



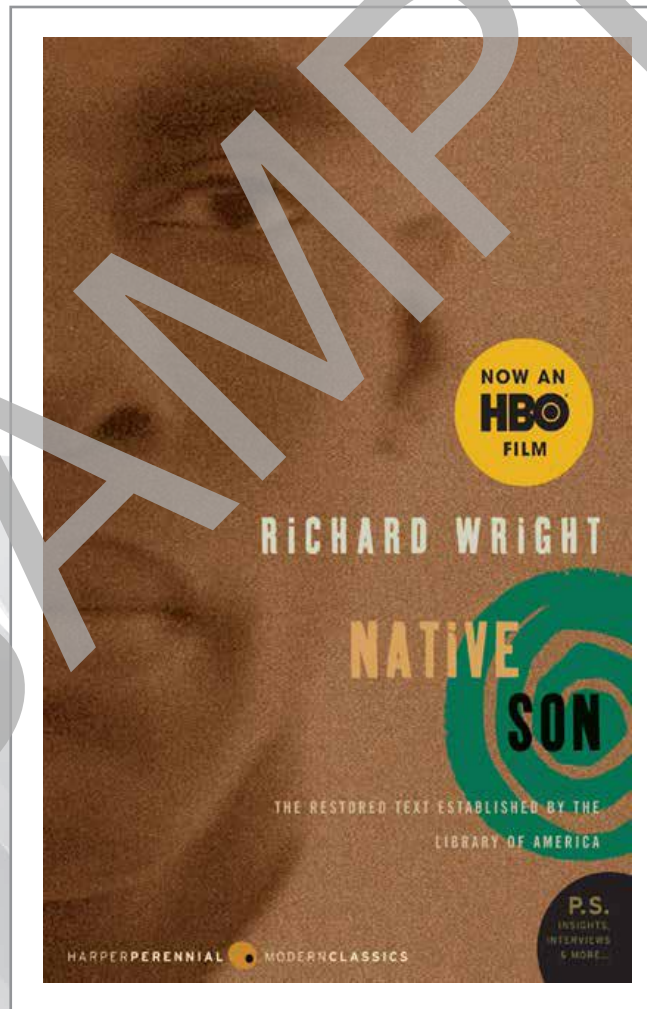
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Native Son

Richard Wright



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Native Son

Richard Wright

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Compare/contrast,
brainstorming, research,
discussion

Comprehension

Main idea, predicting

Writing

Response log, short story,
creative writing

Vocabulary

Literary Elements

Foreshadowing, setting,
characterization, naturalism,
dialect, symbolism, point
of view, suspense

Listening/Speaking

Role playing

Other

Geography, drama,
stream of consciousness

Summary of *Native Son*

Book One: Fear

The story opens on a morning scene of poverty—a cramped, decrepit apartment in the predominantly black Chicago ghetto where Bigger Thomas lives with his mother, his sister Vera, and his brother Buddy. After smashing a rat with a skillet, Bigger angrily promises his nagging mother that he will show up for his new job that evening. Later he and his friend Gus commiserate about how whites have control of everything. They walk to the pool room to meet their friends Jack and G.H. and plan to rob Blum's store.

With several hours to kill before the robbery, Jack and Bigger go to a movie. While watching a newsreel that shows wealthy young white women lolling on Florida beaches, Bigger recognizes one—Mary Dalton—as the daughter of the man he is about to begin working for. Bigger and Jack return to the pool hall and Bigger—who won't admit that he is afraid to rob a white person—turns his fear and anger on Gus. He holds a knife to Gus's throat, makes him lick the blade, then slashes a pool table with the knife. Having effectively but subconsciously sabotaged the robbery plans, Bigger goes home for his gun and heads off to his new job.

The kindly but patronizing housekeeper, Peggy, lets him in and Bigger is overwhelmed by the lavish surroundings. Peggy reveals that the Daltons give millions to charity for blacks; ironically Mr. Dalton also owns many run-down tenements in the ghetto, including the apartment where Bigger lives. Bigger is introduced to Mr. Dalton, to Mrs. Dalton—who is blind—and to Mary, who unintentionally humiliates Bigger by asking if he belongs to a union.

Bigger's main duty is to serve as chauffeur, and that night he is instructed to drive Mary to the university. En route, Mary lets him in on a secret: she is really going to spend the evening with her friend, Jan (a Communist activist of whom her parents disapprove). Jan and Mary, who consider themselves "friends of the Negroes" decide to drive around the ghetto and eat there. Jan takes the wheel of the car, and Bigger grows increasingly uncomfortable as they insist that he sit in the front with them, go into the restaurant and eat with them, and get drunk with them.

Afterwards, Bigger drops Jan off and returns with Mary to the Daltons', but he finds that she is too drunk to climb the stairs. He carries her to her bedroom. Horrified and afraid of being immediately fired when Mrs. Dalton appears in the doorway, he puts a pillow over Mary's face to prevent her from revealing his presence in the room. When he realizes that he has accidentally killed her, he begins planning how to cast Jan as the murderer. After putting her body in a trunk, he carries Mary to the furnace in the basement, hacks off her head so that she will fit inside, burns her body, and takes money from her purse before discarding it.

Vocabulary • Discussion Questions

Writing Ideas • Activities

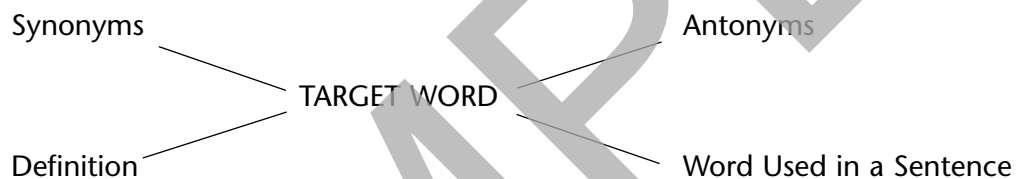
Book One: Fear, Pages 1-50

Vocabulary

galvanized (2)	convulsively (5)	abstractedly (6)	prophecy (8)
vestibule (11)	florid (12)	graft (12)	diligently (14)
plumage (16)	deference (17)	pensive (18)	sonorous (18)
adulation (19)	solar plexus (22)	compounded (23)	succumb (31)
mollifying (41)			

Vocabulary Activity

Word mapping is an activity that lends itself to any vocabulary list. For words that have no antonyms, students can provide a picture or symbol that captures the word meaning.



Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Wright opens the story with the rat episode? What do you learn from it about the setting of the story? (*Bigger has grown up in a shabby environment with no privacy.*) What do you learn from that episode about the relationships between the family members? (*Bigger's mother wants him to handle problems as the "man of the family."*) What do you learn about Bigger? How does he feel about killing the rat? (*He is angry, then satisfied, then enjoys frightening his sister with the body.*)
2. Why does Bigger's mother blame him for the family's situation? (*He hasn't gotten a steady job to support them. She says that the only reason he is accepting the job is because relief is threatening to cut off his food.*) Do you think she is being unfair? What would she say about welfare reform proposals?
3. Why do you think Bigger's mother is "prophesying" the "gallows" for him some day? (*She sees that he has gotten into trouble with the law in the past and seems to have no ambition.*) Why does Bigger "hate" his family? (*He feels that he can't do anything to help them have a better life.*) Is he really "powerless" to help them in their suffering?
4. Why do you think his mother's singing irks Bigger? (*She sings religious songs; he doesn't share her faith.*)

-
5. How would robbing Blum be a “violation of ultimate taboo”? (*Blum is white and Bigger is black.*) Do you think Bigger feels any guilt about having stolen from African Americans who were his own neighbors?
 6. How does the sky-writing lead to Bigger and Gus’s discussion of discrimination? (*Bigger starts talking about how he would have liked to be an aviator; both start talking about how whites control the money, school admissions, etc., making it nearly impossible for an African American to become an aviator.*)
 7. Why does Gus pretend to be J.P. Morgan a few minutes later? (*Morgan was a wealthy white capitalist; Gus and Bigger are escaping their limited world momentarily through fantasy.*) Do you think Gus and Bigger are right when they say that whites won’t let them do anything—or are they failing to take responsibility for their own actions?
 8. What does Bigger mean when he says white people live in his stomach (p. 22)? (*He experiences a constant feeling of anger and fear toward whites, at a gut level.*) Where do you find foreshadowing of the serious trouble Bigger is about to get into? (*Bigger realizes that if he let himself know what his life means, he would probably kill himself or someone else—p. 9*)
 9. What sorts of things does Bigger like to do to escape from stress? (*He hangs out with friends, drinks, goes to the movies.*) What do you do?
 10. Why is Mary Dalton in the newsreel? (*She is a rich, white debutante who has made waves by dating a Communist against her family’s wishes.*) How do Bigger and the others react to her image? (*They talk about how attractive she is, speculate about how Bigger can “stand in with her” and maybe make some extra cash.*)
 11. Why does Bigger pull the knife on Gus? (*He is using Gus as a scapegoat, stirring up trouble so he will have the excuse not to rob Blum’s store.*) How is he feeling as he makes Gus lick the blade? (*excited, satisfied, in control*) What do you think would happen if Gus had also whipped out a knife? What would Bigger say if Jack and G.H. suggested robbing the store without Gus?
 12. Why do you think this book is entitled “Fear”? What instances of fear have you noted so far? (*the family’s fear of the rat, Bigger’s fear of robbing a white’s store, Gus’s fear of Bigger*)
 13. Why does Bigger take his knife and gun to the Daltons’? (*They make him feel less insecure about venturing outside of familiar territory.*)
 14. Did you have any strong reactions to this section of the story? For example, did any of the characters’ actions trouble you? Why?

Prediction: How will Bigger get along with Mary? Will he tell her that he already saw her in the newsreel?

Writing Activity: Jot down places in the novel where Bigger is frightened. Discuss in a small group whether, in each case, the fear is mixed with anger. Using your list for supportive detail, write a paragraph that explains why “Fear” is an appropriate title for this book of the novel.

Literary Analysis: Setting and Atmosphere

The **setting** is the time and place of events in the story. What clues do you have to the setting upon which the story opens?

SETTING  Time: _____
Place: _____

(The description of the tenement and Bigger's conversation with Gus about the heat suggest that this is a winter morning in an urban ghetto; the 14-cent car fare indicates that the story takes place several years ago; the book was published in 1940.)

The **atmosphere** is the overall mood. The setting contributes to the atmosphere, which often includes adjectives such as "gloomy" and "tranquil" that describe the weather. How would you describe the atmosphere or mood at the beginning of the story?

(Description of the rat, crowded apartment, and bickering create a dismal, threatening atmosphere.)

Book One, Pages 51-108

Vocabulary

intimidate (51)	organic (54)	defensively (56)	glowering (58)
capitalist (59)	oblique (76)	inarticulate (76)	ensnared (82)
derisively (88)	furtive (96)	irrevocable (98)	tremulous (105)

Discussion Questions

1. How does Bigger feel as he talks to Mr. Dalton for the first time? (*awkward, embarrassed, powerless*) Why does he want "to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this" (p. 53)? (*He is angry with Mr. Dalton, who acts patronizing.*) Do you find fault with the way Mr. Dalton is acting?
2. Why has Mr. Dalton hired Bigger, knowing about Bigger's criminal record? (*Mr. Dalton thinks of himself as a "friend" of African Americans who provides opportunities for them.*) Why do you think Mr. Dalton brings up the fact that Bigger has been in trouble? (*Perhaps he wants to reassure himself that Bigger's trouble is a thing of the past; perhaps he wants to feel magnanimous; also perhaps he wants to "keep Bigger in his place" by making him aware that his employer knows about his trouble.*)
3. What are the terms of Bigger's job? (*He will get \$20 per week plus room and board plus \$5 spending money for driving the car; he will work every day but be free from noon until evening and get one day off every two weeks.*) Do you think they are satisfactory? Does Bigger? (*yes*)
4. Why does Bigger hate Mary, on first meeting her? (*She embarrasses him by pressing him about whether he belongs to a union—and wants to know why not.*) Do you think there is anything wrong with the way she treats him? What is Bigger's opinion of unions and Communists? (*He*