10 CRITICS DISCUSS

Native Son (1940)

Richard Wright

(1908-1960)

"Its swift rise to murder, its ruthless staging of a scene where race prejudice and palpable injustice capture the reader's sympathy, and the refusal of its author to make his chief character anything but a criminal, dangerous to society, all reveal a creative mind of unusual power, discipline, and grasp of large ideas. The question, which first concerns vice and viciousness and crime, slowly becomes ethical, political, and psychological without once separating itself from an intensely human content."

Henry Seidel Canby
Saturday Review
(23 March 1940) 8

"*Native Son* is the most impressive American novel I have read since *The Grapes of Wrath*. In some ways the two books resemble each other: both deal with the dispossessed and both grew out of the radical movement of the 1930s. There is, however, a distinction to be drawn between the motives of the two authors. Steinbeck, more privileged than the characters in his novel, wrote out of deep pity for them, and the fault he had to avoid was sentimentality. Richard Wright, a Negro, was moved by wrongs he had suffered in his own person, and what he had to fear was a blind anger that might destroy the pity in him, making him hate any character whose skin was whiter than his own.

His first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, had not completely avoided that fault. It was a collection of stories all but one of which had the same pattern: a Negro was goaded into killing one or more white men and was killed in turn, without feeling regret for himself or his victims. Some of the stories I found physically painful to read, even though I admired them. So deep was the author's sense of the indignities heaped on his race that one felt he was avenging himself by a whole series of symbolic murders. In *Native Son* the pattern is the same, but the author's sympathies have broadened and his resentment, though just as deep, is less painful and personal.

The hero, Bigger Thomas, is a Negro boy of twenty, a poolroom loafer, a bully, a liar and a petty thief. 'Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you,' his pious mother tells him. 'Honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life.' A Chicago philanthropist tries to help the family by hiring him as a

chauffeur. That same night Bigger kills the philanthropist's daughter—out of fear of being discovered in her room—and stuffs her body into the furnace. This half-accidental crime leads to others. Bigger tries to cast the blame for the girl's disappearance on her lover, a Communist; he tries to collect a ransom from her parents; after the body is found he murders his Negro mistress to keep her from betraying him to the police. The next day he is captured on the snow-covered roof of a South Side tenement, while a mob howls in the street below.

In the last part of the book, which is also the best, we learn that the case of Bigger Thomas is not the author's deepest concern. Behind it is another, more complicated story he is trying hard to explain, though the words come painfully at first, and later come in a flood that almost sweeps him away. 'Listen, you white folks,' he seems to be saying over and over. 'I want to tell you about all the Negroes in America. I want to tell you how they live and how they feel. I want you to change your minds about them before it is too late to prevent a worse disaster than any we have known. I speak for my own people, but I speak for America too.' And because he does speak for and to the nation, without ceasing to be a Negro, his book has more force than any other American novel by a member of his race.

Bigger, he explains, had been trained from the beginning to be a bad citizen. He had been taught American ideals of life, in the schools, in the magazines, in the cheap movie houses, but had been denied any means of achieving them. Everything he wanted to have or do was reserved for the whites. 'I just can't get used to it,' he tells one of his poolroom buddies. 'I swear to God I can't…. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat.' At the trial, his white-haired Jewish lawyer makes a final plea to the judge for mercy. 'What Bigger Thomas did early that Sunday morning in the Dalton home and what he did that Sunday night in the empty building was but a tiny aspect of what he had been doing all his life long. He was *living*, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live…. The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence…. Every thought he thinks is potential murder.'

This long courtroom speech, which sums up the argument of the novel, is at once its strongest and its weakest point. It is strongest when Mr. Max is making a plea for the American Negroes in general. 'They are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation.' Many of them—and many white people too—are full of 'balked longing for some kind of fulfillment and exultation'; and their existence is 'what makes our future seem a looming image of violence.' In this context, Mr. Max's talk of another civil war seems not so much a threat as an agonized warning. But his speech is weakest as a plea for the individual life of Bigger Thomas. It did not convince the judge, and I doubt that it will convince many readers.

It is not that I think Bigger 'deserved' the death sentence for his two murders. Most certainly his guilt was shared by the society that condemned him. But when he killed Mary Dalton he was performing the first free action in his whole fear-tortured life: he was accepting his first moral responsibility. That is what he tried so hard to explain to his lawyer. 'I ain't worried none about them women I killed…. I killed 'em 'cause I was scared and mad. But I been scared and mad all my life and after I killed that first woman, I wasn't scared no more for a little while.' And when his lawyer asks him if he ever thought he would face the electric chair, 'Now I come to think of it,' he answers, 'it seems like something like this just had to be.'

If Mr. Max had managed to win a life sentence for Bigger Thomas, he would have robbed him of his only claim to human courage and dignity. But that Richard Wright makes us feel this, while setting out to prove something else—that he makes Bigger Thomas a human rather than a racial symbol—shows that he wrote an even better novel than he had planned."

Malcolm Cowley
"*Native Son*"
The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920/1970
ed. Gilbert A. Harrison
(1940; Liveright 1972) 96-99

"With Paul Green he dramatized it (1942), and also produced and acted in a film version (1951). Bigger Thomas, a black boy, reared in the slum world of Chicago, is led by his environment into a life of crime. His patronizing reception by Communist associates of his employer's daughter, combined with other circumstances, throw him into a confused mental state in which he accidentally murders the girl. In the ensuing flight, pursued by a mob, he kills his own sweetheart before he is captured and condemned to death."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"*Native Son*, the most perdurable and influential novel yet written by an American Negro, is at the same time one of the masterpieces of modern proletarian fiction. Taking as its leading character a traditional 'bad-nigger' stereotype usually accepted as a representative Negro by misinformed whites and frequently viewed with nausea by supercilious blacks, the book seeks to show that the individual's delinquency is produced by a distorting environment rather than by innate criminality. Having this purpose, *Native Son* may rightly be regarded as the most significant probing of the plight of the lower-class Northern urban Negro in contemporary American literature."

Hugh M. Gloster
Negro Voices in American Fiction
(North Carolina 1948) 233

"Elements of heredity, of social environment both black and white, of blind chance and misdirected attempts on the part of the whites to break down the colour bar, are brought together to drive the coloured hero of *Native Son* to the murder of a white girl and of his own sweetheart until he is caught, brought to trial, and sentenced to death. The dramatic development and straightforward characterization, as well as the absence of any false sentiment or propagandistic tone, make the novel more effective than most writing in this field. The book gives one of the rare examples of what can be achieved by the technique of pure reporting applied with a consistent attitude and an adequate subject matter."

Heinrich Straumann
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Hutchinson 1951) 50

"Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was a culmination of the Negro protest novel, and its best example. But, as [James] Baldwin has pointed out, Bigger Thomas and Uncle Tom are two extremes of Negro emotionality concerning the race issue. Both of them, the one from anger and the other from sentimentality, turn the reader's attention from the main issues. These issues are genuine and real, and the temptation to turn on the hatred full force is easy to understand. One's being born a Negro immediately puts him into a 'trap,' dooms him to life in a 'ghetto,' makes even ordinary needs all but intolerably difficult to satisfy. The situation exists with equal intensity in North and South... The worst task, of course, is to break through the web of circumstantial difficulties and agonies to a point where self-discovery may properly begin. This is what distinguishes Baldwin from Wright; the latter scarcely ever broke from the hatred engendered by the fate of his birth. When Wright went to Paris, it was to try to find (through Sartre and others) a philosophical explanation of his condition as an 'outsider.' The result was one of the worst novels published in the postwar years (*The Outsider*, 1953)."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regenery/Gateway 1951, 1963) 246-49

"Describes vividly and bitterly, the life of a Negro boy, Bigger Thomas, against whom society conspires at every moment, largely on account of his race. He grows up in a Chicago slum, commits two murders, is captured by the police after a flight over the roof-tops, defended in court by a Communist lawyer, and condemned to death. The book is sensational, but skillfully and sensitively written; it established Wright as a leading Negro author."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) represents a watershed in Negro letters. It seized the imagination of readers and catapulted its author into fame, making him a source of controversy for years to come—a controversy that has not yet subsided. The initial reaction was shock. Wright's account of a shiftless, seemingly apathetic slum boy who harbored an obsessive hatred of whites came as a startling revelation even to the most liberal of white readers—who, when they thought of Negroes at all, tended to regard them benignly as persons just like themselves in black skins.

Perhaps even more shocking was Wright's apparent view that the brutal murders Bigger commits in celebration of his hatred are, after all, the logical outcome of his absurd position in American life. Wright was not, of course, condoning violence, but he *was* saying that the alternative behavior, for the majority of slum Negroes, was dumb submission to a dehumanizing lot. Moreover, Wright further startled white (and Negro) readers by taking as his central figure the stereotypical 'nigger' (the name Bigger is suggestive), whose crimes against a white girl were vaguely sexual in origin. That any Negro author should want to aggravate the paranoid fantasies of racist extremists seemed to some readers almost beyond belief.

Needless to say, white and Negro critics rushed to print, praising or condemning the novel, and still do. And it is not surprising that some of Wright's harshest critics were Negroes. He did not give a true picture of the Negro, they said, but rather a monstrous version of the stereotype that has condemned the vast majority of law-abiding members of their race to live in subhuman conditions (this is precisely Wright's point—that subhuman conditions produce subhuman persons). They protested additionally that Wright's determinism or communism (he was a Party member at the time) distorted reality, since whites and Negroes have often in history transcended their debased environments. Was not Wright himself born into grinding poverty? Here the critics may have had a point, but Wright was writing not about those 'transcended' Negroes, but rather about the many more who had remained mired in the despair and hopelessness of the ghettos.

Whatever the case, on rereading the novel some twenty-five years later, one finds that much of the criticism seems clearly beside the point. What Wright was describing, although he may not have known it at the time, was his vision of modern man. In his entire writing career, Wright produced twelve books (two were published posthumously), and it is astonishing how each, despite Wright's shifting political and philosophical positions, picks up on one or another of the main strands of *Native Son*.... Wright's history echoes the Negro's history in microcosm, in that it spans the years of Southern feudalism, the Northern urban migration, and the international arena of black African politics.... He was born the son of a tenant farmer outside Natchez in September, 1908. When he was six, his father abandoned his family and his mother was left in sole charge of Richard and his younger brother.... For a brief period Richard was placed in an orphanage.... His entire formal education consisted by nine years of public schooling, and up until the age of twelve he had not spent one year in the same school....

He joined the Communist Party in late 1933 and…in the summer of 1937 he moved to New York, and joined the staff of the *Daily Worker* as Harlem Editor.... In early 1940 his history-making *Native Son* was announced as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection…After the Nazi invasion of Russia, the Party seemingly abandoned the Negro cause…the final straw appears to have come when some of the Party leaders privately criticized *Native Son* as being ideologically incorrect.... French existentialists after World War II seized upon Wright's works to support their own philosophy—but his views were formed long before he knew the meaning of the term.... Subsequent to the publication of *Native Son*, Wright was constantly asked by admirers and detractors alike how it was that he himself had not succumbed to then numbing docility of Southern Negroes. Wright was never quite able to answer satisfactorily, but there exist some clues in his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945).... In 1946, a staunch admirer, Gertrude Stein, invited him to Paris, where French intellectuals met him with a hero's welcome and he was made an honorary citizen of France....

Nearly all the weaknesses and embarrassments we have come to recognize in proletarian fiction are present in *Native Son*, yet somehow the reader is not so conscious of them. One reason, of course, is that Bigger Thomas, unlike the usual array of proletarian victims, is thoroughly the antihero. He is not simply weak, he is an outright coward. He is incapable of warmth, love, or loyalty, he is a sullen bully, and he enjoys his first sense of humanity and freedom only after he commits two brutal murders. Still, *Native Son* possesses many of the characteristic failings of proletarian literature. It is transparently propagandistic,

arguing for a humane, socialist society where such crimes as Bigger committed could not conceivably take place. Wright builds up rather extensive documentation to prove that Bigger's actions, behavior, values, attitudes, and fate are determined by his status and place in American life. Bigger's immediate Negro environment is depicted as being unrelentingly bleak and empty, while the white world that stands just beyond his reach remains cruelly indifferent or hostile to his needs.

With the exception of Bigger, none of the characters is portrayed in any depth, and most are depicted as representative 'types' of the social class to which they belong. Despite his brutally conditioned psychology, there are moments in the novel when Bigger, like the heroes of other proletarian fiction, appears to be on the verge of responding to the stereotyped Communist vision of black and white workers marching together in the sunlight of fraternal friendship. Finally, Wright succumbs too often to the occupational disease of proletarian authors by hammering home sociological points in didactic expository prose when they could be understood just as clearly in terms of the organic development of the novel….

Although *Native Son* makes its obvious sociological points, for well over two thirds of the novel Wright dwells on the peculiar states of mind of his protagonist, Bigger, which exist somehow outside the realm of social classes or racial issues. Indeed, Wright himself frequently makes the point that Bigger hangs psychologically suspended somewhere between the white world and the black…with Wright dwelling on various intensities of shame, fear and hate…. To make his readers identify with the violent emotions and behavior of an illiterate Negro boy is no mean feat—but Wright goes beyond the mere shock of reader recognition, and the subsequent implications of shared guilt and social responsibility, and raises questions regarding the ultimate nature of man…. Can Wright's deterministic Marxism be reconciled with the freedom of action that choice implies? The contradiction is never resolved, and it is precisely for this reason that the novel fails to fulfill itself, for the plot, the structure, even the portrayal of Bigger himself, are often at odds with Wright's official determinism. But when on occasion the novel transcends its Marxist and proletarian limitations the reading becomes magnificent.

The structure of *Native Son* is classically simple. The book divides into three parts, the first two covering a little less than seventy-two hours, the third perhaps a little more than a month. Book I, 'Fear,' traces a day in the life of twenty-year-old Bigger Thomas, from the time he wakes up in the morning and kills a rat in the squalid one room tenement he shares with his mother, sister, and brother, to the time he creeps back into bed twenty-one hours later, having just murdered a white girl. Bigger's day thus symbolically begins and ends with death.

But Wright shows that all of Bigger's waking existence is a kind of meaninglessness—a kind of death. In the morning Bigger loiters on the street with members of his gang and plots (fearfully) to rob a white man' store. Later he goes to a movie and sits through a banal Hollywood double bill. Wright here shows how the glitter of the great white world beyond titillates Bigger and, at the same time, frustrates him all the more…. From the very start…Bigger knows deep in his heart that he is destined to bear endless days of dreary poverty, abject humiliation, and tormenting frustration, for this is what being a Negro meant…. 'He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else'….

Bigger is hired as a chauffeur, and his first assignment is to drive Dalton's daughter, Mary, to the University. Once in the car, however, Mary redirects Bigger to another address where she is joined by her lover, Jan. Mary and Jan are Communists and want to befriend Bigger; they sit up front with him in the car and ask all sorts of intimate questions to which Bigger reacts with suspicion and fear. It is women like Mary, he reasons, who have made things hard for Negroes. They make Bigger take them to a Negro restaurant where they embarrass him by forcing him to join them at a table. Later Bigger drives them around the park while Mary and Jan drink from a bottle and make love in the back seat.

After Jan leaves, Bigger discovers Mary is much too drunk to walk to the house by herself, so he carried her to her bedroom and places her on the bed. He finds himself somewhat sexually stimulated, but just at that moment Mary's blind mother enters the room and calls to her daughter. Bigger, fearing what Mrs. Dalton will think, places a pillow over Mary's head so that she cannot respond. After Mrs. Dalton leaves, Bigger discovers he has *accidentally* [emphasis added] smothered Mary to death. He throws the corpse into

a trunk and takes the trunk downstairs to the cellar where he thrusts Mary's body into the furnace. Then he carried the trunk out to the car, since Mary had said she wanted him to take it to the railroad station the following morning….

Bigger's principal fear is self-knowledge—and this, of course, is the main theme and title of Book I. The other fears that make up Bigger's life are by-products of this basic terror. All Bigger's actions stem from his fear. He hates whites because he fears them. He knows they are responsible for his immobility, his frustration, yet to admit even this would be admitting simultaneously a profound self-hatred. So he channels his hatred and aggression toward other Negroes…. He hates Mary Dalton because he fears she will jeopardize his job, and he regards all her overtures as efforts to humiliate him. He kills her *because he fears the help he has given her will be misunderstood*…. [This contradicts statement above that he kills her by accident; italics added.]

The second book, 'Flight,' describes Bigger's awakening sense of life at a time, paradoxically, when his life is most in danger. Although his killing of Mary was an *accident* [emphasis added], Bigger decides that he must assume full responsibility for her death…. In killing Mary, he feels, he has destroyed symbolically all the oppressive forces that have made his life a misery. *Thus perhaps her death was not so accidental as it seemed at the time.* [italics added] He enjoys a sense of potency and freedom that he has never before experienced…and proceeds to act with new-found dignity. Ironically, the dignity takes the form of acts compounding his crime. He plans to lay blame for Mary's disappearance on Jan. Jan was, after all, the last white person to see Mary alone; he is also a Communist, and Bigger knows most Communists are hated. He succeeds in implying Jan's guilt and Jan is arrested and held for questioning. Meanwhile Bigger has revealed to his girl, Bessie, that he is involved in Mary's disappearance—which is now front page news—and Bessie reluctantly agrees to help him extort ransom from the Daltons under the pretense that their daughter has been kidnapped. This plan falls through when reporters discover Mary's charred bones in the furnace, and Bigger is forced to flee.

He and Bessie conceal themselves in a vacated tenement, but Bigger realizes Bessie is at best an unenthusiastic co-conspirator, and decides he must kill her or she will some day reveal his whereabouts to the police. He makes love to her and after she has gone to sleep he smashes her head in with a brick. The monstrousness of the second murder exhilarates Bigger all the more…. Hence Bigger has *opted* to become a murderer, and freely chosen this identity. In an absurd, hostile world that denies his humanity and dichotomizes his personality, he has made a choice that somehow integrates his being…. Ironically, Bigger has assumed exactly the role the white world thrusts upon the Negro in order to justify his oppression… He has the choice…between force and submission…and by rebelling against established authority…he acquires a measure of freedom…. Bigger's original alienation from the Negro community was made of his own free choice. His mother, his sister, his girl—each has made an individual adjustment of some sort to the conditions of Negro life. But Bigger cannot accept his mother's religiosity, his sister's YWCA virtue, or Bessie's whiskey. All seem to him evasions of reality….

The remainder of Book II has a taut, tense rhythm corresponding to the quickening pace of flight and pursuit. As the police inexorably close in, Bigger flies from one street to the next, one tenement to the next; he is chased across roofs—until finally he is flung down from the chimney to which he has been clinging by the pressure of the water directed at him from the hoses of firemen. Book III, 'Fate,' draws together all the significant strands of Bigger's life, and shows how all society, white and black, has a stake in his crimes…. The Communists defend him… Futile attempts are made to convert him to Christianity…. Racists burn crosses in various parts of the city; outside the courtroom in which Bigger is tried, a howling white mob cries for his blood. Bigger's attorney, Max, in a useless but eloquent address to the jury, tries to explain Bigger's crimes in terms of the devastating psychological blows of slavery and racial exploitation….

The chief philosophical weakness of *Native Son* is not that Bigger does not surrender his freedom to Max's determinism, or that Bigger's…do not jibe with Max's socialist visions; it is that Wright himself does not seem to be able to make up his mind. The reader feels that Wright, although intellectually committed to Max's views, is more emotionally akin to Bigger's. And somehow Bigger's impassioned hatred comes across more vividly than Max's eloquent reasoning. Indeed, the very length of Max's plea to

the jury (sixteen pages in the Harper edition) suggests that Wright, through Max, is endeavoring to convince himself. The whole of Book III seems out of key with the first two-thirds of the novel. Where Books I and II confine themselves to a realistic account of Bigger's thoughts and actions, Book III tries to interpret these in a number of rather dubious symbolic sequences…. Everything is highly contrived—as if Wright is placing before Bigger's eyes all the major influences that have made up his life. In another scene of transparently 'symbolic' significance, Bigger, after a trying day in court, flings a wooden crucifix out of the cell door, thereby suggesting his rejection of Christianity.

Perhaps the most flagrant violation of verisimilitude [realism] is Max's plea to the jury. Although it undoubtedly makes good sociological sense and is possibly even a sound assessment of Bigger's character, it is not the sort of thing that would ordinarily persuade a jury. A more realistic approach to the intensely hysterical courtroom atmosphere would have been for Max to plead some sort of insanity—rather than to depict Bigger as a helpless victim of American civilization. Finally, Book III contains a number of improbably colloquies between Bigger and Max. Here Bigger is almost unbelievable. After twenty years of conditioning to mistrust every human being, especially whites, he suddenly opens up and bares his soul to Max…. To suggest that Bigger would respond so quickly to Max, under such circumstances, is to make excessive demands on the credulity of the reader. The inconsistency of Wright's ideologies and philosophical attitudes prevents Bigger and the other characters from developing properly, adulterates the structure of the novel, and occasionally clouds an otherwise lucid prose style.

There are three kinds of revolutionism in *Native Son*—and none of them altogether engages the reader as representing Wright's point of view. Max's communism is of course what Wright presumes his novel is expressing—yet this kind of revolutionism is…imposed from without and not an integral element of Bigger's being. Revolutionism of a Negro nationalist variety is far more in keeping with Bigger's character. Bigger hates all whites with such an intensity that it gives him extreme pleasure to think he killed Mary deliberately. His is a reverse racism…. The metaphysical revolutionary challenges the very conditions of being—the needless suffering, the absurd contrast between his inborn sense of justice and the amorality and injustice of the external world…. He will attempt to march in himself its injustice and chaos…. Perhaps it is Bigger's Satanic election of violence rather than his continued underlying hatred of whites, that so terrifies Max at the close of the novel…The metaphysical vacuum that has been created does not necessarily lead men like Bigger to Communism; it may just as easily lead to the most murderous kind of nihilism. Max's horror was to become Wright's own dilemma two years after the publication of *Native Son*, when he himself left the Party.

It is, then, in the roles of a Negro nationalist revolutionary and a metaphysical rebel that Wright most successfully portrays Bigger. And it is from these aspects of Bigger's character rather than from any Marxist interpretation that Wright's sociology really emerges…. Blindness is one result of Bigger's racist nationalist pride. Prior to his conversion by murder, Bigger has blinded himself to the realities of Negro life (as well as to the humanity of whites—he is unable to accept Jan's offer of friendship, for example, because he blindly regards all whites as symbols of oppression). It is only after his metaphysical rebellion has been effected by the death of the two girls that Bigger acquires sight….

Bigger's new vision…enables him to see how blind whites are to his humanity, his existence [the theme of *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison]. Whites prefer to think of Negroes in easily stereotyped images of brute beast or happy minstrel…. It is this blindness that Bigger counts on as the means of getting away with his crimes…. Even well-meaning people like Mr. and Mrs. Dalton are blind to the sufferings of Negroes…. Mrs. Dalton's blindness is symbolic of the blindness of the white liberal philanthropic community…. Finally, the Communists, Mary, Jan, and Max, are just as blind to the humanity of Negroes as the others—even though they presumably want to enlist Negroes as equals in their own cause…. Bigger is an abstraction—a symbol of exploitation rather than someone whose feelings they have ever really tried to understand…. Although he does not know it, this is really the reason Bigger hates them….

In the final analysis, *Native Son* stands of shifting artistic grounds. Had Wright only managed to affix a different ending, more in accord with the character of Bigger and the philosophical viewpoint he seeks to embody, the novel might have emerged a minor masterpiece. Yet, for all its faults, *Native Son* retains surprising power…. In part, of course, it is the terrible excitement, the excruciating suspense of flight and

pursuit that Wright invests in his best prose. In part, too, it is the shock of unembellished hatred in Wright's portrayal of a seemingly nondescript, apathetic Negro boy…. In [James] Baldwin's view, Bigger is a 'monster'… This, of course, is precisely the point Wright wishes to make—and herein likes its most terrible truth for the reader.

Wright is obviously not describing the 'representative' Negro—although he makes clear that what has happened to Bigger can more easily befall Negroes than whites. He is describing a person so alienated from traditional values, restraints, and civilized modes of behavior, that he feels free to construct his own ethics—that for him an act of murder is an act of creation…. Such 'monsters'…exist. Our tabloids could not exist without them…. Their sense of isolation and alienation is growing in the face of an increasingly impersonal mass society…. It is not that Bigger Thomas is so different from us; it is that he is so much like us."

Edward Margolies
Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors
(Lippincott 1968) 65-67, 70, 72

"For *Native Son*...he conceived a protagonist who would defy anyone's attempt to see him as a mere victim. Bigger Thomas is, much as Wright, the product of American racial practices, and like Wright has a core of inviolable selfhood that gradually grows into a sense of self-determining purpose, but Wright also makes him the murderer of two women who have no immediately personal responsibility for his condition; they are, in terms of their role in the fiction, instruments that break the cycle of fear and self-denigration in which Bigger has been confined by the social and material conditions of his life. Of course, the novel is prophetic of the price a nation must pay for racism, and to its contemporary audience it was a shocking reworking of the typical treatment of victims of society."

John M. Reilly
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1786-87

"Forty years before Richard Wright would make the journalistic caricature of Bigger Thomas a central feature of *Native Son*, [Charles] Chestnutt put the power of the white press under scrutiny... Josh Green [Chestnutt's hero in *The Marrow of Tradition*] is not just a representative of the 'Negro problem'... He is also a 'bad nigger' of the type that appears throughout modern black folklore and in literary adaptations such as George Washington Cable's Bras-Coupe in *The Grandissimes* or the protest heroes of Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and other naturalists.... [Thomas R. Gray] Speaking in chains from the 'condemned hole of the prison' (in this he anticipates the trope of underground existence, deriving from the entombment of the middle passage, that appears throughout African American literature from the slave narratives through the fiction of Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, Ralph Ellison, and others), [Nat] Turner is to some degree an archetypal romantic figure."

Eric J. Sundquist
To Wake the Nation:
Race in the Making of American Literature
(Harvard 1993) 423-24, 442, 452

Michael Hollister (2015)