Native Son

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright was born in rural Mississippi, lived for a time near Memphis, Tennessee, and Jackson, Mississippi, and was raised mostly by female relatives in his extended family. His father left the family when Wright was a child, and his mother worked a series of menial jobs before suffering strokes between 1918 and 1920, requiring medical care for the rest of her life. Having performed well academically until he was forced, in high school, to drop out and begin working, Wright relocated, in 1927, to Chicago—a city that would allow Wright to develop as a writer and thinker, and in which his novel *Native Son* was based. One of Wright's jobs in Chicago was mail sorter at the Post Office. As a young man, Wright read widely in modern English and American literature, as well as translated literature from continental Europe. Wright joined, for a time, the Communist Party in Chicago, and after writing a first novel (*Lawd Today*, eventually published in 1963), he moved to New York City in 1937 and wrote, in 1938 and 1940, respectively, the short-story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* and the novel *Native Son*, which launched his career. Wright's *Black Boy*, a somewhat fictionalized tale of his young life, was released in 1945 and added to his fame. Wright moved to Paris in 1946, and lived there, primarily, until his death in 1960. Wright was an inspiration for other African-American writers, including Ralph Ellison (author of *Invisible Man*) and James Baldwin; the latter would go on to critique Wright's work severely, but with the acknowledgment of its influence on his own.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wright's most famous works—*Native Son* and *Black Boy*—each deal with the effects of a historical event often called the Great Migration, in which million of African Americans left the oppressive political and social conditions of the South and moved northward, to cities like Chicago and Detroit, in the Midwest, and New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, on the East Coast. Although Bigger, the protagonist of *Native Son*, finds that Chicago lacks the overt racism of Mississippi (where Bigger claims to have family, and where Wright himself was born), Bigger also notices a good deal of subtler racism in the city: zones where only whites or blacks are expected to live; "charities" that serve, mostly, to maintain conditions for African Americans, rather than to help them to make money and live on equal terms with whites. Wright wrote during a time of renewed political agitation against discriminatory laws in the South and across the country—the major civil rights push of the first part of the 20th-century in the US—that resulted, in 1964, in the signing of the Civil Rights Act, and a great deal of federal involvement in the political affairs of the South (most notably regarding the right of African Americans to vote). The frustrations exhibited by Bigger and other characters in Wright's fiction stem from the unresolved racial conflicts of 1930s and 1940s America.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wright read a great deal of 19th- and 20th-century literature, in addition to moral and political philosophy, and his books are infused with the ideas of the great thinkers and fiction writers of those centuries. *Native Son* consists of a story—a crime and its punishment—not unrelated to Dostoevsky's great 19th-century novel *Crime and Punishment*, which details the life of a down-and-out man named Raskolnikov, who, like Bigger, is consumed by anger, confusion, and a deep sadness about contemporary life. Wright's works also reflect an interest in the ideas of "existentialism," a complex philosophical tradition best exemplified in literature by the plays and texts of Jean-Paul Sartre, with whose ideas Wright was to become more familiar on Wright's move to Paris after the Second World War. The social novels of the 19th century, including those of Emile Zola, in France, and of Charles Dickens, in England, also have a clear influence on *Native Son* and its focus on telling a story of difficult urban life in 1930s Chicago. Wright also wrote in a tradition of modern African-American literature to which he contributed greatly, especially after the explosion of literary activity occurring in Harlem in the early part of the 20th century, termed the "Harlem Renaissance." Wright was not from New York City, and his work appeared after the major poems of (as one example) Langston Hughes, but Wright nevertheless carried on a tradition of social commentary that writers of the Harlem Renaissance established. The works of James Baldwin (*Go Tell It On the Mountain*; *The Fire Next Time*; *Another Country*) and of Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*) also derive, in part, from Wright's work, if only in the way their work contrasts and opposes Wright's in both style and politics. Both Baldwin's and Ellison's writings are more lyrical, less blunt in their realism than Wright's. But both Baldwin and Ellison considered Wright an important influence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Native Son*
- **When Written:** 1938-1940
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1940
- **Literary Period:** American modernism

- **Genre:** Psychological realism; documentary novel; African-American 20th-century fiction
- **Setting:** Chicago, primarily the South Side, in the late 1930s
- **Climax:** Bigger is sentenced to death by the Chicago criminal court
- **Antagonist:** Buckley
- **Point of View:** third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Baldwin's response. James Baldwin wrote a famous essay, in 1949, critiquing Wright's book, entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel." In it, Baldwin drew on the racial attitudes implicit in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman, which included a good deal of implicit racism on the part of whites sympathetic to abolitionism) as a means of critiquing Wright's understanding of political conditions in 1940s America, and their effect on the attitudes of young African Americans.

Bluntness. Arnold Rampersad, in his introduction to *Native Son* included in the Harper paperback edition, refers to a quotation of R. P. Blackmur's that was applied, as Rampersad notes, by another unnamed "scholar-critic," to *Native Son*: namely, that it is "one of those books in which everything is undertaken with seriousness except the writing." This complaint is sometimes leveled against the occasional woodenness of description and dialogue in the novel, and a sense that the novel was speedily written, almost as a kind of reportage of the events as they are taking place. Other critics, however, argue that this bluntness is a virtue in the novel—an attempt to capture, in "real" and immediate language, the events of Bigger's life as they unfold.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel *Native Son* begins in the Thomas apartment in 1930s Chicago, where Bigger, his sister Vera, his mother (Ma), and brother Buddy all live, in one room, together. Ma and Vera spot a rat, and Bigger kills it with a frying pan, before heading out for the afternoon—a day in which, as his mother and Vera remind him, he has an interview with Mr. Dalton, a rich, white real-estate magnate in the South Side of Chicago. On his way to Doc's pool hall, Bigger runs into his friend Gus, and the two talk about jobs they might enjoy doing if it weren't for the fact that they are African American, and therefore essentially barred from many professions. Bigger tells Gus that he would be an aircraft pilot, if it were possible.

Gus and Bigger go into the pool hall and meet up with Jack and G.H. The four plan the robbery of Blum's deli, with Gus the least willing to perform it, since the gang has never before robbed a white man, and Gus worries about retaliation. Jack and Bigger go to see a movie, in which a newsreel of Mary Dalton, Mr. Dalton's daughter, and Jan, her Communist boyfriend, is shown. Bigger and Jack go back to Doc's, and Gus arrives later than the other three; Bigger threatens Gus with a knife, and Gus runs out of the pool hall, putting an end to the group's robbery plan. Angry, Bigger cuts up a pool table, and Doc kicks them out of the hall.

Bigger goes home for an hour or two, then leaves for his interview at the Daltons'. Mr. Dalton tells Bigger he is to be a chauffeur for the Dalton family; his first job will be to drive Mary to her lecture that evening. Peggy, the Daltons' maid, welcomes Bigger and tells him his other job is to feed the house's **furnace**. Bigger drives Mary that evening, but she instead says she wants to meet with her friend Jan; Jan and Mary have dinner with Bigger, and though they wish to be nice to him, they only embarrass him with their kindness. The three get drunk, and Bigger drives Jan and Mary around the park before dropping off Jan and taking Mary back home.

Bigger carries Mary, who is unconscious, upstairs and puts her to bed; while he is in her room, Mrs. Dalton, who is blind, comes in, smells alcohol, and believes only that Mary is intoxicated once again. Bigger puts a pillow over Mary's face to keep her from saying that Bigger is in the room, and Bigger realizes, when Mary's mother is gone, that he has accidentally killed Mary. Bigger takes her body downstairs, burns it in the furnace, and goes home, in a daze, to sleep in his apartment.

The next day, Bigger realizes that he really killed Mary, and goes back to the Dalton house to develop an alibi. Bigger realizes it is most feasible that Jan is the murderer, so Bigger begins to tell Mrs. Dalton, Mr. Dalton, and Peggy, who have realized that Mary is gone, that Jan stayed late at the house the previous night. Mr. Dalton calls Britten, a private investigator, to ask Bigger questions, and Britten also calls over Jan to the Daltons'. Jan denies that he came over the previous night, and wonders what has happened to Mary. When Jan asks Bigger why Bigger is lying, Bigger threatens Jan with a gun downstairs, in the furnace room, and Jan leaves.

Reporters gather at the house, and hear a statement from Mr. Dalton, who says, in the interim, that he has received a ransom note, forged by Bigger (unbeknownst to Mr. Dalton), demanding 10,000 dollars for Mary's return. Dalton says he intends to pay the ransom. But when Bigger is asked to rake out the furnace, which is full of ash, he spills ash on the floor, and the reporters see Mary's white bones inside; Bigger sneaks out of the furnace room, but at this point he is a fugitive from justice. Bigger goes to his girlfriend Bessie's house, tells her he killed Mary, and makes it seem that Bessie can only go along with Bigger's ransom plan, now, since she is an "accessory" to the crime. Bessie, horrified, leaves with Bigger and goes to an abandoned warehouse, to hide.

Bigger rapes Bessie in the warehouse, then kills her with a brick, to keep her from speaking to police. Bigger then roams around the city, incognito, hoping to avoid the thousands of

police officer searching for him. Bigger is eventually found on the roof of another building in the Black Belt, and is shot with a high-powered hose, debilitating him. He is brought into the police station amid shouts from the gathered crowds, who call him, among other things, a "black **ape**."

In prison, Bigger meets with Buckley, the State's Attorney, his family, the Daltons, Jan, and his lawyer, Max, a friend of Jan's. Bigger also meets with a preacher, who asks Bigger to pray for his own soul. Buckley takes down Bigger's confession, which Bigger signs, and after Bigger sees a burning cross in Chicago, set up by the Ku Klux Klan, he tells the preacher that he does not believe in his immortal soul, and that Christianity has no use for him.

Max interviews Bigger, asking about the circumstances of his life, and in the ensuing trial, although Buckley demands the death penalty, Max claims that Bigger's upbringing, and the difficult living conditions of African Americans in Chicago and elsewhere in the country, should persuade the jury to give Bigger only life in prison.

But the jury decides that Bigger will be executed, and Max's appeal to the Governor of the state fails. The final scene of the novel, between Max and Bigger, shows Bigger thanking Max for listening to him, earlier, although Max is shocked that Bigger is still largely unrepentant for his crimes. Bigger tells Max goodbye, and, as the novel ends, asks Max also to tell Jan "goodbye" from him as well.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bigger Thomas – The novel's protagonist, Bigger is involved with a gang at the beginning of the novel, but his run-ins with the law, and his illegal activities, are minimal. Nevertheless Bigger is defined by his rage: against his mother, the rest of his family, his friends, and those whom he believes have not given him a chance in life. Bigger is hired to work at the Dalton house—home of a wealthy, white communist-leaning Chicago family—and on the first night of his job, after spending time with Mary Dalton and her friend Jan, Bigger accidentally kills Mary, then begins covering up the crime. This cover-up includes Bigger's later murder of Bessie, his girlfriend, and leads to his trial and conviction for rape and homicide. Bigger is sentenced to death at the end of the novel, although his interactions with his sympathetic lawyer, Max, cause Bigger to gain some insight into why he chose to kill in the first place.

Buddy Thomas – Bigger's brother, Buddy tends to take Bigger's side when Vera and Ma tell Bigger he must find a job. Buddy, younger than Bigger, looks up to his older brother, and, after Bigger's arrest, Buddy even says he will help Bigger to violently escape the prison, if necessary—although this is, of course, impossible.

Mr. Dalton – Father of Mary and Bigger's employer, Mr. Dalton is a wealthy real-estate magnate in the South Side of Chicago, and his company owns the apartment building in which Bigger and his family live. Mr. Dalton claims that he donates a good deal of money to African American charities, and that he hires black workers in order to help them. But as Max points out in the trial, Mr. Dalton's help is paternalistic, at best, and serves only to make life marginally better for African Americans while continuing to funnel the meager incomes of the Black Belt toward Dalton's highly profitable real-estate company.

Mrs. Dalton – Mrs. Dalton, like her husband Henry, believes that the Dalton family is helping African Americans in Chicago by offering them jobs and by donating to charities in the Black Belt. Mrs. Dalton's physical blindness—she has been blind for ten years—is a counterpart to what Bigger and Max consider to be her metaphorical "blindness" toward the plight of African Americans in Chicago.

Mary Dalton – Daughter of the Daltons, Mary is driven by Bigger on the night of her murder, and the two of them pick up Jan—although Bigger does not want to socialize with Mary and Jan, because their niceness makes him ashamed of his blackness and lack of familiarity with Communism. Bigger then murders Mary, by accident, while trying to "keep her quiet" while Mrs. Dalton is in Mary's bedroom later that night. Bigger disposes of Mary's body by putting her in the Dalton family **furnace**, thus prompting a city-wide search for Mary, and leading, later, to Bigger's imprisonment and sentencing to execution for his crimes.

Jan – A Communist active in Chicago, and Mary's boyfriend, Jan meets up with Mary and Bigger the night of the murder, and does all he can to treat Bigger with kindness—although Bigger resents Jan's attempts. Bigger then implicitly blames Jan for Mary's murder, hoping that authorities will be fooled, and although some believe that Jan might have "made a pact" with Bigger in order for Mary to be killed, Jan's name is later cleared. Jan has his friend Max, a lawyer for the Communists, represent Bigger at his trial, and Bigger's last words to Max, at the novel's end, are to tell Jan that he says goodbye.

Max – Bigger's defense attorney at his trial, Max is a Jewish-American Communist who believes that the oppressive white majority of Chicago does all it can to "keep down" people of color and members of trade unions. Max sympathizes with Bigger because he, too, is a victim of discrimination, based on his political and religious beliefs. Although Max does not succeed in helping Bigger avoid execution, Bigger is nonetheless grateful to Max for speaking to him as a human being.

Buckley – The State's Attorney and prosecutor of the case against Bigger, Buckley is very much a representative of the city's ruling white majority—he calls Bigger an "**ape**" and a "savage," and makes it seem that Bigger killed out of a

generalized blood-lust, directed particularly against white women. Buckley succeeds at trial in getting the judge and jury to agree to Bigger's execution.

Bessie – Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie tends to go along with what Bigger wants, although when Bigger asks her to help generate a ransom from the supposed "kidnapping" of Mary, Bessie breaks down and worries that her life is ruined. Bigger later rapes and murders Bessie, fearing that she will tell the authorities of Bigger's guilt; Bessie's body is found by the police and exhibited at the inquest, causing Bigger to faint out of shock.

The preacher – An African-American preacher from the Black Belt, the preacher, named Hammond, does all he can to convince Bigger that he will receive salvation for his crimes only in the next life. But after Bigger sees a burning cross, set up by the Ku Klux Klan, in the South Side during his incarceration, Bigger rejects absolutely the preacher's teaching, believing that God can offer Bigger no support or succor in this life or the next.

Deputy coroner – The man presiding over the inquest, in front of the grand jury, the deputy coroner insists that Bessie's body be laid out before Bigger and the remainder of the group assembled. Max objects that this is being done only to incite the mob against Bigger, but the deputy coroner claims Bessie's body is necessary to establish the fact of her murder.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ma Thomas – Bigger's mother, Ma does her best to keep the family going—to feed her children, and to encourage them, namely Bigger and Vera, to help provide for the family. Ma Thomas is spiritually crushed by Bigger's murder, and asks him, while in prison, to pray for his soul.

Vera Thomas – Bigger's only sister, Vera takes classes at the local YWCA in order to become a seamstress. After Bigger's imprisonment, Vera also tells Bigger he ought to pray for his soul and for redemption in the next life.

Gus – A member of Bigger's gang, Gus comes up with the idea to rob Blum's deli, at least initially, but has hesitations about it later on. Bigger takes out his frustration on Gus, choking and attacking him at Doc's pool hall. Gus later visits Bigger in prison.

G.H. – Another member of Bigger's gang, G. H. says that he will go along with the robbery of Blum's deli, but also seems somewhat sympathetic to Gus's side—feeling, perhaps, afraid that the group will get caught if they rob a white man.

Jack – The third member of Bigger's gang, Jack goes with Bigger to the movies on the supposed day of the Blum robbery, and watches, with Bigger, the news-reel starring Mary Dalton and Jan.

Blum – Owner of a deli in the South Side, Blum, a white man, is the target of a planned robbery executed by Bigger's gang. The gang decides against robbing the deli, however, once Bigger attacks Gus and ruins the group's sense of shared purpose.

Doc – Owner of a pool hall in the South Side, Doc seems, at first, to enjoy the company of the gang, but later kicks them all out of his bar after Bigger cuts up the green felt of the pool table with his knife.

Peggy – The head maid of the Dalton house, Peggy is kind to Bigger, cooks for him, and shows him how to stoke the **furnace**. Peggy betrays very little suspicion of Bigger, even after Mary's disappearance.

Britten – A private investigator hired by Mr. Dalton, Britten believes from the start that Bigger might have had something to do with Mary's disappearance. He is later called by Buckley to appear at Bigger's trial, and testifies as to his interactions with Bigger immediately after the murders.

Green – A former employee of the Daltons', and also from the Black Belt, Green, as Mrs. Dalton tells it, used some of his time and money during his employment at the Dalton home to get an education at night school.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WHITENESS, BLACKNESS, AND RACISM

Native Son is a meditation on racial relations in 1930s Chicago, told from the perspective of Bigger Thomas, a young African-American man who, enraged at society, accidentally kills Mary Dalton, whose body he later burns in a **furnace**; and Bessie, his "girl." The novel's author, Richard Wright, drawing in part on his own experiences as an African-American male growing up in the South and moving to Chicago, describes the sensation of "blackness" from Bigger's perspective. Bigger's blackness, and the "whiteness" he encounters in large swaths of society, are not merely skin colors or racial barriers: they become, to Bigger and many others, symbolic distinctions between the morally fallen (blackness) and the morally pure (whiteness).

From the beginning of the novel, when hanging out with "the gang" (including Jack and G.H.), Bigger announces that he cannot pursue his dream of becoming an aircraft pilot, because African Americans in Chicago are not permitted or encouraged to gain even a basic education. Bigger is ashamed and angry when he first meets Mary, Jan, and the Dalton family—even Peggy, the Daltons' head housemaid—because he senses that his blackness has led him into a position of servility to a white

family. This, despite the fact that the Daltons wish to help Bigger (although to a limited extent, based on their own paternalistic understanding of African-American culture).

Mary and Jan *truly* wish to help Bigger—it is a component of their Communist ideology—but Bigger's response, when asked to sit with, shake hands with, and eat with Jan and Mary, is to shrink back from them, out of a mixture of resentment, anger, and fear. The first part of the novel, then—leading up to Bigger's murder of Mary—shows that Bigger's understanding of his own blackness, and black culture, is determined primarily in relation to the city's dominant white culture. Bigger views his own ethnic background with a kind of internalized racial lens—he has difficulty recognizing his own potential as a human being, and he takes an immediate dislike to those members of white society who attempt to help him.

The second part of the novel, Bigger's trial, draws out more clearly these racial divides. Bigger and his trial have become the talk of the city, and a symbol of its racial troubles. The trial divides society starkly between those white citizens who wish to help Bigger—namely Max and Jan—and those who wish to do him harm, to punish him for his crime—namely, Buckley. Max and Jan wish to help Bigger, to treat him as a human being, and to explain, if not justify, his crime based on the harsh realities of life in the Black Belt. Bigger, at first, resents this help, but later learns to respect Max a great deal, and in the poignant final scene of the novel, after Bigger has been sentenced to die, Bigger thanks Max for recognizing his (Bigger's) humanity—for helping him to feel that his own life is worth fighting for.

Buckley, on the other hand, refers to Bigger as an "ape," and seems to relish the punishment meted out to Bigger. Thus Buckley, like many white members of the media establishment in the city, wants only an excuse to punish members of the African-American community—a community that Buckley views as "unproductive" and, at worst, capable of terrible crimes. The novel's resolution provides little consolation for this unfairness. But there is a notable change that occurs: Bigger becomes aware, after his crime and through communication with Max over the course of the trial, that his internalized notions of the bleakness and powerlessness of black culture have been implanted in his psyche by a dominant white culture, one that does not recognize the humanity of the city's black population. Although Bigger must die for his crimes—and he never repents for them—he has gained a degree of self-knowledge through which the reader, too, might come to terms with the US's racial divide.

CAPITALISM AND COMMUNISM

The novel is also a detailed examination of the nature of "capitalism" and "communism" in 1930s Chicago—a time and place known for agitation in the workforce, over who ought to control "the means of production."

Bigger is often caught between these competing worldviews, and though he expresses frustration at the societal status quo, he is not capable, until far later in the novel, of articulating these frustrations in economic terms.

On the one end, capitalism, and the creation of profits for distribution among a small group of people, is embodied by the Dalton family, specifically Mr. Henry Dalton. Dalton is not a rapacious capitalist—he wishes to reinvest his earnings, some of which derive from real estate owned in black neighborhoods, in the community—but he still uses his wealth to insulate himself from the misery of those living in the Black Belt. Other beneficiaries of this system include Mrs. Dalton, who wishes to speak for the interests of their "black help," but who cannot see that her desire to help is itself a manifestation of white privilege; and, of course, Mary, whose communist sympathies embody the interrelation, in the novel, between the capitalist and communist worldviews.

Both Mary and Jan, her lover, are active in the Communist Party of Chicago, and it is their desire to help Bigger as well—to "liberate" his people from the shackles of economic servitude. But Bigger nevertheless experiences a hatred for Mary and Jan despite their good intentions, or perhaps because of them: Bigger seems intuitively to recognize that Jan and Mary, despite their best efforts, are limited by a paternalistic impulse to help African Americans, who, they believe, cannot help themselves. In this way, the communism of Mary and Jan is not so different from the capitalism of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton—both these impulses of kindness lead to death and destruction.

Finally, at the novel's end, Wright offers a portrait of Max as a sympathetic communist figure, one whose motivation to help Bigger is relatively pure (as Max himself, a Jewish member of the Chicago legal community, has felt the sting of discrimination in his own life). Although Bigger never "converts" to communism, he comes, through his conversations with Max, to understand the interdependence of human beings in a community—and this idea, which lies at the root of utopian communism, allows him to approach his death with a kind of quiet dignity. Communism, however flawed and in whatever limited a capacity, is a way for humans to recognize the humanity of one another.

CRIME AND JUSTICE

The novel turns on Bigger's crimes: his murder of Mary, which incites so much protest in the white community of Chicago; and his murder of Bessie, an African-American woman—which, tellingly, does not set off the same firestorm of anger. *Native Son* is a take on the fundamental story of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: two lonely young men, Raskolnikov and Bigger, kill for reasons they cannot explain, and also kill innocent individuals unrelated to their original targets. Both men must come to terms with their crimes in the maw of the criminal justice system.

For Bigger, however, this system is stacked against him to an almost unimaginable degree, as Mary is a member of wealthy white Chicago society. The legal process by which Bigger is tried is contrasted with the "desires" of the Chicago community at large, especially its white community, as represented by the opinions of the State's Attorney, Buckley. Buckley argues that Bigger's crimes deserve to be publicized and "tried" in the community, and that the opinion of the mob, if not admissible at court, nevertheless impacts his own (Buckley's) actions as prosecutor. Buckley asks for the death penalty, and reviews in excruciating detail Bigger's previous gang-related activities, and his gruesome murders.

On the other side stands Max—a small beacon of hope for Bigger, that the latter might avoid the death penalty; that he might have his humanity, and the motivations for his crime, recognized in court. Max consistently describes Buckley's argumentative efforts as attempts to turn public opinion against Bigger. Eventually, Bigger is tried, and a great deal of evidence is brought against him by Buckley, evidence that not only shows Bigger's guilt but makes it appear that Bigger is hardly human, an "ape" who has killed out of a hatred for white people. But Max, calling no witnesses himself, makes an impassioned speech in perhaps the novel's high-point, arguing that Bigger has never had a chance in life, that his view of white society is distorted by the difficulties of his own existence, and that, despite his horrific crimes, Bigger ought to be afforded the legal protections of due process, and the chance to learn and repent in prison for the remainder of his life.

The judge finally decides, based in part on vociferous public outrage, that Bigger must be sentenced to death, and the novel ends on a particularly somber note. But Wright also makes clear that, though Bigger's life is lost, Max's statements on the nature of human suffering, regardless of race, are true ones—ones that might be applied to the lives of other African Americans who have not stumbled as Bigger has.

ANGER AND CHARITY

Wright attempts to tease out, in *Native Son*, the nature of Bigger's anger—his hatred of humanity—and the extent to which charity toward man, as espoused by Max, Jan, Mary, and others, is a preferable way of life. Bigger is defined and enveloped by his hate. He hates the white people he believes have kept him out of school, out of the profession (aircraft pilot) he desires; he hates the Daltons for giving him a room and a job, for treating him as someone in need of charity; and, perhaps most importantly, Bigger hates and rejects his mother and siblings, feeling that, although they love him, they can only crowd in on him and demand things of him. Bigger's anger is his default emotional state—his natural way of viewing the world.

But others in Bigger's life wish to combat this anger. Jan and Mary seem genuinely to want to get to know him, and though the night they spend together goes horribly awry, and Bigger attempts to blame the murder on Jan, Jan nevertheless takes Bigger's side, and hopes, even during the trial, that Bigger might escape the death penalty. Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend, is a foil for Bigger's mother: both are women afraid of Bigger's anger, hoping that he will somehow realize that, although white society might attempt to thwart Bigger and his aspirations, that there exists, too, a society in that Black Belt willing to support and love Bigger.

This all contrasts with the charity offered by the Daltons, who take in members of the black community to work for them, and who give money (evoked most pointedly by the "ping-pong tables") to the Black Belt community. Unfortunately, the Daltons are not capable of understanding that their efforts infantilize and continue, however implicitly, to support the oppression of African-American Chicagoans. Max, on the other hand, is a person outside Bigger's community who, through genuine concern for Bigger's life, and for the plight of all African Americans, shows Bigger compassion, makes a case for Bigger's difficult circumstances, and hopes to avoid the death penalty for his client and friend. At the novel's end, although it is a small victory, Bigger realizes that Max's attempts to understand the story of Bigger's life and circumstances have provided a model for genuine human engagement: a charity of the heart and mind, a form of human communion. Their conversation is not enough to save Bigger's life, but the small smile Bigger gives at the close of the book seems tacit, and poignant, recognition of the possibility of human kindness.

DEATH, LIFE'S PURPOSE, AND THE WILL TO LIVE

Bigger's entire life, leading up to the murders, is characterized by a hatred of his fellow man, and an impulse toward danger and violence. Bigger wishes to rob Blum's grocery, and when his friends do not immediately go along with his plan, he intimidates them. Bigger wants to gratify himself physically (most notably by masturbating in the movie house before the Blum robbery); life, for him, represents only a series of deferrals of death, of small instances of physical pleasure that have no relation to any higher emotional aim.

After the murders—when Bigger claims he "felt free" (to Max), because he was in control of his own life—Bigger comes slowly to realize, through his trial and through the exhortations of Max on his behalf and of Buckley against him, that life is more than a series of disconnected physical pleasures. Life, instead, is lived for a certain goal—for making a profit, for helping others, for establishing a family. Yet Bigger has trouble coming to terms with these realities of unselfish living, until Max asks him about his own life. The paradox of Bigger's condition is that his total selfishness, his ignorance of his family's suffering and of the suffering of others, is combined with a total lack of self-awareness and self-interrogation.

Thus, by asking Bigger to talk about his own life, Max demonstrates the kind of care for another person he believes Bigger ought to have shown to his own friends and family. Bigger does not articulate his prison revelations in exactly these terms, but he nevertheless admits to Max, in their final meeting before his death, that Max has taken the time to see him as an individual, and that this has caused Bigger to recognize that life has value, death is not simply "another thing" that happens to human beings. Death is, instead, the cessation of life's possibility, which is what makes death so unbearable to most. Bigger realizes life's meaning when it is too late to change his own life—but the novel, as cautionary tale, establishes that we, who read it, still have time to correct our lives, to live with purpose, and to put off death by living for others.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE FURNACE

One of Bigger's jobs at the Dalton house is to stoke the furnace that heats the entire property. He is taught to do this by Peggy on his first day of the job. After accidentally smothering Mary later that night in a fit of panic, however, Bigger decides that it would be best to burn Mary's body in the furnace in order to avoid detection and make it seem that Jan is, in fact, Mary's killer. Bigger manages to stuff Mary's body entirely in the furnace, although he has to cut off her head and load it in separately. But Bigger fears all along that the furnace will not burn Mary's body completely, and he is right. The journalists who gather in that room the next day find Mary's body, and this eventually leads to the conviction that places Bigger on death row. The furnace, therefore, is not just an implement used by Bigger to aid in the commission of his crime; it is also a symbol of one of his small jobs at the Dalton estate, and a fiery reminder of the terrible deed Bigger has done. Later in the novel, Bigger has a dream in which the furnace appears to be burning the entire landscape, and it is clear that the physical act of placing Mary inside the machine has stuck with Bigger—it is the dominant image of his crime. And just as Bigger fed Mary into this destructive device, so too is Bigger fed (as Max later argues, at the trial) into the maw of the Chicago criminal justice system. Despite Max's best efforts, the court rules that Bigger ought to be punished this way, and he is sentenced to execution at the novel's end.

"BLACK APE"

Various members of the crowds that gather outside the courtroom, after Bigger's capture, describe Bigger as a "black ape," and even newspaper articles circulating in Chicago do the same. This derogatory term has several meanings. First, it exemplifies the racist discourse common to the United States at that time: a belief that African Americans were somehow biologically inferior to white Americans, and that, as such, black attitudes toward violence, toward women, and toward other parts of society were considered "closer" to those of animals than to those of human beings. This form of racism, so profound in its reduction of African Americans to the image of animals, promotes the kind of vicious anger that leads to Bigger's "conviction" in the "mob," and to his later conviction in the trial, whose prosecution is led by Buckley, the State's Attorney. Max, on Bigger's behalf, attempts to fight the idea that Bigger is inferior to white Americans. However, though Max's argument is impassioned and righteous, it does little to sway the jury and the judge, who sentence Bigger to death. Nevertheless, the novel includes Max's well-meaning dissent as a means of arguing that Bigger is not an "animal," nor is he possessed of animal desires. Instead, it is a majority-white society that has condemned Bigger to inferior status throughout his life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *Native Son* published in 1993.

Book 1 Quotes

❝ You scared your sister with that rat and she *fainted*! Ain't you got no sense at *all*
? Aw, I didn't know she was that scary.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Ma Thomas (speaker), Vera Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

From the beginning of the novel, Bigger is portrayed as someone who causes, rather than alleviates, trouble. He is anxious and already on the verge of small (though significant) violence when he is at home, cooped up in a small apartment with his sister and brother and mother. Bigger knows that his behavior with the rat, whom he views as an invader to the home, will cause his mother and sister to become frightened - but what counteracts this knowledge is Bigger's overwhelming desire to act, and to act with force, upon the world at large.

Thus Bigger is not, even at the beginning of the novel, unaware of the consequences of his actions. But the narrator points out that consequences and an awareness of them are not enough for Bigger. His impulsiveness, his energy, and his anger at the world push him out of the apartment and into a situation from which there is no easy means of escape.

If you get that job . . . I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs.

Related Characters: Ma Thomas (speaker), Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Although Bigger is still a young man, he is the oldest man in the house, and as such, his mother wants him to work, rather than wasting his energy hanging around a pool hall with this friends, as Bigger often does. The job that Bigger can get is that of a driver for a wealthy white family on the South Side of Chicago, in a neighborhood vastly different from the collection of tenements in which Bigger currently lives.

Thus Bigger's mother wants her son to succeed, in part for his own development, and in part so that Bigger's wages can help the family, can raise his sister Vera and his brother Buddy somewhat out of poverty. Bigger's mother does not attempt to hide her aspirations for her son - indeed, she pressures him to achieve (monetarily) outside the home, so that all in the family might benefit. This desire for achievement kickstarts the sequence of dramatic events in the novel.

God, I'd like to fly up there in that sky.
God'll let you fly when He gives you your wings up in heaven.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Gus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Bigger is attracted to the sky, and to the planes in the sky, because he sees them as symbols of freedom and escape. The plan can seemingly soar above whatever petty problems are taking place on the earth. And planes, of course, are filled with people who can fly, who have the professional opportunity to take to the air. Bigger wants the skills of a pilot, and he wants to leave the neighborhood in which he was raised. And yet this is impossible for him to achieve, because as a black man he would never be allowed the education and opportunity to become a pilot. Thus for Bigger, flying a plane is even less likely to happen than flying around as an angel in heaven (as Gus says here).

Because of this, the plane as symbol is not an unknown thing to Bigger. He is aware that, in looking at the sky, he is looking at an object of special fascination for himself. The question of what Bigger knows, and does not know, about himself is an interesting and important one. No reader could argue that Bigger is unaware of his anger, nor of his own ambition. The question is what Bigger does to help, or to hurt, himself as the novel progresses - to alter his life for the better or the worse.

You're scared 'cause he's a white man?
Naw. But Blum keeps a gun. Suppose he beats us to it?
Aw, you scared; that's all. He's a white man and you scared.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Gus (speaker), Blum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Bigger takes Gus to task in this scene. He does so because, as the acknowledged leader of the group, Bigger believes it is his responsibility to make sure everyone is in line with, and on board with, a potential robbery of the pool hall. Because Bigger notes that Gus is reluctant to go ahead with the idea, he angrily calls out Gus's masculinity, and argues that Gus is only willing to harm those whom he believes to be socially equal to himself - in other words, other people of color.

Thus the fact that the pool hall owner is a white man causes Bigger to argue that Gus is afraid of committing a crime against exactly that population that Bigger believes is most deserving of young criminality - the white population, that group of people who own many of the businesses in the region, and whose economic power often disenfranchises

people of color.

> At least the fight made him feel the equal of them. And he felt the equal of Doc, too; had he not slashed his table and dared him to use his gun?

Related Characters: Doc, Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Bigger believes that violence is a way of "evening the score" with those around him, of showing that he is up to any challenge and can make a mark upon life, that he can prove himself when confronted. Bigger does not believe that there are other meaningful ways of interacting with the world. He is, as the narrator describes him, a young man who moves on impulse, who wants to see what he can ask the world for, what he can take from it.

This scene in the pool hall, then, shows how quickly and easily Bigger can come to violence - and how his friends in the small group, who typically do not shy away from acts of petty criminality, are nonetheless afraid of Bigger, worried what he might do. Bigger has no motivation for his outbursts other than the vague feeling that the world isn't fair, and that he must do something serious and abrupt to change or stop that unfair world.

> He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Mr. Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

During his meeting with Henry Dalton, Bigger is terrified he will say the wrong thing - that he won't know how to behave around a man with so much money and power. Indeed, Dalton owns the very apartment building in which the Thomas family lives. But Bigger is struck by another impulse - that he is angry at Mr. Dalton for causing him to feel the way he does, for forcing Bigger, through no overt exertion of power, to be silent, to stumble for his words.

Thus Bigger realizes, in his interactions in the Dalton house, just how power can operate outside the "Black Belt" community in which he was born and raised. There, violence is a major way of effecting power, of getting people to do what you want. But in this part of the South Side, where the Daltons live, power is exercised in an entirely different way - with persuasion, with money, with the idea that certain activities are reserved for certain higher levels of society.

> First of all . . . don't say *sir* to me. I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's the way it'll be between us.

Related Characters: Jan (speaker), Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Jan is an avowed communist, who works for the betterment of all people - so he says. He is involved with Mary Dalton, who, despite her family's enormous wealth and privilege (based on capitalistic success), has committed herself also to certain communist ideals - or at least to learning more about those ideals. Jan's and Mary's communist ideology, at this point in the novel, makes very little sense to Bigger.

This is, in a way, because Bigger lives the life that Jan and Mary study from the outside. Jan and Mary do not understand what it's like to grow up in a shabby tenement, without any privacy. They are educated, and they are afforded other privileges (beyond those of money) by being white, by moving in a society that is entirely removed from that of Bigger. For all this, however, their desire to get to know Bigger is genuine - even if, at base, they cannot really know him, and can only spend time with him and condescendingly project onto him what they think he is, and what his life is like.

> The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman. He had to get away from here.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Bigger does not mean to kill Mary Dalton - indeed, he has nothing against her. He and Jan and Mary have had a strange though not a bad time on the evening of the murder. Jan and Mary have gotten to know Bigger, and Bigger has observed them as people who are sympathetic to his life but fundamentally different from it - as do-gooders who wish to know more about the world beyond the white communities of the South Side.

Bigger kills Mary, ironically enough, because he is afraid of what Mrs. Dalton and others might think of him in her bedroom at night. He kills, then, because he already expects a white family to think he is doing something wrong, or criminal, with Mary - that he has gotten her drunk and tried to take advantage of her, or has persuaded her into the vice of drinking itself. Bigger therefore kills because he feels he has no way out - only to realize that, in killing, he has sealed his fate, forcing himself to live permanently on the run from an entire "city of white people."

He was not crying but his lips were trembling and his chest was heaving. He wanted to lie down upon the floor and sleep off the horror of this thing. . . . Quickly, he wrapped the head in the newspaper . . . then he shoved the head in. The hatchet went next.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most gruesome scenes in the book. Again, Bigger does not chop up Mary because he wants to do this, or because he derives any pleasure from it. Rather, he believes he must do so in order to hide the body. The line of reasoning is, for him, perfectly logical - he must dispose of the body so that no one finds out about the murder - and he must do it quickly and efficiently. But in a context removed from this one, of course, Bigger's behavior is enormously irrational. He has, after all, killed out of fear, and now he is burning the corpse out of fear. His desire not to be caught causes him to commit further and further criminal acts, from which, fearfully, he feels he must run. The book is now structured as a series of consequences of Bigger's fatal, tragic act, the accidental killing of Mary - and the manner by which he eludes, for a time, the authorities who zero in on him.

Book 2 Quotes

You've got a good job, now . . . You ought to work hard and keep it and try to make a man out of yourself. Some day you'll want to get married and have a home of your own . . . .

Related Characters: Ma Thomas (speaker), Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Ma Thomas's words here are, of course, sickeningly ironic - for Bigger has no future, and there is no potential life of marriage and stability for him. He is a killer, now, and a fugitive, who has returned home not knowing where else to go - and who realizes that, after a short while, the Daltons will realize that Mary is missing, and will attempt to find her by any means necessary. Bigger has a sense, as his mother is speaking, that his life has changed entirely, and that his future - which only the day before lay in the Daltons' hands - is now one of ceaseless running, the life of a lonely fugitive.

Ma Thomas, at this point in the novel, has not abandoned the hope that Bigger will "reform" himself, that he will take on familial responsibilities and settle into a calmer, less violent life. Of course, this is not the path that the novel takes over the ensuing sections.

Bigger stepped back, thunder-struck. He felt in his pocket for the money; it was not there. He took the money from Buddy and stuffed it hurriedly in his pocket.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Buddy Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Bigger begins making mistakes (apart, of course, from the series of enormously horrific acts he committed at the Daltons, not least of which was murdering and dismembering Mary Dalton). That is - he becomes less and less adept at covering up the traces of his crime. One of those is the money he has taken from the Dalton family, which he knows he must conceal. And yet, at the crucial moment, when he is to walk out the door and head back to the Dalton house, he leaves this money behind, and his innocent and unsuspecting brother, Buddy, finds it.

Bigger knows that it is unlikely Buddy will tell anyone about the money - at least on purpose. But Bigger also senses that the mistakes he's making here are mistakes he might make in other venues - if, say, he has to talk to the Daltons or to the police. He worries, then, that he will reveal his guilt without meaning to.

Ultimately, though, his hate and hope turned outward from himself and Gus: his hope toward a vague benevolent something that would help and lead him, and his hate toward the whites; for he felt that they ruled him, even when they were far away and not thinking of him . . . .

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Gus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Bigger is a changed man when he sees his friends the day after the murder. Naturally, he is changed because of the crime he has committed - but his friends believe he is changed because he is now working for the powerful Dalton family. The narrator plays on this irony - that Bigger's friends do not know what he's done, and are in awe of him - and Bigger himself feels that, perhaps, as he stands with his friends, he might imagine some future that is beyond his immediate circumstances, beyond the crime and the difficulty of living in Chicago's Black Belt.

But this dream only lasts so long. Although Bigger enjoys feeling that his friends are in awe of his new-found money (in relative terms), he knows he must go back to the Daltons, and at this point, things will become much more difficult. He will have to pretend he knows nothing about Mary's disappearance - and because Bigger is so easily flustered around the Daltons, it is precisely this kind of pretending that will be difficult for him to manage.

Listen, I just felt around in Mary's room. Something's wrong. She didn't finish packing her trunk. At least half of her things are still there. She said she was planning to go to some dances in Detroit and she didn't take the new things she bought.

Related Characters: Mrs. Dalton (speaker), Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Dalton realizes that Mary couldn't have gone to Detroit after all, even though Bigger has tried to make it seem that nothing changed in Mary's plans. Mrs. Dalton knows her daughter, and knows that her desire to live well, and to live fashionably, would trump her desire to escape from the family in the middle of the night. In other words, Mary's possible disappearance after her lecture at the University of Chicago simply does not fit in with the remainder of her behavior. It is something she would not do unless she had no choice.

The Dalton family naturally distrusts Jan because of his communist sympathies, and their suspicions initially fall on him. But Bigger also realizes, in overhearing the conversations between Mrs. Dalton and Peggy, that soon they will turn their attentions to Bigger himself - and he will be forced to produce an alibi for the night before, the events of which, mixed up with alcohol, are already difficult for Bigger to narrate, even before the murder took place.

A woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away. He had read of how men had been caught because of women, and he did not want that to happen to him. But, if, yes, but if he told her, yes, just enough to get her to work with him?

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Bessie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

On the one hand, Bigger knows that Bessie will support him, that she cares for him and - most importantly, in his mind - that she is afraid of him. Bessie seems to sense that, for Bigger, there is an anger welling up inside, a hatred of oppressive white populations and also of people more

generally. Bessie knows that Bigger is capable of violence, perhaps even horrible violence.

Thus, when Bigger tells Bessie part of the truth, that he wishes to take a ransom for Mary and Jan, Bessie feels that there is little she can do. She is worried that, if she opposes Bigger, he will try to harm her. And she perhaps senses that Bigger is not being totally honest with her, that he is only tell her a part of the story. Bessie, even more so than Bigger, is hemmed in - unable to make a free choice. She can only do what she must do in order to survive.

He was confident. During the last day and night new fears had come, but new feelings had helped to allay those fears. The moment when he had stood above Mary's bed and found that she was dead the fear of electrocution had entered his flesh and blood. . . . As long as he could take his life into his own hands and dispose of it as he pleased . . . he need not be afraid.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

This is an important scene in the novel. Bigger is, at this moment, still largely under the influence of alcohol, which he has consumed with Bessie. When Bessie drinks, she becomes more and more amenable to Bigger's plan, if only as a means of survival. When Bigger drinks, he finds that he is more and more confident, that he no longer worries that he will be caught and executed - that, perhaps, he can even profit off of Mary's death by collecting a ransom and running away with Bessie.

These thoughts flood Bigger's consciousness and nearly cause him to forget what he has done, that he has committed murder. Bigger vacillates between fear on the one hand and anger on the other, between a certainty that he will be caught and a certainty that he will be able to trick all those involved. Bessie, for her part, continues only to worry, to sense that danger is just around the corner - and to attempt to save herself in the process, while realizing that she cannot escape from Bigger while he is still alive and a free man.

You *are* a Communist, *you goddamn* black sonofabitch! And you're going to tell me about Miss Dalton and that Jan bastard!

Related Characters: Britten (speaker), Bigger Thomas, Jan, Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Britten is the first person in the Dalton household, after the investigation formally begins, to sense that Bigger might somehow be involved in Mary's disappearance. Of course, everyone knows that Bigger was the hired chauffeur, driving the car that carried Mary and Jan. Suspicions fell initially on Jan, whose communist sympathies were enough to raise a red flag to the authorities. But now Britten notes that Bigger seems nervous, that he has trouble stating exactly what he was doing the two nights previous and explaining what he knows about Mary's disappearance.

Britten, interestingly enough, however, pegs some of Bigger's guilt on the idea that he is a communist (and the rest on the fact that he is black). Of course, Bigger only knows a very small amount of what communism is, and this he knows from a brief conversation with Jan and Mary. He did not kill because he sought, according to communist ideals, to break down a system that was economically unfair. He killed simply because he wanted to avoid trouble - because he was afraid. But naturally Bigger does not confess any of these feelings to Britten.

Yeah; I killed the girl . . . Now, you know. You've got to help me. You in it as deep as me! You done spent some of the money . . . .

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas (speaker), Mary Dalton, Bessie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Bessie might have spent some of the money that Bigger stole, and in this sense she is complicit with a very small part of Bigger's crime, but she was also forced to do these things - forced to help Bigger, with the implicit threat that, if she did not, he would harm her. Bessie has had little freedom to speak of throughout the novel, which is why she's gone along with Bigger in the first place - and now, Bigger uses this to ensnare her further.

Bessie and Mary, in this sense, are both victims of Bigger's wrath, even before Bessie dies. Because of her race and class, Bigger knows that he can manipulate Bessie in ways he could not manipulate Mary - but Bigger asserted power over Mary anyway, through physical force at least. Even though Mary's death derived from a sense only of self-preservation, Bigger nevertheless sees himself, by this stage of the novel, as someone who is willing to kill again in order to save his own life.

❝ There was silence. Bigger stared without a thought or an image in his mind. There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In the furnace room, surrounded by members of the new media, Bigger has a sense, even before Mary's bones are discovered not totally burnt in the furnace, that he is now no longer able to escape. He knows that, even if he were innocent, even if he had not killed Mary, even if he had managed to work peaceably in the Dalton house for many years, that there is something in his very blackness that would cause white people to suspect him of wrongdoing.

That Bigger himself has committed a heinous crime is, of course, true. But that Bigger has been a victim, throughout his life, of terrible acts of violence, large and small, implicit and explicit, is also true. Bigger has a sense, now, that the latter point can never justify the former - that no judge will look at his life and view his difficult circumstances as "making up" for murder. But Bigger also realizes how unfair the system is, how all its mechanisms, supposed to produce justice, would have been stacked against him even if he had done nothing out of the ordinary.

Book 3 Quotes

❝ And yet his desire to crush all faith in him was in itself built upon a sense of faith. The feelings of his body reasoned that if there could be no merging with the men and women about him, there should be a merging with some other part of the natural world in which he lived. Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

In jail, Bigger has an opportunity to consider, in a more abstract and philosophical sense, the crimes he has committed, and the society in which he has committed them - and, before that, the environment in which he lived with his family. Bigger knows now that part of his wish, above all, was to be a part of a community larger than himself, to bond with the men and women around him. Distant from his mother and siblings, distant also from his friends, although he spent a great deal of time with them, Bigger sought for something beyond his own life - something large, a set of ideas or acts according to which he could live. This was Bigger's ambition, even if he did not know it.

Killing Mary was the signal mistake of Bigger's life, and it was deeply wrong. But that killing, and the acts that followed, were also the means by which Bigger's life began to change - at least, the means that caused Bigger to recognize the larger social forces at work in his life, and in the lives of those around him.

❝ Bigger, I've never done anything against you and your people in my life. But I'm a white man and it would be asking too much to ask you not to hate me, when every white man you see hates you . . . .

Related Characters: Jan (speaker), Bigger Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

Jan, for his part, seems immensely understanding at this juncture in the novel, even though Bigger has essentially tried to tell the authorities that Jan murdered Mary, or was

at least responsible for her disappearance. Jan understands that the circumstances of Bigger's life have been difficult, far more difficult than he could ever imagine. In contrast to his behavior the night that Bigger killed Mary, Jan now seems more willing to speak to Bigger directly, man to man. He no longer sees Bigger as an abstract representation of what it means to be "black" in Chicago, or of what it means to be a "worker" in a city where so much wealth is concentrated in so small a part of the population. In one of the novel's grander ironies, it is only after Mary's death that many of the characters are able to understand themselves and one another - and it is a bitter, bitter irony, too, for it has come at an immensely steep cost in innocent human lives.

Now listen, Mr. Max. No question asked in this room will inflame the public mind any more than has the death of Mary Dalton, and you know it. You have the right to question any of these witnesses, but I will not tolerate any publicity-seeking by your kind here!

Related Characters: Deputy coroner (speaker), Mary Dalton, Max

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

The deputy coroner, who is handling the prosecution in the case at this preliminary stage, does all that he can to stoke the flames of white anger in Chicago. A great many people are violently angry at Bigger for killing a white woman - and the racist elements in that city see this murder as an inevitable part of the racial violence they believe to exist in the Black Belt. In other words, the deputy coroner wants the jury, composed of white men, to see this as a crime of racial score-setting on Bigger's part - in the hopes that this race-baiting attitude will cause them to convict Bigger and sentence him to death.

Max, on his side, tries to show that Bigger is a human being who made a series of horrible mistakes and who committed terrible crimes - but that he is a human being all the same, and therefore deserving of human sympathy. But the deputy coroner disputes this in court as mere "publicity-seeking" - that is, the deputy coroner believes that any defense that Max offersis fundamentally out of line, since, to him, Bigger is indefensible.

Isn't it true that you *refuse* to rent houses to Negroes if those houses are in other sections of the city?
Why, yes.
Why?
Well, it's an old custom.

Related Characters: Max (speaker), Mr. Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

Max exposes what he believes to be Mr. Dalton's hypocrisy when it comes to the African American populations in Chicago. Mr. Dalton professes that he has done, and continues to do, all that he can to help those in the Chicago community - that his life, outside his business interests, is one of a philanthropist. But, as Max reveals, this life is far more complicated. Dalton charges African Americans very high rents, and tends not to rent to black families in his "white" buildings. He sees nothing wrong or contradictory in this, either.

In essence, Mr. Dalton's views on race are separatist, if not segregationist. He believes that white and black communities are fundamentally different - they may not always be opposed - but he does what he can to offer a "helping hand" to black families. Even this, again, he only does within limits - he does not believe in putting black families on any sort of equal footing with white families. But Dalton does believe that his efforts to help charitably in the city, both in white and black populations, have been sincere ones.

NEGRO KILLER SIGNS CONFESSIONS FOR TWO MURDERS. SHRINKS AT INQUEST WHEN CONFRONTED WITH BODY OF SLAIN GIRL. ARRAIGNED TOMORROW. REDS TAKE CHARGE OF KILLER'S DEFENSE. NOT GUILTY PLEAS LIKELY.

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas, Bessie, Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 341

Explanation and Analysis

This is an example of the kinds of headlines that the narrator and novelist imagine for Bigger's trial. It is obvious

that Bigger is not afforded any kind of fair trial in the press - after all, he is a "killer" and not an "alleged killer" right in the headline, and the reporting of his dismay at the sight of the girl's body seems to show that, though he was capable of doing what he did, he is no longer capable of facing up to it. This, the newspapermen believe, is a sign of Bigger's underlying cowardice.

For the media and many parts of the white Chicago community at large, Bigger's trial is a means of placing further blame on African American populations. Crime, according to these mainstream white viewpoints, is a black problem because African American families do not care to protect their neighborhoods, or because criminality is somehow "inherent" to them. The newspaper thus does all it can to fan the flames of racial hatred in the city.

> Speaking for the grief-stricken families of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears, and for the People of the State of Illinois, thousands of whom are massed out beyond that window waiting for the law to take its course, I say that no such quibbling, no such trickery shall pervert this Court and cheat this law!

Related Characters: Buckley (speaker), Bessie, Mary Dalton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 374

Explanation and Analysis

Buckley, the prosecutor, does what he can to make it seem that he must prosecute aggressively, and ask for the death penalty against Bigger, because the "community" (meaning the white community in Chicago) will rest for nothing less. This, by implication, means that the white community might feel it necessary to take justice into its own hands if Bigger is not sentenced to death. This threat of extra-legal violence is a chilling one, and is a sign that the nature of violence in a racially-polarized society, like Chicago at this time, does not operate equally. Members of white society are more or less allowed to threaten certain members of black society with violence outside the legal system, and without consequences - assuming that the legal system does not step in first to put Bigger to death. Buckley's words are chilling ones, and they are calculated to make the jury feel obligated to vote for execution, so that Bigger gets what white Chicagoans (essentially, bowing to racist mob rule) feel to be his just punishment.

> What I killed for must've been good! It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something . . . . I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em . . . .

Related Characters: Bigger Thomas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 429

Explanation and Analysis

Bigger, during his time in jail, tries his best to understand what he has done and why he has done it, before he is put to death by the state of Illinois. To this speech Max, his lawyer, has nothing substantive to say - Max is scared at the thought that Bigger believes he has achieved some level of insight through murder. Max is fundamentally a pacifist, even as he recognizes the events that have caused Bigger to become so violent. And Max finds, ultimately, that there is little he can do or say to Bigger to make sense of the violent mistakes Bigger has made, and through which he has brought his own life to an end.

Bigger, for his part, believes that his passions were powerful ones - that his anger against the restrictive elements of white society were themselves persuasive, even though killing is inherently wrong. He felt, in killing, that he was powerful and consequential, even if he sees during the trial that the murders of Mary and Bessie have only created more harm, more suffering, more pain in the world. At this bleak and somewhat contradictory point (at least on a moral level), the novel draws to a close just before Bigger is put to death.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1

The alarm clock rings, and an African-American family of four, living on the South Side (in the "Black Belt") of Chicago gets up. The family lives in a single room in a tenement building, and consists of a mother and three children: Bigger, the oldest; Vera, the middle child; and Buddy, the youngest. As is their custom, the two boys turn their heads so that Ma and Vera can get dressed with some small amount of privacy.

One of the novel's primary characteristics is the manner in which it compresses time and the activities of its protagonist, Bigger. Thus, the alarm clock rings on this, the first day of the novel, which is also the first day of Bigger's job; Bigger will meet Mary this evening, and by the next day, his entire world will have changed.

Ma and Vera spot an enormous rat, running around the one-room apartment, and begin to scream, begging Bigger to do something about it—to kill the rat. Bigger tells Buddy to block off the rat's hole in the room with a wooden box; the rat jumps and holds onto Bigger's pant-leg, and the women scream again; Bigger throws the skillet and misses the rat.

The feeling of being chased—of having nowhere to go—and of being expected merely to "disappear" in some hole or another, is intended by Richard Wright as a clear parallel to Bigger's situation. His apartment, after all, is not much larger than a single room.

But on a second throw, Bigger aims at the rat, which is near the wooden box looking for its hole and its escape to safety; Bigger hits the rat squarely with the thrown skillet, and kills it. Bigger then beats the rat with a spare shoe, making sure it's dead. His mother and Vera ask him to take the rat, which is nearly a foot long, outside, but before doing this, Bigger taunts Vera by swinging the dead rat in front of her face. Vera, asking Bigger to stop, faints out of fear. Ma yells at Bigger for doing this, and the family lays Vera out on the bed to recover.

A great deal of foreshadowing occurs in this first scene. Bigger kills the rat, but in this case he does so on purpose—his murder of Mary is very much an accident, an outcome of a series of events that appear, to Bigger, to be beyond his control. In this larger world Bigger is like "the rat", though in the span of 12 hours he will become a killer.

Ma chastises Bigger, wondering aloud why she even gave birth to him, and tells Buddy to put newspaper over the bloody spot on the floor where the rat was killed. Bigger, far from apologizing for taunting Vera, tells his mother that maybe he shouldn't have been born at all—Ma chastises Bigger again for his anger and his defiant attitude toward her authority.

Ma's sentiment here will be echoed, in a way, by Bessie, who wonders, when Bigger has confessed to his crimes, how she has had bad enough luck to fall in with a man who has brought her only torment and suffering, despite her hard work.

Ma also worries, aloud, that Bigger will get into trouble running around with his "gang." Vera, who is now somewhat recovered from her fainting spell, announces that she has to get ready for her sewing lessons at the YWCA, which she takes in order to be able to support the family one day as a seamstress. The family has a quick breakfast, prepared by Ma, and Ma reminds Bigger that he has an appointment with a Mr. Dalton that evening at 5:30, about a job. Ma reminds Bigger that this job would provide extra income for the family, and would make their circumstances far more comfortable.

Bigger's "gang" is, to a certain extent, a red herring in the novel—something that seems important in the beginning, that turns out only to point to events of greater importance. Bigger will not get in trouble with the authorities because of the gang's activities—instead, he kills only by accident, after panicking. Bigger then ascribes importance to his murder of Mary and Bessie only while in custody.

Bigger wolfs down his breakfast, as Vera and Ma remind him of the importance of the job, and of the fact that, if Bigger doesn't take it, the family will be removed from the relief rolls, which will further impoverish them. Buddy seems to support Bigger and tells Ma and Vera that Bigger will do the interview, and that Bigger doesn't need to be nagged by the two women. But Ma replies that she gets enough "sass" from Bigger, and that Buddy should be quiet. Bigger asks Ma for some tram-car fare, and leaves the apartment.

Mr. Dalton participates in something like a "work-to-welfare" program in the city of Chicago—in order for Bigger's family to stay "on the register," Bigger, who is of working age, must work a certain number of hours each week. Thus, Bigger's money will not only support his family directly, it will also enable them to collect their government-sponsored assistance.

Outside the apartment, Bigger contemplates his fate: he can either take a job he hates, and help support his family, or he can refuse the job and cause himself and his family to starve. Bigger believes that his life consists of just these choices, between two equally upsetting and unpleasant alternatives. Bigger watches two workers paste up a poster of Buckley, a man who is running for re-election as State's Attorney. When the workers leave, Bigger looks at the poster, thinking that, if he were in Buckley's position, he would have real power and could make extra money through graft—which he presumes Buckley, a politician, to engage in. Bigger feels that the eyes of the Buckley poster "follow him" as he walks away from the picture.

Bigger tends to see life in these discrete, binary terms. This case presents only two alternatives, and both are unpleasant. Bigger does not want to work for anyone—he wants to live a life that is free and unencumbered. And so the idea of working to support his family is odious to him. But Bigger also knows that a great deal of misery, for himself and for others, will ensue if he does not take the job with Mr. Dalton. It is not clear, however, that Bigger is concerned with his family's well-being as such: rather, he hopes to make money so they will not keep "asking him" to do so.

Bigger, still standing on the street corner near his apartment, realizes he has enough money either for a magazine or a movie, but not both—Bigger "hungers" for the escape sitting in a movie-house might provide. Bigger runs through the day's "plan," which he has arranged, or talked about, with the other members of his gang—boys named Gus, G.H., and Jack. The plan is, the group intends to rob Blum, the owner of a deli in the neighborhood, between three and four that afternoon, when the policemen on the block are taking their break.

What Wright does not make clear is whether Bigger was seriously contemplating this robbery before the scheduling of his job interview, or whether the interview itself has conditioned the "need" Bigger feels to rob Blum's deli. The other members of the gang seem to think that they do not have to rob Blum that very day, that there is no need to rush a crime that will require careful planning.

While thinking about this plan, which would provide quick money for the group, but which would mark the first time the gang had robbed a white, as opposed to a black, merchant, Bigger runs into Vera, who is exiting the apartment on her way to her sewing lesson. Vera reminds Bigger, once again, that it is very important Bigger take the job with Mr. Dalton, as the family needs the money. Bigger curses Vera under his breath as Vera walks away.

Vera is in every sense a good, well-natured character—she does everything she can to support the family, and her work as a seamstress is intended only to help Ma's financial troubles. Bigger appears to have special difficulty listening to Vera's advice, perhaps because she is so unimpeachably good, and in her mother's favor.

On his way to the pool-hall, where the gang normally meets, Bigger runs into Gus, the gang-member who had initially planned the robbery of Blum's. Bigger and Gus loiter on the sidewalk, smoke cigarettes, and talk to one another. Gus and Bigger see an airplane in the sky, writing an advertisement against the blue day, and Bigger remarks that he would love to fly a plane if he could, and that he feels he's not permitted to have a chance to fly, because the military is segregated, and because most flying jobs go to white men.

A notable scene of serenity. Much of the novel, especially its middle portion, after the commission of the crimes, is a chase, but here, Bigger has a chance merely to relax, enjoy the beautiful day, and think about what he would like to do, if he could choose from anything in the world. Although Bigger dreams of being a pilot, he seems to think this dream so impossible as to be exactly that: a passing fancy.

Still looking wistfully at the sky, Bigger and Gus walk toward the pool-hall and play a game with each other called "white," in which the two pretend to have jobs that are available only to white men. Bigger and Gus pretend to be generals in the US Army, JP Morgan and a stock-broker, and the president of the United States and his Secretary of State. They laugh, with some bitterness, at the outlandishness of these pretend conversations; these occupations, they realize bitterly, could never be filled by a black man from the South Side of Chicago. Unfair labor practices make it impossible, or highly improbable, for African Americans to climb to such professional heights.

Another notable "game." Bigger and Gus both seem, without really mentioning it, to equate whiteness with power, authority, and privilege. For the most part, the text of the novel bears out this racial relationship: African American characters tend, in the novel, to work in subservient positions, and white characters tend to wield power over Bigger. Although there are benevolent white characters (Jan, Max), there are few to none powerful, politically-influential African American characters, though Max later makes passing mention to civil rights leaders.

Bigger, finally, remarks aloud to Gus that "white folks" don't allow the African-American population to do anything—and Gus tells Bigger he's surprised that Bigger hasn't figured this out sooner. Bigger, however, goes on to say that sometimes, this inability for black Americans do to anything makes him extremely angry. The two watch a pigeon fly by, and Bigger says that he wishes he, like the pigeon, could simply fly, over the city and away from his problems—and though Gus finds this silly of Bigger to say, Bigger goes on to add that the pain white people create for him lives in his stomach, and that he fears that something will go wrong in his life—that he will be forced to lash out, violently, against this pain.

The second book of the novel is entitled "Flight," and it becomes apparent very quickly that flying is a dominant metaphor for Bigger. In his current world, he can only walk, indeed crawl (as he does over the roofs of Chicago, while being pursued by the police). In his ideal life, however, Bigger would be able to avoid the difficulties of daily drudgery simply by soaring above them at a high altitude, as from a bird's-eye view.

Gus agrees with Bigger, to an extent, about the anger they both feel for white people, although Bigger seems to think he is going to "do something" about this anger, something he can't control, and Gus does not say something similar. Gus and Bigger head to the pool-hall and begin playing a game of pool, after saying hello to the owner of the establishment, named Doc. Bigger brings up, to Gus, the plan to rob Blum, a plan which Gus originally concocted but which the gang hasn't talked about for over a month. Bigger wants to pull the heist off that day, but Gus now expresses worry that they can get away with it, or that Blum might shoot them before they get away. Bigger taunts Gus, saying Gus is scared of robbing a white man. Gus denies this angrily.

Gus, in these scenes, is very much the novel's voice of reason. Although he recognizes the same racial and power dynamics that Bigger does, Gus is not guided by his emotions, by his rage, the way Bigger is, and so Gus is more willing to wait, to find the best moment to pull of the robbery, to ask questions, to make a plan with the other members of the gang. Bigger's anger at Gus's hesitation—which Bigger calls cowardice—probably stems, in part, from the fact that the other gang members seem to agree with Gus's prudent approach.

Jack and G.H. arrive at the bar, and Bigger continues to talk to the three of them about the robbery at Blum's. Jack says he's "in," but G.H., like Gus, expresses dismay at the thought of robbing a man with a gun, and a white man, no less. Bigger, angry that the group is not willing to take action, finally asks each man whether he's "in." Jack repeats that he is; G.H. says he'll do it if everyone else does. Only Gus does not respond, and Bigger continues to taunt Gus, calling him "yellow" and a coward. Finally, despite being held back by the other two, Bigger leaps on Gus and considers stabbing him or beating him up, in order to force him to go along with the heist.

G.H. and Jack are not described in the same narrative detail as is Gus, but nevertheless, some facts about their characters emerge: Jack seems more willing to hang out with, and listen to, Bigger, and G.H., like Gus, tends to want to plan the gang's activities in more detail—to act with his head, and not with his heart. Bigger's attack, here aimed at Gus, will not be the first time he leaps at him, nor the first time he refers to him as a coward.

G.H. and Jack pull Bigger and Gus away, and Doc warns the boys, from the front of the pool-hall, not to fight inside. Gus agrees, after a long spell of silence, to go along with the heist, but he says he is not willing to take orders from Bigger any longer. G.H. takes Gus outside so that Gus can "cool off," and Jack stays in the pool-hall with Bigger; they all agree to meet up at three to pull off the heist. Jack and Bigger realize that they ought to do something to kill time before three, and decide to go to a movie playing at a nearby cinema. They buy tickets with their small amount of remaining change and go inside the cool, dark theater.

Bigger greatly enjoys the movies, and a number of critics have stated that the entire novel has a "cinematic" quality, especially in the speed and directness of its scenes. In a sense, the narrator of the novel might be understood as taking psychological cues from Bigger, its protagonist—Bigger thinks of the world in "quick cuts," at film speed, and so the narrator tells his story in this manner.

Bigger and Jack have a competition to see who can masturbate the fastest in the darkness of the theater. They each masturbate, ejaculate, then move to other seats to watch the movie. The show begins with a news reel, depicting a Chicago heiress in Florida and her young lover—the heiress is Mary Dalton, daughter of Mr. Dalton, the man with whom Bigger is to interview later that day; and her friend, a known Communist sympathizer, is named Jan. The newsreel is a kind of "popular" or human-interest story about the "outrageous" young Ms. Dalton, who associates with Communists and others believed to be outside her social circle.

One of a great number of coincidences in the novel, that appear to downplay the element of verisimilitude, or life-like-ness. One might wonder, here, what the chances are that Bigger would see a film-reel of the woman he is to meet, and then murder, in the space of a few hours. Many critics, and indeed Wright himself, in an essay on the novel ("How 'Bigger' Was Born"), have taken up this aspect of the work, arguing that its "convincingness" derives from its emotional force, and not from the order of its events (what Wright calls its "surface reality or plausibility").

The feature presentation begins, a movie titled *Trader Horn*, which seems to be about black natives in Africa, and their interactions with the white colonizers who come to observe them. Bigger and Jack watch the movie for a while, as Bigger turns over in his mind what it would mean to rob Blum, and the kind of money he could make working for the Daltons; aroused from his reverie by Jack, Bigger realizes that it is close to their appointed meeting-time for the Blum robbery. Jack and Bigger leave the theater.

Although very little time is given to a description of this film, it goes to show just how prevalent depictions of African Americans as "savages" were in 1930s America. Bigger and his friends have been inundated with these images since birth, and so their feelings of rage and humiliation toward the dominant white culture are best understood in this context.

On their way back to the pool hall, Bigger leaves Jack, briefly, telling him he will meet him at Doc's; Bigger goes inside his apartment building (which is on the way from the theater to Doc's), gets his gun from under the mattress, where it's hidden in the small apartment, and is nearly "caught" by his mother, who is singing in the kitchen, preparing lunch. Bigger bounds back outside and heads to Doc's, where he meets back up with Jack and G.H. Bigger and the rest of the gang wait for Gus to arrive, and when Gus comes in late, Bigger kicks him, angrily, yelling that Gus is too scared to go along with the robbery, as evidenced by the fact that Gus has arrived late to their three o'clock rendezvous.

No mention is given as to how Bigger was able to acquire a gun, or how he is able to keep it in such a small apartment without anyone in his family ever noticing it. The narrator never states, either, whether Bigger has had occasion to use the gun previously, or whether he really intends to shoot someone with it on the first day of the novel. Notably, Bigger does not use a gun to kill either Mary or Bessie; he suffocates Mary and bludgeons Bessie, brutally, with a brick.

Jack and G.H. attempt to hold Bigger back, but Bigger falls on Gus and begins to beat him up, showing that Bigger is the "bigger man" and that Gus is merely a coward, one who wants the Blum robbery not to go off as planned. While still on top of Gus, pinning him to the ground, Bigger forces Gus to lick the exposed blade of Bigger's knife; when Bigger allows Gus to rise, Bigger mimes what he would do if here were to cut out Gus's belly button. Gus and the other members of the gang are rattled by Bigger's aggression; Bigger himself seems not to understand, fully, why he is so angry with Gus about being late for their rendezvous.

Another scene in which Bigger uses a different implement to attack—this time, a knife. The scene of humiliation, in which Bigger forces Gus to lick the blade of his knife, also has a kind of submerged sexual innuendo that is never taken up—although the previous scene in the movie theater, in which Jack and Bigger masturbated separately while speaking to one another, points to a certain openness regarding at least the discussion and sharing of sexual experiences.

After Jack and G.H. finally pull Bigger away from Gus, Gus runs out the back door of Doc's pool hall; Jack and G.H. accuse Bigger of foiling their plot to rob Blum's, and even seem to believe that Bigger has done this on purpose, because Bigger himself secretly was too afraid to carry out the robbery. This enrages Bigger even more, and when Doc tells Bigger to calm down, Bigger takes out his knife again and begins slicing up the green felt of the pool table. Doc shouts at Bigger and the gang to leave and never come back; Bigger believes he could fight and kill Doc, but decides to leave the pool hall, and walks alone, leaving the rest of the gang, to collect his thoughts.

Bigger finally acknowledges to himself, while leaving Doc's, that it was he who was afraid—and that, perhaps, fear is the defining characteristic of his life, the manner in which he interacts with all sorts of authority figures, including his mother, Doc, and, eventually, the Dalton family. This fear causes Bigger not to cower alone, however; it creates in him an even more pronounced rage at society, which he regards as the cause of his fear—thus establishing a cycle of fear and anger that propels Bigger throughout.

Bigger returns home to his small apartment, and his mother asks why he came into the room earlier; Bigger says he did so "for no reason," and does not mention the gun he picked up. Bigger lies down on the bed and realizes that, once the plan to rob Blum's became a reality, he became agitated and scared, and he took this frustration out on Gus in order to avoid the robbery altogether; Jack and G.H. were right about Bigger's rebellion and cowardice. He continues to turn over these thoughts while lying on the bed.

Ma seems to understand that Bigger behaves in a furtive manner around her, but she cannot quite put her finger on anything that he's doing wrong. Ma, once Bigger has been captured, wants desperately to believe that Bigger was not capable of committing Mary's murder—she knows that Bigger is upset, but hopes he is incapable of true violence.

Bigger's mother rouses him at five, as it is beginning to grow dark outside; she says it is time for him to walk to the Daltons' house in Hyde Park, near Bigger's "Black Belt" neighborhood, but in the "white" section of the South Side. Bigger makes his way through the adjacent white neighborhood, with the gun still under his shirt and tucked into his pants; he has heard that, on occasion, African Americans walking around these neighborhoods have been harassed by white residents.

The racial geography of this part of Chicago is quite disturbing, and unequal: the South Side, which once contained a large number of mansions owned by white industrialists, is now dominated by a group of African American Chicagoans charged high rents by those same industrialists, who live mostly in the Hyde Park neighborhood.

Bigger walks up to the Daltons' house and, not knowing where the "service" or back entrance is located, decides, nervously, to knock on the front door. These he is met by a white maid, who asks if he is Bigger Thomas, here to talk to Mr. Dalton; Bigger says that he is, and the maid lets Bigger inside. After waiting awkwardly in a sitting room for Mr. (Henry) Dalton to appear, Henry finally does, and he leads Bigger back through the house's long, ornate corridors to his office. En route to the office, Bigger briefly meets Mrs. Dalton, and is surprised to find out that she is rather old, frail, and blind.

Another choice of symbolic importance: Bigger knows that it is, or could be, rude to walk into the front of a white person's house as an African American, yet he is not sure where else to enter. Luckily, in this case, he has chosen "correctly," and Peggy sees him inside; but this choice is indicative of just how many rules governing the behavior of African Americans reinforce social distinctions between groups in Chicago.

Henry asks Bigger for his "relief paperwork," or the document given by the Chicago workers' relief agency discussing Bigger's qualifications for the job. Henry asks Bigger to sit and make himself comfortable, but Bigger is nervous around Henry, calling him "Mr. Dalton, sir"; Bigger's nervousness, additionally, frustrates Bigger, as he is not sure why he is so intimidated by the wealth and kindness of the Daltons, seeing as how Henry appears only to want to offer Bigger a job. Henry reveals that the specific position would be chauffeuring: Bigger would drive the Daltons' car around Chicago.

Bigger's anger/fear relationship, here, is very visible. On the one hand, he is afraid of Mr. Dalton, because of the power Dalton wields, and not necessarily because Dalton is intimidating (indeed, Dalton seems relatively kind). On the other, Bigger senses that his fear is itself a kind of liability, and this makes him angry and ashamed. He will continue to have these feelings throughout the remainder of his evening with Mary and Jan.

Henry, consulting the paperwork, sees that Bigger is a "hard worker" if given a job he enjoys. Bigger concedes that this is true. Henry goes through the nature of the chauffeuring job: Bigger will make 25 dollars a week, 20 of which he can send to his family, who, as Henry cross-checks via Bigger's paperwork, live in an apartment owned by the South Side Real Estate Company—a company owned, in turn, by the Daltons. Bigger will sleep in a small room in the Daltons' home; his meals will be prepared by Peggy, the maid who let Bigger into the house; and his driving will mostly consist of errands needed by the family, and of Mary Dalton's trips to her lectures at the nearby University of Chicago.

What is not really mentioned as Dalton goes over the nature of the job with Bigger, is that the job will essentially require Bigger to abandon his social life, to give himself over entirely to the care of the Dalton family. In this way, although the job pays well, it also serves to reinforce the notion that African Americans are inferior to whites in Chicago, that servants must care for their bosses absolutely, and that the social life of a servant is beneath consideration—it simply does not matter to the Daltons.

At this, Mary walks into the office, as if on cue; Bigger recognizes her from the news-reel he saw with Jack earlier that afternoon. Mary introduces herself to Bigger and asks immediately if he belongs to a union; Bigger, confused as to what a union is, and as to what to say to Mary, says nothing, and Henry tells his daughter not to grill Bigger about his political views at this first meeting. Mary calls her father, half-jokingly, "Mr. Capitalist," and leaves, asking if Bigger will be driving her to her university lecture that night. Henry says that Bigger will, and dismisses Mary from the office.

Mary, though she is the beneficiary of a great deal of "capitalist" success—her family's money was, after all, earned in real estate—has come to be sympathetic with the cause of labor, and she wonders whether Bigger is, too. What Mary does not realize, however, is that her knowledge of the labor movement is a result of her education, one that Bigger, in his poverty, has not had a chance to acquire.

After Mary leaves, Bigger worries that he has said something wrong about unions and capitalism, but Henry, perhaps sensing Bigger's unease, tells Bigger that he (Henry) is a supporter of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and that the jobs he offers as part of the relief program, to young men from the Black Belt, are designed to aid young African Americans in their search for work. Bigger is too nervous to allow this information to sink in fully, and Henry shows Bigger the kitchen, where Peggy will prepare his meals. Before leaving Bigger, Henry also informs him that it will be part of Bigger's duties to stoke the **furnace** and keep the house warm.

Here Wright shows that Dalton's motivations for helping Bigger, if myopic, misguided, and paternalistic, nevertheless stem from a place that is good. Dalton understands that grave inequalities exist in Chicago, and he wants to address them; but he does not realize that the real way to do so would be to change the structural problems keeping young African Americans from finding long-term employment. Instead, Dalton can only offer Bigger a position, essentially, of servitude.

Peggy tells Bigger more about the Dalton family as he eats bacon and eggs in the kitchen, after Henry has left—Bigger has not eaten since early morning and is famished. Peggy says that the man who was chauffeur before Bigger, an African American man from the South Side named Green, worked for the family for ten years, and was "treated very well" by the Daltons. Peggy goes on to say that Henry is rich now, but that his goodness and charity derive from his wife, who was afflicted with blindness ten years before, and who was wealthy when Henry married her some time ago. Henry then used his wife's money to make even more money in Chicago's real estate market.

Again, Peggy reinforces the comments Dalton has made to Bigger, by arguing that others, like Green, who were "good workers," were given benefits, like an education. What Peggy seems to miss here, as does Dalton, is the fact that Green's subservience to the Dalton family allowed him to gain an education only through extreme effort—whereas Mary is free to skip her lectures as she pleases, without fear, since her father is paying for her (expensive) education.

Peggy also tells Bigger that Mary is a good child but "wild," that she runs around with a crowd the Daltons don't really approve of (mostly Communist sympathizers). Peggy takes Bigger down to the basement and shows him the **furnace**, where he is to burn the trash, rake out the coals, and sweep the ashes to keep the house warm. Peggy then leaves Bigger to rest until his 8:30 appointment that evening, to drive Mary to her lecture at the University of Chicago.

This is Bigger's first interaction with the furnace, which will come to play an important role in the story. The furnace is central for many reasons, but Bigger seems to sense that the furnace can be used to obliterate things. He will therefore try to burn away Mary's body, and when this does not work, the furnace will be the key piece of evidence pointing to Bigger's guilt.

Bigger lies on his new bed in the Dalton house for a moment, and thinks about the things, including a gold watch, he'll be able to buy with his new job and income. He realizes he's thirsty and goes downstairs for a glass of water in the kitchen; en route, through the hallways, he nearly runs into Mrs. Dalton, who speaks to him briefly, asking if his accommodations are OK, and if he needs anything else. Bigger replies in nervous, short phrases—similarly to how he behaved with Mr. Dalton—and when Mrs. Dalton asks if Bigger would like to go to night school while employed in the house, the way Green did, Bigger says he's not sure, that he hasn't thought about it.

Mrs. Dalton, throughout the narrative, is described in ghostly terms, and her blindness plays an important part in this—she appears to glide through her house, she is frail, and she does not see with her eyes, but rather perceives things through touch, smell, and occasionally intuition. Bigger is afraid of Mrs. Dalton, and it is perhaps this fear of her that causes him to put a pillow over Mary's head, in her bedroom, accidentally suffocating her.

After getting and drinking his water, Bigger realizes it's about time to take Mary to her lecture. He checks out the car he will drive—a dark, late-model Buick, and when he gets in the front seat, Mary gets in the back. He begins to drive her to the University—whose location Bigger knows already—but as Mary is directing him, she asks that he pull over to the side of the road and wait for a moment. She asks for a match and lights a cigarette, then announces to Bigger that she won't be heading to her lecture. Instead, she directs Bigger to drive her to the outer part of downtown (the "Loop"), to pick up a friend of hers. Mary says that Bigger should do this and act as though, if the Daltons question him, he has driven her to her lecture. Bigger is nervous, but does what Mary tells him.

From the beginning, especially after the news-reel discussing Mary's "questionable" activities with Jan while the two are on vacation, one might be inclined to think that Mary will not, after all, be attending her lecture that evening. It is perhaps a testament, again, to Bigger's fear of people in positions of authority that he does not question Mary's desire to skip her lecture, nor does he feel particularly torn about what to do—he simply takes Mary where she wants to go. Only when Jan and Mary begin talking to Bigger as an equal does Bigger find that he is ashamed, and, paradoxically, that he is made aware of his inferior social station.

They arrive at an apartment in the outer Loop, and Jan, the man Mary was with in the news-reel Bigger saw earlier that day, comes out to introduce himself to Bigger, and to greet Mary. Jan offers Bigger his hand to shake, but Bigger is so confused by Jan's politeness and informality that it takes him a while to shake it back. Mary tells Bigger that it's all right, that Jan is a Communist and a "friend to all." Jan tells Bigger to call him by his first name, and not by "sir." Jan then asks to drive the car, and tells Bigger to slide over to the middle of the Buick's long bench seat; Bigger is sitting squeezed between Jan and Mary, and, nervous once again, Bigger realizes he has never been this close to a white woman before.

Because Jan insists on communicating with Bigger as though the two are friends, Bigger realizes—or it is made clear for Bigger—the extent to which his world is defined by the power relations between whites and blacks. In other words, Bigger is only made aware of his inferiority when confronted with the prospect that there are some who do not consider him inferior. In this way, it is not Jan's fault that he is kind to Bigger, but Jan's kindness is also a trigger that causes Bigger to feel angry and ashamed.

Bigger is also confused and angry at Jan's informality—paradoxically, Bigger feels even *less* comfortable in his skin, and with his blackness, since Jan has drawn attention to the perceived racial differences between them, even though Jan is attempting to make up for these differences. Bigger stews on these thoughts as Jan continues driving the car around Chicago. Jan and Mary say that want to eat somewhere in "Bigger's neighborhood," meaning the Black Belt, and after not knowing where to direct them, Bigger finally tells Jan about Ernie's Kitchen Shack, a "black" establishment near where Bigger lives.

Mary and Jan's desire to eat at an African American establishment, however, probably does not derive solely from a desire to help Bigger—rather, it also contains a certain amount of social "tourism," or the idea that Mary and Jan will learn something about the Black Belt simply by eating with Bigger at one restaurant. Mary and Jan can simply walk into the diner, but Bigger will later have to explain why he was eating there with a white couple.

While en route to the diner, Mary remarks that, although she has traveled to many parts of Europe, she does not know how "the people" live in the Black Belt, which is very close to her own Hyde Park neighborhood, the latter of which is an island of wealth amidst the poverty of the South Side. The car reaches Ernie's, and Bigger believes that Jan and Mary will go inside to eat while Bigger remains in the Buick. But Jan insists that Bigger join them for the meal, and though Bigger hesitates, Jan eventually convinces him to come inside and eat with them.

Mary's comments regarding her travels in Europe serve only to underscore these feelings of "tourism." Bigger, for his part, does not feel like a tourist when he leaves the Black Belt and travels to Hyde Park—instead, he feels like someone who is no longer in a neighborhood where he belongs. It is a sign of Mary's privilege that she can belong anywhere, that everything is a "trip" for her, a "tour."

Jan asks Bigger what he likes to eat, and Jan offers, without listening to Bigger's reply, to buy him fried chicken and beer. Bigger assents to this, and Bigger notices his "girl," Bessie, sitting on the other side of the diner—he does not wave to her, but they each notice that the other is there, and Bessie seems confused at Bigger sitting at a table with a white man and a white woman. While the three eat their fried chicken, which Bigger has trouble choking down (because of his nervousness, which has caused his throat to become dry), Mary and Jan ask about Bigger's upbringing. Bigger speaks in monosyllables, saying that he was born in Mississippi, that he lives with his mother and two siblings, and that his father was killed in a race riot in the South when Bigger was very young.

Jan also, in an attempt to buy for Bigger the kind of food "he likes," orders fried chicken and beer, without realizing that it might be considered offensive to Bigger, the very fact that Jan assumes Bigger likes these foods because they have been associated, stereotypically, with the African American community. Bigger notably has very little appetite when eating with Jan and Mary, perhaps because the very idea of sharing a table with them has been tainted by their good intentions and by the unfortunately racist way in which these intentions are made plain.

Jan then tells Bigger that he (Jan) is a member of the Communist party, with which Mary sympathizes, and that the Communists are working for the betterment of all people, especially those who have been discriminated against because of the color of their skin. Bigger does not know much about Communism, but feels that, although what Jan is saying seems "good" to him, "Communism" itself is a politically fraught word—the kind of word white politicians tend to throw around and fight over. During this conversation, Mary tells Bigger that she's going to Detroit at nine in the morning the next day, and that Bigger should deliver Mary's trunk to the train station for her. In the meantime, Jan has ordered more beer and a fifth of rum for the table.

Because Bigger has very little interaction with the political system of his day, he knows only that Communism is opposed to Capitalism, and that the former is "bad" while the latter is "American" and therefore "good." Bigger will only learn as the novel progresses that there are those who consider themselves good American who nevertheless support Communist causes—in fact, they consider themselves good American because *they support these causes. Max is an example of this kind of progressive patriotism.*

Bigger, Mary, and Jan are all fairly drunk from the significant amount of alcohol they've consumed while eating dinner. Jan brings the rum with them and they pay the bill; Jan tells Bigger to drive the three of them around the park, while he and Mary are in the back seat together. Bigger drives slowly, and listens to what Jan and Mary are talking about in the back—Mary says she'll pay Jan a certain amount of money for help with legal fees, probably having to do with the Communist party, and Jan says that his friend Max is the best lawyer the party has in Chicago. Bigger does not understand much about their conversation, but he notices that Jan and Mary are getting very drunk on rum in the back of the car.

After dinner, once the three of them are fairly intoxicated, racial boundaries, and boundaries of servitude, become more apparent. Jan and Mary now sit in the back of the car, Jan no longer wishes to drive, and in fact Jan asks that Bigger simply drive them around so they can talk to one another. Bigger has returned to his position as servant for the Dalton family, and though Jan probably still thinks of Bigger as his equal, he has no trouble asking him to "do his duty" while he and Mary have a conversation.

After briefly trying to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and asking Bigger to sing along, Mary and Jan decide that it's probably time to call it a night—Mary has to get back to her parents' house, so that they don't think she's a "bad girl." Bigger drinks two big gulps of the rum, and Jan and Mary finish the bottle; Jan worries that perhaps Mary has had too much to drink, and might pass out; Mary says that's she OK, and that Bigger will get her home safely.

Bigger's intoxication, though not as severe as Mary's, will nevertheless have consequences for the remainder of the evening. Perhaps, if Bigger were not so drunk, he would not have panicked when in Mary's room, and would have chosen another means of silencing her, as opposed to accidentally suffocating her.

At the edge of the park, Jan gets out of the car, shakes Bigger's hand once again, and offers him some pamphlets of Communist literature. Jan says he would like to discuss the pamphlets with Bigger the next time they meet. Jan says goodbye to Mary, who at this point is quite intoxicated but is still conscious; Mary gets into the front seat with Bigger, Jan leaves to catch a Loop train back to his apartment, and Bigger and Mary drive back to the Daltons' house. When they arrive, Bigger parks the Buick in front of, but not inside, the detached garage, although it appears it's going to snow overnight. He helps Mary to grab her hat and walk, slowly, inside; Mary can barely support herself, and is on the verge of passing out.

The events of this section will be matters of much dispute, once the investigation commences. Jan gives Bigger Communist pamphlets for "good reasons," namely, because Jan wishes that Bigger become educated about the Communist Party, but Bigger later realizes that these pamphlets will make the evening look like a recruitment event arranged by Jan, which will cause investigators, like Britten, to believe that Jan himself is responsible for Mary's disappearance.

Bigger half supports, half drags Mary upstairs, up the back staircase, and when he reaches the second floor, he asks her several times which is her room, although she is too drunk to answer. Bigger realizes he is going to have to guess Mary's room, and, picking one, opens the door with one hand while attempting to keep Mary upright with the other arm. He carries Mary into the room, lays her down onto her bed, and, briefly overcome by her beauty and unconscious state, leans over to kiss her several times, on the mouth. Mary does not respond, and Bigger lies over her—though he stops before assaulting Mary.

Although this sequence becomes a focal point in the novel—what exactly Bigger did when in Mary's room—Wright makes it clear that Bigger, at least for a moment, considers assaulting Mary while she is unconscious. His kiss is not returned, nor is it welcomed; but Bigger stops before taking the assault any further. He does not do so in his later interaction with Bessie—causing the reader to believe that either he is stopped by Mary's race or that, once he has killed Mary, Bigger no longer has compunction about committing any crime whatsoever.

Bigger hears a sound as he lies atop Mary in Mary's bedroom—it is Mrs. Dalton, who has heard the commotion on the stairs and who has come to Mary's room to see if everything is OK. Bigger realizes that he must remain completely still, and so must Mary—if Mrs. Dalton finds out that Bigger is in Mary's bedroom with her, and that they are both drunk, he will be kicked out of the Dalton house and perhaps turned over to the police. To keep Mary from making any noise, Bigger quickly takes a pillow and pushes it down over Mary's face, keeping her quiet but, also, beginning to suffocate her.

Here, Mrs. Dalton's blindness does not help Bigger at all, and in fact probably serves only to heighten Mrs. Dalton's other senses (as Bigger intuits upon meeting her earlier that day)—especially her sense of smell. Although Mrs. Dalton does not spot Bigger in the room, she clearly senses that something is wrong, and it is Mrs. Dalton's conversation with Peggy, the following day, that causes the family to believe Mary has been harmed.

Mrs. Dalton walks over to Mary, smells the rum on her body, and, remarking that she's "drunk," walks quickly back out of the room; apparently, Mary has come home drunk many times before, and Mrs. Dalton does not sense that Bigger is in the room with her, nor that anything else untoward has happened to Mary. Meanwhile, with the pillow over Mary's head, Bigger realizes that Mary is no longer struggling against the pillow, nor is she breathing. Bigger pulls away the pillow, relieved that Mrs. Dalton has left the room, but he quickly realizes that Mary is not moving and not breathing—he wonders whether she is still alive, and, checking for her pulse, realizes, with an enormous shock, that he has accidentally killed her in his attempt to keep her subdued and quiet.

The crucial murder scene. Bigger does not intend to kill Mary, although it is hard to imagine how he thought he could put a pillow over her head for so long a period of time without injuring her seriously. But Bigger was also inebriated during the crime, making it further likely that he simply didn't comprehend, in the moment, the consequences of his actions. From this point forward, the narrative will revolve entirely around Bigger's actions here at this moment.

Bigger realizes, through a series of rapid reactions, that he will need to concoct a story to explain how this has come about. He thinks frantically and decides that the best course of action is to blame the murder on Jan, whom he can say came back to the Daltons' house (instead of being dropped off, as he was, downtown near the park); Bigger can then create an alibi, in which Jan was the last person to speak to Mary alive. This will turn all suspicion onto Jan. Bigger also remembers that Mary was to go to Detroit the next day, and that Bigger was to drop her trunk off at the train station. Bigger realizes that he can stuff Mary's body into the trunk and ship it, over rail, to Detroit, thus putting the Daltons off the scent of Mary's murder for several days, buying himself more time to figure out an escape plan.

Bigger frantically snaps to attention, realizing not just that he has killed the daughter of his employer, but that he was in her room late at night, and that now, the authorities will stop at nothing to find him and kill him. Bigger is of sound enough mind to realize that people like Mr. Dalton already suspect communists, like Jan, of foul play, meaning that Jan is an obvious choice for Bigger to frame. Bigger considers immediately running away but reasons that it is perhaps safer to stick around, shift the blame onto Jan, and monitor the situation from within the Daltons' home.

Bigger, with great effort, manages to fold Mary's body in half and stuff it into the trunk; he then pulls the latch of the trunk. On the way downstairs, carrying the trunk with Mary's body inside, Bigger realizes, however, that the trunk is extremely heavy, and that he can instead burn Mary's body in the **furnace**. Bigger puts Mary body about halfway in and begins pushing it into the fire; he body goes in most of the way, but stops near the head region. Bigger attempts to cut off the head using his pocket-knife, but it won't go through the neck bone; he then picks up a hatchet, in the corner of the furnace room, and uses it to chop off Mary's head, which he then pushes into the furnace along with the hatchet and the rest of the body. Although Bigger worries that the coal-fire might not burn Mary's body entirely, he figures this is the best plan to guarantee his own escape.

Ironically, Bigger's first interaction with the furnace—a part of his job—is to load Mary into it, and burn her body so that it cannot be found. This scene is particularly gruesome, and is perhaps intended by Wright to remind readers of the equally gruesome sequence in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, in which Raskolnikov bludgeons the pawnbroker in the head, filling her apartment with blood and gore. And, like Raskolnikov, Bigger will only realize the amount of incriminating evidence he has left behind the next morning, after realizing, in the light of day, that he has killed.

Bigger leaves the trunk in the basement and goes back outside, where he sees that the door to the Buick is still open, with Mary's purse inside. He decides to leave the Buick there, with the door ajar, but takes a wad of bills from Mary's purse, and the purse itself, and begins concocting his plan—that Jan came back to the house with Bigger and Mary; that Bigger went to bed; that Jan must have killed Mary in the night; and that Bigger himself would deny any further knowledge of the event.

The status of the Buick—where it was parked, and why—will show the Daltons that the previous night was an anomalous one. The reader might infer, here, that the Buick is simply always to be parked inside, regardless of the circumstances, and the fact that this simple rule was not followed the night previous indicates that something terrible has taken place.

Bigger, in a half-daze, walks outside toward his own apartment, deciding to sleep there tonight. He comes in silently, takes his gun out and slides it under his pillow, and goes instantly to sleep next to Buddy, leaving until the next day the remainder of his planning, and the crafting of his alibi. The first book ends.

It is also intriguing and paradoxical to note that Bigger carried the gun with him the entire evening, and did not fire it—he did not rob Blum—but he wound up, despite this, killing Mary and disposing of her body by especially gruesome means.

BOOK 2

Bigger awakes and realizes, just as his eyes open, that his has killed Mary and stuffed her body in a **furnace**; the events of the previous night, at the Dalton house, were real. He quickly realizes that, although the rest of his family is still asleep in their apartment, he has left Mary's purse, with some of her money, lying out on a chair in the room, and his pocket-knife, still in his pocket, has dried blood on it. Bigger realizes that he can take some of the pamphlets Jan gave him, which are still in his pockets, and put them in his drawer at the Daltons', making it seems like Jan was trying to forcibly convert him to the (purportedly evil) Communist cause.

Just like Raskolnikov, Bigger has left out, overnight, key bits of evidence that could be seen as incriminating. Bigger is lucky that no one in the apartment is yet awake—but Bigger will later on be undone by Mary's bits of bone in the furnace, another glaring oversight that will cause the blame for the murder to fall squarely on Bigger. The small amount of money Bigger steals from Mary will also only last him less than a day, as will be seen.

Bigger looks at the clock; it's seven a.m. Bigger then decides that, in the hour and a half before he is to take Mary's trunk to the train station, he will pack and work further on his alibi, to make it seem that Jan is Mary's murderer. As he is gathering clothes and putting them in his own small suitcase, he wakes his mother, who asks if Bigger got the job at the Daltons. Bigger says that he did. His mother asks why Bigger came in so late the night prior—at four a.m.—but Bigger angrily replies that he came in at two. His mother quibbles for a moment, and says four—Bigger corrects her again, hoping to keep his alibi straight, in case he has to relate it later to the police.

Bigger senses, even as he knows he has left a trail of evidence linking himself to Mary's murder, that it will be important to keep his story straight. But as it turns out, his mother is never questioned in connection with the murders—the journalist, upon finding bits of Mary's bone, will have all the proof they need, when Bigger simultaneously flees the scene. One imagines that, if Bigger simply said Jan fed the bone into the furnace, he could have maintained his ruse at least a while longer.

Vera and Buddy soon also wake up, and Vera, like Ma, asks Bigger if he got the job, and how much he's making. Bigger angrily tells Vera the details of the job; Vera can sense that Bigger is upset, but Bigger won't tell her why. Buddy takes Bigger's side, and seems excited about Bigger's new occupation. Ma prepares breakfast for the family, and as she is doing so, Buddy tells Bigger that Bessie came by their apartment the night before, telling Bigger's family that she saw Bigger at Ernie's eating with two white people. Bigger explains that this is part of his new driving job, and Buddy seems impressed by this.

Although it is not clear how Ma and Vera feel about Bessie, they nevertheless are close enough with her that it is not uncommon for Bessie to visit the Thomas home after-hours. In this case, Bessie serves as a the conversational link between Bigger's actions the previous night—eating with Mary and Jan—and his family, who would not have learned this fact otherwise.

As Ma is preparing breakfast, Bigger realizes that this is perhaps the final time he will eat with his family. Although he is nervous about the crime he has committed, he also feels that he has "surpassed" his family now, that he has done something that has liberated him—killing a white woman—and that, now, there is no turning back—that Bigger is free to determine the course of his life. Bigger and the rest of the family eat bacon and eggs, and Bigger jumps up, saying he has to go. Realizing that he ought to pretend he does not have the cash he has in fact stolen from Mary's purse, Bigger asks his mother for a half-dollar, which she gives him. Bigger walks out the door.

Bigger's first realization that his murder of Mary has been "empowering" to him. Although it is not entirely clear, even as the novel progresses, what Bigger means by this, it is perhaps sufficient to say that, by killing Mary, Bigger has changed the course of his life. He has, in a sense, broken through the frustrating binary in which he has had to live—the choice between a job he hates and his family's total poverty. In this instance, Bigger feels, if erroneously, that he has taken his fate into his own hands.

Buddy comes after Bigger and meets him on the staircase; Buddy hands his brother the large wad of cash that had fallen out of Mary's purse, which Bigger thought he had stuffed securely in his pocket. Buddy asks where the money came from, but Bigger tells Buddy not to mention to anyone, under any circumstances, that Bigger has this money. Buddy agrees, and looks at his brother with a mix of fascination and awe. Bigger says he has to go, and leaves his brother, walking out into the snowy morning.

Buddy, throughout this entire ordeal, will never cease to support Bigger, even when Bigger is in jail—at that moment, Buddy asks, perhaps not entirely seriously, if he can be of any help to Bigger in breaking out of prison. Buddy, like Jan and Max, support Bigger, although Buddy does so out of brotherly love, and Jan and Max do so out of a sense of class solidarity with a man they consider a worker and comrade.

Walking back to the Daltons', Bigger stops off in a drugstore, where he finds G.H. at the soda counter. Bigger buys G.H. a pack of cigarettes, and G.H., surprised at Bigger's generosity, asks what has changed—Bigger hints that his job at the Daltons' has made him a rich man overnight. Jack and Gus enter, too, and Bigger, to show that there are no hard feelings, buys them all packs of cigarettes and wishes them a good day, saying he has to head off to work. On his walk to a tram-car, which will take him to the Daltons', Bigger appears positive about his plans, believing that, when news of Mary's death is revealed, everyone will immediately blame Jan and his "red" (Communist) companions.

Perhaps Bigger's generosity in this sequence should have been enough for the members of the gang to realize that something was amiss—it wouldn't make sense that, after one day on the job, Bigger would already be wealthy enough to provide cigarettes for all his friends, since he is only being paid a relatively small wage to serve as a driver. But the gang seems happy for Bigger—and, perhaps, relieved that he is no longer angry at them for the botched robbery of the previous day.

On the tram-ride to the Daltons', Bigger thinks about the possibility, however improbable it might seem, of a large group of black citizens rising up against their white overlords in Chicago. Bigger seems to wish that this would happen—or, at the very least, that blacks would organize themselves and agitate for better rights—but Bigger thinks to himself that it would take an enormous effort for African Americans to do this. Bigger also remarks on the growing difficulties in the world—the Second World War is about to start, and there is strife in Spain, Italy, and Germany—and he wonders if African Americans in Chicago have any hope of standing up to the white majority, if, in turn, entire countries are having difficulty holding back the tides of dictatorship and war.

Although there are not many references to the "outside world" in the novel, Bigger here begins to wonder about the state of war in Europe, which, based on other events of the novel, seems to place the book in the late 1930s, when the Spanish Civil War was raging, and when Europe was dividing itself into Fascist and Allied group. Bigger senses that there is not total uniformity among segments of the population he considers "white" or "powerful." But Bigger also senses that these decisions, of war and power and politics, are not typically made by African Americans in the United States.

Bigger's musings are cut short by the end of his tram-ride; he arrives at the Dalton house, and, entering, is wished good morning by Peggy, who tells Bigger that he ought to tend to the **furnace**, which, according to her, burned hot the night before, but is now burning only feebly. Bigger says he will look to the furnace immediately. Peggy tells Bigger that it is nearly time to take Mary to the station; Bigger begins his alibi, telling Peggy that Mary had him keep the car outside overnight (the car is now covered in fresh snow); Bigger also reports that Mary asked him to bring her trunk downstairs in preparation for her departure the next day.

The snow, which has occurred over night, paints the entire day with a kind of eerie whiteness and silence. Bigger will have to trudge through the snow several times, to get to Bessie's house, and will have to drive through the snow to get to the train station. If anything, the snow appears to add to the closeness and stillness of the scenes—the fact that Bigger is muffled, stifled by the events of the previous night, and that eventually he will be overwhelmed by them.

Peggy goes upstairs to get dressed, and Bigger goes down to the **furnace**-room, where he fears that Mary's body might still be visible among the coals—or, even worse, that the body has somehow, miraculously, avoided being burnt at all, which would completely foil Bigger's plan. Bigger notices that the furnace seems especially full, but he cannot detect anything particular among the ashes; he adds more coal to the furnace, then drags Mary's trunk out to the car, making it seem as though Bigger's preparations for driving Mary have not been interrupted.

Even at this point in the novel, Bigger senses that furnace might not burn hot enough to have completely obliterated all traces of Mary's body—crematoria, for instance, must burn at exceptionally high temperatures for long periods of time to reduce bodies totally to ashes. But Bigger also figures that he will be able to dispose of these ashes at some point, undetected.

Peggy returns to the kitchen and asks if Bigger has seen Mary come downstairs yet that day; Bigger says that he has not, and Peggy, not knowing how Mr. and Mrs. Dalton will react when they wake up, tells Bigger to take Mary's trunk down to the train station, for it to be sent along to Detroit (presumably, Peggy thinks, along with Mary). Bigger drives the trunk to the station and drives back, navigating the now quite snowy streets.

The trunk will be one of the first indications that all was not right with Mary the previous night, as Mrs. Dalton will realize that Mary did not pack a good deal of new clothing for the "dances" in Detroit, meaning that perhaps someone else packed Mary's trunk for her.

When he returns to the Daltons' house, Bigger is asked by Peggy if he'd like any breakfast; he has no appetite, but agrees to eat some oatmeal and milk. Peggy asks who Mary was with the night before, and Bigger says it was Jan, while also insinuating that Bigger left the car with Jan and Mary, in the driveway, and that Jan was the last person to see Mary before she went to bed. He then goes to check on the **furnace** and heads back to his bedroom, wondering what will happen when the Daltons find out that Mary is missing.

Bigger's meals with Peggy never seem to be comfortable affairs. Although Bigger is provided for at the Daltons' house—he is indeed given a great deal of food, more or less whenever he wants—it is his fate in the novel that he can never enjoy this bounty, as he is either too ashamed at the Daltons' paternalistic generosity, or too nervous after the crime to eat a meal unencumbered.

Bigger, in his room, hears Mrs. Dalton and Peggy talking in the hall; he goes into a closet in his bedroom, from which he can hear Mrs. Dalton and Peggy quite distinctly. Mrs. Dalton asks Peggy why the car was in the driveway all night; Peggy responds that Mary is not in her room, that her bed appears not to have been slept in, and that Jan called that morning (as he promised to do, in Bigger's presence, the night before), checking in on Mary before her train-ride to Detroit. Peggy wonders if Jan's calling wasn't just a feint, used to make it seem that Mary did not stay at his house the night before. Peggy seems to believe that Mary's absence is simply one of her pranks, an instance of "bad behavior" with Jan.

Through Peggy and Mrs. Dalton's interaction, the reader begins to learn that Mary has been accustomed to this sort of behavior previously—and, indeed, Mrs. Dalton's response the night before about Mary's drunkenness (and the very existence of the news-reel showing Mary on vacation with Jan) indicates that Mary has a reputation as something of a reckless socialite. But neither Peggy nor Mrs. Dalton is prepared to believe that this recklessness could lead to any serious harm on Mary's part.

But Mrs. Dalton responds that Mary was in her room at two a.m. the night before—when Mrs. Dalton crept in and smelled liquor in the room—and wonders if something hasn't happened to Mary. Mrs. Dalton then feels around in Mary's room and discovers that a good many of Mary's new clothes were not packed in the trunk—this causes Mrs. Dalton to believe that Mary didn't pack her trunk at all the night before, and that something happened to Mary to keep her from going to Detroit as planned. Mrs. Dalton says that she'd like to speak with Bigger later that day, after she's thought for a moment about where Mary could be.

Bigger realizes, upon overhearing this conversation, that he will need an airtight alibi in order to fool the Daltons long enough to make his escape. Although Bigger was panicked during the commission of the crime, and is still panicked now, he nevertheless recognizes how important it will be to shift blame convincingly onto Jan, the most likely other suspect in Mary's murder.

Some time passes, which Bigger spends dozing in his room. Mrs. Dalton has Peggy ring for Bigger; Bigger hears it on the third ring, and Mrs. Dalton comes to his door, asking about the events of the previous night. Bigger knows that Mrs. Dalton's embarrassment about Mary's disappearance—which she believes is a result of Mary's sexual impropriety with Jan—will cause her not to grill him too harshly. Bigger makes it seem that Jan came back to the house with Mary, that Jan told Bigger to leave the car in the driveway, and that Jan then went up to Mary's room with her—and that both of them were inebriated. Mrs. Dalton thanks Bigger for this information and tells him he can have the rest of the day off.

Bigger realizes, here, that Mrs. Dalton will be nervous to talk to him about subjects she considers taboo—namely, the sexual activities of her daughter, or these supposed sexual activities. In this way, Bigger evinces a nuanced understanding of the motivations and hesitations of someone in Mrs. Dalton's position. At other times, however, Bigger seems blind to the expectations or desires of those around him—especially in his relationship with Bessie, whose feelings he rarely takes into account.

Bigger decides that he will take the afternoon and visit with Bessie, his girlfriend, whom he glanced briefly the night before at Ernie's. He rides a streetcar to Bessie's neighborhood and thinks, en route, of how, if the white people he passes in the streetcar knew that he had just murdered a white woman, they would beat and murder him. Bigger also scolds himself for not managing to make more money out of the murder—he briefly considers the idea that he might have pretended to kidnap Mary to extort more from the Daltons.

As evidenced by his interaction with Mrs. Dalton in the previous scene, Bigger has become far more aware of the feelings of those around him, perhaps because the initial shock of committing the murder has worn off. Bigger has also started to see the murder as something he should have profited from. In his state of poverty and anger, he shows no remorse.

Bigger arrives at Bessie's small, squalid apartment, and greets her cheerfully. Bessie does not know "what's gotten into" Bigger, and when Bigger asks what Bessie's been up to, Bessie replies that she's been working, and that she wonders if Bigger has been doing the same. Bigger says he's been very busy, which is why it's been difficult for him to call Bessie or see her, but now he shows her the wad of money he's taken from Mary's purse, making it seem like the money was given to him by the Daltons; he promises to be sweet to Bessie from now on, and says that she can stay with him occasionally at his room in the Daltons' house.

Bessie is not so easily won over in this case, and though she receives a relatively small amount of description in the course of the novel, Bessie is one of the work's more interesting characters. She is loyal to Bigger, although she seems to understand Bigger's selfishness, his desire to further his own life at the expense of other people's. By the same token, Bessie agrees to go along with Bigger's plan, half out of fear, and half out of desperation at her current, impoverished circumstances.

Bessie is alarmed at the sight of all this cash, and asks Bigger several times where he could have gotten it all at once. They count the money; it amounts to 125 dollars. Bigger then tells Bessie that he's going to be sweet to her, without revealing any more information about the money; they make love and nap for a time. When they wake up, Bigger seems distant, and Bessie asks whether Bigger doesn't have something on his mind; Bigger replies that he does, but wonders if he'll be able to share this information with Bessie. Bessie says she can keep a secret and wants to know, but Bigger replies that they should go out and get a drink.

What Bigger has "on his mind" at this moment could be a matter of some dispute. Perhaps he wants to fill Bessie in on the entire truth of the murder—how he killed Mary accidentally, and how they ought to flee—but it is more likely, at this point, that he is considering how to tell Bessie only part of the truth, in order to use her in his scheme to collect a ransom from the Daltons. Again, Bigger shows that he has lost some of the panic of the previous night, and is thinking farther ahead in his own self-interest.

Bessie continues to ask Bigger about the nature of what he's been up to, and Bigger replies that it will be easier to talk once they're seated at the Paris Grill, the bar where they will have drinks. Bigger thinks that what Bessie really wants is alcohol—he believes that she drinks to forget the difficulties of her life—and what Bigger lusts after is Bessie's body. This reverie is interrupted when they reach the bar; Bigger orders two gin cocktails, and Bessie drinks hers quickly. Bessie again asks Bigger if he will tell her what's on his mind.

Bessie's alcoholism is not given much space in the novel, but it is clear, from her interactions with Bigger, that she is dependent on alcohol, and that she uses it primarily to forget the difficulties of her life—some of which are caused by Bigger's treatment of her. Bessie is perhaps the most pitiable of the novel's characters, caught between a difficult world and a relationship with Bigger that she cannot escape.

Bigger decides, on the fly, to tell Bessie a half-true version of what has happened to Mary. He says that Mary has eloped with Jan, that no one can find the couple, and that he, Bigger, has taken some of the money from Mary's room—thus the large wad of cash he's been holding in his pocket. Bigger tells Bessie that the two of them can make it seem that Jan, or someone else, has abducted Mary—Bigger and Bessie can therefore ask for a ransom, and make their way out of town while Mary is still unaccounted for. Bigger tells Bessie that it's very important she keep this plan secret, if it's going to work.

Bigger has grown more confident, and is more capable, in this section, of creating a story that can make it seem that he was not the murderer, but that, nonetheless, he is in a position to profit from Mary's disappearance. Despite this, Bessie appears to sense, from the beginning, that Bigger knows more information about Mary's condition than he is willing to let on—and this will be confirmed the next day.

Bigger and Bessie leave the bar; Bessie is worried about the plan, since it is so obviously illegal, since it exposes her to criminal prosecution—and, most of all, since she can't be sure that Mary wouldn't return on her own. Bigger makes it seem that it's very unlikely Mary would return in this way, and Bessie asks how Bigger can be so sure, but Bigger doesn't respond. Outside, Bessie tells Bigger that she's scared of the plan, but that she'll go along with it to please Bigger, if necessary. Bigger gives Bessie some money and tells her he'll meet with her the following night. On his walk back to the Daltons' house, Bigger thinks on the "blindness" he has seen, from Bessie to his mother to the Daltons—no one can believe that Bigger would be capable of killing Mary, right under their noses, without their realizing.

One might ask why Bessie goes along with Bigger's plan, despite voicing her objections to him. Although Bessie knows that her relationship with Bigger is an abusive one, she feels powerless to change her circumstances—she feels she needs the "protection" a man can offer her, even though Bigger provides nothing like protection, and indeed only seems to imperil Bessie. Bessie also perhaps figures that there are few places in Chicago where she can hide from him; and Bessie makes little mention of other family and friends, indicating that Bigger alone takes an interest in her life, however minimal.

This feeling, that everyone in the world is blind, and that he, Bigger, can see, makes Bigger feel proud of his own strength. He reaches the Daltons' house, and runs into Peggy, who tells Bigger that Mrs. Dalton wants him to pick up Mary's trunk from the train station, since the family has called to Detroit and Mary has not arrived at her destination. The family is now extremely worried on Mary's behalf, and Bigger fears that his plot is becoming more complicated.

Another indication for the family that something is seriously wrong with Mary, that she is perhaps no longer just playing one of her "pranks," but instead that she has gone missing. Bigger's confidence in the previous scene with Bessie is tested by the harsh reality of this new situation—his alibi will have to withstand official scrutiny.

Mr. and Mrs. Dalton come down to the kitchen to speak with Bigger before he leaves to pick up the trunk from the station. Mr. Dalton asks Bigger, directly, what happened the night before, and Bigger, lying to keep his alibi straight, says that Jan returned to the house with Mary, that Mary told Bigger to take the trunk down to the basement, and that Jan told Bigger to keep the car outside all night. Bigger then implies that Jan and Mary were in Mary's bedroom together after two o'clock.

One might stop to imagine, here, how likely it would be that an authority would believe mild-mannered Jan to be Mary's abductor. It is perhaps an evocation only of the strength of the Communist "menace" that the police and Britten fear Jan so greatly, even though he tends to preach a mostly non-violent kind of progressive politics.

Bigger goes to the train station, picks up the trunk, and returns to the Dalton house. He thinks, en route, that he will have to "fasten" his story straight in order to keep the authorities from figuring out that Bigger is lying about Jan's presence in the house, and other details of the previous night. Bigger takes the trunk downstairs to the **furnace** room, and, just as he is considering busting open the trunk to look inside and again examine its contents, Henry comes into the room, startling Bigger. Henry asks Bigger what's the matter, and Bigger, saying nothing, is introduced by Henry to Britten, a private investigator hired by Henry to look into Mary's disappearance.

Again, it seems in this sequence of events that time has been "collapsed" somewhat, as Britten, the private investigator, is hired by Dalton in a relatively small span of time—a few hours—between Mary's disappearance and Bigger's return from the train station. One might imagine that Henry has a PI on retainer; one might also simply conclude that, in this part of the novel, Wright wanted to introduce Britten's character as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

Britten says hello to Bigger and asks, first, to see in the trunk; because it is locked, Britten will need to bust it open, and for this Henry asks for the hatchet—the same one Bigger burned the night before in the **furnace**, after using it to chop off Mary's head. Bigger feigns looking for the hatchet and says it's not in the furnace room—Britten says it's no problem, and breaks open the trunk himself, finding very little clothing inside. Britten then has Bigger sit on the trunk and, again, answer some questions about the previous night.

An important piece of evidence, missing. Although Bigger knew that he had to destroy the hatchet, because it was covered in blood, he did not count on its absence being an important issue; here, however, Dalton and Britten cannot find the hatchet when they need it, and any seasoned PI might determine, from that, that perhaps the hatchet was used in the commission of the crime.

Bigger realizes that now is the time to go into more detail with his story, in order to convince the Daltons and the authorities that Jan is responsible for Mary's disappearance. Bigger tells the story of the night more or less as it happened, except making it seem that Jan came back to the house with Bigger and Mary, and that Jan then went into Mary's room after telling Bigger to take the trunk down to the basement, and to keep the car parked out in the driveway. Britten asks Bigger if Jan attempted to give him any Communist literature, or talk to him about Communism, and Bigger, sensing that this is an opportunity to make Jan seem suspicious, agrees that Jan did in fact do so.

For many in the novel, it's a very small leap between "Communist propaganda" and "murder." It seems not to matter to characters like Britten that committed Communists of Jan's nature are mostly pacifists, and devoted to causes they find unjust. It is far easier for Britten and Dalton to assume that Communists want the destruction of the American government and the "American way of life."

Britten suddenly begins yelling at Bigger, asking if he, too, is a Communist, and if Bigger is therefore in on Jan's plot to kidnap or hurt Mary. But Bigger, genuinely frightened, says that he doesn't know anything about Communism, and that he was only following orders the previous night, the first night of his new job at the Daltons' house. Henry seems convinced by Bigger's innocence—by the idea that Bigger is as scared of Communism as any God-fearing American would be—and Britten, grudgingly going along with Dalton's assessment, tells Bigger he might have questions for him later. Dalton tells Bigger to go upstairs and continue working for the family as usual.

Henry, perhaps to his credit, does not suspect that Bigger is responsible for Mary's disappearance. It is unclear, initially, why this is the case: perhaps he is more inclined to think Jan is the criminal; perhaps he feels that Bigger did not have the means to plan for such a kidnapping. In the second case, it is Henry's subtle shade of racism that keeps him from seeing the truth that is right before him—that Bigger himself, the "hired driver," is the responsible party.

Bigger goes back up to his room and hears Mr. Dalton and Britten talking in the kitchen. Dalton defends Bigger, in his typically paternalistic way, saying that many black young men from the South Side never get a chance, and that he, Dalton, only wants to help them. Britten, on the other hand, has only derogatory things to say about African Americans, and wonders whether Bigger can be trusted in his account of the previous night. Britten says that he will go about trying to contact Jan, to see if Bigger's story stands up to scrutiny.

Britten is very much the opposite of Dalton—he is suspicious of seemingly anyone in a position of inferiority, or with "something to prove." This includes both Jan and Bigger. Interestingly, once Bigger seems to be the actual criminal, Britten never gives up hope that Jan was somehow implicated, perhaps in helping to "recruit" Bigger to his Communist cause.

Bigger lies down and has a nightmare about the previous night, in which he, Bigger, is running in a terrible apocalyptic landscape, and in which a **furnace** looms, burning bright and hot, on the horizon. Bigger awakes to the sound of a bell ringing, and realizes he is being called from below. When he arises, he answers the door to find Jan, Mr. Dalton, and Britten wanting to speak with him. The three come into Bigger's room. Britten asks Jan whether it's true that Jan gave Bigger Communist pamphlets and then came back to the Dalton house the night before. Jan says he didn't come to the Daltons' at all, and asks Bigger directly why Bigger is lying to the authorities to say that this is so.

There are very few scenes like this in the novel, where Bigger is allowed to describe, via the narrator, the subjective material of his own mind. Often, Bigger's thoughts are reported in the same manner they would be in something like a newspaper article—Bigger's confusions appear more or less straightforward as they make their way to the reader. But in this case, Bigger's dream is strange, and is described strangely—all that can be discerned from it is the magnitude of Bigger's anxiety about his crime.

Jan continues to describe the events of the previous evening—he does not lie, but instead says that, although he gave Bigger some Communist literature, he, Jan, did not come back to the Daltons', nor did he tell Bigger to do anything with Mary's trunk. Jan wonders, genuinely, who or what has put Bigger up to lying about the night's events—Jan cannot convince Britten or Dalton that he isn't lying, and although Jan says he's going to go back to his own apartment (since Britten is only a PI and not the police), Britten says that he'll call the authorities and have Jan picked up for questioning. Britten and Dalton seem to trust Bigger's word over Jan's at this point in the conversation.

One might question whether Jan's response, here, or the amount of his emotional investment, seems true to life. Always rational, Jan simply tells Britten that the night's events did not happen as Bigger describes them—although he is clearly agitated, he does not seem to evince the righteous indignation of someone who has been falsely accused. Later on, Jan will be one of the first to accept Bigger's "apology" for having shifted the blame, even though Bigger never really apologizes to Jan.

On the way out of the house, Jan runs into Bigger, who has gone down the staircase (Britten and Mr. Dalton have already left Bigger's room to discuss matters further); Jan asks Bigger, again, why Bigger is lying about the previous night, but Bigger says he doesn't want to talk to Jan. The two walk down to the **furnace** room, and, after Jan continues asking Bigger what's the matter, and why Bigger is lying to Britten, Bigger pulls out his gun and threatens Jan, saying he does not want to talk to him, and that Jan ought to leave the premises. Jan, confused as to Bigger's motivations and Mary's whereabouts, leaves the house, and Bigger, in a kind of rage, walks out into the still-snowy night.

As compared to Jan's relative calm, Bigger becomes more and more upset the longer Jan's stays in the house. This, perhaps, because Bigger is himself anxious, deep down, for having shifted the blame to Jan, whom he knows to be innocent. It is a testament to the strangeness of Bigger's anger that he is almost willing, in the Daltons' own house, to shoot Jan, rather than to talk to him about the nature of his crime—one gets the sense that Jan would listen to, and maybe try to help, Bigger, if Bigger chose to confide in him.

Bigger goes to a corner store and gruffly asks for some paper, a pencil, and an envelope, then rides the tram-car to Bessie's apartment, remarking along the way that Mr. Dalton's company owns the apartment house in which Bigger was raised, and probably the one where Bessie lives, too—Dalton claims he is all for helping African Americans, but he's also happy to take their money and force them to live in squalid conditions. At Bessie's apartment, Bigger gets out of the tram-car and walks up to her room, banging loudly on the door and asking to be let in. Bessie does so, but seems afraid of Bigger; he tells her to shut the blinds, get him a knife (for sharpening the pencil), and have a drink while he works.

As it turns out, Mr. Dalton owns not only the apartment building that Bigger's family lives in, but also the tenement where Bessie lives (presumably alone). It becomes clear, throughout the course of the novel, that Dalton owns a great deal of the Black Belt, and he later admits that he refuses to rent to African Americans outside this region of town because it's an "old custom" to keep African American families "together" in this way—a more or less bald statement of segregated racism.

Bigger puts on gloves (so his fingerprints cannot be traced on the letter), and writes a ransom note, pretending to be a Communist from Jan's group called "Red." The note, scrawled quickly, asks for ten thousand dollars to be brought the following evening at midnight, in small bills, to a stretch of Michigan Avenue on which Bessie will be stationed, in an abandoned apartment—when the car sees a flashlight shine three times, it's to drop off the money out the window of the car and speed away; Bessie will then collect the cash, and Bigger and Bessie will leave town.

Although it is not expressed explicitly in this section, one gets the idea that the note does not bear the style of one written by members of the Communist Party in Chicago—that it is not in the manner of the informational pamphlets Jan has provided to Bigger earlier in the narrative. Nevertheless, Bigger goes to great lengths to make the note appear anonymous, even making sure that he does not touch it with his bare hands.

Bessie comes up to Bigger after he finishes the note, asking once again where Mary is, and if Bigger knows about her whereabouts—she begins to think that Bigger himself has kidnapped or harmed Mary. Bigger finally breaks down and admits to having killed Mary; he tells Bessie that she's now "in" the plot "as deep" as he is, and that, because she has spent some of the money Bigger gave her the night before, she could also be arrested and tried, along with Bigger. Bessie is terrified by this, but Bigger says they are going out to scout locations for an abandoned apartment, wherein Bessie can wait, the following night, for the Dalton family's drop-off of the ten thousand dollars.

Of course, this is not exactly true—although Bigger has implicated Bessie in the events of the previous night and day, Bessie has not yet committed a crime, and she is mostly just scared of Bigger—worried that he might harm her in some way. Bigger proves himself adept at manipulating Bessie, at getting her to do exactly what he wants, and when he wants it—and Bessie seems to be powerless to stop the engines of fate, which she acknowledges are carrying her toward bad luck and death.

They leave Bessie's apartment and head to Michigan Avenue; Bigger has brought a flashlight along, and they duck into an abandoned apartment building, one that used to be owned by wealthy white families who have since fled the Black Belt. Bessie has begun whimpering and crying to herself, and when Bigger tells her, continually, to be quiet, Bessie finally asks aloud if Bigger isn't just going to kill her, too, and whether it might not be better if Bigger were in fact to do so.

A bit of foreshadowing. Bessie understands that, at this point, Bigger is pursuing his task single-mindedly, and Bessie also senses, before Bigger does, the futility of his scheme to extort the Daltons through a fake kidnapping. Bessie will spend much of the rest of the novel in an alcoholic stupor, as a way of coping with the terrible stress of Bigger's plot.

Bigger gets Bessie, finally and grudgingly, to agree to wait for the "drop-off" of the money the following night, in the abandoned apartment they have staked out. Bigger leaves Bessie, tells her to be patient and calm, and says he will see her soon. Bigger walks through the snowy, cold night back to the Daltons' house, where he goes up to the front door furtively and drops the ransom note, sealed in an envelope, under the front door. He is nervous that he has committed himself to this additional ruse, on top of already having murdered Mary, but he feels, too, that he is powerful enough to pull off the trick. Bigger then goes inside through the back entrance.

Although, of course, Bigger's murder of Mary is the dominant plot "hinge" of the novel, it is nevertheless greatly important, at this point, that Bigger drops off the ransom note, for he sets into motion a belief that Mary has been kidnapped which is difficult to quell. The amount of media attention caused by this announcement will bring reporters to the Daltons' home, and it is reporters who find Mary's bones hidden in the furnace.

Bigger finds that a large dinner has already been set out for him by Peggy. Bigger lays into the food, and finds that he is famished, having eaten only little in the past 24 hours. Bigger also sees that Peggy has brought in the envelope from the front hallway, and set it on the table in the kitchen—Bigger eyes the envelope nervously, until Mr. Dalton comes in and takes it away. While Peggy tells Bigger that he should be up the next morning at 8 a.m., in order to drive Henry to work, Henry himself comes back into the kitchen, with Bigger present, and asks Peggy who dropped the letter off at the house. Bigger notices that Henry looks stunned by the contents of the note.

Bigger finally has a meal after waiting an immensely long time to eat—this is perhaps the last moment of comfort he will find as a "free man," as certainly his trial, in the final section of the book, is a harrowing and nearly torturous experience. Dalton, for his part, seems not even to notice Bigger at this point in the novel; he is too concerned about Mary's wellbeing, now that he "knows" she has been kidnapped.

Bigger goes back up to his room, from which he can hear a commotion downstairs. Henry has called Britten over to the house once again, and Britten immediately begins asking questions of Peggy—wondering if anyone else what at the house that afternoon, if Bigger has been acting strangely, and, notably, if Bigger has referred to anyone as "comrade" or has used other instances of Communist language. Peggy says that she doesn't believe so; Bigger waits, hears more commotion downstairs, and then hears Britten calling for Bigger to join him in the **furnace** room. Bigger obeys and goes downstairs, nervous now.

Britten returns, and has even more questions for members of the Dalton household. Britten seems to think there is a link between Bigger and a cell of the Communist Party in Chicago—what Britten does not realize until later, however, is that Bigger acted, and committed murder, out of fear and out of no set of principles. And Jan, a representative of the Communist Party, wanted only to help Bigger—not to recruit him as a part of a systematic crime-wave through the city.

Britten greets Bigger curtly in the **furnace** room; Britten has been joined by three men, his "associates" at the private investigation firm. Britten continues to ask Bigger the same questions he asked of him earlier in the day, but with a renewed urgency: what Bigger did the night before, what Bigger saw, how Jan behaved with Mary, what Jan told him to do with the trunk. Bigger repeats his story and makes no glaring errors in recounting it to Britten.

The furnace room will prove to be the center of events in the Dalton home for the remainder of this part of the novel. It is the furnace's malfunction, caused by Bigger's lack of attendance to it, which causes him to clear the ashes, to reveal the bones—and which forces him to flee the house entirely.

Britten asks Bigger, pointedly, if Bigger is a Communist, and Bigger says he is not, and that he knows very little about Communism. A voice from upstairs calls down to the **furnace** room—newspaper reporters have arrived at the house, and though Britten says he can provide them with no information at the time, one reporter answers that the story has already hit the pressed: the headline is "Red Nabbed as Girl Vanishes."

As in any era, reporters tend to arrive even in what appears to be a situation lacking any evidence; it is not made clear how the reporters learned of Mary's disappearance, but once they are at the Dalton house, they immediately take hold of the story, and indeed make the story, when it is journalists themselves who find Mary's remains.

Britten goes upstairs for a moment to talk to Henry, then returns to say that Dalton will not have anything official to say on the matter till Tuesday (it is still Sunday, the day after the crime was committed). The reporters ask if Mary is missing, if Jan is responsible, if Jan has been arrested, and what Dalton plans to do about finding his daughter. Britten admits that they don't know where Mary is, but does not provide any more information. One nameless reporter attempts to talk softly to Bigger and slips him some money, asking him for all the information he has; but Bigger realizes he cannot speak to the reporter, says as much to him, and slips the money back into his hand.

An interesting and relatively subtle part of the novel. The journalist's actions here are barely discernible even by Bigger, to whom they are directed; Bigger only realizes after missing a beat that the journalist is attempting to bribe him. The fact that Bigger makes a "principled" stand here, and returns the money, might be viewed either as Bigger's self-interest—not wanting to talk to authorities at all—or as a strange kind of loyalty to the Daltons' privacy.

Mr. Dalton comes downstairs, however, and announces that he would like to make a statement after all regarding his daughter's disappearance. Mrs. Dalton follows him down the stairs, and the reporters gasp at her white, nearly glowing presence, whom the narrator describes as being "ghost-like." Henry tells the reporters that he has asked the police to release Jan and drop all charges against him; Henry goes on to apologize to Jan for the statements made by Bigger and others that put him in jail in the first place. Henry then announces that Mary has been kidnapped by a man calling himself Red, whose note the Daltons have recently received; because this note was delivered when Jan was in custody, Dalton has reason to believe that Jan is not involved.

Dalton, for his part, was never as convinced as Britten was that Jan was involved in criminal activity, and because Jan was in prison when the ransom note was delivered, Dalton seems to think that Jan was not involved, even though, as Britten later suggests, Jan might have put someone else in the Communist Party up to the delivery of the note—it was, after all, only signed "Red." Dalton never formally reconciles with Jan, but it is seen that Jan is at least tolerated by members of the Dalton family for the rest of the novel.

The reporters ask if the Daltons plan on paying the ransom, and Henry replies that he will, and will follow the instructions listed in the letter (which the letter itself has asked the Daltons not to make public; thus Dalton does not tell how the ransom will be delivered). As Henry is telling the reporters this information, Bigger stands quietly in the corner of the **furnace** room and wonders if the plan will work as he intended. The reporters go upstairs to check Mary's room for more clues, and when they return to the furnace room, they find Bigger reading the newspaper in which the story of Mary's disappearance, and Jan's arrest, are first reported.

Dalton appears to take the ransom note very seriously—perhaps as a strategy, knowing that, if he does not, then the kidnappers might simply murder his daughter. Dalton does not ever admit to believing that Mary was actually captured, but he seems to think it is the best course of action to proceed as though she has been, to follow the demands of those leaving the ransom. Note how easy it is for Dalton to bring together so much money, more than Bigger would be likely to earn in a lifetime.

The reporters ask Britten if they may interview Bigger, since he was the last to see Mary alive the previous night. Britten says Bigger can provide no new information, but grudgingly agrees to allow them to talk to Bigger. Bigger tells the reporters that he really can't say anything more than Mr. Dalton has just told them, and during their conversation, another reporter, who has gone upstairs to use his phone to call the newsroom, comes back to say that Jan won't leave police custody after all.

Interestingly, Jan does not want to leave the police station, and though he eventually does, the reason for his finally doing so is never divulged, nor is his reason for wanting to stay in the first place. Most likely is the idea that the reporters later discuss, namely, that Jan simply did not want to be "free" in a city where he is the chief suspect in Mary's disappearance.

Some of the reporters, and Britten, believe that Jan won't leave the precinct because he is in fact guilty and afraid of what will happen to him if he's free to walk around; other reporters, however, believe Mr. Dalton's hunch, that Jan has nothing to do with the kidnapping. Some of the reporters ask more questions about Jan—including if he's Jewish—and others try to get more information from Bigger, who stands more or less mute in the **furnace** room; the reporters conclude that Bigger can provide little useful information to them, and that Bigger himself is "stupid."

A recurring, and subtle, plot-point is the questioning by authorities relating Judaism and Communism. This was common in the 1930s in the US, before the Second World War—there was a sense in some aspects of the culture that anti-Semitic notions of Jewish "conspiracy" and global political notions of Communist conspiracy were aligned or perhaps linked. These concerns are only briefly mentioned, however, in this novel.

The reporters take more pictures of Bigger—this picture-taking causes Bigger to feel even more uncomfortable. Peggy comes downstairs with food for the reporters and Britten, and tells Bigger that it's become cold upstairs, and that Bigger will therefore need to clean the ashes out of the **furnace** in order to push more coal into it. Bigger realizes that, if he cleans out the ashes, there might be chunks of Mary's body that have not yet burned—he is filled with fear at having to stoke the furnace in front of the reporters.

A crucial moment in the novel. It is interesting here to note that it is Peggy who is, in some sense, directly responsible for Bigger being "found out" by the authorities—since she asks that Bigger clean out the ashes while the reporters are still present. Bigger is in a situation from which he cannot escape, for he cannot make it seem that there is any problem at all with looking inside the furnace.

Bigger tries to shove more coal into the **furnace** without clearing out the ashes, but the furnace begins smoking and fuming, causing the reporters to choke on a cloud of black smoke that begins filling the furnace room. The reporters tell Bigger that he has to clear out the ashes, and he finally relents; one of the reporters pokes around in the furnace and releases the ashes; he spots something curious inside, and pushes the ashes out of the furnace with a shovel, scattering them on the floor of the room. The reporters realize that the white chunks of bone are in the ash, and that they probably belong to Mary's body, which has burnt in the furnace and choked it with ash and debris. Bigger is immediately gripped by an immense dread.

From this point forward, the novel is a story of Bigger's attempts at survival. He is no longer capable of convincing authorities that he is not the responsible party—instead, he must do everything in his power to resist being captured, and, after this, he must do all that he can simply to survive the ordeal of the inquest and subsequent trial. All Bigger's dreams of a new life, somewhere beyond Chicago, with Bessie at his side, evaporate once Mary's bones are scattered across the floor.

Bigger realizes that, if he doesn't go, he will be questioned once again by Britten and the authorities, and may in fact be placed in jail. As the reporters are combing through the ashes and wondering who is responsible for Mary's death and cremation, Bigger walks quietly out of the **furnace** room, climbs the steps, and makes his way to his own bedroom; he then jumps out the window into the snow. Bigger realizes that, in his fear, he has urinated in his pants, but he also realizes that he still has his gun. He begins to walk to Bessie's house.

What is perhaps not totally plausible here is the fact that not a single reporter in the room turns to see where Bigger is headed. Perhaps Bigger is simply very skilled at making himself disappear, and one wonders, too, if the journalists simply feel, at this point (and wrongly), that Bigger does not possess the mental faculties to have been involved in Mary's disappearance at all.

On his way to a tram-stop, which will take him to Bessie's, Bigger stops at a kiosk and buys a copy of a newspaper, in which he reads more about the abduction, the ransom, and the holding of Jan in custody. Bigger fears that, with all the scrutiny of the police across the city, there will be no way for him to pick up the money on Michigan Avenue later that night without being caught—he fears that the plan is now off, and that he and Bessie will have to flee. He hops on a tram, rides it for a few minutes, gets off, and enters Bessie's apartment, where he tells her sharply to turn on the lights.

A recurring feature of the novel is the manner in which newspapers are deployed to tell Bigger and other characters of events that are happening "off-stage," or in a part of Chicago that is not being described by the narrator. Even in prison, Bigger will be given bits and pieces of the newspaper, supplied mostly by his friendly lawyer Max.

Bigger tells Bessie everything—that he truly did kill Mary, and that the reporters found her body in the **furnace**; that he ran away from the Dalton house and will be hunted by the police; that he only has 90 dollars left, with which they will need to live while they hide out in abandoned houses in the Black Belt. Bessie moans and says she wishes she were dead—she tells Bigger, as they gather quilts, drink whiskey, and prepare to leave Bessie's apartment, that the police will find them and perhaps kill them. Bessie also tells Bigger that the police will believe he raped Mary, if word gets out that he was in her room with her. Bigger had not thought of this, and immediately realizes that Bessie is right—they will consider Bigger a rapist and a murderer.

An important realization, for Bessie and for Bigger, in the novel. Bessie is, of course, right—the entire city of Chicago believes, until the very end, that Bigger raped Mary and burned her in order that he might be able to hide the evidence of that rape. The myth of black male hypersexuality is so strong in the world of the novel that Bigger simply cannot convince anyone that he did not rape Mary Dalton—especially once it is found out that Bigger went on to rape his own girlfriend, Bessie, in the aftermath of the first murder, and before her death.

Bigger and Bessie leave Bessie's apartment and walk outside for several blocks, until they find a different abandoned building that smells of rot and decay. They climb up to the third floor, and Bessie spreads out quilts and takes out the flask of whiskey they've brought with them; Bigger leans over the window to an air-shaft in the building and smokes a cigarette. Finishing his smoke, Bigger tells Bessie to lie down and be calm for a moment in the cold, dark room of the abandoned building; Bigger lies down next to her, and though Bessie protests, Bigger begins taking off her clothes and fondling her. Bessie continues saying no, and Bigger rapes her on the floor of the abandoned room; Bessie is intoxicated and appears to fall asleep at some point during or after the assault.

It is unclear, of course, why Bigger chooses this time and place to assault Bessie, although there are several possible explanations. One, offered later by Bigger in his conversations with Max in prison, is that, because Bigger is expected to rape, and especially once he realizes that all of society will feel he raped Mary, he feels he has nothing to hold on to—no reason to uphold the laws under which he was raised. But there is also a sense that Bigger wants to possess Bessie utterly, to control her in a world otherwise completely beyond his control—and rape is a part of this terrible impulse.

Bigger goes to the air-shaft once again and thinks about his murder of Mary and his current situation with Bessie—he worries to himself that Bessie will not be able to keep quiet and go along with the plans he devises; that she will give herself up to the police and cause Bigger to die in prison or be electrocuted. Bigger decides that he must kill Bessie; he scans the apartment for materials (using the flashlight, briefly, to illuminate the space while Bessie sleeps), and finds a brick, which he takes over to where Bessie is sleeping.

Just as the furnace is the central functional element of the Daltons' house, and one to which Bigger will return when he needs to dispose of Mary's body, the air-shaft in the abandoned building is the structural element linked to Bessie's demise—Bigger will seek to stash her body there after her death, and like Mary, Bessie, too, will be found by authorities much later. In Bessie's case, her body is frozen from exposure, not burned, as in the furnace.

Bigger holds the brick above Bessie's head and hesitates for a moment, wondering if he can kill again, but soon this hesitation is gone, and he decides that the only way to carry out his plan and possibly escape police detection is by bludgeoning Bessie to death. He brings down the brick on Bessie's skull, repeatedly, until he feels a sickening softness and moistness on her head; he turns on the flashlight again to make sure she is dead, and sees her mangled and broken face lying in a pool of blood.

Another brutal instance of murder. Bigger, already a profoundly unsympathetic character, probably reaches his nadir at this point in the novel, murdering an innocent women who is simply devoted to him, who wishes to please him, and who, above all, is terrified of him. Bessie is the novel's truest victim—she has suffered the most and gained the least in her short and difficult life.

Bigger dumps Bessie's body down the air-shaft, only to realize, after he's done so, that Bessie had Bigger's remaining money in her shirt pocket. Now Bigger is entirely without cash, and he reflects on the two murders he has committed in the past two days—he realizes that a major split has occurred in his life; he lives a "new life" now, and he must figure out a way to avoid detection and survive. But he still feels the small, electric feeling of pride, or excitement, at the thought that he has escaped the narrow confines of his previous life. Bigger tries to sleep on the floor of the abandoned building before planning his next move in the morning.

Although it is no victory for Bessie, and certainly it does nothing to save her life and assuage her pain—but Bigger, at the very least, cannot profit from her death, since Bessie had the money in her pocket, and Bigger disposed of her body without even considering this fact. Bigger's lack of money appears to matter a great deal at this juncture, but in fact, Bigger will barely need money at all, since his capture is so imminent, it would be impossible for Bigger to escape, even if he had hundreds of dollars.

Bigger wakes up the next morning and, curious about the recent developments in his case, steals a newspaper from a corner vendor while the man isn't looking. Bigger then ducks into an alley and reads the headlines and article, which seem to say much that he'd expected: that he is being hunted by the Chicago Police, that they believe he murdered and possibly raped Mary, and that thousands of officers, and some vigilantes, are walking the streets of the Black Belt and South Side in order to find him.

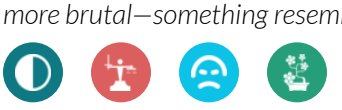
Just as the opening book of the novel follows Bigger closer, and provides information about Chicago only inasmuch as it is revealed to Bigger, here, too, we find through the newspaper that Bigger is being hunted, that all of Chicago is on the lookout for him—we see very little of these crowds, however, and mostly hear them, later, as they hurl racist insults at Bigger.

Bigger realizes that he has to find a place to hide out. He goes first to a bakery and uses five of his remaining cents to buy a loaf of bread; he then hoists himself, via the alley, in the kitchen of second floor apartment with a For Rent sign out front. Bigger huddles in the corner of the apartment and eats his bread; he can hear, from the noise in the adjacent apartment, that a family is arguing about his case, which they've read about in the newspaper—everyone in the Black Belt seems to be talking about it. Someone in the other apartment says that Bigger's running away makes him seem guilty; another says that Bigger will always have seemed guilty, even if he was innocent, and that perhaps he ran away only in order to avoid an unfair trial.

An important point raised by the neighbor here, and conveniently heard by Bigger while he is on the lam. Even if Bigger were innocent, what protection could he expect from a city, and a police department, primed to assume that all African American men are criminals? Bigger knows that he is guilty, and that his escape would be purely in his self-interest; but he also knows, deep down, that there are others like him who are innocent, who are nevertheless hunted through the city, and treated with none of the kindness that ought to be afforded to a human being in the United States.

Bigger moves to the back of the kitchen and tries to sleep, as he has barely slept the past two nights. He dozes for an indeterminate amount of time, then goes back to the window and hears more African American citizens discussing his case; one person even fears that he has heard noise in his apartment building, assuming it is Bigger, hiding out. Bigger sees, while hiding out in the alley again, the headline of a newspaper that states that 8,000 armed men are bearing down on the Black Belt, sweeping from house to house; Bigger realizes that he must hide himself even better, or pray there is a way to elude the authorities. He climbs back into the apartment building, turns off the light, and waits.

Eight thousand armed men is almost an unfathomable number—an enormous army, essentially, raised against Bigger, and that number, as the headline indicates, is swollen with citizens from the surrounding (white) areas, who have joined vigilante leagues to find Bigger. The police, apparently, do nothing to actively discourage white citizens from doing this, and the notion that Bigger is being hunted by an army of white men only makes it seem more likely that this is not a search for a criminal, but a prelude to something far more brutal—something resembling a "lynching."



Bigger then hears, after several minutes, the sounds of motors and sirens, which by now have encircled the block in which he is hiding. It is unclear whether Bigger's presence has been tipped to the police, or whether this is simply part of the sweep the police are doing of the entire neighborhood; Bigger climbs through a trap door and makes his way to the roof of the building, where he wedges himself between the chimney and the trap-door. He hears police officers arguing about whether Bigger is still in Chicago; one says that Bigger "could be in New York" by now.

The irony, here, is that Bigger probably did have sufficient time to escape the police, at least in Chicago, and to make his way out of the city—but only if he had left immediately after Mary's murder. It is unclear whether Bigger would have been the first suspect, or if Jan still would have—meaning that, by sticking around the Dalton house, Bigger probably only hurt the chances of his escape.

Another police officer, to whom the first was talking, roots around in the apartment then climbs the trap-door and begins to poke his head through it, scanning the roof. Bigger, acting almost on reflex, pulls the gun out of his pants and uses it to hit the officer, named Jerry, on the head; the officer tumbles back down to the apartment and Bigger begins crawling away to another part of the roof. Bigger then gets up and begins running across the roof of the building, jumping over ledges to the roofs of adjacent buildings, in the hopes of eluding the police officers who have reached the roof and are now following him on foot. The block is encircled.

The officers who are searching for Bigger do not seem particularly well equipped to catch him, but this does not matter, as there are so many officers and there is only Bigger, alone, with a gun to protect him, and a limited amount of roof on which to crawl. This chase scene is notable for its lack of climactic action—from the beginning, Bigger seems to sense that his cause is doomed, that he will be captured by the police.

A bullet flies past Bigger's head, and Bigger realizes that he is captured; there is nothing he can do to avoid the police. He also realizes that, eventually, he will reach the edge of the block and will only be able to jump off the entire building. The police officers continue shooting at him and throwing tear-gas canisters at him; they realize that Bigger has a gun, although he does not fire back on the police. Finally, the police decide to use the hose on Bigger; it is pulled onto the roof, and a spray of water is unleashed onto Bigger's freezing body.

Bigger's gun might have been "useful" here, although he does not have the desire to fire it. Thus Bigger never ends up discharging his weapon throughout the entirety of the novel, despite having killed two people, and having threatened a good many others with death for various reasons. The gun is, ultimately, a red herring, like the robbery at Blum's—something designed to turn the reader's attention away from other events in the novel.

Bigger collapses under the powerful stream of water, and the policemen tell him repeatedly to put down his weapon. At this point, Bigger realizes that he has truly been captured; his flight is over. The police take Bigger's shivering body and drag it down the steps of the apartment building; his head and body knock against the staircase as he is led outside. The last thing Bigger hears before losing consciousness is the sound of people on the street yelling at him, calling for his death by lynching, and referring to Bigger as a "black **ape**." The second book ends.

It is difficult to disassociate the stream of water from the use, in the south, of water canons as a means of brutalizing large groups of African Americans, often those who had assembled in protest of segregation and other Jim Crow laws. Bigger, here, is caught because of this canon, and from this point on, the criminal justice system has him in its total control—he is a prisoner now, and can only await his fate.

BOOK 3

Bigger is "dragged" from one police precinct to another, in an effort to get him to talk, to cooperate with authorities. But Bigger has more or less "given up," at least as far as his outward struggle with the police is concerned. He thinks, inwardly, that, despite his best efforts, his attempts to kill in order to change the world around him, he has only ruined his own life, in addition to taking two others. Bigger realizes that some new experience, a "new pride and humility," will have to be born in him, if he is to derive any "message," any meaning from his killings.

From this point forward, Bigger is mostly concerned with how to survive in prison—how to move from day to day, and how to contextualize his actions, in the face of increasingly powerful pressure, often racist, that is placed upon him by authority figures. Only Max and Jan, during this period of imprisonment, are truly able to connect with, and to help, Bigger.

Bigger is led by police to the Cook County Morgue, where he spots Mr. and Mrs. Dalton and Jan, though Bigger cannot speak to them—he is nearly in a daze, and has been eating little food and drinking little water since his capture. Presumably the Daltons and Jan are in the morgue to identify Mary's body; after seeing them, Bigger falls into a swoon, and awakes on a cot in a different part of the Cook County municipal building, where the cops offer him food and water, and where Bigger asks to read a paper.

This is the first of several swoons Bigger undergoes in prison. Bigger's swoon might be compared to Vera's, at the beginning of the novel. Then, Bigger was responsible for it—he teased her with the dead rat. And here, Bigger sees an even more horrific sight of death—the body of Mary, almost completely destroyed, which is now visible in the harsh light of the exam room.

A policeman gives him a copy of the most recent edition, where Bigger reads of his capture. Bigger also reads a physical description of himself, his skin color, and his "animal-like" or "**ape**-like" features, and a description of his family in Mississippi as being "shiftless and immoral." The article reports that some authorities in Chicago are already saying, publically, that death is the only fate possible for Bigger, and a southern white newspaper editor, quoted in the piece, says that, in the South, African Americans are not permitted the kind of liberties they have in the North, which can cause crimes like the ones Bigger has committed.

The racist linkage of Bigger and "ape" imagery has a profound effect on the nature of the trial and on the remainder of the novel. If, as Buckley, the judge, and members of the jury reason, Bigger is truly an "ape," then he does not need to be treated as a man, does not need to be afforded the protections and the rights the court might otherwise afford to a white man in Bigger's position.

Bigger drops the paper and lies back down on his cot. A period of time passes, and then an African American preacher from the Black Belt is let into Bigger's room by the police. There, the preacher begins telling Bigger that the only way to save himself is by saving his soul, by giving himself up to Jesus, by admitting to God's power and God's love. Bigger listens to the preacher impassively, saying nothing, and only when the preacher offers Bigger a wooden cross for his neck does Bigger snap out of the reverie the preacher's words have occasioned. Bigger sees Jan coming into the jail cell, where the preacher remains; a jolt of fear runs through Bigger, and he wonders why Jan has come to see him.

The preacher arrives with a message that seems, almost, to have been inserted into the text forcefully by Wright. To the preacher, as to Bigger's mother, seeking salvation is at this point Bigger's only option—he must ask God for forgiveness, in order to have some chance at an afterlife in paradise. But Bigger does not care about the life after this one; in fact, he cannot be made to care about his own life now. Thus the preacher's message, and his mother's, fall on deaf ears.

Jan begins speaking, though it is difficult for him to get the words out. Jan tells Bigger that, though at first it was hard for him (Jan) to accept that Bigger had lied and tried to blame Jan for Mary's murder, Jan now understands that Bigger was offended by Jan's gestures of kindness when they were out on the town that night. Jan also says that, in jail, he thought about the number of African Americans who had been killed by whites, either authorities or vigilantes, and though Jan still grieves for Mary, and knows that Bigger has done something wrong, Jan still wishes to help Bigger to fight the charges against him in whatever way possible. Bigger listens to Jan politely, and the preacher tells Jan he is a good man for saying these things.

Jan's goodwill in this part of the novel might seem hard to believe, since Jan has just found at the Bigger has murdered his girlfriend, whom Jan loved, and that Bigger then went on to blame Jan for exactly this murder. Jan, however, recognizes, perhaps to a fault, that Bigger has been wronged by society, and that what Bigger needs, now, is an advocate in his corner, someone who is willing to explain to the jury just why Bigger has behaved in this manner. Thus Jan agrees to have Max, his friend, represent Bigger.

Bigger wonders if Jan isn't trying to trick him, but Bigger realizes that Jan wants to help; Jan asks Bigger if he can send Max, the Communist Party lawyer who is also a public defender, to be Bigger's lawyer; although Bigger says he has given up all hope, Jan asks that Bigger trust Max, whom Jan calls into the cell along with the preacher (whose name is revealed to be Hammons). Max tells Bigger that he's here to help Bigger's case, and though Bigger says he has no money, Max says that doesn't matter; the Labor Defenders will take up Bigger's case for free.

Max might be understood as a "preacher" of a different kind. He does not care about salvation in the afterlife, but rather hopes to afford Bigger the most humane treatment possible in this life. Max does not excuse Bigger's actions, but he also believes that Bigger, like anyone else in the United States, deserves a fair trial in a court of law.

At this point, Buckley, the State's Attorney whose picture Bigger saw on a poster in the beginning of the novel, walks into the cell as well. Max tells Buckley immediately that Bigger will be signing no confessions; Buckley, who is contemptuous of Max, Jan, and all Communists, says that his office doesn't need a confession to convict Bigger, since the evidence against him is so strong. Buckley tells Bigger some "advice," that Bigger ought to give himself up completely, that the only thing Bigger can hope for now is, essentially, a swift and painless death.

Buckley, who is technically a public servant, seems willing to serve everyone who is not *a member of Chicago's African American community. Buckley indeed tells Bigger that he must follow the "wishes" of the mobs outside; Buckley implies that he cannot be held responsible if justice is not done in the courtroom and if the mob's clamor for justice on their own. This sentiment is terrifying for Bigger.*

At this, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton enter the cell, too. Buckley goes to them and wishes them his condolences for their daughter's murder. Henry and Mrs. Dalton say that they only wanted to help Bigger and send him to school; Henry says that just today he has given more ping-pong tables to a local community center in the Black Belt. But this causes Max to yell out that African Americans in Chicago need more than ping-pong tables; they need systematic support at all levels, and a new kind of fairness in government and the economy. Buckley shouts out that this is Communism, pure and simple, and implies that Max's ideas are un-American.

It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Mr. and Mrs. Dalton would be allowed into Bigger's cell before his trial had even commenced, but again, as per Wright's statements in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," what is more important to him, in this sequence, is establishing the emotional texture of Bigger's incarceration, rather than the idea that he, Wright, is following strict rules of verisimilitude in laying out his novel.

Bigger's family and the rest of the gang enter the cell, too, which now contains most of the major characters in the novel up till this point. Bigger's ma asks him if he's really committed these crimes, and Bigger, not answering directly, tells his mother that he doesn't need anything at the moment; that there's nothing she can do for him. Ma says that Vera has dropped out of her sewing classes because of the looks the other students give her; Buddy offers to break Bigger out of jail, but Bigger tells Buddy to be quiet and forget such outlandish ideas.

Not only has Bigger greatly disappointed his family—he has nearly destroyed it entirely. Not even Vera, Ma's last beacon of hope, is able to continue in her classes, and therefore the family is more or less destitute. Only Buddy seems not to abandon all hope—he still believes, as a child might, that Bigger can escape and rejoin the family outside the prison walls.

Ma tells Bigger that, in heaven, the family will be reunited, and that Bigger ought to pray for his own salvation while in prison; the preacher seconds this opinion. Jack and Gus tell Bigger that the authorities tried to blame a number of crimes on them, but the boys wouldn't confess and were helped by Jan and Max, who have also volunteered to defend the gang. Ma pulls Vera, Buddy, and Bigger into a circle, and prays loudly for Bigger's soul. On their way out of the cell, Ma asks Mrs. Dalton, who has been standing in the corner with her husband, not to have the authorities kill Bigger. Mrs. Dalton says that it's now out of her hands, and that she tried to help Bigger, but the Daltons to agree to allow the Thomases to stay in their apartment, owned by Mr. Dalton's corporation.

This interaction between the Thomas and Dalton families, the only one in the novel, serves the underscore the relationship between the two—something Mrs. Dalton believes is strictly financial. The Daltons will permit the Thomases to keep their apartment, but that is all the relief they can provide. And perhaps this is sensible; after all, Bigger did murder their only daughter, Mary. But the Daltons have long profited from the Thomas's poverty, and their "kindness" will result in them continuing to profit from it.

The Thomas family leaves the cell, and Buckley tells Bigger that he's caused a great deal of pain for everyone around him, and that the best thing to do is to confess to everything, avoid trial, and receive his punishment. Max and Jan also leave the cell, with the preacher and the members of the gang. Only Buckley and Bigger remain, and Buckley takes Bigger to a window to show him the chanting mob outside his cell, who want to lynch Bigger on the spot. Buckley says he's the only thing standing between Bigger and this lynching.

Buckley once again takes an opportunity to tell Bigger that, essentially, there is "nothing he can do" to keep the mob away from Bigger if the court does not convict him and sentence him to death. Of course, this is not true—Buckley's obligation is to the law, not to the mob outside, but Bigger feels that what Buckley is saying is true, even if it is not morally right. Bigger is guilty, but the law is also not fair, or even trying to be fair.

Buckley asks Bigger where Bessie is, and tells Bigger he knows that Bigger raped and killed Bessie. Buckley tries to pin other rapes and murders on Bigger, naming names Bigger has never heard, but as Bigger denies these other crimes, Buckley becomes only more convinced that Bigger has a long criminal history, and that Bigger has ties to the Communist Party. Bigger continues to deny that Jan had anything to do with Mary's murder, and Bigger also denies that he raped Mary, although he did rape Bessie.

Buckley simply assumes that Bigger must have committed every unsolved crime in the Black Belt region over the past several years—Buckley is not content merely with solving the case at hand; rather, he hopes to pin a length criminal history on Bigger, to make him the scapegoat for an entire community.

Buckley brings in a secretary to take down Bigger's confession; Buckley makes it seem as though, for an instant, he is sympathetic with Bigger's plight, since Bigger has never had a "fair shot" in life. Bigger realizes at this point that all hope is lost, and begins narrating exactly what happened on the night in question, including Mary's murder and then Bessie's the next night. The secretary takes it all down, and Bigger signs it. The secretary and Buckley leave, and as Bigger collapses to the floor, feeling all is now over, Buckley says he is off to "the club," and that Bigger is only a "scared" young man from Mississippi.

Bigger realizes that, at this point, there is no use in disputing the charges; he confesses to his crimes in meticulous detail, perhaps with the hope that, in doing so, he might somehow avoid suspicion for other crimes he truly did not commit—the crimes Buckley wants to pin on him after the fact. Buckley desire to go to the "club" after the confession serves only to underscore the disconnect between his world of luxury and Bigger's.

Bigger lies on the floor, convulsed by sobs, realizing that, now that he has confessed to his crime, he must find a "new strength" on which to stand and with which to face the charges leveled against him. The police come back into the cell and say it is time for the inquest. As Bigger is being led to the inquest room by a guard—where he will be formally read the list charges—a white man escapes from a crowd of people gathered in the building and punches Bigger in the head, before being removed from the hallway by other guards.

This is not the first time, and will not be the last, that Bigger is subjected to violence outside of the court-sanctioned protocols he is to undergo during his trial. Although no one in the Chicago judicial system officially condones these extra-legal practices, it is understood that Bigger will have to withstand a certain amount of racism during his trial—and no one steps in to stop it.

Bigger is led into a courtroom for the inquest—or the hearing in which "facts regarding the case" are established. This will require members of the Dalton family to testify; Bigger looks on as Mrs. Dalton is sworn in and handed a piece of metal by one of the court employees. The deputy coroner presiding asks Mrs. Dalton if she can identify the piece of metal, and she says she can: it is an earring she once owner, and her mother before her; Mrs. Dalton gave that earring to Mary when she turned 18. The deputy coroner goes on to ask what Mrs. Dalton saw the night of the murder. Mrs. Dalton tells how she went into Mary's room and smelled alcohol; the deputy coroner raises the possibility that Mary was already dead when Mrs. Dalton entered the room. The deputy coroner has no further questions, and Mrs. Dalton sits down.

Before the trial, the inquest must be convened to determine the cases "facts" and to decide the crimes with which Bigger is to be tried. Normally, this is more or less a perfunctory affair, but in this instance, the deputy coroner, perhaps wanting to make a name for himself, decides to run through a very long list of evidence, and to bring in witnesses to discuss Bigger's behavior and actions before and after the murder. This is done primarily to inflame the crowds, who already want to see Bigger killed—without, even, the burden of a "trial."

The deputy coroner then asks the (white, male) members of the jury if they have any reasonable objection to serving on the jury for the trial of Bigger Thomas; they say they have no objections. The deputy coroner calls Jan to the stand, ostensibly in order to further clarify the events of the night in question; soon after the deputy coroner begins his interrogation, however, Max objects aloud, saying that Jan is not on trial, and that the fact that Jan and Mary were drinking that night should not be used to implicate Jan in Mary's murder.

Only Max is the voice of reason in this instance, remarking that everyone knows the crimes with which Bigger has been charged, and that the facts of the case are really not in doubt. After all, Bigger has already signed a confession—the deputy coroner seems only to want to make sure that everyone in the crowd, and all the newspaper, are aware of the grisly details of the murders. The law wants *the mob at fever pitch.*

The deputy coroner then launches into a series of leading questions against Jan, asking whether Jan would approve of Mary marrying an African American, whether Jan got Mary and Bigger drunk in order to facilitate a romantic interaction between the two, and whether the Communist Party paid for the rum Jan purchased for the purposes of "welcoming" Bigger into the fold of the Party. Jan strenuously denies all these allegations, saying he only wished to give Bigger literature about the Party in order to help bigger. At the end of the questioning, Jan and Max are both exhausted and horrified by the leading, prejudicial questions being asked; Jan is told to sit down, and the deputy coroner calls Henry Dalton to testify.

The deputy coroner, like Britten, is unwilling to let go of the idea that Jan was in some way connected to the murders. This stems entirely from Jan's association with the Communist Party, since Jan has demonstrated, time and again, that he is a patient, kind individual, one committed to passive resistance and non-violence. But the courts, and the authorities in them, believe that Communism is a threat to the American way of life, and therefore, Jan is a threat to all that they stand for.

The deputy coroner quickly asks Mr. Dalton a few questions about the nature of his charitable work in the African American community in Chicago. Max then rises to cross-examine Dalton; he asks whether it's true that Dalton owns the South Side Real Estate Company; Max also makes it clear that Dalton only rents to African Americans in the Black Belt (that, in other words, he would not rent an apartment outside the Black Belt to an African American family). Max also gets Dalton to admit that he has never hired anyone of African American descent, whom he has helped to "educate" through his charities, to work for him in a professional capacity at one of his companies. Dalton has only hired African Americans to work for him personally, as Bigger did.

An important scene in the novel, if not in the inquest. Dalton finally admits to the "tradition" that keeps him from renting apartments to black families in parts of Chicago other than the segregated Black Belt. Dalton seems to think that there is not anything wrong with this policy; indeed, he believes that African-American families want to live "together," in a segregated community, and that his company is merely helping to facilitate this.

The deputy coroner then states that, owing to the "circumstances" of the trial, he finds it necessary to bring into the courtroom the mutilated body of Bessie, about whom Bigger has thought very little since her murder. Max and Bigger are both shocked that this is possible; many in the room are shocked as well, and Max yells out, objecting, that the presence of Bessie's body can only be used to incite violence against Bigger, to prime the public for vengeance against him. The deputy coroner, however, says that Bessie's body is a necessary part of the inquest, and when it is uncovered, Bigger swoons, hearing only that he is to be charged with two counts of rape and murder, and that he is to be transferred to Cook County Jail, where Max says he will meet with Bigger to formulate their next move.

The unveiling of Bessie's body is an especially gruesome moment in the text. For Mary's body consisted only of shards of bone, barely identifiable; in this case, however, Bessie's body is very much present, and the damage that Bigger has done to it is also on display. The presence of Bessie's body forces Bigger to comprehend what he has done to his girlfriend, a person who loved him, and to whom Bigger felt it necessary to channel all his anger and frustration. Again, in this section, it becomes clear that Bessie is perhaps the most thoroughly victimized character in the novel.

As Bigger is once again led through the hallways of the coroner's office and the municipal building, he hears shouts from white citizens, in the building and outside, leveled against him; someone once again calls him a "**black ape**." Bigger is then taken quickly by the authorities back to the Dalton house, where the police ask him, once he is taken out of the car, to "go through the motions" of how he killed Mary, how he took her down to the furnace room and attempted to burn her body. Bigger is too stunned to cooperate, and wonders why the police are asking him to do this; large crowds are gathered on the streets outside, hoping for a glimpse of Bigger as they scream and curse his name.

This scene, or sequence of scenes, seems not to follow standard legal protocol, as it is unclear why the police take it upon themselves to parade Bigger through the streets of Chicago and force him to re-create the actions that the court does not hold in dispute. Perhaps the only reason for which this is done is a simple one: the police want, further, to inflame public sentiment against Bigger. And they succeed in doing this, for Bigger is once again referred to as an "ape," an "animal."

On his way out of the Dalton house, once again led by police with weapons drawn, Bigger is spat on by a white citizen, and Bigger sees a lone cross, high on a roof in the South Side, on fire—Bigger recognizes that this is a sign of the Ku Klux Klan, and that the white citizens of Chicago will not rest until Bigger is killed. Bigger is shoved back into a police car and driven to Cook County Jail, where he is processed, in a daze, and admitted formally as a prisoner following his cruel "parade" through the community. As this is happening, Bigger rips off his wooden cross, worn around his neck and given to him by the preacher, and hurls it away from himself.

Although relatively little description is afforded this scene, it is one of the starkest in the novel. Bigger himself describes, earlier, that his family came from the South, and yet, in Chicago, a northern city, one sees signs of the Ku Klux Klan, associated with the cruelest, most racist segments of Southern society. Bigger understands, when he sees this cross, that his trial will no longer maintain even a shred of objectivity—he is now, simply, going to be killed.

Bigger realizes that the preacher has been waiting for him at the jail , and though the preacher tells Bigger not to abandon Christ—to keep Him, rather, in his heart—Bigger says he has no soul and wants no hope, now; he rejects a religion whose symbols can be used, as in the flaming cross he has just seen in the South Side, as images of hatred for African Americans. The guards at the prison lead Bigger to his cell, where he collapses, bereft; the guards tells the preacher he ought not to bother Bigger, as his behavior has been especially "wild" since the inquest. The preacher and guards leave Bigger alone in his cell.

It is understandable, then, that Bigger no longer wishes even to associate with the image of the cross—the very same cross that the preacher gave him when he met Bigger earlier in this section of the novel. Although the preacher acknowledges that there is a great deal of hate directed at Bigger, the preacher also believes that Christ is the guardian who will protect Bigger in these circumstances—a conclusion with which Bigger does not agree.

Bigger lies still for a while, then rises and realizes that, even here, in jail, the "cellblocks are segregated"—Bigger cannot escape the racial discrimination he has felt his entire life, even while incarcerated. A guard comes buy and gives Bigger a newspaper (sent by Max) and tells Bigger that Max has also arranged for Bigger to get new clothes while awaiting trial. As Bigger sits in his cell, he watches as white guards bring in a middle-aged African American man, mentally ill, who claims he is a university professor writing a book on African Americans. The mentally unstable man yells at the guards, saying he wants to report the findings of his research to the President of the United States; after screaming in their shared cell for a time, the mentally-ill man is led away by guards in a straitjacket.

A shocking sequence, and an important one. Members of African-American society who resist the prevailing order—the order as orchestrated by white Chicagoans, in which African American speech is considered a threat—are forced into prison, and are treated as mentally unstable. Bigger recognizes that this man has been forced, through a lifetime of discrimination, to question even his most fundamental beliefs, and his own sanity. And Bigger understands, too, that prison is segregated, just as the outside world is—that prison is a mirror of the culture of which it is a small subset.

Bigger is told by a guard that Max is here to see him; Bigger is taken to an interview room where he and Max can talk. Max asks Bigger to begin telling him about his life, and although Bigger tells Max that there's no use in max helping him, now, Max insists that Bigger tell him something about his life experiences, and his reasons for committing his crimes. Max tells Bigger that he knows Bigger hates white people, and that many white people hate Bigger. Max also begins telling Bigger that people like the Daltons also hate trade unions and the efforts of the lower classes to provide for themselves. Max repeats that he is hear to help Bigger, and that he wants to know why Bigger committed his crimes.

Max's interview with Bigger is one of the most important long passages in the novel. Max, like Jan, wants to learn about Bigger as a human being, wants to separate Bigger, the murderer and rapist, from Bigger, the young man who has committed terrible deeds but who is nevertheless a man. At first, Bigger is defensive, wondering if Max has an ulterior motive in wanting to get to know him, but slowly, Bigger begins opening up to Max, telling him about the circumstances of his life.

Max asks if Bigger raped Mary, and Bigger repeats that he did not, although he considered it briefly when he was in the room with her, in part because so many white people assume that black man want to rape white women. Bigger tells Max that, that evening with Jan and Mary, Bigger *hated* them; they made him feel inferior, ashamed of his blackness. Max tells Bigger that Jan and Mary were trying to communicate with Bigger, even though their efforts may have been flawed, and though Bigger understands this intuitively, he has trouble recognizing that Jan and Mary had Bigger's best interests at heart.

Bigger is given a chance, here, to explore the reasons for his shame and hatred. When he was eating with Jan and Mary, he felt that his blackness was pushed to center-stage—that Jan and Mary, though well-intentioned, were still communicating to him because of, and by means of, his blackness. Bigger, for his part, wanted only to communicate with them as a human being.

Max asks Bigger if he went to church, if he believes in God, and Bigger says that he doesn't, really, and that church never helped him to feel loved, or to feel hope about his circumstances—Bigger, in fact, says that church is for "poor people," even though Max tells Bigger that he himself is poor. Bigger also tells Max, after Max asks him, what he wanted to do for a living—be an aviator. Although Bigger notes that it is difficult for an African American man to learn to fly planes in the army, which is segregated, and in which black men are forced, often, to do menial jobs while white men get to fly the planes.

An interesting, small section, in which Bigger attempts to distance himself from "poor" Chicagoans, even though he himself is very poor, as Max points out. Perhaps this is an indication of a psychological truth, that humans tend to believe that they are not the worst off of those around them; that there are others who must have a more difficult plight than they do. Bigger says that religion only belongs to the poorest and the most desperate.

Max goes on to ask Bigger if Bigger has ever voted, or cared about politics in any way; Bigger responds that he was once paid five dollars, as a child, to vote illegally in a local election, but this is all. Max goes on to say that he understands, to an extent, how Bigger feels, and the discrimination Bigger has experienced, as Max, a Jewish-American, has also been discriminated against for his religious belief, particularly by high-powered members of Chicago society.

An indication, briefly, in this scene of the kind of machine politics in Chicago that were common during the 1920s and '30s. Politicians, or member of the "machine," would pay young city residents to vote illegally, in order to "stuff ballot box" and ensure that candidates (usually Democrats, in the cities) would retain their seats.

Max tells Bigger that they will begin by entering a not-guilty plea at Bigger's arraignment, followed by a switch to a guilty plea for the trial; Max will do this to enable himself a platform, in the trial, for arguing the difficult circumstances of Bigger's life, in an attempt to persuade the jury, perhaps, to lessen Bigger's sentence to life imprisonment. Bigger agrees to this and Max leaves the cell, saying he will check in with Bigger soon. Bigger is left to his own thoughts, and though he is "exhausted and feverish," he cannot sleep, because he is filled with "rage" against the powers-that-be in Chicago; he also greatly regrets the decisions he has made leading up to the murders. For the first time since his imprisonment, Bigger realizes that he wants to live, that he wants to avoid death for as long as possible.

Bigger's realization that he wants to live can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, it might be understood as a slow turn toward self-knowledge—the idea that Bigger has come to terms with his crimes, and that he is seeking to repent. There is another, more cynical view, however, which is merely that Bigger wants to remain alive for as long as possible, because all human beings wants to live as long as possible—it is a basic desire of all humankind. It is unclear, here, which if these imperatives motivates Bigger.

Over the next week, before his trial begins, Bigger is again visited by his mother and Vera, who ask if Bigger has been praying for salvation; Bigger lies and says that he has been. Bigger receives another newspaper, sent to him in jail by Max, which shows that the Governor of Illinois has ordered the National Guard to protect the courthouse from riots during Bigger's trial; professors and other "experts" are quoted in various articles in the paper, arguing that Bigger is "more cunning" than might be expected, and that he, like other black men, has a "fascination" with white women.

A long-running racist stereotype—the idea that African-American men simply "cannot stop themselves" from being attracted to, and from sexually assaulting, white women. Bigger, as Bessie predicted, has been caught up in a storm he did not even consider—for as much as white society loathes the idea that Bigger murdered Mary, they are even more upset by the idea that he might have assaulted her beforehand. And, in fact, he considered such an assault and did *stop himself.*

Max arrives on the day of Bigger's trial, tells him to straighten his tie and look presentable for court, and walks with Bigger into the courtroom, where the judge and bailiff declare that the case of the People of the State of Illinois vs. Bigger Thomas is now in session. Bigger spots his family, members in the gang, and a good deal of other Chicago citizens in the audience of the courtroom, and wonders if he will be able to make it through the trial without swooning again, as at the inquest.

The trial, as in many novels of "crime" and "punishment," forms the climax of the action, although the outcome in this novel is more or less clear from the beginning—that Bigger is guilty, and that he will be convicted of his crime and sentenced to death. The suspense, here, arrives in the form of the arguments used for and against Bigger, by Max and Buckley.

Buckley, as State's Attorney, is representing the prosecution, and Max, as Bigger's attorney, enters officially a plea of guilty, which is a change from the plea of not guilty as entered at the inquest; this change has been done according to the plan Max set out to Bigger at their previous meeting. The courtroom gasps as Max says he intends to argue not that Bigger was insane when committing the crimes, but rather that the circumstances of his entire life should be considered during the sentencing period of the trial. Buckley objects to the judge, arguing that Max must argue either for insanity or not, that there is no middle ground, but Max contends that he has a right, during sentencing, to offer mitigating circumstances on his client's behalf, and the judge agrees with Max.

Max's argument seems here to be quite sensible, and from a legal standpoint, they are not without precedent, as it is common for defendants to argue that there are other circumstances impacting their decision to commit a crime, and that these circumstances should excuse them from the death penalty. But Buckley argues that any such arguments are attempts to "wash away" the crime that Bigger has committed—Buckley argues, instead, that Bigger must pay the "ultimate price" for these two murders. There is a suggestion here that Buckley might have been willing to entertain such circumstantial evidence for a white person, but certainly not for a black one.

The judge asks Bigger to rise and to acknowledge (after stating that he has only received an eighth-grade education) that he, Bigger, is entering a guilty plea. Bigger says he knows what he is doing, and agrees to the please. The judge asks Buckley to begin his case with an opening statement, and Buckley rises, arguing that a mob is "breathing down his neck," and "standing at his back," hoping that "justice is served" in Bigger's case. Buckley makes it seem that Max is putting forward an insanity defense on Bigger's behalf (to which Max vociferously objects), and Buckley closes his opening statement by going over in detail, the gruesome nature of Bigger's crimes.

Buckley once again makes the case that the citizens of Chicago will not rest unless Buckley has Bigger sentenced to death. Of course, one might argue that Buckley is just doing his job: following the will of the people who elected him. But it is truly Buckley's job the make sure that the state prosecutes defendants in a just manner, and if Buckley is arguing that the mob wants its own brand of justice, then he is necessarily infringing on Bigger's own right to a fair trial.

Buckley asks the judge, before Max begins his statement, that Buckley be allowed to call sixty witnesses for the prosecution against Bigger; Max argues that this number is an exorbitant one, designed only to inflame the anger of the people in the courtroom and all over Chicago, but the judge says that sixty witnesses will be heard. Max then gives his brief opening remarks, saying that, though a guilty (and not an insanity) please has been entered, Max has a right and a duty to argue that Bigger's circumstances, the difficulties he has faced in his young life, ought to be weighed against the severity of his crimes when the sentence against Bigger is determined. Max sits as the courtroom murmurs at Max's impassioned defense of Bigger, and the judge adjourns the courtroom until after lunch.

What is interesting, here, is Bigger's and Max's reluctance to argue that Bigger was operating under the fog of "insanity" when he committed his crimes. Presumably this defense would be possible, but Bigger and Max consider it a lie, since Bigger has never once said that he felt insane when he was killing; only that he was afraid, and that he killed because he did not know what else to do. In a strange way, Max seems to respect Bigger for, at the very least, taking full responsibility for his actions, even if those actions are horrific ones.

Buckley then, after lunch, calls a long parade of witnesses, each of whom can attest only to a small set of details regarding Bigger's character and appearance, and each of whom argues that Bigger seemed "sane" when they met him. This list includes Britten, fourteen newspaper reporters who were crowded in some way in the furnace room, and who had some view of the bones that fell from the furnace; two of Bigger's teacher (who called him a poor student, but "sane"); and members of Bigger's gang. A small girl even climbs inside a mock-up of the furnace in the Dalton home, to show to the jury that Bigger could indeed have fit and burned Mary's body in that device.

The parade of people Buckley calls to the stand include most of the characters from the novel, and some who have not been mentioned at all, like Bigger's teachers from elementary school. As at the inquest, it appears, here, that Buckley has done this only to make sure that everyone in the courtroom—the jury, the judge, and the crowd itself—recognizes the extent to which Bigger's crimes has rocked the city of Chicago. Max, for his part, argues that these witnesses are not necessary, since no one on the defense disputes the facts of the case.

Buckley, finally satisfied after several days of witnesses, that the facts of the case have been established, rests his case, and Max agrees, as the defense, that the facts Buckley has presented are true (if overwhelming in their repetitiveness). Max says that, as in his opening statement, he will be calling no witnesses, but will instead make a plea, at the appropriate time, that Bigger be sentenced to life in prison rather than to execution. The judge asks Max to make his plea the next day, and adjourns for the evening.

Max, on the other hand, calls no witnesses, since there are, really, no witnesses he could call to support his argument. Instead, Max makes a nuanced, impassioned case for the difficulty of Bigger's circumstances—not to excuse Bigger's deed, but to contextualize and perhaps explain his actions, as the outcomes of a young man whose life has been governed largely by fear.

The case recommences the next day. Max begins a long, impassioned speech on Bigger's behalf, arguing not that Bigger deserves total clemency, but rather that Bigger's life circumstances ought to be viewed before the court tries to condemn him to death. Max argues that, although Bigger's crimes are horrific, they must be judged in the violent and impoverished context in which he was raised; Max also reveals that he, a Jewish man representing Bigger, has received death threats for his participation in Bigger's trial. Max argues that Bigger is being tried "as a symbol" of blackness and violence in the city, and that it would be unwise and unfair to give him death simply because that is what the mob, dominated by the voices of white citizens, demands.

One interesting parallel in the novel is the manner in which Max's life has been impacted by racism, as has, of course, Bigger's. Although in Max's case this racism is not nearly so severe, anti-Semitic sentiment in Chicago nevertheless causes him, constantly, to have to justify his motivations, and to argue for his total "American-ness," as though, being Jewish-American, he might have allegiances not entirely in line with those of other citizens. It is Max's experience of racism that, perhaps, gives him a window on Bigger's situation.

Max then begins a long, lyric disquisition on the nature of injustice in the United States. Max makes clear that Bigger's crimes are crimes, and that society is not responsible for the crimes as such. But Bigger has also grown up in a deeply unequal society, one in which opportunity is systematically denied to African Americans. Max states that this society also denies opportunity to another entire class of people, one not determined by race—namely, labor (vs. owners of capital)—and it is these distinctions, black and white, labor and owner, that create a United States that is divided, and in which violence between groups is made possible.

Max, too, considers that there are enormous class distinctions in America, in addition to racial ones, and that Bigger has had terrible experiences not just because of the color of his skin but because of the lack of economic opportunity provided to people of his impoverished circumstances. Bigger's lack of education, and his lack of a political consciousness, seem to derive from his inability to continue in school, because of the family's financial pressures.

Max states that killing Bigger will not solve the larger problems that face Chicago and the rest of the country. It will not produce a more equitable distribution of wealth; it will not integrate the neighborhoods; it will not ensure that African Americans have equal access to fulfilling employment. Max goes on to say that Mary wanted to help Bigger, and for that she was killed—this is Bigger's fault, but killing Bigger will not bring Mary back; it will not undo Bigger's wrong. The only way to make good out of Bigger's crime is to spare his life, to stop the cycle of murder and recrimination that forces the African American population in the United States to remain subjugated to the power of the white majority.

Max admits that Mary and Jan had Bigger's best interests at heart, at least as far as they could. Mary and Jan were also blinded by their own privilege—they did not necessarily know how to interact with someone in Bigger's position, but they wanted to help, they wanted to get to know Bigger, even if Bigger was afraid of them. This is one of the great ironies, and tragedies, of Bigger's case—that Mary and Jan did not want to be his enemy, but rather, hoped they could possibly be his friend.

Max says that Bigger did not state, in his deposition at the inquest, or in his confession, that "all went blank to him." Instead, he takes responsibility for his crime, even if he is not entirely sure why he killed. Max states that Bigger's undifferentiated hate—expressed toward blacks and white alike—is a result of the societal pressures and unfairnesses placed on African Americans; Max also emphasizes that Bigger's "very existence is a crime against the state," in the state's eyes—meaning that the United States does everything it can to blame African Americans for societal wrongs before African Americans have committed a single crime.

Max's argument, here, takes a turn into the "public sphere," as he claims that Bigger has, for his entire life, been "criminalized," or viewed with a kind of suspicion by those white citizens of Chicago who expect young African-American men to commit crimes. Bigger admitted to Max, previously, that he probably at least considered raping Mary, and actually raped Bessie, because he had been told his entire life that rape was something to which African-American men were predisposed—that Bigger had in some way "internalized" this racist ideology.

Max closes his argument by stating that sending Bigger to prison would be an act of mercy and an act of courage—it would mean that the court avoided mere vengeance and still delivered justice to Mary's and Bessie's families and to the city of Chicago. But sending Bigger to prison would also indicate that the state wishes for Bigger to be rehabilitated—to learn the meaning of a virtuous, a good life—without merely forcing Bigger to die as repayment for his wrongs. Max closes by saying that, to keep Bigger alive is to keep the spirit of the society in which he lives alive.

Perhaps Max's most powerful point. Killing Bigger accomplishes nothing other than vengeance—to kill him is to say that killing can, in some way, answer the senseless killing for which Bigger is in jail in the first place. But Max says that, for the state to keep Bigger alive is the more powerful gesture—it is the kind of thing that an enlightened democracy ought to do. The question is, whether this justification is sufficient for the jury to sentence Bigger to life in prison.

The court takes a brief recess. Buckley then rises and delivers his closing argument, in which he once again rehearses the details of Bigger's crimes (while saying that he will not rehearse these details); Buckley also attributes Max's motive, in his plea for Bigger's life, not to a general humanistic spirit but to "typical Communist cunning." Buckley refers to Bigger as a "savage" and a "demented" person, and does all he can to stir up, once more, the court's resentment against Bigger. The judge, after Buckley's statement is heard, says the court will adjourn for one hour to determine the facts and give its ruling. Max pleas for more time in order for the court to go over the case, but the judge says that one hour is sufficient. Both Bigger and Max believe that all is lost, and that Bigger will be sentenced to death.

Max and Bigger both recognize, at this point, that the trial is more or less over, that if the judge is only giving the jury an hour to think over its ruling, then that jury has probably already come to a decision, one that cannot be changed. Buckley, for his part, does everything he can, before the end of arguments, to make it seem not only that Bigger is a criminal, but that Max himself is a person committed to defending and indeed supporting criminals, and that Max is somehow blaming Bigger's actions on the Chicago community at large.

Bigger and Max are called back into court after recess, and the verdict is delivered swiftly and as imagined: Bigger is sentenced to die on Friday, March 2. Max vows to Bigger, as Bigger is being led away, that Max will speak to the Governor and ask for a stay of execution, but Bigger senses that this is the end, and he begins to resign himself to his own execution. Several days pass, and Max sends along a telegram saying that his appeal to the governor failed, and that the execution will be carried out. Bigger seems resigned to his fate, and to have expected that clemency would not pan out.

At this juncture, Bigger understands that nothing stands between him and death—only time. Soon he will be killed, and it is not quite accurate to say that he has accepted his fate, but he also understands that, even if he does not *accept it, there is nothing he can do to change it. Max seems genuinely upset that there is nothing more he can do for his client. He truly cares about Bigger as a human being.*

Max visits Bigger in his jail cell in the days before his execution. Max apologizes to Bigger, saying that he tried everything he could, and Bigger seems choked with emotion in the presence of Max. Finally, Bigger thanks Max for all he's done for him, and in particular, for listening to Bigger, for asking questions about Bigger's life before the trial started. This was the first time Bigger was ever really asked anything by an outsider—by someone who wished to learn more about Bigger's humanity.

An important point in the novel. Bigger was greatly moved by Max's help, but mostly by the fact that Max cared enough about him to ask him about his life, about the nature of his struggles as a young man. Bigger will always remember Max's help, and in a sense, Bigger also regrets that he was not able to see that Jan, too, wanted to help him, as did Mary.

Max is greatly moved by Bigger's sentiments, and he takes Bigger to a window in his cell, showing him the buildings of the Chicago skyline. Max tells Bigger that these buildings are not "held together just by stone and steel," but by the "belief of men." Max tells Bigger never to lose sight in this belief—in the power of humankind—and Max also says that the white majority in Chicago, like those who control the means of production, are afraid of the beliefs of men like Bigger (and, implicitly, like Max).

Another important moment. Max's beliefs are not religious sentiments—he does not believe that Bigger will be saved in the afterlife—but Max also knows that Chicago itself, that the United States on the whole, is held together by the idea of free men, from all backgrounds, making decisions together. Max wants Bigger to know that such a world does and can exist outside the prison walls.

As Max is getting ready to leave, Bigger says that he's not sure why he killed, but that after he did, he began to feel more powerful, more free; Max appears "terrified" by this sentiment, and Bigger agrees that it is, to some extent, a terrifying one. Max appears to have no more to say to Bigger, and wishes him goodbye. Bigger also says goodbye, and as Max gets his hat and leaves the cell, Bigger tells Max to say goodbye also to Jan. The cell door closes, and Bigger is left alone, awaiting his execution. The novel ends.

Yet the novel ends on a truly ambiguous note. Although Max does his best to argue for the inherent goodness of man, Bigger, even as Max is leaving, wonders whether killing in his case wasn't justified—this causes genuine terror for Max, who perhaps believed, up till now, that Bigger would repent totally for his crimes. Max now sees that, although Bigger's death by execution is in no way justifiable, it is also possible that Bigger might never admit to the full immorality of the crimes he committed—no matter how long he is given, in prison, to mull over his deeds.

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