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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Native Son

by Richard Wright

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Native Son

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 the way religion affects blacks
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

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. Based on 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 novel. 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 some 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

Note to the Teacher: Throughout the novel, adult language and themes are evident: murder, rape, thievery, and other criminal actions. Therefore, the maturity level of the class should be taken into consideration.

All references come from the Perennial Classics edition of *Native Son*, copyright 1993.

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.

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.”

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

Overall Questions for Book One: The answers may be found anywhere in Book One

1. Read the brief biography of Wright in the chronology of the book. What elements of his life are mirrored in Book One?

2. Some critics believe the name Bigger is a combination of the words “Big” and “Nigger,” which is not a flattering name for the main character of the story. What evidence is there that Wright may not like or approve of Bigger’s behavior in Book One?

3. Some critics think Bigger is angry at both blacks and whites. He is angry at the blacks because they are passive in the face of white rule. He is angry at whites for controlling his life and life choices. Cite incidents from the story to support or refute these ideas.

4. Naturalism is a deliberate kind of realism in novels, stories, and plays, usually involving a view of human beings as passive victims of natural forces and social environment. In what ways can Bigger be considered to be a victim of an oppressive social environment that acts as a driving force, compelling him to murder Mary?

5. Cite incidents from the story to support or refute the following statements: It is not unusual for young people of all races to feel pressure and conflicting emotions as they become adults. They are faced with difficult choices and responsibilities, so some of them rebel against authority. In this sense some of Bigger’s problems are universal to all young adults.

10. What does the following passage from the story suggest to the reader about the significance of rats to the story? What might they symbolize?

“He reeled through the streets, his blood shot eyes looking for a place to hide. He paused at the corner and saw a big black rat leaping over the snow. It shot past him into a doorway where it slid out of sight through a hole. He looked wistfully at that gaping black hole through which the rat had darted to safety.”

11. Bigger listens in on a conversation between Jim and Jack, two ordinary black men. They are discussing whether or not they would turn Bigger in to the authorities if they saw him. Briefly summarize their opinions on this issue. Do you agree or disagree with either of these men? Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.

12. What does the following passage tell the reader about Bigger’s reasons for rejecting religion as a way of easing the tensions in his life?

“It would have been easy to have lived in it, for it was his mother’s world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that.”
