

Joyce E1

3. Characterization and Point of View:

The Tragic Hero

Bigger's predestined outcome, embodied in the elements of setting and the series of events that leads to his incarceration, illuminate him as the tragic hero. For he is alienated from both the Black and white communities because of his volatile, stubborn, determined, prideful personality. This portrayal of Bigger challenges the stereotypical images of most Black characters prior to 1940 and the traditional assumption that victimized characters and tragic heroes are mutually exclusive.

At the outset of his "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright addresses what he sees as the need of Black writers to depict Black characters that move beyond the limits of stereotypes and racial expectations:

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (37)

Ironically, this statement subtly undercuts the mistaken notion that Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomas is merely a plea for Black humanity and speaks to the need of Black literature to represent truthfully the complicated consciousness of Black Americans. With Bigger Thomas's psyche at its center, *Native Son* describes a

young man who, when unaware of his emotional victimization, succumbs to the hysteria of racial oppression and who, after becoming conscious of his fears and emotional blindness, understands the role he has played in his suffering. Thus in his characterization of Bigger, Wright probes deep into human consciousness, revealing the intricacies of Bigger's personality that make him at once good and evil, fearful and defiant, awful and awesome.

This rendering of Bigger through these juxtapositions of opposites manifests itself in Wright's denunciation of the portrayals of Blacks as simple one-dimensional figures. For Wright clearly understood that to depict Black life in the midst of a vortex of social, political, and economic impediments does not demand that the depictions of Black people be stereotypical or predominantly reflections of victimization. An example of the dehumanizing effects of racial oppression and of the strength and ambiguity which the human spirit embodies, Bigger emerges as a rebellious, prideful, temperamental, challenging young hero whose suffering and emotional growth result from his refusal to acquiesce to the racial injustices of a Jim Crow society. The initial scenes of the novel make evident what becomes a most essential element of Bigger's personality: the interrelationship between his rebellious spirit and his strong sense of pride. Bigger's pride, which is apparent when we first meet him, undergirds the sullen indifference that typifies his interaction with his family and gang in Book 1, motivates his rebelliousness in Book 2, and awakens him at the beginning of Book 3.

As the title of Book 1 suggests, fear proves to be as strong an element of Bigger's personality as his pride. When confronted with the white world or with merely a suggestion of confrontation, Bigger most often becomes completely enwrapped by fear. This fear, which surfaces in Bigger's loss of control, is his *hamartia*, his mistake in judgment or the force responsible for his error in judgment. Throughout the novel, Bigger vacillates between indifference bolstered by his strong sense of pride and hysteria incited by his equally intense fear of the white world. Both immobility and fear engulf him as he accidentally murders Mary Dalton. Yet, despite

his fear and the numerous opportunities he has to flee for his life before the discovery of Mary's bones, he defiantly remains among the Daltons, controlling and manipulating them through his awareness of the discrepancy between his reality and their illusions concerning that reality. The discovery that he is Mary's murderer results only from his loss of control—his inability to sustain a balance between fear and his new insight into the vulnerability of the white world. It is characteristic of tragedy that the same personality trait which accentuates the hero's humanness ironically precipitates his downfall—in this case Bigger's mistakes in judgment that lead to his murders, capture, and impending death.

Those passages in which Bigger's fear overwhelms his judgment and precipitates immobility, hysteria, or violence highlight the function of a third-person limited narrator who makes evident Bigger's thoughts, motives, and the subtle shifts in his consciousness. Since Wright's purpose is to present a work "so hard and deep that [his readers] would have to face it without the consolation of tears," his most difficult task is that of achieving an artistic balance between the aesthetic distance necessary to avoid excessive pity and the empathy necessary to ensure the reader's admiration of Bigger's determination and spiritual awakening. The third-person point of view resolves this dilemma through its relationship with characterization. For Wright's central intelligence softens the impact of Bigger's volatile temperament and his tendency toward violence. Rather than illuminating a contradiction in Wright's intention to maintain an aesthetic distance, the third-person center of consciousness reflects instead the degree to which Wright—the tragic artist—commits himself to sustaining the tension throughout the thrust and parry of the ideas that embody Bigger's fate (Sewall 13). Susanne Langer's "The Tragic Rhythm," succinctly summarizes the movement of tragic drama, providing insight into the movement of *Native Son* as well as into the essence of Wright's depiction of Bigger:

Tragic drama is so designed that the protagonist grows mentally, emotionally, or morally, by the demand of the action,

which he himself initiated, to the complete exhaustion of his powers, the limit of his possible development. He spends himself in the course of one dramatic action. This is, of course, a tremendous foreshortening of life; instead of undergoing the physical and psychical, many-sided, long process of an actual biography, the tragic hero lives and matures in some particular respect, his entire being is concentrated in one aim, one passion, one conflict and ultimate defeat. (90)

Wright, like the many tragedians before him, begins *Native Son* at a point in which the elements of his hero's past have already conspired to bring about Bigger's "ultimate defeat." The seeds of Bigger's destiny and his challenge of his fate are rooted in his obstinacy in taking the job at the Daltons'. Consequently, quite early in Book 1, the job with the Daltons becomes the essential element of the dramatic action through which Bigger's characterization unfolds.

Bigger's resistance in accepting a job given to him by the relief office separates him emotionally from his family and friends as much as it does from the white world that provides the job. His aggressive slaughter of the huge rat, his dangling the rat in his sister's face, his habit of lying to his mother, and his routine fights with members of his gang exemplify his volatile temperament and rebelliousness long before he meets Mary Dalton. Distinctly different from the rest of his family and friends, Bigger is unable to acquiesce to the socioeconomic rules that govern the conditions in his home and in the rest of his community. His resentment of his family's stifled lives provokes his challenge of the Jim Crow codes that dominate their existence. His rebellious actions and pride consistently place him in opposition to the white world in a manner similar to that of the relationship between the Greeks and their gods: "To the Greeks, every action was a risk because it might invite the displeasure of a god; but, such was the tragic aspect of existence, man had to act. Great actions, the kind about which tragedies were written, involved great risks; and, since they inevitably involved a degree of *hubris*, they were ambiguous" (Sewall

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35-36). Wright's descriptions of Bigger in the early scenes depict a young man whose proximity to whites is not only a risk to himself but also to those whites with whom he interacts. The explosive combination of Bigger's lack of exposure to whites, his rebelliousness, and his fear exacerbates the risks involved when he becomes employed in the Dalton home.

Bigger's actions reflect the ambiguity of his personality. The same pride that forces him to challenge the established order of things also bolsters his sullenness and the seeming indifference that hides his feelings. The narrator's descriptions of Bigger's thoughts after he upsets his entire family reveal the ambiguity in Bigger's character by highlighting the discrepancy between his awareness of the tenuous condition of his family and his response to this condition:

He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fulness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve. . . . he denied himself and acted tough. (9)

Suggesting the naturalness of Bigger's personality, Wright compares the aura of a flower that blooms mysteriously to the response Bigger's family and friends have toward his moods and sullen temperament. For his family and friends never know exactly how Bigger will respond to a given situation. His pride motivates him to action and sets him apart from the rest of the Blacks in the novel. He hates and fears himself as he observes his behavior from a distance, but is unable to control himself because the hate and fear are so strong.

Bigger's accidental murder of Mary is an inevitable outcome of the socioeconomic elements of a Jim Crow society. However, his strong sense of pride and courageous spirit distinguish him significantly—tragically—from the typical naturalistic character.

Sewall's description of Oedipus's *hubris* and the unfolding of Oedipus's fate aptly applies to Bigger: "A man without *hubris* would have humbly acquiesced in his fate and let it unfold as it would. There would have been no significant action" (37). Instead of humbly acquiescing, Bigger responds to Mary's death by taking control of his life and thrusting himself deeper into the tragic experience.

Emboldened by his own daring exploits in disposing of Mary's body and by his skillful manipulation of the Daltons and the police, Bigger challenges the stereotypical image of his blackness. Though Mary's murder, his framing Jan, his writing the kidnap note, and his implicating the Communist party all attest to his rebelliousness, the courage he displays during the final scene of Book 1, his capture, demonstrates his intensity, his "will to do or die, the uncompromising spirit which makes him pay any price, even life itself, for his object" (Myers 135).

Wet and soiled from urinating in his clothes upon hitting the snow when he jumped out of the window of his room, hungry, almost frozen, frightened, and hysterically desperate for many hours, Bigger defiantly struggles to escape the hostile vigilantes. His reaction to the long awaited "There he is!" that signals his being spotted on the roof of a ramshackle building reflects a determination—characteristic of the tragic hero—to fight with every inch of his life: "The three words made him stop; he had been listening for them all night and when they came he seemed to feel the sky crashing soundlessly about him. What was the use of running? Would it not be better to stop, stand up, and lift his hands high above his head in surrender? Hell, naw! He continued to crawl" (224).

It is no accident that the first person from Bigger's community to visit him in jail is Reverend Hammond. Just as most Blacks in Bigger's community see themselves through the distorted images presented in the newspapers, they have also internalized the image of themselves as downtrodden, fated sufferers following the life of Christ. Thus Reverend Hammond's mission is to render Bigger submissive. Bigger, however, unlike his mother and the rest of his en-

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vironment, rejects religion and its concomitant passivity and guilt. He is a man of action and necessity. For "he had killed within himself the preacher's haunting picture of life even before he had killed Mary, that had been his first murder" (242).

Bigger has long intuitively recognized that the white world uses religion as a kind of sedative that minimizes rebelliousness in Blacks. Bigger's adverse reaction to religion corresponds to what D. D. Raphael sees as the tragic hero's necessary defiance of religion: "Because Tragedy snatches a spiritual victory out of a natural defeat, it is nearer to the religious attitude than is Epic. In another way, however, Tragedy tends to be inimical to religion. It elevates man in his struggle with necessity, while the religious attitude is one of abasement before that which is greater than man, before the awe-inspiring sublime" (196).

In addition to Bigger's rejection of religion, his murder of Bessie is another element of necessity which characterizes him as a tragic hero. His thoughts when he equates Bessie's alcohol with his mother's religion pinpoint his isolation from the rest of the community by emphasizing his will for the ideal—in this case social and economic retribution:

He hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion. He did not want to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep. It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (204)

Ironically, Bigger's rebellious will to act in response to the socioeconomic restraints that preclude his being an integral part of American society further separates him from his family, friends, and the mainstream of American society.

Bessie's death clinches his rejection of the social norm of his en-

vironment. Her relationship to him and the feeling this relationship evokes in the reader call to mind Northrop Frye's description of the female suppliant necessary to enhance the tragic mood. After discussing the *bornolochos*, or comic character that increases the comic mood, Frye continues:

The corresponding contrasting type in tragedy is the suppliant, the character, often female, who presents a picture of unmitigated helplessness and destitution. Such a figure is pathetic, and pathetic, though it seems a gentler and more relaxed mood than tragedy, is even more terrifying. Its basis is the exclusion of an individual from a group, hence it attacks the deepest fear in ourselves that we possess. . . . In the figure of the suppliant pity and terror are brought to the highest possible pitch of intensity, and the awful consequences of rejecting the suppliant for all concerned is a central theme of Greek tragedy. Suppliant figures are often women threatened with death or rape. . . . (217)

Consequently, Bigger's rape and apparent superfluous murder of Bessie emerge as essential elements of Wright's tragic theme. Wright characterizes Bigger as the single individual who, through his preordained murder of Mary Dalton, is catapulted into taking control of his own life. The scene in which Bigger's mother, sister, brother, Jack, G. H., Gus, Buckley, Jan, Max, and the Daltons crowd around Bigger in a single room suggests that these characters are a kind of chorus "against which the hero's *hybris* may be measured" (Frye 109).

Bigger's *hybris* incites the defiance which underlies his strategy to remain in the Dalton home and to orchestrate the movement of his own destiny. He replaces his knife and gun, the previous symbols of his rebellion, with a new type of weapon—his awareness of the discrepancy between his reality and the white world's perception of him. This new insight stimulates Bigger's imagination and gives him self-confidence for the first time in his life. He assumes the role of the subversive strategist who comes to know his enemy far better than his enemy understands him. When questioned about

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Mary's absence by Mrs. Dalton, he quickly intuits the sociological and racist codes that prohibit Mrs. Dalton from searching below the surface of things: "... he knew that a certain element of shame would keep Mrs. Dalton from asking him too much and letting him know that she was worried. He was a boy and she was an old woman. He was the hired and she was the hirer. . . . After all, he was black and she was white. He was poor and she was rich" (108-9). And later when Bigger meets Britten, Mr. Dalton's private detective, Bigger effaces his intelligence, assuming a docile attitude that fulfills Britten's expectations. Bigger understands Britten on sight and slowly feeds him the information he wants him to have.

Chance affords Bigger a number of opportunities to attempt an escape long before his capture. Like the typical tragic hero, however, he plunges deeper into the tragic experience, choosing not only to fight, but also to shape his destiny. As he carries Mary's trunk to the car in his perfunctory move of taking it to the train station, he contemplates leaving with the money he had taken from Mary's purse. But self-confidence and excitement motivate his decision to test his will to its extreme. And even after Britten's hostile, intense interrogation, Bigger gathers his defiant forces, determined to outwit his adversaries:

Bigger went to the window and looked out at the white curtain of falling snow. He thought of the kidnap note. Should he try to get money from them now? Hell, yes! He would show that Britten bastard! . . . He'd give that Britten something to worry about, all right. Just wait.
Because he could go now, run off if he wanted to and leave it all behind, he felt a certain sense of power, a power born of a latent capacity to live. (140)

The series of events that unfolds once Bigger reaches the Dalton home gives him the opportunity to take the risk which pushes to the surface his hidden potential to pursue life to its fullest, to push himself in order to discover his greatest possibilities. By showing Bigger's rebellious nature, which has always isolated him from the

Black community and branded him a threat to the white community, Wright depicts Bigger as the hero whose desires exceed the limitations peculiar to a Jim Crow society.

No matter how well planned, Bigger's crafty strategy is destined for failure. The success of his choice of action depends upon his ability to control his fear, and ironically it is this fear which causes him to lose control and thus precipitates his capture. Although malevolent external forces play an essential role in setting the tragic pattern in motion (Delmar 4), Bigger's psychological makeup is responsible for the errors in judgment that produce and sustain the tragic action. In the initial scenes, Bigger's sullen treatment of his family and the violent display of emotions that instigates the fight with Gus spring from his fear. In the case of his family, Bigger assumes a sullen persona because he fears the vulnerability of love and responsibility.

Quite simply, he fights with Gus because he fears whites intensely. In describing Bigger's feelings as he waits for Gus to agree to rob their first white store-owner, the narrator explains how Bigger transfers his fear of whites to violence toward Gus:

He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was, and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery. . . . he watched Gus and waited for him to say yes. . . . Then he could not stand it any longer. The hysterical tensivity of his nerves urged him to speak, to free himself. He faced Gus, his eyes red with anger and fear, his fists clenched and held stiffly to his sides. (22)

The contradiction between Bigger's fear of robbing a white man and the fact that he himself is the originator of the idea to rob Blum reflects the irreconcilable aspects of his personality. He vacillates between fear and hate, hate and shame, sullenness and hysteria.

Just as his loss of control with Gus alienates him completely from his gang, the hysteria which overcomes him when Mrs. Dalton enters Mary's room brings about Mary's death. Bigger's fear of

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whites, and their lack of perception of how environmental forces have shaped their psyches quite differently from his, function jointly to presage Bigger's murder of Mary. The scenes that portray Bigger's contempt for Mary as she naively questions him about unions and communism, and his extreme discomfort with Jan and Mary in Ernie's Kitchen Shack, all stimulate in Bigger a desire to "leap" to action to destroy the emotions that overwhelm him. Wright's frequent use of the word *leap* in describing Bigger when he feels most entrapped and the imagery that compares Bigger's feelings to the processes of nature suggest that Bigger reacts instinctively when confronted with a representative of the world that seeks to dominate him.

Bigger understands that being in Mary Dalton's room automatically means that he has broken the most important law of the cosmological order characteristic of a Jim Crow society. Consequently, when blind Mrs. Dalton enters Mary's room, Bigger completely loses control as his fear powerfully overwhelms him. When Mrs. Dalton approaches the bed, he becomes caught up in a spell of hysteria, intuitively acting to save his life. Throughout this scene that moves very quickly, Wright charts Bigger's reactions so vividly that a careful reading of the scene precludes any idea that Bigger acts with evil intent. As Mary tries to rise from the bed in response to her mother's voice,

Frenzy dominated him. He held his hand over her mouth and his head was cocked at an angle that enabled him to see Mary and Mrs. Dalton by merely shifting his eyes. Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. *Frantically* he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it firmly. . . .

His eyes were filled with the white blur moving toward him in the shadows of the room. Again Mary's body heaved and he held the pillow in a grip that took all of his strength. . . .

He clenched his teeth and held his breath, intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him. His muscles flexed taut as steel and he pressed the pillow, feeling the bed give slowly, evenly, but silently. (73-74, emphasis mine)

One of the most important scenes in the novel, this necessarily long passage demonstrates the intensity of Bigger's fear and shows the extent to which fear holds him in a trance, causing him literally to lose sight of everything around him, except the "white blur."

Ironically, then, Bigger's act of carrying Mary to her room to save himself from blame and harm backfires cataclysmically. Of more importance, and equally ironic, is the fact that the failure of his attempts to defy his destiny is in part rooted in his own psyche. As long as he maintains his self-control, he is able to sustain the emotional stability and strength he needs to meet any sudden, unexpected change. Any arousal of fear renders him vulnerable and ineffectual. The furnace, which continually excites his fear to an intensity comparable to that responsible for his murder of Mary, is the curse or mistake that instigates Bigger's capture. Like his fear of whites, fear of the furnace rhythmically presages danger and entrapment. When he carries Mary's body to the basement, he intends to dispose of her by using the trunk until he spontaneously decides to burn her in the furnace. His burning Mary compounds the levels of irony that lead to his incarceration. For both his fear of the furnace and the lingering images of Mary's body haunt him and finally cause him to become so immobilized that he pinpoints himself as her murderer.

His crucial mistake in judgment is his delay in cleaning the furnace. Because of his intense fear of attracting attention to the furnace, he permits the coal to pile up, knowing that the ashes could eventually block the air ducts:

He stood a moment looking through the cracks into the humming fire, blinding red now. But how long would it keep that

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way, if he did not shake the ashes down? He remembered the last time he had tried and how hysterical he had felt. . . . He imagined that if he shook it he would see pieces of bone falling into the bin and he knew that he would not be able to endure it. He jerked upright and, lashed by fiery whips of fear and guilt, backed hurriedly to the door. . . . he could not bring himself to shake those ashes. (145-46)

Bigger continues to stall, hoping that the reporters and Britten will leave the house. Instead of leaving, the reporters, excited by the coverage of Mary's absence in their daily papers, decide to question Bigger again and to take pictures of him and the Daltons. When it gets cool in the house, the moment finally arrives when Peggy, as she brings coffee to the reporters, asks Bigger to clean the ashes.

Her request confounds Bigger as much as the shepherd's story of Oedipus's past bewildles Oedipus. Bigger's first thoughts reveal his emotions: "Clean the fire out! Good God! Not now, not with the men standing round" (182). The movements that follow progress as quickly and as intensely as those of the rat scene. Bigger gradually loses control. Against all his will, he knows he has to respond to Peggy's order because the other whites have heard her. He opens the door to the storage bin and decides to add more coal, hoping that the fire will burn until the basement is free of the reporters. On the contrary, the smoke burgeons rapidly, choking him, filling the room, and stifling the reporters. When a reporter frantically takes the shovel, Bigger knows that he no longer has control of the situation: "He wanted to go to him and ask for the shovel; he wanted to say that he could take care of it now. But he did not move. He felt that he had let things slip through his hands to such an extent that he could not get at them again" (184). When the reporter with the shovel stares incredulously into the ashes, Bigger's worst fear materializes. Wright compares Bigger's feelings to the malfunctioning of the furnace, suggesting the symbolic relationship between Bigger's fear and the furnace: "Bigger edged forward, his lungs not taking in or letting out air, he himself was a huge furnace now through which no air could go; and the fear that

surged into his stomach, filling him, choking him, was like the fumes of smoke that had belched from the ash bin" (185). Overwhelmed by the fear responsible for his error in judgment, Bigger again attempts to defy his destiny. While the reporters are entranced by what they find in the ashes, Bigger escapes.

Although we do not sanction his murder of Mary, we empathize with him because of the intense fear that motivates his actions. Thus, characteristic of tragedy, Bigger's *hamartia*—his loss of control caused by fear—plays the paradoxical role of making him at once vulnerably human and threateningly awesome. Despite our knowing that Bigger's fate and our moral code demand that he be captured, we become involved in his struggle to evade the vigilantes. For Wright's adroit use of a third-person limited narrator controls the degree to which we identify with Bigger's tragedy. Katherine Fishburn summarizes the function of the narrator in *Native Son*: ". . . *Native Son* is told entirely from the viewpoint of Bigger Thomas, the narrator; we never know what is in the minds of other characters. In limiting himself to Bigger's perspective, Wright is asking the reader to identify with his hero and to try to understand his motives and actions" (12). The role of the narrator is to soften the reader's harsh judgment of Bigger by establishing an affinity between the reader's consciousness and Bigger's, and thus ensuring that we feel Bigger's fate as our own. The tragic artist traditionally creates a hero whose courage and defiance incite our admiration and censure. We censure the hero when his actions offend our sensibilities and separate us from him, and we admire him—from a sublime distance—as he fights in the face of all adversity. Although the narrator identifies completely with Bigger, as Fishburn explains, he is not to be confused with Bigger. Because Bigger is inarticulate and incommunicative throughout most of the novel, the narrator reveals the seething world of Bigger's psyche, illuminating motives and thoughts Bigger fails to perceive. Vacillating between extreme sullenness and an explosive temper, Bigger lacks the introspection that brings self-knowledge. The narrator "at the most crucial points of action and self-recognition, becomes a sort

of translator, or refiner, of the stifled, muddled intensity of Bigger's inner life" (Larsen 106). With the exception of Bigger's murder of Mary, the essential action in *Native Son* takes place in Bigger's mind. This internal counteraction functions—by means of the narrator—as an element of the tragic dialectic through which the effects of Bigger's suffering unfold.

An informed, keen, and sensitive narrator provides the comprehensive look at Bigger's thoughts, revealing the reasons for the sudden moods, iron reserve, volatile temperament, and fear which characterize Bigger in Book 1. After Bigger kills Mary, the narrator, throughout Book 2, intermittently directs attention to the emotional battle that takes place in Bigger's mind. At the same time that he struggles defiantly to forge his own destiny by outwitting the Daltons and the police, Bigger fights a battle to overcome the guilt and stress that persistently threaten him. While his fear of the furnace is the final cause of his loss of control, the haunting image of Mary's bloody head also works to subdue him. Complementing the narrator's explanation of Bigger's motives, the references to the lingering images of Mary's body help to counterbalance the portrayal of Bigger's violent nature and thus mitigate against the reader's harsh judgment of him.

Working against the strength that manifests itself when Bigger faces the Daltons and Britten, the images of Mary's head become opposing internal forces that reflect the divisive personality characteristic of the tragic hero. These recurring images highlight the seething emotional turbulence hidden by Bigger's mask of composure. When he approaches the furnace and imagines that he sees Mary's head, he risks losing his mask:

The inside of the furnace breathed and quivered in the grip of fiery coals. But there was no sign of the body, even though the body's image hovered before his eyes, between his eyes and the bed of coals burning hotly. . . .

At the moment he stooped to grasp the protruding handle of the lower bin to shake it to and fro, a vivid image of Mary's face as he had seen it upon the bed in the blue light of the

room gleamed at him from the smoldering embers and he rose abruptly, giddy and hysterical with guilt and fear. His hands twitched. . . . (100-101)

This picture of Bigger's vulnerability serves the same functions as the narrator's description of the fear and mixed emotions Bigger experiences in his home and with his gang. Outwardly tough and intractable in his attitude toward his family and friends, and manipulative and shrewd in his treatment of the Daltons and the police, Bigger is always inwardly quite fearful and neurotic.

The relationship between the image of Mary's head and Bigger's increasing anxiety reaches its peak in a bizarre dream which discloses the depth of Bigger's apprehensions. After Britten initially interrogates him, Bigger, physically and emotionally exhausted, slips into a deep sleep in which he dreams he hears a ringing church bell that grows louder as he stands on a street corner. He stands in a red glare like the glare from the furnace, holding a heavy, wet, and slippery package. When he unwraps the package, he discovers his own head with wet bloody hair. When white people begin to close in on him asking questions about the head, he awakes slowly, realizing that the sound is coming from the doorbell of his room. From the moment the bell begins to ring directly over Bigger's head, Wright describes how Bigger's waking fears reflect his unconsciousness. The approximately 316 unpunctuated words of Bigger's dream diminish the emotional barriers between Bigger's unconscious mind and our own.

Wright achieves a skillful balance between those elements which evoke the reader's identification with Bigger and those that detach us from him. The narrator's astute translations of Bigger's thoughts as well as the numerous descriptions of Bigger's emotional and physical fatigue counteract our response to the repugnant scenes in which Bigger chops off Mary's head with the hatchet and batters Bessie's face with a brick. Even Bigger's daring, hardened attempts to carry out his scheme of collecting money by using the kidnap note are accompanied by the narrator's intermittent descriptions of Bigger's nervousness and extreme exhaustion. When Bessie deduces

why Bigger is certain that Mary will not show up to thwart his plans of collecting the kidnap money, the narrator calls attention to the change Bessie's recognition of Bigger as a murderer effects in him:

His jaw clamped tight and he stood up. . . . He began to feel cold, he discovered that his body was covered with sweat. He heard a soft rustle and looked down at his hand; the kidnap note was shaking in his trembling fingers. But I ain't scared, he told himself. He folded the note, put it into an envelope, sealed it by licking the flap, and shoved it in his pocket. (151)

Hence despite his fear, exhaustion, and the odds against him, Bigger is a man driven by the necessity to test his power.

In fact, Bigger's will is so strong that we tend to overlook the implications inherent in the narrator's descriptions of Bigger's struggle to avoid collapsing. After Bigger slips the kidnap note under the Daltons' door and burns the gloves and pencil and paper, physical weakness, fear, and anxiety sap his strength, illuminating his loneliness and agonizing sense of guilt:

A strange sensation enveloped him. Something tingled in his stomach and on his scalp. His knees wobbled, giving way. He stumbled to the wall and leaned against it weakly. A wave of numbness spread fanwise from his stomach over his entire body, including his head and eyes, making his mouth gap. Strength ebbed from him. He sank to his knees and pressed his fingers to the floor to keep from tumbling over. An organic sense of dread seized him. His teeth chattered and he felt sweat sliding down his armpits and back. He groaned, holding as still as possible. His vision was blurred, but gradually it cleared. Again he saw the furnace. Then he realized that he had been on the verge of collapse. (157-58)

Bigger's exhaustion and loneliness grow as he fights for his freedom. With Bessie, before her death, as his only marginal companion, he is enwrapped by an "organic sense of dread" and is unable to sleep and eat.

He runs to Bessie not only for the money from Mary's purse, but

also because he yearns for companionship. Thus his initial thoughts are not of murder. But while he is in Bessie's presence, her covering makes him see that including her in his plans has been a mistake. His realization of the necessity to kill Bessie comes to him suddenly and firmly from the depths of consciousness: "He wondered if she was sleeping, somewhere deep in him he knew that he was lying here waiting for her to go to sleep. Bessie did not figure in what was before him" (199). He fidgets with the brick, the flashlight, and the blanket, delaying the act that he himself finds totally repugnant. The narrator carefully explains that Bigger's heart beats wildly, his breath swells, and his muscles flex as he tries "to impose his will over his body." Only his thoughts of Mary's burning body, of Britten, and of the law help him overcome his revulsion at the idea of killing Bessie.

After Bessie's death, Bigger flees through and across the tops of apartment buildings, trying to evade capture. Throughout these scenes that lead to Bigger's incarceration, the narrator persistently points to Bigger's isolation and loneliness and describes the effects of his hunger and of the cold, icy water from the fire hose that finally whirls him onto his back. Still functioning as an essential means of sustaining a balance between the opposing aspects of Bigger's personality, the narrator at the beginning of Book 3 becomes obtrusive because Bigger is in a semiconscious state and because he grapples with ideas completely new to him. And near the end of the novel, the narrator virtually disappears when Bigger, stimulated by Max's questions that plunge him deep into introspection and retrospection, begins to articulate his own feelings. The articulate, pensive, tranquil Bigger who emerges from Book 3 is quite different from the sullen, temperamental, neurotic young man who reports to work at the Dalton home. Bigger's suffering yields knowledge and is responsible for the change in character Sewall holds necessary to tragedy: "One simple criterion of tragedy lies in the question, How does our first view of the protagonist . . . differ from what we see at the end? Has there been a gain, if only minimal, in humanity, self-knowledge, wisdom, insight—all that we have subsumed under the notion of perception?" (167)

The price that Bigger must pay for his new knowledge of self is suffering and death. The change that he undergoes begins, of course, when he takes the job at the Daltons' and continues as he struggles to escape the police. His incarceration in Book 3 enhances his suffering and catapults him into a vortex of new emotions that lead to his discovery of self-awareness. Pride forces him to attempt again to control his own life. Traditionally, pride is the tragic flaw that makes the hero vulnerable to the forces that attempt to subdue him and ironically precipitates his transcendence.

The inquest scene which opens Book 3 brings Bigger closer to his fate. Having failed in his attempt to bring meaning into his life, he yearns to reach inside himself to destroy that which gave him hope. His coma symbolizes his "deep physiological resolution not to react to anything" (233). Because Bigger is only semiconscious and because his confinement brings him into the realm of completely new experiences, the narrator plays a key role in interpreting Bigger's feelings. He even goes so far as to explain that Bigger cannot intellectualize his feelings of renunciation; instead, "his feeling sprang up of itself, organically, automatically; like the rotted hull of a seed forming the soil in which it should grow again" (234).

Bigger's organic desire to pull completely inward, to kill himself, is as instinctive as the indignation that forces him to consciousness when he perceives that the purpose of the inquest is to mock and demean him. The narrator describes Bigger's movement toward consciousness and rebellion as he watches those around him in the large room of the Cook County Morgue:

There was in the air a silent mockery that challenged him. It was not their hate he felt; it was something deeper than that. He sensed that in their attitude toward him they had gone beyond hate. . . . Though he could not put it into words, he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment. . . . And as he felt it, rebellion rose in him. He had sunk to the lowest point this side of death, but when

he felt his life again threatened in a way that meant that he was to go down the dark road a helpless spectacle of sport for others, he sprang back into action, alive, contending. (235-36)

The same rebellious attitude and pride that characterize Bigger in Books 1 and 2 spring him back to consciousness with a new determination to defy the powerful, capricious forces that challenge his self-respect.

This time his pride forces him to do battle in an emotional arena rather than a physical one. During the course of his confinement, his consciousness grows in depth and perceptivity. Although Bigger's initial response to Max does not differ significantly from his reaction to Buckley or any of the whites around him, he eventually responds to Max's questions, which are designed to extract from him the reasons for the drives and fears that made him react so intensely as to kill. When Bigger first feels the urge to talk, his inexperience at self-evaluation thwarts him:

Bigger was staring straight before him, his eyes wide and shining. His talking to Max had evoked again in him that urge to talk, to tell, to try to make his feelings known. A wave of excitement flooded him. He felt that he ought to be able to reach out with his bare hands and carve from naked space the concrete, solid reasons why he had murdered. He felt them that strongly. If he could do that, he would relax, he would sit and wait until they told him to walk to the chair, and he would walk. (295-96)

This passage punctuates Bigger's emerging need to establish some link between himself and the rest of humanity and his desire to discover, for the first time in his life, who he is so that he might die with dignity.

His drive to communicate places him inside the world. Lying on his cot and reflecting upon the events of his life, he begins to understand that he has never been as unconnected to others as he had thought. After his family visits him in jail and relates the Black

and white communities' maltreatment of them in response to Bigger's crimes, he realizes that his life indeed affects the well-being of his family. This discovery of a link with something outside himself, along with Max's subsequent questions, unleashes thoughts and feelings that had been unfamiliar to Bigger. Explaining Bigger's thoughts after a long session with Max, the narrator reveals Bigger's trepidation at the new thoughts forming within him:

For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of. If that white looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan—then he was faced with a high hope the like of which he had never thought could be, and a despair the full depths of which he knew he could not stand to feel. (306)

Bigger, however, is not able "to leave this newly seen and newly felt thing alone" (306).

The entire experience of the trial and the physical limitations that confinement places upon Bigger thrust him even deeper into self-analysis. Although he does not comprehend the words in Max's speech, the mere act of the speech and Max's seeming sincerity move Bigger to want "to talk with him and feel with as much keenness as possible what his living and dying meant" (350). During this last scene in which both Bigger and Max face each other with the knowledge that the governor has refused Bigger's appeal, Bigger's self-revelation reveals the outcome of the long emotional battle that has characterized him in Book 3.

In a long and powerful speech that demonstrates Bigger's growth and makes it clear that a subtle change has taken place in the relationship between him and the narrator, the new Bigger evinces that his suffering has yielded the knowledge of his affinity with the rest of mankind:

"Mr. Max, I sort of saw myself after that night. And I sort of saw other people, too." Bigger's voice died; he was listening to the echoes of his words in his own mind. He saw amaze-

ment and horror on Max's face. Bigger knew that Max would rather not have him talk like this, but he could not help it. He had to die and he had to talk. "Well, it's sort of funny, Mr. Max. I ain't trying to dodge what's coming to me." Bigger was growing hysterical. "I know I'm going to get it. I'm going to die. Well, that's all right now. But really I never wanted to hurt nobody. That's the truth, Mr. Max. I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They were crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room. Lots of times I tried to forget 'em, but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me. . . ." Bigger's eyes were wide and unseeing; his voice rushed on: "Mr. Max I didn't mean to do what I did. I was trying to do something else. But it seems like I never could. I was always wanting something and I was feeling that nobody would let me have it. So I fought 'em. I thought they was hard and I acted hard." He paused, then whimpered in confession, "But I ain't hard, Mr. Max. I ain't hard even a little bit. . . ." He rose to his feet. "But I—I won't be crying none when they take me to that chair. But I'll b-b-be feeling inside of me like I was crying. . . . I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them. . . ." (355)

Bigger understands and articulates quite coherently what he is and how he became what he is. Bigger's spiritual awakening now complete, we no longer need the narrator to intermediate, to bridge the gap between Bigger's turbulent consciousness and our perception of that consciousness. The rebelliousness, the pride, the volatile temperament, and the fear are superseded by a new depth that embodies self-knowledge and spiritual growth.

Having found hope within himself, Bigger takes emotional responsibility for himself, forcing his reality upon the worn and resigned Max. Moreover, the narrator, who previously guided the reader through the flux and flow of Bigger's consciousness in Books 1 and 2, and the initial parts of Book 3, becomes less obtrusive. Wright interweaves dramatic dialogue with the interpretive voice of the narrator to accentuate Bigger's ability to express the depths of his own thoughts. The reader, then, is able to separate Bigger's

consciousness from the voice of the narrator. Instead of serving their usual role as translators of Bigger's thoughts, the narrator's comments function as asides or stage directions. From this point on, the narrator virtually disappears and the novel progresses to its end through dramatic dialogue between Max and Bigger.

Bigger emerges from his ordeal as a composite, individual personality whose tragic fate arouses our compassion as well as our alarm. We do not forget that while external forces always set the tragic pattern into action, the hero himself is in part responsible for his fate. Bigger, too, realizes this as his "faint, wry, bitter smile" follows Max down the steel corridors when Max leaves him to his impending death. This understanding of his role in his fate and of the emotional liaison that binds all of humanity make Bigger a universal hero, pulling him out of the mire of naturalism into the realm of tragedy. Through the magnitude of his suffering and through his perception of it, Bigger joins a host of protagonists whose suffering Sewall cites as tragic. In reference to the protagonists of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Sewall writes, "That these people achieve tragic stature—anything but 'little'—is due in large part to their capacities, developed through suffering, to understand themselves, judge themselves, and see in their lot an image of the universal" (148).

4. Technique: The Figurative Web

The crux of tragedy is ambiguity in the characterization of the hero and irony embodied in the events that affect the hero's life. Richard Wright's *Native Son* epitomizes this duality in the personality of Bigger Thomas. With Bigger's consciousness at the center of the novel, Wright creates the mood of exploration and anxiety (Sewall 25) through his portrayal of Bigger as paradoxically indifferent and violent, fearful and prideful, sullen and passionate. As shown in Chapter 3, the narrator, identified with Bigger's consciousness, ensures that we perceive simultaneously Bigger's vulnerability and his violent temperament. Thus the narrator's guidance along with the ambiguity in Bigger's character explains why it is possible not only to feel sympathy for but also to like Bigger Thomas, who is both murderer and hero. Yet, the sublimity of the novel lies in the connection between Wright's characterization of Bigger and his unique use of sentence structure and figurative language. For *Native Son* is a linguistically complex network of sentences and images that reflect the opposing or contradictory aspects of Bigger's psyche and thus synthesize the interrelationship between Wright's subject matter and his expression of it.

Much of the criticism on *Native Son* has focused too exclusively on the image of the snow and the metaphor of blindness. It has overlooked the tightly knit web which Wright creates through his figurative use of the colors black, white, and yellow and the interrelationship between the images of the snow, the sun, the wall (the "white looming mountain"), the metaphor of blindness, and