

# Individual Learning Packet

## Teaching Unit

# Native Son

by Richard Wright

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## Objectives

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

1. discuss the following societal elements that contribute to Bigger's feelings of oppression in the story, and point out how they add to his feelings of shame and anger:
  - inferior education
  - menial jobs
  - forced pattern of deferential behavior in the presence of whites
  - discriminatory housing
2. recognize the relationship between the author's life experiences and the experiences of the characters in the story.
3. point out examples of irony in the story, including the following:
  - Bigger's frustration with the media for its stereotyping of blacks, yet his self-serving use of it after Mary's disappearance
  - the practices of Mr. Dalton's South Side Real Estate Company, which gives birth to Bigger's antisocial acts
  - Bigger's dreams of being a pilot and the ambiguous use of the word "flight"
4. comment on the following symbols in the story:
  - the white cat
  - the color white
  - fire in the furnace
  - the rat as a symbol of Bigger's ultimate fate
  - blindness
  - damaged heads
5. comment on Bigger's apparent hatred for the passivity he sees in the black race, including Bigger's view of black religion.
6. discuss whether the communist party is shown in a positive or a negative light by Wright when presenting the following issues:
  - media stereotyping
  - the ability to see people as individuals
  - the impact of capitalism on oppressed people
7. contrast between violence as an act of rebellion to rise above oppression, with violence as a reflex action created by the oppression.
8. point out the racist actions of the newspapers and the criminal justice system in this story, and comment on how they contribute to oppression.

### **Questions for Essay and Discussion**

1. Briefly describe how Bigger kills the rat. In what ways does the rat's death mirror Bigger's final fate?
2. What are Bigger's choices in life? What are his dreams?
3. Why does Bigger pick a fight with Gus?
4. Support or refute the following statement: Mrs. Dalton is both physically and politically blind.
5. In the following quotation, what do Mrs. Dalton and Mrs. Thomas want from Bigger?

“...his mother wanted him to do the things she wanted him to do, and he felt that Mrs. Dalton wanted him to do the things she felt that he should have wanted to do.”
6. What does Mary do to make Bigger hate her? Why does he kill her?
7. Define parallelism. Find an example in the story.
8. What evidence is there that Bigger is an intelligent young man, far more intelligent than anyone gives him credit for?
9. In what ways is Bigger's life similar to Richard Wright's life? What does Wright himself say about his inspiration for the character?
10. Support or refute the following statement: Bigger is angry at both blacks and whites.
11. What is ironic about Bigger's plan to use the world's fear of communism to help frame Jan for Mary's disappearance?
12. Assume the color white is a symbol in this story. What does the following passage from the novel suggest to the reader about its meaning?

“To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead...”
13. Summarize Bigger's relationship with Bessie. What evidence is there that neither one of them is capable of loving the other? Why does Bigger kill her?
14. List the instances in the novel where “heads” are injured or damaged in some way. What might they symbolize in this story?
15. What is ironic about the South Side Real Estate Company?

# Native Son

## BOOK ONE - FEAR

### Pages 3 – 22

#### VOCABULARY

**galvanized** – stimulated with electric current  
**gingerly** – carefully  
**plumage** – feathers  
**surly** – ill-humored  
**translucent** – see-through

1. Briefly describe how each member of the Thomas family reacts when the large rat scurries into their one room apartment.  

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2. Why does Mrs. Thomas tell Bigger he is “the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!?” What is she implying about Bigger’s activities in the following passage? “You think I don’t know what you boys is doing, but I do.” (Pg. 9)  

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3. For what reasons does Bigger behave toward his family with an “attitude of iron reserve”? (Pg. 10)  

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**Pages 81 - end of Book One**

## VOCABULARY

veritable – genuine

1. Why does Bigger see Mary with a “mingled feeling of helplessness, admiration, and hate”? (Pg. 82)

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2. For what reasons is Bigger terrified of being discovered in Mary’s room?

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3. Briefly outline Bigger’s plan to cover up Mary’s murder.

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**Pages 255 - end of Book Two**

## VOCABULARY

**emitted** – sounded  
**lurid** – glowing  
**plume** – feather-like form  
**quelled** – suppressed

1. In the following section from the story, Bigger knows the authorities are closing in on him. What do you think Bigger intends to do if he is cornered?

He could run over those roofs, over the snow and round those chimneys until he came to the building that dropped to the ground. Then that would be all. Would he jump off and kill himself? He did not know. He had an almost mystic feeling that if he were ever cornered something in him would prompt him to act the right way, the right way being the way that would enable him to die without shame. (Pg. 259)

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2. Critics have compared the fire in the furnace in the Dalton's basement to the fire and turmoil inside Bigger. With this idea in mind, what do you think is the significance of the hose that is used to wash Bigger off the water tank?

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**Pages 363 – 405**

## VOCABULARY

**cagy** – crafty  
**dastardly** – maliciously  
**lauds** – praises  
**mawkish** – sickening; excessive  
**mitigation** – freedom; relief  
**philanthropy** – love of humankind  
**presiding** – holding authority

1. List the three possible sentences available to the judge after Bigger enters a plea of guilty.

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2. In what ways does the description of the trial illustrate for the reader the racism and oppression present in the judicial system?

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3. How does Max hope to convince the court to spare Bigger's life?

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