Richard Wright is known for his unflinching portrayals of the violence underlying American racism. To fight against racism, “using words as weapons . . . as one would use a club,” was his avowed intention. In the “Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” Wright describes graphically the painful experiences of his coming of age in the Deep South prior to the Civil Rights era. His was an upbringing defined by violence. Wright speaks of the lynch mobs, mutilations, and beatings that punctuated the oppression of Southern blacks and the threat of such violence to any member of the black community who, in any way, transgressed from the roles assigned to them. But violence, however traumatic, was not the only lesson which shaped the consciousness of the young Wright. On the contrary, he was impressed as much by acts of empathy as by those of cruelty. An enduringly powerful aspect of Wright’s work is, in fact, his own considerable capacity for empathy—his ability to feel it, to portray it and evoke it for his readers.

It should be noted, however, that Wright’s empathy is not sentimental. Indeed the distinction between empathy and the related value, sympathy, was a central concern for him. His understanding of the distinction concurs with recent studies that essentially view sympathy as an experience in which one regards another, usually a victim, with moralizing pity, or as David Depew puts it: “a smarmy sense of pity and superiority” (qtd. in Greiner). In empathy, on the other hand, “we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others” (Keen 5). Empa-
thy requires one to step metaphorically into another person’s shoes, a condition which seeks to avoid the mere assumption of other people’s feelings in order to acquire personal kudos in the name of sympathy. As Keen points out, a reader may empathize with terrible villains in a text, without attributing them pity or pardon and yet achieve a constructive, humanistic consciousness. That goal is clearly at the heart of Wright’s novel, *Native Son*, conceived with the intention of sweeping sympathy aside and opting for a powerful employment of empathy.

As an author, Wright drew upon his own feelings of both empathy and sympathy, to produce insightful characterizations. He was fascinated by contemporary studies in sociology and psychology and recounts that his writing was at first, “more an attempt at understanding than self-expression.” As he matured artistically, however, he feared that his sympathetic depictions had had an unexpected consequence that had certainly not figured in his intentions. His first book, the collection of short stories called *Uncle Tom’s Children*, had been a critical success. Its title implied that Wright’s generation, unlike the stereotypical “Tom” character portrayed by Harriet Beecher Stowe, would not be passive victims but would fight the violence and injustice they came up against. The book drew widespread praise, including that of Eleanor Roosevelt, who commended it in her column for the *New York World-Telegram*. But as readers piled up in eager expectation, Wright felt he had made “an awfully naïve mistake.” His humanizing portrayals did indeed touch people, but they also seemed to offer a merely cathartic experience of dramatic tragedy:

> I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. (“Born”)

Wright feared that the sympathy aroused by *Uncle Tom’s Children* was merely self-indulgence on the part of its readers; tears took the place of outrage and defused the call to action against racism. His concern was justified. One reviewer, for example, claimed that the success of the work was, in itself, a cause to refute its thesis:

> Freedom, despite Mr. Wright’s evidence to the contrary, is not really dead in America. His own recent history as a writer must prove that. (qtd. in Rowley 142)

Such a response was not what Wright had anticipated. But his subsequent novel, *Native Son*, was designed to produce an entirely different effect. He would show his readers, particularly his white readers, that racism was not merely a question of the idea of nemesis formulated by the whites in connection with the blacks in the Southern States, but that it had overarching implications for the nation as a whole. This time the scene would not be Dixie, but the heart of the industrial North. *Native Son*, in fact, was set in Chicago, “the pivot of the Eastern, Western,
Northern, and Southern poles of the nation.’ Wright conceived Native Son not only as an indictment of racism but as an analysis of the capitalistic American system which nurtured it. Industrial Chicago had been the cradle of Wright’s own ‘Internationalist’ consciousness, acquired through his membership of the John Reed Club and the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPU-SA). In Chicago, Wright observed first and second generations of black migrants from the rural South, like himself, being transformed into an urban proletariat. The mode of production may have been different, Wright found, but the exploitation and disenfranchisement of African Americans was very much the same.

However, just as Native Son steers clear of any saccharine notion of sympathy, it also avoids the danger of becoming a sterile ideological tract. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is a character created in empathy with the global proletariat, the oppressed masses. But Wright did not intend him to be a working-class hero. Far from it. Instead of depicting him in terms of heroics or dogma, he chooses to focus on the negative implications of Bigger’s subconscious. Bigger’s propensity to simply “blot out” disturbing or confusing thoughts, to repress problems rather than think them out, contributes above all else to his tragic fate. This aspect of the novel, Bigger’s refusal to process his internal conflicts, reflects the author’s interest in psychology. An important Freudian reference resides in the “Medusa’s head” image that haunts Bigger after he murders Mary and decapitates her in an attempt to dispose of her body. The decapitation of Mary, though gruesome, lends itself perfectly to the Freudian concept of sexual guilt and angst, here applied to the realities of racism faced by Bigger. He is assumed by the white characters to have raped Mary, and though he didn’t, he knows that no court or lynch mob will believe him. Such a sexual transgression, even if consensual on the part of the white woman, would lead to the death and mutilation—that is, castration—of the unfortunate black man so accused by white vigilantes. The “Medusa’s head” image invokes the fear of castration, but here in a literal rather than a symbolic sense. Freud called it an “apotropaic,” a talisman to ward off the crisis of consciousness. Thus the image has a further extension in Bigger’s predicament. It also encapsulates his refusal to integrate his inner life with his actual material conditions. If he had been able to bring to bear upon his condition the powers of analytical thought, Wright suggests, the story might have turned out differently for him—and for his victims. Thus Native Son exhorts one to think critically as the first necessary step on the road to social justice. To think, Wright suggests, is inherently to act.

Significantly, Bigger’s tendency to “blot out” his thoughts and feelings is less a crisis of class consciousness than one of empathy. That consciousness, “indeed having a self at all—depends upon [one’s] ability to humanize objects, including the object that is [one]self” (Greiner). A large part of his tragedy is his unwillingness to accept friendship, love, and camaraderie. Bigger’s relationship with his “gang” is maintained through intimidation. He is ashamed of his family because he perceives their poverty as weakness. He views his girlfriend Bessie as a mere
sex object. He feels only a sense of debasement and anger when Mary and Jan, however ineptly, try to treat him as a comrade, rather than as a servant. In short, he does not empathize. When Jan, the young white communist fiancé of Mary, whom he meets on his first night as the Dalton family chauffeur, gives him some party pamphlets he accepts them reluctantly. Had he accepted Jan’s overture, Bigger might have discovered a language to analyze his oppression, and perhaps begin to free himself. Instead, he keeps the pamphlets, calculatedly stacked in a neat pile but unread, in order to implicate Jan in the murder of Mary Dalton. Bigger has already killed the young white woman, albeit without premeditation. He tries unsuccessfully to burn her body in the basement incinerator of her swank family home but is discovered, hunted down, convicted and ultimately, executed. (A first night on the job could not have gone worse.)

It is only when Bigger’s spirits are at their lowest ebb that he begins a transformation in consciousness—not in regard to class but his own humanity. Incarcerated and facing a trial whose verdict—despite the determined defense presented by his principled lawyer—is a foregone conclusion, Bigger begins to analyze his own feelings and thoughts. The transformation is represented when he is visited in his jail cell by the other characters. In a deliberately surreal scene, his cell becomes crowded as one after the other they enter: the local preacher; the defense lawyer; the prosecutor; Mary Dalton’s fiancé, Jan; Henry Dalton and his wife; Bigger’s mother, his sister Vera and brother Buddy; his “gang,” Gus, G. H., and Jack. Though he categorically rejects the preacher’s advice to turn to religion, Bigger is moved by Jan’s compassion and, especially, by the grief which his family feels over his predicament:

He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer. No matter how much he would long for them to forget him, they would not be able to. His family was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit (345).

In the world of the novel, jail is an opportunity forced upon Bigger to think about his life. Symbolically, the interior of the cell represents his psyche as he calls to mind those who have affected him and whom he has affected. As Bigger processes his feelings, he searches within himself for the meaning of his life and death. In failing to find it, he arrives, however, at a deeper insight which rescues him from alienation. Bigger recognizes that he longs for the company of someone who understands him and in whom he can confide. For Bigger, who has never felt close to anyone, the longing for a confidant is a revelation. Indeed, he has accessed his “ability to humanize objects, including the object which is [him]self” (Greiner). The person he seeks is Max, precisely because Max had gotten him to talk about himself during his counsel, and in Bigger’s words, though Max knew he was a murderer, “[he] treated me like a man” (495). Max had regarded him with empathy, precisely at a time when Bigger—having renounced the sense of power which his crimes falsely led him to experience—was able to receive it, and
more importantly, to *reciprocate* it. It is with irony and pathos, then, that Bigger comes finally to express and embrace his own feelings. He does so when Max visits him for the last time, on the eve of his execution.

The young man’s coming to consciousness is—for him—tragically too little, too late. But it offers a strange kind of hope. It is an impersonal one; a hope for humanity rather than for the protagonist. Wright’s portrayal of Bigger’s inner landscape, in any event, should not be subsumed in the idea of “internal(ized) racism.” The latter concept, once prevalent in literary theory, has often overshadowed material considerations about the source of such oppression—the importance of which one might stress by calling it, somewhat absurdly, *external* racism. Wright was above all a materialist writer and thinker, even when he pursued more abstract conventions such as psychology or existentialism to make manifest his themes. Though he had broken with the Communists, his views remained basically Marxist. His concern with how oppression impacts the psychology of the oppressed does not endorse the facile judgment of “blaming the victim” inherent in racism. Rather, it is an expression of empathy which would become the cornerstone of the author’s own post-communist internationalism.

That “internal racism” has little to do with Bigger’s experience is clear from Wright’s trenchant portrayal of Northern oppression. He contextualizes the emotional reality of the oppressed within the concrete world of industrial capitalism. Bigger came into his job as chauffeur to the rich white real-estate entrepreneur, Henry Dalton, through the community “relief” agency. The paltry welfare payments which the Thomas family received were contingent upon Bigger accepting the job. It was an act of charity offered by Dalton, Mary’s father, who had taken a spurious interest in the plight of impoverished black youth. The opportunity might have led to a better life for Bigger and his family. It seemed to be the vehicle of upward mobility; the American Dream proposes that if one buckles down to good honest work, he will eventually rise to the middle class. But Wright rents the veil of this cherished old myth. Dalton, a respected businessman and philanthropist in his community, is also a slumlord to whom black people like the desperately poor Thomas family pay high rents for their cramped, rat-infested, ghetto kitchenettes. Moreover, Dalton and the other Chicago slumlords form a cartel. They exact exorbitant rents because they themselves have created a housing shortage for African Americans. The South Side neighborhood is the only area where they will accept black tenants; conversely, they rent better, more affordable housing to whites in the rest of the city. The Thomas’ situation recalls the confined spaces which Wright himself had shared with his own family in Chicago. More broadly, it reflects the social reality of the South Side then experienced by African Americans. Wright typically encountered young men who shared the same circumstances as Bigger, his fictional protagonist. At the South Side Boys’ Club, Wright observed firsthand the effects of environment and, in his words, surveyed numerous versions of “Bigger Thomas”:
Here I felt for the first time that the rich folk who were paying my wages did not really
give a good goddamn about Bigger, that their kindness was prompted at bottom by
a selfish motive. They were paying me to distract Bigger with ping-pong, checkers,
swimming, marbles, and baseball in order that he might not roam the streets and
harm the valuable white property which adjoined the Black Belt. I am not condemning
boys' clubs and ping-pong as such; but these little stopgaps were utterly inadequate to
fill up the centuries-long chasm of emptiness which American civilization had created
in these Biggers. (“Born”)

In *Native Son* Wright shows, with bitter irony and with humanism, but without
sentimentality, how Bigger's *lumpen proletarian* environment has predetermined
his ending up in jail and his execution. Bigger moves through his young life, re-
tacting to things not of his own making. He does, of course, have the power to
choose, though options are few and the difference between them is negligible.
The choices he does make are consistently bad. He accepts dire consequences in
exchange for the momentary thrill of power he feels in merely exerting his will.
Tragically, he finds that his unintentional murder of Mary gives him the most
potent sense of empowerment he has ever felt. His deliberate, brutal rape and
murder of Bessie Mears, his young black girlfriend, seems to him anti-climactic
by comparison. His dominant sentiment is one of misplaced self-fulfillment.
The portrayal is understood in the cold light of materialism. In Marxist terms,
his feeling is akin to false consciousness. That Bigger’s perceived self-fulfillment
after the murders is, indeed, misplaced is clear through the author’s use of empa-
thy. It is the latter which gives a subtle nuance to the story, though the subtlety
has been missed by many readers. Bigger’s actions are certainly not intended to
be seen, as by Jackson, to “legitim[ize] violence as a liberating tool.” It certainly
didn’t liberate Bessie—except from life—and she, after all, was oppressed by rac-
ism as much as Bigger. Nor does the novel itself posit “[t]he advocacy of violence
as an imperative step in the formation of a self-conscious identity for African-
American subjects” (Jackson). Just as *Native Son* is not propaganda for commu-
nism, neither is it a militant call to arms. It is a radical, humanist call to empa-
thize with the living reality of racial oppression.

Wright’s use of empathy does not let his characters (or his readers) off the
hook for the responsibilities they incur. For example Dalton, Mary’s father, is not
the villain of the piece but neither is he inculpable. The real-estate king is im-
moral in terms of societal analysis. The establishment of which he is part daily
paves the way to prison and the electric chair for the poor and disenfranchised,
especially black men. Yet Dalton is also, in a way, to be pitied. He has lost his be-
loved daughter and must witness the decline of his blind and ailing wife. But
yet again, Dalton is not without blame in Mary’s death. Hubristically, he has
made her murder possible. He has constructed the environment in which “Big-
ger was born,” and arranged the fateful meeting of Mary and her killer. In other
words, he is responsible for exploiting the penury of people like Bigger’s family
who, in turn, provide him with the wherewithal whereby he can afford to make

PERRI GIOVANNUCCI
the apparently philanthropic gesture of plucking up a destitute young man and lodging him under his own ample roof as a pampered household servant. Dalton may see himself as a victim of his own good intentions, but he reveals his agency when he interviews Bigger:

“All right, now,” said Mr. Dalton. “Let’s see what you’ve got here. You live at 3721 Indiana Avenue?”
“Youssuh.”
Mr. Dalton paused, frowned, and looked up at the ceiling.
“What kind of a building is that over there?”
“You mean where I live, suh?”
“Yes.”
“Oh, it’s just an old building.”
“Where do you pay rent?”
“Down on Thirty-first Street.”
“To the South Side Real Estate Company?”
“Youssuh.”
Bigger wondered what all these questions could mean; he had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, but he was not sure.
“How much rent do you pay?”
“Eight dollars a week.”
“For how many rooms?”
“We just got one, suh.”
“I see...” (54-55)

It is significant of the slumlord’s negligence that Dalton must pause in order to call to mind the building in question. He has likely never seen it for himself, though he would have known that it was rundown and overcrowded. Like Bigger, Dalton too has the ability to “blot out” disturbing thoughts. He also allows himself the privilege of remaining ignorant of the Thomases’ poverty. Yet were the family to fall behind in their rent, the apparatus of eviction would automatically come into effect, and the Thomases would find themselves in the position of many of the poor during the Depression: out on the street. In fact, after Bigger’s indictment, the Thomas family is asked to move from their Indiana Avenue kitchenette. When Dalton learns of this from Bigger’s mother, he promises he will “tell them not to make you move” (349). He also mentions that he has just sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boys’ Club.

Apart from its compelling storyline, Native Son is thought-provoking because of its synthesis of materialism and psychoanalysis, two of Wright’s main areas of interest. Notably, in his depiction of Dalton’s own tangential implication in Mary’s murder, Wright revises a basic Marxist tenet—that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction. In this case, white racism itself has generated the death of Mary who, as Bigger knows, is not only considered the flower of her generation, but the representation of all that her society cherishes—“a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty” (188). Furthermore, with the death of Mary, Dalton’s only child, the real-estate king will have no heir to whom...
to pass on his fortune, his business, or his name. Dalton is bereft in many ways; his wife may be literally blind, but he has been blind-sided by his own apparently sincere belief in the myths of capitalism. Blindness is a recurring theme in the novel, not least for its psychoanalytic associations with castration (like the “Medusa’s head” image), but importantly as a rhetorical externalization of “turning a blind eye.” Wright thus accomplishes in Native Son the aim he had set himself after what was to his mind, the too complacent reception of Uncle Tom’s Children. He does not jerk the tears of readers but shakes them into a stark realization that the violence—inherent and actual—of white racism would inevitably turn upon its progenitors.
WORKS CITED


EMPATHY IN THE WORK OF RICHARD WRIGHT