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Prof. Azhar Hameed Mankhi

Abbas Salim Hamad

Wasit University  
College of Education

Email:

[azharhameed2017@gmail.com](mailto:azharhameed2017@gmail.com)[abbasalabadi@gmail.com](mailto:abbasalabadi@gmail.com)**Keywords:****Richard Wright,  
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**An Absurdist Reading of Richard Wright's Native Son****A B S T R A C T**

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) stands as one of the most important and impactful illustrations of the plight of African-Americans against institutional and societal racism. Wright depicts his main character, Bigger Thomas, as being an aimless and purposeless being largely defined by a White-dominated society. It is only after working for an affluent family and becoming closer to White people that he begins to question his place in the universe and the predefined notions of what it means to be a Black person in America. The two gruesome murders he commits profoundly make him reassess and redefine both himself and his surrounding environment. Bigger gains a stronger understanding and feeling of companionship towards people of his race. By all means he is a rebel who revolts against all and every preconceived notion of what defines him as a black man. His unapologetic attitude, his relentless clutch to life and his rejection of both religion and hope makes him an ideal absurd hero in a chaotic world where all odds are stacked against him. This new found attitude and consequent profound knowledge acquired as a result perpetuate Bigger as one of the strongest examples of a Sisyphian character in modern American fiction.

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قراءة عبثية لرواية ((ابن البلد)) لريتشارد رايت

الباحث: عباس سالم حمد السلطان

الأستاذ. آزار حميد منخي العقيلي

جامعة واسط كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

المستخلص

تعتبر رواية ((ابن البلد)) (1940) إحدى أهم الروايات وأكثرها تأثيراً والتي وضحت صراع الأمريكيون الأفارقة ضد العنصرية المؤسسية والاجتماعية. رايت يقدم الشخصية الرئيسية (بجر توماس) على كونه شخصية بلا هدف أو غاية مُعرف من قبل مجتمع يسوده البيض. إلا أنه بعد العمل لعائلة ثرية والاقتراب من الأشخاص البيض، يبدأ (بجر) في التساؤل عن مكانه في الكون والمفاهيم المحددة مسبقاً لما يعنيه أن تكون شخصاً أسود في أمريكا. إن جرمي القتل الشنيعتين اللتين أرتكبهما جعلته يعيد تقييم وتعريف نفسه وبيئته المحيطة. بجر يكتسب فهماً أقوى وشعوراً بالرفقة تجاه الناس من عرقه.

يعد بجر، بكل المقاييس، متمرداً وثائراً ضد كل فكرة مسبقة عما يعرفه على أنه رجل أسود. تشبثه بالحياة دون هواده ورفضه لكل من الدين والأمل يجعله بطلاً عبثياً مثالياً في عالم فوضوي تتشابك فيه كل الاحتمالات ضده. سلوكه الجديد هذا والمعرفة العميقة اللاحقة التي يحصل عليها نتيجة لذلك تجعل بجر كواحد من أقوى الأمثلة على الشخصية السيزيفية في الرواية الأمريكي الحديثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ريتشارد رايت ، الأبن الأصلي ، العبثية ، ألبرت كامو ، توماس الأكبر

## Introduction

American author Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on the 4th of December in 1908. His works touched on the African Americans' plight against social and institutional discrimination in the late 19th to early 20th century. With both his paternal and maternal grandparents being born to slavery, Wright was all but aware of the struggles of his race. Furthermore, his critical attitude towards religion, his constant contemplation of the existential question of the Black race, and his rebellious outlook towards authority from an early age shaped his writing in his later life, giving it an Absurdist undertone.

*Native son*, perhaps Wright's most critically acclaimed novel, sheds light on the manner in which the Black community is surrounded, monitored, controlled and judged by the inescapable vigour of the racial majority. The cultural impact of the novel has been of great magnitude. Irving Howe's (1972) states:

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. (p. 63)

*Native Son* depicts the life of a 20-year-old Black boy named Bigger Thomas dwelling with his family in a rat-infested one-bedroom apartment. Things seem to be turning for the better as Bigger gains the opportunity to work as a chauffeur for the Daltons; an influential and rich White family. However, on his first assignment, bigger returns with a drunk Miss Mary Dalton. Being heavily intoxicated, Mary is incapable of going to her room which forces Bigger to carry her to her room. Once there, Mary's blind mother Mrs. Dalton enters the room. Being afraid of the dire consequences of being caught as a Black man in a room of a White woman, Bigger puts a pillow on Mary's face to silence her while accidentally suffocating her in the process.

In hopes of hiding all evidence of his accidental murder, Bigger burns Mary's body in the family's furnace only for the remains of her body to be discovered later by reporters. A manhunt fuelled by racial prejudice commences and Bigger is finally caught. Bigger is sentenced to execution by the electric chair but not before witnessing a rudimentary existential transformation that makes him revolt against his fate. Esther Merle Jackson (1962) states that "Richard Wright's *Native Son* is, perhaps, to this time, the most moving and passion-filled portrait of a Negro as man in revolt against Fate." (p. 364)

Bigger's two gruesome murders spark in him a new energy that transforms him into more or less the ideal Absurd Hero described in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*

(originally published in 1942). Camus sees the absurd as being a result of the human need for reason, meaning and purpose and the universe's cold indifference towards these needs (Camus, 1979). Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines absurdism as "a philosophy based on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe"(2022). Eugene Ionesco defines the absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose" adding that when man is "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, [he becomes] lost [and all] his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." (Esslin, 2001, p.23). Václav Havel (1990) sees the absurd as similar to "the experience of the absence of meaning" (p.201).

For Camus, Sisyphus, a character from Greek mythology, is the ideal embodiment of the Absurd Man. According to the myths, Sisyphus is punished for his trickery of the gods which includes deceiving Death in hopes of continuing to enjoy life. The gods punish Sisyphus with the task of rolling a heavy boulder to the top of the mountain only for it to fall back again. Sisyphus continues to perform this endless task over and over again for all eternity.

Camus likens Sisyphus's condition to that of modern man who is trapped in a never-ending cycle of futility Sisyphus, however, teaches man the proper way of dealing with the absurd and overcoming the godless, purposeless and meaningless fact of his life: "Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile." (Camus, 1979, p. 111)

The responses to the fact of life's absurdity can take one of three forms. One can commit physical suicide: "Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering." (Camus, 1979, p. 13). Camus, however, acknowledges that suicide is a mere escape of the Absurd without any proper reconciliation between man's desire for purpose and the universe's indifference.

Another response would be that of philosophical suicide by taking a "leap of faith". It is a way of finding meaning through God. Camus uses 19th-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard as an example of this approach: "Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish, and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition" (Camus, 1979, p. 41). Needless to say, Camus rejects this approach as well because like philosophical suicide, it constitutes nothing more than a mere attempt to escape life's absurdity rather than facing it head-on.

The last approach, and the one Camus heavily supports, is acceptance. In other words, the Absurd Hero fully acknowledges the absurd without any attempt to escape the fact. In a world devoid of meaning, purpose and absolutes the Absurd Hero finds solace in creating his own meaning while fully aware that it is ultimately rendered futile by the inescapable fact of death. Like Sisyphus, the Absurd Hero finds solace in the middle of ultimate futility: "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1979, p. 111).

Sisyphus is in essence a rebel manifesting his rebellious attitude through his wholehearted acceptance of his destiny and his bewildering enjoyment of his endless and futile

labour. Thus, it is not only the struggle that makes Sisyphus an ideal Absurd Hero but also his revolt against his fate. Camus defines revolt as “the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (Camus, 1979, p. 54). Sisyphus’s knowledge of the futility of his act does not stop him from fully embracing it thus, becoming “superior to his fate” and “stronger than his rock” (Camus, 1979, p. 109).

Camus admits this struggle implies the following: “a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)” (Camus, 1979, pp. 34-35). The absurd character is not the one to grasp to a false sense of comfort provided by either hope or religion. He is the one to recognize that what matters most is the present and takes little (if any) consideration to the future. He is the one to acknowledge the ultimate price he has to pay for his passion for life:

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. (p. 108)

### Analysis

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* exhibits the harsh and often forgotten reality of the Black community in America. It is Wright’s wake-up call for America to the cruel and inhuman condition of the Black community. Twagilimana and Sublette (2011) see this as being symbolically reflected in the alarm clock that opens the very first pages of the novel. Indeed, much of the first book (appropriately titled “Fear”) aims to introduce the readers to Bigger’s life and familiarize the reader with the socio-economical, historical and political forces that have shaped who and what Bigger Thomas is. Bigger lives in a world that doesn’t provide him many chances to succeed. As a black man, he is deprived of many opportunities in life including his dream of becoming a pilot. Bigger’s friend Gus states it best saying "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane," (Wright, 1970, p. 20). Instead, Bigger is limited to performing menial low paying jobs that have little to no future prospects.

Left with no option, Bigger accepts a job as a chauffeur to the Daltons and, much like Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice* ends up smothering Mary with a pillow leading to her unintentional death. This murder proves to be a crucial turning point not only to Bigger’s life but to the ontological perception of himself. In Bigger’s own words “I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ’em” (Wright, 1970, p. 392). In typical Sisyphian fashion, Bigger takes full ownership of his crime and even tries to convince himself that it wasn’t in fact an accident. Going even further he defines himself in terms of his crime “what I killed for, I am!” (Wright, 1970, p391-2). It is hard to look past the Cartesian implications of Bigger’s statement and the Sartrean emphasis on acceptance of responsibility. Bigger obtains a new more aware perspective on life in which he defines himself on his own terms. Bigger refuses to be a cliché or a predefined stereotype. He becomes the doer

instead of the one acted upon and the agent instead of the object. Bigger “wanted to do something” in his life and finally, he has. (p. 390)

Needless to say, the self-recognition and understanding that Bigger derived from the violent murder sparked controversy. James Baldwin (1961) in *Nobody Knows My Name*, argued that "one of the severest criticisms that can be leveled" against *Native Son* is Richard Wright's "gratuitous and compulsive" interest in violence in the book (p.11). Similarly, Nathon Scott (1970) complained that Wright's obsession with violence led to the destruction of his characters. Robert Butler (1986) disagrees, revealing that Right was always in full control of the violence adding that "Native Son, his masterwork, uses violence extensively but as a necessary and powerful reflector of the deepest recesses of its central character's radically divided nature." (p. 10)

On a wider spectrum, Bigger's murder reveals a rudimentary issue plaguing the very structure of American society; namely racism. The White dominated American society reverts to overt racial slurs and racist terminology. Bigger is killed "nigger", "ape", "black thing" and "dog". Furthermore, his crime is not attributed to his own personal shortcomings but rather to the underlying innate inferiority of his race. By simply being black, he is guilty no matter how he tries to defend himself:

Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said. (Wright, 1970, p101)

Despite all these circumstances and the inevitability of his death, Bigger refuses to find comfort in both religion or hope. Bigger, on multiple occasions, rejects the false comfort that religion would provide. Furthermore, he sees religion as being partially the problem for providing this false sense of relief while not actually solving anything. The cross that the reverend so vehemently tries to impose on him is the same cross used in racist rituals. The “cross was not the cross of Christ, but the cross of the Ku Klux Klan” (313). Not only does this portray Bigger as an absurd hero but it is also revealing of Wright himself. From his early life, Wright had been critical of religion's impact on the Black community and its role as a co-conspirator in the misery of the black community. In his famous essay entitled "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (2001), Wright lays out these ideas.

It was through the portals of the church that the American Negro first entered the shrine of western culture. Living under slave conditions of life, bereft of his African heritage, the Negroes' struggle for the religion of the plantations between 1820-1860 assumed the form of a struggle for human rights. It remained a relatively revolutionary struggle until religion began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial. But even today there are millions of American Negroes whose only sense of a whole universe, whose only relation to society and man, and whose only guide to personal dignity comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation. (p.54)

Religion for Bigger, like for Wright is unmistakably a method of escape that provides little to no actual solutions. He compares it to the whiskey Bessie drinks to drown her problems. This view is undeniably similar to that of Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger*

(French: *L'Étranger*). Meursault is condemned to death for murdering an Arab and fully embraces and confesses to his guilt yet refuses the consultation provided to him by religion.

Bigger treats hope in a similar fashion to religion. Early on in the novel readers see that Bigger lives in a hopeless, bleak situation where his downfall seems all but imminent. In fact, Bigger can be seen as a symbol of the hopelessness of the African-American community as a whole. He is deprived of any hope of achieving his dream of becoming a pilot; he is deprived of all but the minor, low-paying jobs and has no future prospect. In an essay entitled *Boys in the Hood: Black Male Community in Richard Wright's Native Son* (2006), Aime Ellis states that "for Bigger and his friends (Gus, G. H., and Jack), Chicago's Black Belt afforded virtually no opportunities to gain access to industrial jobs or vocational training programs". (p.184)

### Conclusion

Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas is a vibrant example of an absurd hero. He revolts against a structurally racist and biased society. Like Sisyphus, he owns his act and takes full responsibility while refusing to resort to any form of comfort provided by either hope or religion.

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