

## The Meaning of Bigger Thomas

Samuel Sillen discusses the most-discussed character of 1940's literature. Article II of the series on Richard Wright's novel.

IT IS my impression that most reviews of *Native Son*, whether favorable or hostile, suffer from two closely related faults. The first is a tendency to consider events and character apart from their context and development. The second is a failure to analyze the organic relation between the esthetic and social effects of the book. These faults reflect two essential characteristics of undialectical thinking: atomism, or the chopping up of reality into disjointed bits; and dualism, or the application of a double standard of life and literature.

Criticism must overcome the error of thinking in compartments before it can hope to register sound judgments of artistic work. For the creative process is a dialectical process. It is characterized, in other words, by a sense of organic change and development; it does not differentiate mechanically between content and form; it sets up a reciprocal influence between the parts and the whole; it strives toward the resolution of conflict on progressively higher levels of consciousness. If we are properly to understand and evaluate the product of such a process, we must ourselves think dynamically. This is certainly our first responsibility to a novel like *Native Son*. It is not an impulsive or haphazard creation. To discover its deepest meaning, to appraise its weakness and its strength, we must grasp the novel as a carefully planned accumulation, rather than as a broken sequence, of events, characters, moods, and ideas.

By isolating various aspects of the book from its total meaning, most commentators of both the right and the left have apparently missed the real significance of the central character, Bigger Thomas. At one pole Bigger has been treated as a mean, contemptible, ignorant, and brutish killer; the subterfuge of quotation marks around the expression "bad nigger" has again and again been used to convey this impression. At the opposite pole Bigger has been treated as a poor victim of circumstance, a helpless creature whose human dignity has been stamped out by an oppressive society; according to this view he is to be pitied, not hated. Neither approach, I believe, gets us close enough to the truth.

The first approach is a flat distortion of the novel. The horrible external details of Bigger's actions are maliciously ripped out of their human and social context with a view to creating hostility toward the Negro people. This is precisely the impression that State's Attorney Buckley and the lynch-inciting press seek to create *within the book itself*.

Indeed, Wright deliberately portrayed a conflict of interpretation over Bigger's actions as an integral part of his dramatic structure. In this conflict, the class forces of our society are revealed; the esthetic effect of this clash is identical with its political effect. Through the behavior of the prosecution at the coroner's inquest and at the trial, Wright exposes the bigoted, deceitful, and hypocritical impulses of the anti-Negro forces in America. Buckley, the machine politician, has to get Bigger, at whatever cost to decency, in order to ensure his reelection. The press raises the lynch cry of "sex-killer" in order to still the South Side demand for better housing. It is not Bigger who is obscene, vicious, cruel; it is the men who convict him. The intelligent reader must shudder at the thought of any past or future identification between himself and the powers that a Buckley represents.

The approach to Bigger as a creature of circumstance is more sympathetic, but it misses an essential point. I would emphasize most firmly that the analogy to Dreiser has been overdone. For Bigger Thomas is not, like Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, a weakling who tends merely to reflect the pressures of his environment. The difference between Wright's dramatic realism and Dreiser's naturalism is connected with a difference in their conception of the role of personality in fiction. In *Native Son* the social pressures meet the resistance of a positive and creative individual. There is a revolutionary potential in Bigger, however frustrated or perverted it may be by the discriminatory order in which he lives. Too much attention has been paid to the unfortunat ways in which society has forced him to express himself, and not enough to the dynamic emotional force which drives him toward an assertion of his will to create a different world for himself. It is only partly true to say that capitalism makes him what he is; it is even more important to insist that capitalism *unmakes* what he is, a sensitive, imaginative, and creative personality.

### THE REAL BIGGER

Bigger is a rebel whose every word and gesture is a challenge to those who have attempted to curb and crush his talents. "Why they make us live in one corner of the city?" he cries. "Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships. . . ." His mother and the Reverend Hammond urge him to accept the consolations of religion. His friend Gus advises him not to think so much or he will go mad. His girl Bessie, weary and worn from her work in other people's kitchens, offers to

snatch salvation out of forgetfulness in sensual pleasures. But Bigger cannot forget, he refuses to forget that he is being elbowed out of life.

And Bigger is tender and warm beneath his hardboiled exterior. Everybody comments on the opening scene, where Bigger is mean and tough toward his sister Vera and his mother. One should balance that with the jail scene near the end of the book when his family comes to visit him. "How you l-l-like them sewing classes at the Y, Vera?" he asks the sister whom he had once scared to tears. And when he learns that she has had to leave the Y because she is now ashamed before the other girls, he realizes that his family is a part of him in spirit as well as in blood. Three times he tells his mother: "Forget me, Ma," though he knows, with a new and mature insight, that she will never forget. Similarly, Bigger's attitude toward Jan Erlone undergoes a profound change which reveals his unfolding attitude toward other people. At first, Bigger had attempted to implicate Jan in the death of Mary Dalton, knowing that the authorities would jump at the chance to punish a Communist. But after he has been captured, and after the sincerity of Jan's friendship has been proved, Bigger refuses to allow the court to blame his actions on the Communists. "He didn't have nothing to do with it," he says. "There wasn't nobody but me. I don't care what happens to me, but you can't make me say things about other people."

Indeed, the whole meaning of Jan in this story has been widely misinterpreted. Jan has been described by reactionary critics as a horrible example of how Communists treat Negroes; here again such an interpretation is portrayed and refuted in the novel itself through the Red-baiting, anti-Semitic tactics of the press and prosecution. Some Communists, on the other hand, are disturbed by the portrayal of Jan because, as they rightly point out, certain of his actions are not representative of the behavior of Communists and therefore open to reactionary propaganda against Wright's own party, the only party which has fought consistently and courageously on behalf of the Negro people.

It is quite true that Jan's behavior in the opening section of the book is not that of a mature Communist. Indeed, it is Jan himself who later on admits his blunders. His good will toward Bigger Thomas outruns his understanding of Bigger. By overwhelming Bigger with his impetuous kindness, by overreaching himself in his quite sincere demonstration of friendship, Jan manages to increase the bewilderment of the man whom

he would enlighten. I believe that Wright was driving home the point that mere good will may turn into its opposite unless it is coupled with a rich understanding of human personality. This is not a new conception. It is certainly a Marxist conception. As I have already suggested, Jan himself grows up toward this idea, which he must always have had in theory, as a result of bitter practice. "I was kind of blind," he tells Bigger. And the real stature of Jan's new understanding is revealed in the scene in which he pleads with Bigger to let him help, despite the fact that the girl he loved had been accidentally killed by Bigger, and despite the fact that Bigger has tried to pin the murder on him. Later on, at the coroner's inquest, the prosecution attacks Jan—for shaking hands with Bigger, for eating with him, for urging him to drop the Mister! As a result of such a cross-examination, I for one feel the strength and humanity of Jan. His character, like Bigger's, emerges from the novel as a whole, rather than from one scene. Both men *grow*. And in the end, both men have made a bridge over the great gulf which originally separated them.

There is, however, an element of validity in the criticism of Jan as a character. I think it is this: that the first Jan scene, coming as it does at a moment of high tension, burns itself deeper into the reader's mind than the second, which comes immediately after the tension of the murder and the flight has been snapped. There is a difference in the dramatic impact of the two scenes. The second is unfortunately less fully developed than the one before the death of Mary. Moreover, too long an interval has elapsed between the restaurant and the jail scenes, so that readers tend to have a first impression of Jan which no later explanation will quite succeed in modifying. On the other hand, too many readers have evidently ignored what is actually in the book.

Another aspect of the book that has caused much comment is the trial scene. My own feeling is that Mr. Max's defense speech is weak in two respects. For one thing, it is a lengthy rhetorical restatement of the issues which the novel has already stated in powerful dramatic terms. It is a set speech which makes one feel that Wright, a little uncertain that his meaning has been communicated, interpolated what amounts to a summary draft of the story. Because of his concern with explicit statement, Wright does not take advantage of the scene's potential dramatic values. This artistic weakness is linked with an even more important fault: the absence of clarity in the appeal. Whatever judgment legal experts may pass upon the correctness of the procedure adopted by the defense, the plea itself leans too heavily on an involved psychological approach that gives a confusing picture of the political issues in the case. Mr. Max's overstudied phrases in the courtroom suffer by contrast with his simple and effective talk outside.

The absence of Negro characters who have

*It won the Guggenheim Prize . . .  
It deserved the Pulitzer Prize!*

. . . IT'S YOURS FREE



# "The Stricklands"

by EDWIN LANHAM

(RETAIL PRICE \$2.50)

**T**HIS is a novel of Oklahoma, a people bruised by adversity, but not beaten; a story of tragedy and triumph; the story of Jay Strickland, whose motto might have been "all men are my brethren."

"The Stricklands" is an exciting story of an Oklahoma redhead who was not remotely vicious but who couldn't keep out of trouble and whose troubles pile up until the story reaches a climax in which the cries of the hunters following their prey blend with the tom-toms beating out the measure of an Indian stomp-dance.

The book is just that. It is also the story of a family—the Strickland family: Crosby, who made the best corn licker in his part of the state and knew it aged best in a keg fastened to a swaying branch; his sons, Jay, who had dedicated himself to organizing the tenant farmers, and Pat, the redhead; and Pat's wife, Belle, beautiful, a crack shot, devoted to her son, her husband, and her husband's people.

NEW MASSES, 461 FOURTH AVE.,  
N. Y. C.

Gentlemen: Please send one year of *New Masses* and "The Stricklands" by Edwin Lanham to me. I enclose \$4.50.

Name . . . . .

Address . . . . .

City and State . . . . .

4-30-40

"The Stricklands" is a novel you won't want to miss. It's yours—free . . . Merely fill out the coupon below, enclose \$4.50 in check or money order for one year's subscription to *New Masses* and "The Stricklands" comes along automatically as a free gift to you. *This is a limited offer.* Tear off the coupon and send it in today.

**LATEST IMPORTED RUSSIAN RECORDS!**  
 By Modern Russian Composers  
*Song of the Plains*  
*Red Moscow*  
*Kalinka*  
*From Border to Border*  
*Cossack's Song*  
*Sport March*  
*Strolling Home*  
*Field, My Field*  
 and many others  
 Send for Complete List NM  
 Phone CH 2-6744 Open Evenings



**O. PAGANI & BRO.**  
 289 BLEECKER STR - N.Y.  
 Cor. 7th Ave.

LO ngareo 5-8896  
**MARTY'S**  
 Your Hairdresser for Beauty Aid  
 123 West 45th Street, bet. Broadway & 6th Ave., New York  
 100% Unionized

## Subscribe for Life

NEW MASSES is now in the midst of a "Bill of Rights" sustaining fund drive for \$25,000. We have often indicated in the past that one of the most effective ways to aid this drive is to secure subscriptions. Steady subscribers are, as you know, the only actual and bona-fide angels that this magazine possesses. We don't call them angels; we call them, more accurately, *reader-stockholders*.

To present subscribers of NEW MASSES and to newsstand readers, we are offering a special *Life Subscription* to NEW MASSES for \$100.

In the twenty-nine years of its history, as a courageous fighter for freedom and a better day, NEW MASSES has had on its subscription rolls a small host of subscribers who began their subscription way back in 1911 when the *MASSES* first started. They've uninterruptedly stuck with us and today they admit frankly that they can't do without us.

May we suggest that you, too, join this inner circle? Make your check payable to either Carl A. Bristel, Treasurer, or Weekly Masses Corporation, 461 Fourth Ave., New York City.

NEW MASSES, 461 FOURTH AVE., N. Y. C.  
 Please put me down for a life subscription to NEW MASSES. Enclosed is a check for \$100.

Name . . . . .  
 Address . . . . .  
 City and State . . . . .

identified themselves with the labor movement has been noted as a defect of the book. It is pointed out that *Bigger* is projected as a symbol of the Negro people, and that this is unfortunate because such a symbol does not suggest the socially constructive reactions of masses of Negroes to their oppression under capitalism. I believe that we must move cautiously here. It is true, of course, that *Native Son* is not an all-inclusive picture of Negro life. It is equally true that American fiction has so far failed to give an adequate picture of Negro men and women in the trade union and progressive political movements. In this respect, novelists are lagging behind reality. I think that Wright might have given some more explicit indication that there is a quite different side of Negro life from that which he has dealt with here—several indirect suggestions do appear—but I also believe that to have developed this side to the extent which it deserves would have meant the writing of another novel. This is *Bigger's* story. It had to be told; and I rejoice that it has been told so well. If *Bigger* must be interpreted symbolically, it is only to the extent that he represents the deep urge to live and create which no exploitative society can permanently subdue. Properly directed, the positive aspects of *Bigger's* nature to which I have referred are loaded with a significance and hope for the future toward which we aspire. On the title page of the novel, Wright has quoted a verse from Job which pointedly expresses the meaning of *Bigger* Thomas: "Even today is my complaint rebellious, My stroke is heavier than my groaning." It is a meaning that will not easily be forgotten.

### THE FLOOR IS OPEN

I hope that readers of NEW MASSES will send in expressions of their reactions to *Native Son*. I am certain that an open and full discussion from various points of view will clarify a number of basic critical problems raised by the book. NEW MASSES is eager to publish such a discussion. By all means, let us hear what you think.

SAMUEL SILLEN.

### The Aviation Business

THE AVIATION BUSINESS: FROM KITTY HAWK TO WALL STREET, by *Elsbeth E. Freudenthal*. *The Vanguard Press*. \$3.00.

WITH export figures setting new records and the administration seeking an increase in air forces of army and navy, the aviation industry once more takes the spotlight of current interest. Stock prices reflect the expectation of higher profits. Insiders are preparing once more to reap a golden harvest. In the development of American aviation scandals have flared up periodically ever since the first costly fiasco of planes that would not fly for the American army in Mexico in 1916. Some of us remember the billion dollars laid out for army planes in the World War, which produced no fighting machines whatever and

less than two hundred unsafe observation planes which (literally) went down in history as "flaming coffins." But the details of the scandals, and the record of expansion at public expense between scandals, have been pretty much buried in dusty files of government hearings, special reports, and financial manuals.

Now, at last, these records have been thoroughly combed. From them *Elsbeth Freudenthal* gives us a critical, well written and well documented story. As factual narrative it is excellent, rich in detail and yet keeping clearly distinct the various elements in the situation. Although the story is held strictly to the aviation industry and no political interpretation is attempted, it throws much light on the capitalists' technique in this period of capitalist decay. For the manufacture of airplanes and the operating of air transport have become an essential part of national defense. So the growth of the industry has been encouraged by the government and the industrialists have utilized to their own profit its strategic importance. Aviation is a small industry in total investment, total value of products, and numbers employed, and yet most of the leading financial interests of the country have clustered about it.

Miss *Freudenthal* renders an important service by giving detailed and exact information on the financial groups active in the largest companies. She also makes very clear that while these groups compete in manufacturing and air transport within the United States, they are all united in Pan American Airways. This company holds a monopolistic position and is a semi-governmental agency of imperialism. How Pan American has been subsidized by high rates for carrying mail and protected from competition has been officially investigated. But the seamy side of its development has had none of the publicity attending the various stages of the domestic airmail scandals. Is this because it is a semi-governmental agency, as Miss *Freudenthal* suggests? Or is it because its board of directors assembles the innermost circles of American finance capital?

Two important facts stand out in the story of the aviation business. First, many of those individuals most intimately involved in the scandals of the World War period—and publicly exposed at that time—are still important figures in aviation and banking. And, second, while investigations have led to new regulations and the formal separation of manufacturing and transport, there has been an astonishing continuity of interest and control within the several groups of companies. This is emphasized by the author, who shows frankly and well the rotten symptoms of capitalist corruption.

But questioning of the system itself, or analysis of the reasons for increased international tension and heavier armaments, lie entirely beyond the scope of the book. Miss *Freudenthal* does urge the necessity for government ownership of airplane manufacture and transportation. She does not suggest the seriousness of such a proposal, involving as it does the wresting from dominant financial interests of one of their richest sources of profit.