structured by racial oppression.

The power of the novel lies precisely in this refusal to simplify responsibility.

Findings of the Study

The analysis produces the following major findings:

First, *Native Son* presents racism as systemic rather than merely individual. Wright connects racial prejudice with housing, employment, public opinion, and legal institutions.

Second, economic oppression is inseparable from racial oppression. Bigger's poverty and limited opportunities are produced within a broader structure of segregation and discrimination.

Third, fear is a central psychological consequence of systemic racism. Bigger's fear influences his relationships, decisions, and understanding of power.

Fourth, Bigger's identity is shaped by alienation and racial stereotyping. His tragic self-realization emerges through destructive acts because society has denied him meaningful forms of recognition and agency.

Fifth, Wright presents violence as both an individual crime and a social symptom. The novel does not excuse Bigger's actions, but it demands an examination of the conditions that contributed to them.

Sixth, the criminal justice system is shown as operating within a racially prejudiced social environment. Bigger is judged not only for what he has done but also through the racial image imposed upon him.

Seventh, the comparison with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Invisible Man*, and *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates the diverse consequences of systemic racism. These include legal injustice, invisibility, rage, identity conflict, internalized self-hatred, and psychological collapse.

Conclusion

Richard Wright's *Native Son* remains a powerful literary study of the destructive relationship between systemic racism, economic oppression, psychological conflict, and the criminal justice system. Through the character of Bigger Thomas, Wright demonstrates that individual behaviour cannot be understood entirely apart from the social conditions in which that individual has been formed.

Bigger's life is shaped by segregation, poverty, restricted opportunity, and fear. These conditions do not excuse his crimes, but they provide the necessary context for understanding the psychological world in which those crimes occur. Wright's achievement lies in his refusal to separate individual tragedy from social responsibility.

The novel presents racism as a structure operating through institutions rather than simply as personal hatred. Housing discrimination confines Bigger's family to poverty. Economic

inequality restricts opportunity. Racial stereotypes influence social interaction. The media transforms Bigger into a symbol of Black criminality, while the criminal justice system operates within a society already shaped by racial prejudice.

The psychological consequences of this environment are equally important. Bigger experiences fear, anger, alienation, and an unstable sense of identity. His violent actions become tragically connected with his desire to experience power and existence. Yet the power he discovers is destructive, demonstrating the devastating consequences of a society that denies individuals constructive forms of agency.

The comparative analysis strengthens this argument. *To Kill a Mockingbird* exposes racial prejudice within the legal system through the wrongful conviction of Tom Robinson. *Invisible Man* explores the experience of racial invisibility and the struggle to develop an independent identity. *The Bluest Eye* reveals how racial ideology can become internalized, producing self-hatred and psychological destruction. Together with *Native Son*, these novels demonstrate that racism affects institutions, communities, bodies, and consciousness.

Wright's contribution is particularly distinctive because he connects social oppression with the production of fear and violence. He asks readers to recognize that a society cannot deny people dignity and opportunity and then refuse to consider the consequences of that denial.

Ultimately, *Native Son* is not simply a novel about murder or punishment. It is a profound examination of how social structures enter individual consciousness. Bigger Thomas's tragedy emerges from the intersection of personal action and historical oppression. He is neither a figure who can be understood only as a victim nor one who can be dismissed merely as a monster. He is a deeply contradictory human being shaped within a deeply unequal society.

For this reason, *Native Son* continues to hold an important place in discussions of literature, race, poverty, crime, and justice. Wright compels readers to move beyond simple explanations and confront the relationship between structural inequality and human behaviour. The novel's enduring message is that justice cannot be separated from the social conditions in which people live. A society that seeks to understand crime must also examine poverty, exclusion, fear, prejudice, and the institutions that distribute power unequally.

The tragedy of Bigger Thomas is therefore both personal and collective. His story represents the consequences of an environment in which racial identity determines opportunity and in which economic oppression reinforces social exclusion. By exposing this relationship, Richard Wright transforms *Native Son* into a lasting critique of injustice and a challenging exploration of the relationship between society and the individual.

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