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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Richard Wright's

Native Son

from

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General Introduction to the Work

General Introduction to *Native Son*

NATIVE SON IS CONSIDERED a seminal work in African American literature, not to mention an important work of the American Literary Modernist Movement. While *Native Son* explores motifs predominantly found in African American literature—such as alienation, class conflict, and identity—the novel pertains to all people, not just a segment of the population. The themes and motifs that are explored in *Native Son* are relevant to everyone and give the novel universality.

As an American novel, *Native Son* explores urban America in the early 20th century. While exploring racial conflict, the novel also illuminates the class tension caused by the existence of a sizable economic under-class. The class debate becomes an ideological one when the author explores the economic models of Capitalism and Communism and their social effects. Even with the heavy focus on Bigger Thomas's individual plight, the novel remains a formidable picture of early 20th century American urban life.

The ethnic and racial tensions Wright presents are not limited to the conflicts between African Americans and European Americans; *Native Son* also explores discrimination against Jewish and Irish Americans, not only to show that oppression and intolerance are ubiquitous, but to accurately portray urban life in the early 20th century. While the novel does not provide a clear solution to the social conflict, Wright suggests that if it is not resolved the world could create other men like Bigger Thomas.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Native Son*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining Bigger's Subconscious

1. Copy and distribute the handout Activity One Worksheet.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
3. Have each pair or group review the definitions of id, ego, and superego at the top of the worksheet. Then, have them complete the chart by providing examples from the text in which Bigger's id, ego, and superego are manifested.
4. Reconvene the class and have the groups present their findings.
5. Have the students answer the following questions:
 - In what ways do the three aspects of Bigger's subconscious interact with and complement each other?
 - Which of the three aspects of Bigger's subconscious influence his behavior the most? Why?
 - Do external forces affect the amount of influence each part of Bigger's subconscious has on his life? If so, which ones? Why?
 - Does the interaction between Bigger's id, ego, and superego seem typical of an ordinary person? Why or why not?

Feminist Theory Applied to *Native Son*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Exploring the Female Experience in *Native Son*

1. Copy and distribute the handout Activity One Worksheet.
2. Divide the class into five groups, or in groups with a number divisible by five. Assign each group one of the following characters:
 - Mama
 - Mary Dalton
 - Vera
 - Peggy
 - Mrs. Dalton
3. Have each group complete the worksheet, determining how their assigned characters are portrayed by the author. The worksheet will have students answer the following questions:
 - What is your character's role in the novel? How does she help progress the plot?
 - How is your character portrayed in the novel? Is she unique, or is she a stereotype? Are her character traits generally positive or negative?
 - How does the author's portrayal of your character contribute to your overall understanding of the text? Do any biases emerge that detract from the themes or central message of the novel? Why?
 - Is your character given any power in the novel? Is it economic, social, maternal, or physical power? What is significant about the power (or lack of power) given to your character?
4. Reconvene the class and have students report on their findings.

Marxist Approach Applied to *Native Son*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Exploring Socioeconomic Class in *Native Son*

1. Copy and distribute the handout Activity One Worksheet.
2. Divide the class into five groups, or a number of groups divisible by five.
3. Assign each group one of the following characters:
 - Bigger
 - Jan Erlone
 - Mr. Dalton
 - Bessie
 - Peggy
4. Have each group complete the chart on the worksheet by identifying the following:
 - the character's use of money
 - the character's living situation
 - the character's possessions
 - the character's social connections
 - the character's ideologies and political views
 - the treatment of the character by people outside of his or her socioeconomic status
5. Students should then answer the following questions about their assigned character:
 - What can you determine about your character's socioeconomic status based on the criteria above?
 - In regards to class conflict, is your character a member of the *bourgeoisie* or the *proletariat*? Is there any evidence in the text that he or she oppresses others or is oppressed?
 - Does your character exhibit signs of *commodification* (i.e., desiring things for their social value instead of their innate usefulness)? Provide examples from the text.
 - Is your character alienated by a specific group of people? If so, by whom and why?