Gothic Descriptions in *Native Son*

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Abstract

Richard Right’s *Native Son* expressed the protest against the western mainstream culture, represented the history and current situation of the African-American, and revealed their inner pain by using the general features of the Gothic novel. From the perspective of the Gothic, this paper analyzes the inheritance and transcendence of the *Native Son*. After the study of the Gothic elements in the novel, we try to uncover the profound meaning behind the words on the basis of understanding the life circumstances of the African-American.

Key words: Gothic; Gothic novel; Native Son; Bigger; African american

INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is really one of the best books ever written by an African-American writer. In his book he describes the pains of ghetto life for the Negroes in Chicago’s black belt. Never has an author ever caught the thoughts and feelings of a single person as Wright did with the main character Bigger. As Irving Howe asserted in 1963, “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. It made impossible a repetition of the old lies (and) brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.”

The novel is based on young Bigger Thomas, a Negro teenager growing up in Chicago’s “black belt” in the 1940’s. Each day Bigger must deal with his poor and starving family, pressure of being the “leader” of his delinquent group of friends; he is segregated, oppressed, angry and most of all very scared. A brutal bully on the exterior masks his silent fear that he discusses with no one and doesn’t even admit to himself. The source of Bigger’s fear (and hatred) is the great mountain of white people, whom he holds accountable for oppression of the Negro population. One afternoon, Bigger devises a plan with his buddies to rob a white delicatessen. He then starts a fight and pulls a knife on one of his boys in order to get out of pulling off the burglary. Later that night he is to get his first job, driving the family car for a very prominent white family on the other side of town. Though he doesn’t admit it, Bigger is happy that he will at least have money for his family to be able to eat and even excited about the prospect of being able to provide like a man should. That evening, on his first job of driving the young daughter to a “school event”—Bigger murdered her in an accidental sort of way. Bigger derives a plan to cover up the situation, which fails miserably and he gets himself into even more trouble. The painful and gruesome actions that Bigger is able to perform are the byproduct of his oppression and ultimate fear. Despite that he is pretty certain he will be unable to escape his fate; after the murder, Bigger is more calm and peaceful than he has been ever before in his life. He deals with his fate stoically, for now he is a man and understands more deeply than before. He arrives at an enlightened existence of race and death and fear and anger, and for the first time believes that maybe he really is something more than a criminal black kid on the streets of Chicago.

The language in the book is easy-flowing, and not terribly descriptive, which was done intentionally, so
the reader could read between the lines and make clear assumptions. The first two sections of the book are loaded with intrigue, suspense, and drama. The reader is right there with Bigger as he tries to mislead the murder investigation, and then runs from the large angry masses when his cover-up is foiled. The third section allows you to get into Bigger’s mind and feel his confused emotions. Here, the reader is treated to Wright’s views on society mainly through the voice of Bigger’s trial attorney.

In *Native Son*, Wright was aiming at something more. Bigger Thomas is doomed, trapped in a downward spiral that will lead to arrest, prison, or death, driven by despair, frustration, poverty, and incomprehension. As a young black man in Chicago of the 1930s, he has no way out of the walls of poverty and racism that surround him, and after he murders a young white woman in a moment of panic, these walls begin to close in. There is no help for him—not from his unlucky family; not from liberal do-gooders or from his well-meaning yet naive friend Jan; certainly not from the police, prosecutors, or judges. Bigger is debased, aggressive, dangerous, and a violent criminal. As such, he has no claim upon our compassion or sympathy (Trudier, 1990, p. 12).

All of these ideas and attitudes were conveyed by Wright’s superb writing strategy which is quite deep on many levels, especially the symbolic writing method and the gothic descriptions. We must assemble them in our mind to understand the intricate pattern the author has created.

## 1. GOTHIC DESCRIPTIONS IN *NATIVE SON*

Wright had a way of telling his reader about his own life through his writing. It was Wright’s 1940 novel, *Native Son*, that stirred up real controversy by shocking the sensibilities of both black and white America. Richard Wright was one of the first American writers of his time to confront his readers with the effects of racism. He marked the beginning of a new era in black fiction.

Based on the accomplishments made by those giants who have contributed a lot to the study of *Native Son*, and with an attempt to achieve a better understanding of this fiction, this thesis is devoted to a further analysis of the gothic descriptions concerning the subject. This cognitive approach to *Native Son* will help us gain a better insight into the very nature of the fiction.

As asserted at the beginning of this paper, Richard Wright had employed a mixture of writing strategies. Gothic descriptions are one feature of his Native Son.

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is still usually taken as one of the foremost examples of late American naturalism, and much is made of the impact of modern sociology, particularly known as the Chicago School of Sociology, on the conception and shape of the novel. Yet numerous scholars, at least in the past, have remarked on the influence of the gothic tradition on Wright’s novel, arguing to one degree or another whether his usage of the gothic undermines or supports the sociological realism of the work. However, the crucial importance of gothic literature and what might be thought of as the gothic sensibility to the representation of political consciousness and political development (and the relation of the gothic to contemporary mass culture) in *Native Son* has not received much sustained scholarly attention.

The primary question here is not whether *Native Son* is a gothic novel, but how the gothic functions within the novel and how it relates to the African American folk culture of the South as well as the mass culture associated with the urban North.

### 2. FORESHADOWING

Wright’s novel is filled with foreshadowing to what could be called the landmarks of the gothic: premonitions, curses, prophecies, spells, the subterranean, paintings, veils, trapdoors, demonic possession, graves, returns from the dead, skeletons, haunting, ghosts, confinement, doubles, gothic mansions, visions, conspiracies, premature burial, and so on.

The white world is “alien” and dangerous, and the black rat of the novel’s opening scene foreshadows Bigger’s inevitable invasion, offense, seizure and execution. In the essay How Bigger was Born, Wright says that when he began writing *Native Son*, he could not think of an opening scene. He decided to proceed without one, and when he had almost finished the novel, this opening came to him. How much it accomplishes. Of course the rat illustrates the miserable conditions under which the Thomas’s live. But in addition, Bigger’s killing the rat helps reveal his character: he enjoys the violent clash. The rat is the first of many animal images in this novel. And the fate of the cornered, hunted rat foreshadows Bigger’s eventual fate, just as the crushing of its head foreshadows Bigger’s murder of his girlfriend Bessie.

Mrs. Thomas foretells her son’s future: “Well, I’m telling you again! And mark my word, some of these days you going to set down and cry. Some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it will be too late then.” “Stop prophesying about me,” he said (Wright, 1940, p. 13). Mrs. Thomas’s prophecy turns out to be correct in the extreme—just as Bigger’s own premonitions about his tragic ending come true.

Ma “prophecies” (Wright, 1940, p. 13) the gallows and Bigger tells Gus that he fears some violence approaching. Besides the premonitions, Mary’s appearance in the newsreel foreshadows her appearance in Bigger’s life, and the advertisement for State Attorney Buckley foreshadows his own appearance towards the end of the novel. Bigger has carried a knife and gun long before he accidentally
kills Mary, and this underscores the irony of Bigger’s situation. Even when violence is obvious and fated, Bigger is not permitted to knowingly participate in his fate. Like any number of Greek or Shakespearean tragic cases, Bigger’s accidents and passions mark the steps of his life and death.

The structure of the novel foreshadows Bigger’s crime of “fear” (Wright, 1940, p. 7), his “flight” (Wright, 1940, p. 102) and his “fate” (Wright, 1940, p. 293) in execution. In this regard, the foreshadowing produces a sense of dramatic irony in that, we are aware of Bigger’s “fate” (Wright, 1940, p. 293) well before we see him go through the motions of his life. Similarly, the “cliffhanger” (Wright, 1940, p. 84) at the end of Book One is a false one; even if the death of Mary Dalton was unexpected, Bigger’s self-assurance that he has covered his tracks is a spurious one.

Book Two marks the transition between Bigger’s “flight” (Wright, 1940, p. 102) and “fate” (Wright, 1940, p. 293) accordingly, a lot of foreshadowing are displayed in this section. There is a feeling of suspense that is sustained throughout Book Two, but this is not derived from the element of the unknown. Rather, the reader must watch Bigger become more and more entangled in the webs of fate. Certainly, Ma’s warning of the “gallows” (Wright, 1940, p. 13) recurs as Bigger exhibits the “hubris” that precedes a great fall. Bigger’s headlong rush towards his fate is not dampened when Bessie warns him that he will never be able to escape from the mobs and five thousand white police officers. And Bessie prophesies her own murder at Bigger’s hands, adding that even if his confession of accidental homicide is valid, he will certainly be executed as a murderer or rapist. Bigger will be charged as the murderer and rapist of both Mary Dalton and his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, but it is his rape of Bessie that proves that he raped Mary (Wright, 1940, p. 315). His brutal response to Bessie’s foreshadowing brings an ironic sealing of his fate.

When Bigger tells himself that he is entering a “new world” (Wright, 1940, p. 429) this foreshadowing is again, ironic. Certainly, Bigger is transforming into a “new person” (Wright, 1940, p. 429) living in a “new world” (Wright, 1940, p. 429) but the new worlds he will encounter are prison and the electric chair. However, there is nothing magical in these predictions; rather, they are realistic, if instinctual, assessments of what the results of straining against the limits of life set for someone just like Bigger.

However, because these predictions are expressed in supernatural terms, they offer no understanding of why these limits are set or, once understood, how these limits might be changed. It is worth noting that this incomprehensibility is not limited to the black characters of the novel. Mrs. Dalton is described as a “blind” and ineffectual, though well-meaning “ghost”, because she is a sort of ghost of good intentions, unable to understand the real causes of poverty and degradation in the ghetto and unwilling to undertake the sort of actions to change society fundamentally so that such conditions are no longer possible.

Therefore, despite this use of the terminology of the supernatural and the uncanny, there is nothing supernatural in Native Son. What these terms represent is both an instinctual understanding of the results of the capitalist system in the United States and a mystification of the laws of that system. Throughout the novel, Wright uses foreshadowing to build his argument that Bigger’s “fate” (Wright, 1940, p. 293) has less to do with his individual actions and more to do with his circumstances. This provides some explication of the title Native Son and positions Wright well within the vein of “Naturalist” writing.

3. TRANSFERENCE AND DOUBLING

The gothic also mystifies the social system in other ways, most notably through a type of transference (Davis, 1971, p. 20).

Thus we see a sort of doubling in which an African American character, generally Bigger, becomes a double or stand-in for a white character, allowing the black character unconsciously to reenact and control a formerly uncontrollable situation (Tuhkanen, 2001, p. 89). For example, Bigger, psychologically unable to rob the white storekeeper Blum, recasts his fellow gang member Gus as Blum and beats up, and symbolically rapes, Gus. Likewise, Bessie becomes a double of Mary Dalton in that her rape by Bigger is actual and her murder intentional, whereas the rape of Mary was a half-formed desire and her murder accidental.

Other moments of black-white doubling include the pairing of Bigger’s brother Buddy with the young white Communist Jan Erlone, Mrs. Thomas with the Dalton’s Irish servant Peggy, and in a very telling scene the doubling lifestyles of the rich and famous in the film The Gay Woman with a stereotypically savage Africa in Trader Horn, which Jack and Bigger watch in a double feature. And, of course, there is the opening moment of terrifying and uncanny doubling in which Bigger kills a version of himself: a monstrous black rat filled with rage and fear.

A similar sort of doubling also takes place in which Bigger posits two Biggers—one who is in control of himself and one who is controlled by gothic terror: “There were two Biggers: one was determined to get rest and sleep at any cost; and the other shrank from images charged with terror” (Wright, 1940, p. 237). In much the same way Bigger also sees two bizarrely dissociated Bessies—a corporeal Bessie entirely under his control and a consciousness who contests that control and demands things of him: “As he walked beside her he felt that there were two Bessies: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; and the other was in Bessie’s face; it asked questions; it bargained and sold the other to best advantage” (Wright, 1940, p. 233).
Both of these doublings—the pairing of black and white and the bifurcation of the individual—are aspects of a sort of gothic vision by which Bigger attempts to interpret and control his environment. Or at least these doublings allow Bigger to control himself enough to be able to act in some manner which validates him as a person—at least in his own view—within that environment.

4. OTHER GOTHIC DESCRIPTIONS

Again, it should be noted that such mystification and misunderstanding are not restricted to Bigger. They are characteristic of virtually everyone the reader encounters in Native Son. Once again Wright utilizes a central gothic convention, a terror of incomprehension. This is the terror that the world one inhabits is guided by rules other than those one is able to see, or that within one’s world or very close to it are contained secret deeds, other selves, sisters, explanations—of crucial importance to us if only one could find them.

In Native Son, particularly in the first two sections, nearly all the major characters look for a certain meaning in the other characters which they are sure is there, but which they are unable to understand or which they misconstrue.

Bigger is constantly saying that he is unable to make out what various white characters, particularly the Daltons and Jan Erlone, are talking about. Mary Dalton says that she wants to know black people and that she knows so little despite the fact that her family’s house in Hyde Park is an easy walk from the South Side black community. In this regard, perhaps the most painful moment of an extremely gruesome book for the reader is not either the grisly murder of Bessie or that of Mary, but when Mary sings “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” to what Bigger recognizes as the wrong tune. Jan Erlone’s demand that bigger take Jan and Mary to an “authentic” (Wright, 1940, p. 75) black restaurant on the South Side rates a close second. For that matter, the mystery of the Daltons is not solved when the skeleton in their basement is revealed, leading eventually to Bigger Thomas, because it is clear that they will never understand the secret behind the veil of the black belt where people live in houses the Daltons own. Thus, like the gothic dance of the Maules and the Pyncheons in The House of the Seven Gables before they give up their twin obsessions of property and revenge, Native Son intimates that the Daltons of the world will continue to encounter the Biggers. And neither will be able to understand the other because the rules which guide their world are hidden in a web of gothic figuration. In fact, that both the Biggers and the Daltons perceive each of their worlds as largely disjunct from that of the other is actually another form of mystification which will hinder them from objectively apprehending the nature of their social order.

The fundamental reason that none of the characters that we see in the first two sections of the novel understands the underlying rules of society is that they are caught up in various narratives the function of which is to perpetuate the power relations of American society and, again, to mystify the true nature of those relations. Some of these narratives are basically ghosts of a past era of American society. These narratives are not simply accounts of the past which make sense of the present and offer a guide to conduct—this is implicitly or explicitly true of all the narratives in the text—but are holdovers from the past. This category of ghosts would include both Mrs. Thomas’s stoic and accommodation Christianity, which has its ultimate origin in the slave, South, as well as the older Daltons’ paternalistic narrative of philanthropy. Both of these older narratives no longer have the desired impact on a new generation of uprooted and marginalized young people represented by Bigger and his gang: They have no desire to defer desire until the next world or go to night school in order to become better educated servants. Of course, the Daltons have an interest in not demystifying these narratives despite the death of their daughter.

Wright associates fire with his character’s destructive capabilities in the grisly decapitation of Mary’s head and her burning in the furnace in Native Son. Wright twice brings Bigger back to the scene of his crime. And his description borders on the sensational and journalistic. However, the scenes in the novel evoke a vision of the Inferno.

Wright’s description of Bigger’s visit to the fiery furnace following Mary’s incineration:

The inside of the furnace breathed and quivered in the grip of fiery coals . . . The coals had the appearance of having burnt the body beneath, leaving the glowing embers formed into a shell of red hotness . . . He shut the door and pulled the lever for more coal . . . the oblong mound of red fire turned gradually black. (Wright, 1940, p. 134)

In the Dalton basement, Wright wrote:

the smoke was rolling from the furnace now in heavy billowing grey clouds, filling the basement. Bigger backed away, catching a lungful of smoke. He bent over, coughing. He heard the men coughing . . . (He) opened the lower door of the furnace. The smoke surged out, thick and acrid. God-damn! (Wright, 1940, p. 249)

In the “red darkness” of the basement, Bigger sees “Mr. Dalton and another white man . . . their faces . . . white discs of danger” (Wright, 1940, p. 176). Bigger perceived by the white men who regard him as a savage, attempts to stir the ashes in the furnace. Bigger, who “despite the smoke and his burning eyes and heaving chest, was flexed taut” (Wright, 1940, p. 250). In Native Son, this physical scene of hellish fire and smoke comes to serve as an analogue for a hellish psychological state. The frightening, solipsistic condition it conveys is projected in the novel as nightmare. In Native Son, the vision of the Inferno, as Bigger later remembers it, suggests the culmination of his terror.
Wright describes this horror in a lengthy periodic sentence. Haunted by the memory of Mary’s bloody head and the furnace, in a terrifying dream, Bigger projects his own dread of dying onto her head:

. . . he stood on a street corner in a red glare of light like that which came from the furnace and he had a big package in his arms so wet and slippery and heavy that he could scarcely hold onto it and he wanted to know what was in the package and he stopped near an alley corner and unwrapped it and the paper fell away and he saw—it was his own head. (Wright, 1940, p. 189)

Although Bigger’s nightmare concludes with his throwing the head defiantly into a crowd of whites, later Wright implies that the nightmare has come to possess Bigger: “He himself was a huge furnace now through which no air could go; and the fear that surged into his stomach, filling him, choking him, was like the fumes of smoke” (Wright, 1940, p. 251).

Bigger follows Mary’s murder with the rape and murder of his black girlfriend, Bessie Mears. An action appalling to a 1990s feminist reader of Native Son, Bigger’s second murder might have been more readily interpreted by the 1940s reader as an extension of the infernal nightmare characterizing his life and as a consequence of his alienation from other human beings.

CONCLUSION
In fact, Native Son is not a gothic novel, in which the gothic description figures an American consciousness, particularly the consciousness of black Americans, which is the product of the particular social relations of American capitalism and hence something to be transcended. Wright’s use of the gothic is also implicitly a critique of the African American writers who preceded him, and their handling of the actual and symbolic journeys from and to the African American folk and constructions of the folk inheritance. Wright’s use of the gothic is not in conflict with his ideological stance as a black male Communist writer of the mid-twentieth century, but in fact follows from this stance.

REFERENCES