

## Black Masculinity and Violence: An Analysis of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex interplay between Black masculinity, violence, and systemic racism as depicted in the writings of Richard Wright. It challenges the notion that gendered behaviours are biologically determined, arguing instead that society shapes the expression of masculinity, particularly within a traditional patriarchal context where it is often associated with strength, dominance, and aggression. The paper highlights how stereotypical characteristics of Black men have been shaped by centuries of racial subjugation and economic oppression, often leading to exaggerated forms of patriarchal expression and negative racial stereotypes reinforced by mainstream media. Through an analysis of Wright's novel titled *Native Son*, the paper aims to show how childhood trauma and violence, stemming from both within the Black community and from White oppression, profoundly impact the development of Black individuals. Richard Wright's autobiographical novel *Black Boy* serves as a powerful illustration of how violence, fear of white prejudice, and harsh familial discipline create a sense of fear, helplessness, and a perception of life as a brutal fight for survival. These early experiences can lead to manifestations of anger and detachment.

Furthermore, the analysis extends to Wright's *Native Son* and the character of Bigger Thomas, examining how systemic racism and social oppression can lead to internalized rage, self-destructive behaviour, and violence. Ultimately, the paper argues that understanding violence in the context of Black masculinity requires considering the profound impact of historical and ongoing systemic oppression. It raises crucial questions about accountability, blurring the lines between individual responsibility

and societal liability for the violent outcomes shaped by deeply ingrained societal injustices. Wright's works challenge readers to see violence not merely as an individual moral failing but as a consequence of broader societal problems rooted in race, power, and class

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Masculinity, also known as manhood, as a set of attributes, behaviours, and roles associated with boys and men. Like race, many mistakenly assume that the behavioural attributes of gender are born out of biological impulse. We often overlook the fact that society, rather than our genetics, shapes how we show masculinity or femininity. In a traditional patriarchal society, masculinity is often associated with so called manly qualities such as strength, aggressiveness, dominance over women, and sometimes violent superiority over other men. Over the course of history, most societies accepted patriarchal dominance as part of the natural order. Black Masculinity which is studied as a subfield of Gender Studies, is dedicated to study the typical behaviours of African American males. Literature on this subject claim that stereotypical characteristics of Black men have been shaped by centuries of racial subjugation and response to economic oppression. When we talk of black masculinity, we often associate with a more exaggerated forms of patriarchal expression such as aggressiveness, sexual domination and violent superiority. This is the negative racial stereotypes that are associated with black manhood and is further re-enforced by mainstream media such as movies, music, and television shows etc which shows that black males to exhibit violent criminal behaviour and an extraordinary desire for sexual conquest over women. Trevor B. Milton in his essay titled *Class Status and the Construction of Black Masculinity* writes that these widely viewed stereotypes were born out of centuries of institutionalized racial subjugation and the simultaneous fascination and fear of these attributes by White Americans. As working-class White Americans adjusted to Reconstruction Era America after slavery, many promoted the stereotype of the violent and rapacious Black male in order to justify the solidification of legal segregation in the 1890s. African American men were equated with animals: physically strong, sexually unrestrained, and intellectually inferior. Another article by Patrick Wilmot titled *The Role of Violence in the*

*Works of Wright and Fanon* argues that Black masculinity has been a constant target of white American oppression and misrepresentation. He further elucidates that the so called 'myth' of the impotent Black male serves to uphold white supremacy, alleviate fears of Black power, and undermine the Black liberation movement.

One of the main tenets of African American literature is depiction of the harsh realities of growing up as a black person in a violent environment with the stigma of colour. In the essay *Violence and Black Childhood*, Domna Pastourmatzi talks about the relationship between the upbringing of a black child and the behavioural attributes that they exhibit when they grow up. From the era of slave narratives to contemporary novels, countless black authors have vividly portrayed the harrowing connections between this formative period and the profound experiences of humiliation, anguish, cruelty, and abuse. Whether autobiographical or fictional, many writings associate blackness with misfortune and victimization. Childhood for blacks is often a traumatic experience with lifelong implications with emotional and physical trauma that cannot be eradicated. A close analysis of Richard Wright's autobiographical novel *Black Boy* provides a powerful exploration of the complex relationship between childhood trauma, violence, and racial identity. Wright's memoir vividly illustrates how violence, both structural and personal, shapes his formative years. The violence Richard faces is not just physical but also psychological, deeply affecting his perception of the world, his relationships, and his sense of self.

In *Black Boy*, Wright recounts the trauma he faced not only from white people but also from his own family and community. His childhood is filled with violence, fear of white prejudice, and frequent conflicts with his mother, grandmother, and other relatives. Richard is exposed to violence early in life. After being abandoned by his father, he is subjected to harsh beatings from his mother and the women in his household, who use physical punishment to enforce discipline and obedience. This violent environment fosters a deep sense of fear and helplessness in him from a young age. Growing up in such an oppressive setting inevitably leads black boys like Richard to become violent. By the age of four, he becomes an arsonist, setting fire to his own home; a killer, when he takes the life of a kitten to get back at his father; and a torturer, when he cruelly torments a fragile crawfish. These early experiences convince

Richard that life is a brutal fight for survival, one that must be met with violence. Additionally, throughout his time in Mississippi and Arkansas, he witnesses the white violence inflicted on black people. *Black Boy* serves as a memoir about racism and racial identity, highlighting the difficulties of growing up as a young African-American man in the South. It vividly depicts the harsh realities of Southern racism and highlights that racial differences are not inherent or biological, but rather the result of a society that is economically and politically unequal. Wright's depiction of violence within his family—particularly the harsh discipline he receives from his mother and other family members—underscores a cycle of trauma. This violence, often justified as a means of discipline, becomes a tool for survival in a world already marred by racial inequality and oppression. His early experiences with arson, animal cruelty, and emotional detachment are chilling manifestations of the anger and helplessness that result from such a brutal upbringing. The emotional scars left by early violence, compounded by the societal structures that continue to oppress black people, contribute to the complex, often painful journey of self-discovery and survival. This makes *Black Boy* not just a memoir of a young man's struggle, but a broader commentary on the long-lasting effects of racism on the black psyche.

The connection between Bigger Thomas and Richard Wright, as well as other young black men of that time, is indeed crucial to understanding the psychological impact of systemic racism. Wright uses Bigger's character to illustrate how social and racial oppression creates a sense of powerlessness and internalized rage, leading to self-destructive behaviour and violence. Bigger's initial involvement with the gang and his subsequent actions—particularly the accidental killing of Mary Dalton and the murder of Bessie—serve as poignant symbols of his disillusionment with society. His sense of powerlessness is not just about his limited opportunities, but also about the racialized expectations that he must contend with daily. The novel's depiction of his rage isn't simply directed at the people he interacts with, but at a society that constantly dehumanizes him and limits his chances for a better life. In the essay titled *Black Boy No More? Violence And the Flight from Blackness in Richard Wright's Native Son*, Kadeshia L. Matthews writes that Bigger's violence is a distorted form of self-creation and a desperate attempt to achieve manhood in a society that systematically denies it to black men. Bigger himself claims that "murder is an act of

self-creation" and this act gives him a sense of freedom and significance. The idea that Bigger feels a strange empowerment after killing Mary is especially significant because it shows how his need for agency and control over his life leads him to actions that confirm the very stereotypes that white society holds about him. Wright emphasizes this cycle of fear and violence, showing that racism's effects are not only structural but also psychological, impacting both the oppressed and the oppressors. Bigger's brutality and his violence are unsettling, but Wright is not glorifying them. Rather, he is showing how a person can be shaped by their environment and the constant dehumanization they experience. Wright's portrayal of Bigger's internal conflict—his frustration, confusion, and feelings of insignificance—adds depth to his character, making him more than just a villain. He is a product of a racist system that has stripped him of his sense of identity and humanity. Ultimately, Wright's message in *Native Son* is not just about the dehumanizing impact of racism, but also about how deeply rooted societal structures can create destructive cycles that are difficult to break. It's a powerful exploration of how individuals can be shaped by forces larger than themselves and how the fear and hatred of one group can perpetuate violence and misery for everyone involved.

Wright goes out of his way to emphasize that Bigger is not a conventional hero, as his brutality and capacity for violence are extremely disturbing, especially in graphic scenes such as the one in which he decapitates Mary's corpse in order to stuff it into the furnace. Wright does not present Bigger as a hero to admire, but as a frightening and upsetting figure created by racism. Indeed, Wright's point is that Bigger becomes a brutal killer precisely because the dominant white culture fears that he will become a brutal killer. By confirming whites' fears, Bigger contributes to the cycle of racism in America.

*Native Son* explores the intersection of black masculinity and violence as a central theme. The novel beautifully portrays the intricate relationship between black masculinity, violence and the struggle for identity in a racially charged environment. Bigger's life is marked by systemic racism, economic hardship, and limited opportunities. As a result, he feels trapped and powerless, with no clear path to escape his circumstances. He experiences a constant sense of suffocation, both physically and psychologically. The weight of societal expectations, racial prejudice, and economic inequality

bears down on him. This pressure builds until it explodes in violent acts. Bigger's violent response begins when he accidentally kills Mary Dalton, the white daughter of his employer. Fear and panic drive him to cover up the crime, leading to a series of increasingly violent actions. His desperate attempts to avoid detection escalate the situation, culminating in the tragic death of his girlfriend, Bessie.

*Native Son* highlights the racial bias within the justice system, particularly through the trial of Bigger Thomas. Wright uses the trial not just as a legal proceeding but as a focal point for exposing the pervasive racial prejudices that infect every aspect of society, including the legal system, media, and public opinion. The media's sensationalizing of the case is a key element in how the public perceives Bigger. From the moment of his arrest, he is depicted as a monstrous, almost inhuman figure. The sensational headlines and public outcry reduce him to a symbol of fear for the white community, reinforcing stereotypes about black men as violent and dangerous. This dehumanization is central to the narrative, as it both reflects the racial dynamics of the time and contributes to the very cycle of violence and hatred that the novel critiques. The media and public reaction to Bigger's trial serves to further isolate him. He is no longer seen as an individual but as a representation of all the fears white society has about black people. This is especially apparent in how the court proceedings unfold, where the focus is not on whether Bigger is guilty of the specific charges, but rather on his race and the perceived threat he represents. His fate seems predetermined, as the justice system works in tandem with racial prejudices to deliver a sentence that reflects the deeper social inequities. Bigger's rage and frustration lead him to defy societal norms. The murders he commits—starting with Mary Dalton, then Bessie—are extreme acts, but they can be understood as expressions of his desperation and his need to assert control over a life that has been relentlessly controlled by others. His sense of powerlessness within the confines of a racist society drives him to make violent, destructive decisions that feel, to him, like the only way to exert any control. The irony, of course, is that the very system that has oppressed Bigger now condemns him for acting out in ways that reflect the frustrations and rage that were cultivated by that system. In this sense, his trial is not just a moment of legal judgment, but an example of how racism, violence, and dehumanization feed into each other, perpetuating

a cycle that is hard to escape. Wright's portrayal of Bigger's trial and the public's reaction to it suggests that the true monstrousness lies not in Bigger himself, but in the system that turns a young man into a symbol of fear and violence. The justice system, rather than offering fairness or rehabilitation, reinforces the existing racial hierarchies, ultimately trapping people like Bigger in an inescapable cycle of violence and oppression.

Richard Wright's exploration of violence in *Native Son* reveals its deep connection to systemic oppression. Pierre W. Orelus's in his essay *Black Masculinity under White Supremacy* argues that the legacy of slavery and colonialism has profoundly shaped how Black men's masculinity is perceived and performed, particularly within the context of white supremacy and institutional racism. The author further analyses how these historical forces, along with heterosexism and social class, have contributed to the marginalisation and stereotyping of Black men, sometimes leading to the internalisation and reproduction of violence. Bigger's violence is not born out of premeditation or inherent malice, but rather from a place of profound desperation and frustration. His violent acts are an instinctive reaction to the suffocating limitations imposed on him by society. He has been denied basic opportunities for dignity, personal growth, and human connection, and, in his mind, violence is the only means by which he can assert his own existence in a world that continually denies his humanity. While his actions are undeniably brutal and unforgivable in their own right, Wright doesn't depict them as mere expressions of evil or moral failure. Instead, he shows them as the outcome of a deeply fractured and unjust system that has systematically marginalized and dehumanized individuals like Bigger. Wright uses Bigger's inner turmoil, guilt, and confusion to illustrate how violence can emerge from a place of profound alienation and helplessness, not just malice.

The question of accountability is crucial to understanding the novel's broader critique of society. Is Bigger solely to blame for his actions, or is he a product of a broken, racist system? Wright deliberately blurs the lines between individual responsibility and societal liability, encouraging readers to grapple with this question. While Bigger undeniably makes choices—sometimes actively choosing violence—Wright suggests that those choices are shaped, if not entirely determined, by the oppressive forces around him.

In this way, Bigger becomes both a victim and a perpetrator, a tragic figure who is shaped by the very systems that confine and dehumanize him.

In conclusion, *Native Son* challenges readers to consider violence not just as an individual moral failing, but as a consequence of a larger, deeply ingrained societal problem. Bigger's violent acts are not excused, but they force readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that violence is often a symptom of deeper societal injustices. Wright asks us to look beyond the individual, to examine the structures of power, race, and class that shape individuals' lives, and to question how these structures contribute to the suffering and violence that pervade society. Through Bigger's story, Wright ultimately invites us to reckon with the ways in which systemic oppression breeds not only personal tragedies but societal ones, too.

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