

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Native Son**

by Richard Wright

written by Michael Stacey



**Prestwick House**

Item No. 309005

# Native Son

## Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the use of various literary devices in the novel, such as metaphor, imagery, foreshadowing, and irony.
2. explain how the novel can act as social commentary.
3. analyze the development of themes in the novel.
4. analyze plot structure to show how the author creates suspense and paces the narrative.
5. analyze conflict in literary texts.
6. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

## Background Notes

### *NATIVE SON* AND HISTORY

Richard Wright's *Native Son* is set in a contentious period of American history. Although *Native Son* was published some seven decades after the American Civil War, the novel explores the lingering societal struggles. Such struggles emerged from the Great Migration, the term given to describe the mass exodus of African-Americans out of the southern United States in the early years of the twentieth century. Such an influx of people to northern American cities made an impact not only on the northern cities in the United States, but also the southern cities, left with reduced populations.

The reader of *Native Son* should realize the time in which the novel is set is important not just because of the Great Migration, but because of the greater racial conflict seething in America. Such conflict is nothing new to the American public, as racial conflict has been part of the greater cultural debate in America for nearly its entire history. *Native Son* is a novel that is rooted in historical context. The novel connects to American history through the mentioning of various historical figures, as well as the high profile Loeb and Leopold murder case. The historical context allows the novel's plot to become part of a larger cultural debate.

### LOEB AND LEOPOLD

Loeb and Leopold are mentioned several times in *Native Son*. Loeb and Leopold were wealthy young students at the University of Chicago who kidnapped and murdered Bobby Franks, the son of a Chicago millionaire. They believed that they were above the concerns of "normal" men due to their extraordinary intelligence, so they could not be judged by or held up to the same standards as normal men. These views led them to attempt to commit a "perfect" crime. They kidnapped Bobby Franks, murdered him, and attempted to ransom him to his father.

However, they were eventually caught and imprisoned. During their trial, lawyer Clarence Darrow employed an unusual strategy. Knowing that public opinion was heavily against Loeb and Leopold, he asked them to plead guilty. Darrow then based his defense on the idea that the two young men had been so influenced by their environment that they were not completely responsible for their actions. Darrow's objective was to avoid the death penalty for Loeb and Leopold, and he succeeded; both men were sentenced to life plus 99 years.

## Major Literary Qualities of *Native Son*

### NARRATION

The narration of *Native Son* is third-person limited. The limitation comes from the fact that the narrator does not know the thoughts of any of the characters except for Bigger. This is significant because the author uses this narration style to focus on Bigger's psychology.

### STRUCTURE

*Native Son* is structured in three parts and is not given formal chapters as typically seen in novels. The lack of traditional chapter markings is indicative of the time in which the novel was published. Some techniques of American Literary Modernism included breaking the traditional forms of literary works. In the case of *Native Son*, the lack of traditional chapter markers can be understood as a departure from traditional forms of the novel. The novel's three-book structure also gives the novel unity that it might not have had with multiple chapters. By having three major groupings of action in the novel, the individual books of the novel are easier to view against one another. The lack of chapter divisions makes it difficult to isolate parts of the plot, which may be easier to do in novels with traditional chapters. The lack of traditional chapters also helps pace the novel by providing fewer places for the reader to pause.

### THE ANTIHERO

Bigger can be classified as an antihero, as he lacks the necessary qualities to be categorized as an archetypal hero. First, Bigger's role as the protagonist of the novel leads the reader to assume that there is an antagonist or an antagonistic force in the novel. The reader can identify various characters or institutions in the novel as being antagonistic. The antagonist or antagonistic force(s) must be identified before exploring any antiheroic relationship. For example, the legal system is biased against Bigger. When this relationship emerges in the novel, the reader will likely feel some modicum of sympathy for Bigger. This puts the reader in a difficult situation, as Bigger has committed awful acts. It would be easy to categorize Bigger as a hero except that he does not have the virtue necessary to fit that category. At the novel's close, Bigger believes that he has murdered for a good cause, that his murders represented something good. Bigger's murders are obviously wrong actions, but the America that helped to create Bigger is depicted as wrong as well. Bigger's struggle against this implacable system lends credence to a reading of him as an antihero.

## PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION #6

Mass media wields a considerable amount of power in modern societies; it is often the general public's primary source for news. It is no surprise, then, that some works of modern literature offer pointed commentary on the role of mass media.

Choose a text of established literary merit in which mass media plays an important role.\* Then, in a well-written essay, explain what the text's portrayal of mass media contributes to thematic development. Do not summarize the plot.

\* *Note to Students: For the purposes of this unit, you must choose Native Son.*

## PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION #7

Authors often use titles as clues to a text's contents; used in this way, titles become devices by which the author can structure his or her work while also informing the reader about subjects of prime importance.

Choose a text of considerable literary merit.\* Then, in a well-organized essay, explain what the text's title (and/or subtitle or section titles, if applicable) contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

\* *Note to Students: For the purposes of this unit, you must choose Native Son.*

## PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION #8

In 1624, the English writer John Donne wrote, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." In modern times, philosophers and writers (among other groups) have studied the concept of alienation. Alienation can take many forms, one of which is the involuntary separation of a person from the society to which she or he belongs.

Choose a text of outstanding literary merit in which the concept of alienation plays a central role.\* Then, in a well-written essay, explain what this alienation contributes to character development. Do not merely describe how the character comes to be alienated from his or her society. Avoid plot summary.

\* *Note to Students: For the purposes of this unit, you must choose Native Son.*

# Native Son

## Book One: Fear

(from the beginning of the book until the first inserted break)

1. Explain Bigger's family dynamic.

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2. Characterize Mama.

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3. What is the role of the gasoline advertisement in the narrative?

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4. Explain how Bigger and Gus's conversation adds verisimilitude to the narrative.

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5. What role does cinema take in this portion of the book, and how does it convey meaning about the role of art and media in society?

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**Book Two: Flight****(from the beginning until right before Bigger's visit with Bessie)**

1. Book Two is titled "Flight." What expectations do you have for this portion of the novel?

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2. What role do the pamphlets play in this portion of the novel?

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3. How are Bigger's thoughts on the "dangerous" aspects of the pamphlets ironic, and what does this irony suggest about the view of American society presented in the book?

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4. How has the murder changed Bigger's character?

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5. The narrator says of Bigger, "He had murdered and created a new life for himself." What does this antithesis suggest about the view of American society presented in *Native Son*?

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**Book Two: Flight**

**(from Bigger's visit with Bessie until Bigger hears  
the sound of Britten's and Mr. Dalton's footsteps fading)**

1. What does Mary's stack of paper money represent to Bigger?

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2. Characterize Bessie and explain her function in the novel up to this point.

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3. Characterize Bigger and Bessie's relationship.

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4. Explain the allusion to "Loeb and Leopold." How might this allusion also work as foreshadowing?

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5. In what way is Bigger's treatment of his mother similar to the way he treats Bessie? What does this indicate about Bigger's feelings toward women?

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**Book Two: Flight**

**(from the author's first inserted break of Book Two until the end of Book Two)**

1. How do the newspaper articles in this section reinforce the theme that the media can create and distort reality?

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2. Why is Bigger so offended by the idea that Jan must have helped him with the murder and kidnapping?

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3. Briefly explain the symbolic meaning of the white portion of the black-and-white South Side map in the newspaper.

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