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Said In His Heart: The Murders in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Scott T. VanDuzer

Native Son, a powerful novel by Richard Wright, was first published in 1945. Set in Chicago in the 1930's, Wright's novel is more than just a description of an age. It is the story of a small life caught in a tight, cramped, poor, and dangerous place.

Native Son is ostensibly the story of Bigger Thomas and his murder of Mary Dalton. Although the first killing mentioned in the book is the killing of Mary Dalton, this is neither the first nor the most important murder. Wright clearly refers to four different murders or killings performed by Bigger Thomas. Bigger murders Bessie, because she knows he murdered Mary. Bigger's crime did not begin with Mary, however, for "he had killed many times before" (101). And these "murders" themselves were not the first, for they stem from what Wright tells us was Bigger's very first murder: "he had killed within himself the preacher's haunting picture of life even before; that had been his first murder" (264). Bessie's physical murder stems from the physical murder of Mary, which stems from the many killings before, which stem ultimately from Bigger's first murder, the murder of the preacher's haunting picture of life, and this last is the murder the novel is truly about.

The physical murder of Bessie is the most premeditated, the most cold-blooded, and, to Bigger and most of the others, the most unimportant. The murder of Bessie, even before she fully understands what Bigger had done, is never far from Bigger's mind, and a mixture of events and planning on Bigger's part finally brings it to pass. It is, in every sense of the word, premeditated. When Bessie first suggests that Bigger killed someone, Bigger thinks that stopping Bessie, "who now knew too much, would be easy" (163). "He was afraid that he would have to kill her before it was all over" (170). Finally, he realizes that Bessie is a dangerous burden: "Coldly, he knew that he had to take her with him, and then at some future time settle things with her, settle them in a way that would not leave him in any danger. He thought of it calmly" (215). Bigger is coldly and calmly planning nothing less than the murder of Bessie. Once the murder has been premeditated in such a way, it is only a matter of time until it is coldly and bloodily carried out. When Bigger "lifted the brick again and again, until in falling it struck a sudden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow" (222), he is simply thinking this is the way it had to be and simply feeling that he and the room are cold. But if the murder of Bessie is the most premeditated, and the most cold blooded, it is also the most unimportant. When the coroner deems it imperative that the jury examine one additional piece of evidence to help shed light on the actual manner of the death of *Mary*, he brings out Bessie's body. When Max complains that exhibiting the

body serves no decent purpose, the coroner complains that "it will enable the jury to determine the exact manner of the death of Mary Dalton" (306). "The black girl was merely evidence" (307). Bigger, for his part has "completely forgotten" Bessie, not because he has thought any less of Bessie, but because the meaning of Mary's death has caused him more fear. Though Bigger plans to kill Bessie and coldly does so, the murder of Bessie is important only because of the light it can shed on the death of Mary. Bigger himself has to kill Bessie because she knows about Mary.

If Bessie's death is premeditated, Mary's is spontaneous; if Bessie's is cold blooded, Mary's is done in fear; and finally, if Bessie's is unimportant, Mary's is very important. To think that Bigger has any plans to kill Mary is absurd. The physical death is accidental in every sense of the word. He doesn't even know he kills her. When he is describing Mary's death to Bessie, she asks "'You didn't plan to kill her?'" "'Naw,'" Bigger replies, "'I swear I didn't'" (213). It is clear that he didn't. When the smothering actually takes place, he is acting, as the rat in the corner, purely out of fear. From the beginning of the scene to the end, Bigger is fearful: "He stood, holding her in his arms, fearful, in doubt" (83). He is seized by a "hysterical terror" when Mrs. Dalton appears at the door. His fists are clenched in fear, he "waits tensely, afraid to move for fear" (84). Frantically, he catches a corner of the pillow and puts it over Mary's mouth. He holds it there "intimidated to the core by the awesome white blue [Mrs. Dalton] floating toward him" (85), and only realizes later that Mary suffocates. But if Mary's death is unplanned, and even unknown as it is committed, it is also, in retrospect, of great importance. The white people, not knowing, consider it a rape and murder of a white girl by a black man, and this belief gives the death great importance. For Bigger, it is the crime for which he will die. Mary's death caused him the most fear: "not her death in itself, but what it meant to him as a Negro" (306). This murder is the most important physical killing that occurs in the book, but Wright, at this point, leaves physical killing and the public sentiment and courtroom dramatics behind and begins to explain why Bigger killed Mary.

He begins to talk of two less physical, more internal, more important murders, of which the physical murders are only the outward manifestations. "Though he had killed by accident [Mary], not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident" (101). As Bigger thinks, the physical reality begins to slip away. It *was* a physical accident, but "in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental" (101). "He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstances to make visible or dramatic his will to kill" (101). These murders are certainly less physical, having, as Bigger reveals, nothing to make them visible. They are internal and committed perhaps as part of his daily existence, but they are also more important, as he, in contemplating them after he has killed Mary, begins to realize: "His crime seemed natural; he felt that all his life had been leading to something like this" (101). No longer a matter of wonder, the understanding or realization that these murders have occurred reveals to him the hidden meaning of his life. What is this hidden meaning? It is in his thinking about

and developing of this idea of the hidden meaning that he emerges with a new world order. This is important to Bigger, more important than any physical murder he committed: "Things were becoming clear; he would know how to act from now on" (108). But as Bigger contemplates this thought in relationship to the "murder" he has been committing all along, he thinks that "in a certain sense he had been doing just that in a loud and rough manner all his life" (108). Why did he make this connection? It is a connection between what he knows he has been doing, murdering in his mind, and what he has now done outwardly. The two statements, so similar, are verbal expressions of his "new" philosophy on how to live his life. But the question might arise as to why he needs to come up with a new way to live his life. A look at the remaining murder will answer that question.

Wright calls this the first and as the first, the seminal, murder. When the preacher is talking with Bigger, Bigger feels a sense of guilt deeper than even his murder of Mary had made him feel: "He had killed within himself the preacher's haunting picture of life even before he had killed Mary: that had been his first murder . . . to live, he had created a new world for himself" (264). What is the haunting picture of life that he has killed? It is the story that will make "'yo' heart glad" (263). It is the story of creation, temptation, sin, redemption, salvation, and hope. It is, as Bigger views it, the picture that gives rise to the quiet presence of his mother, "inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded" (102). Once, when Bigger was hiding in the city, he awakened to the sound of singing and shouting. It was music from a church and he tried not to listen, "but it seeped into his feelings, whispering of another way of life and death . . . he shook his head, trying to rid himself of the music" (237). But try as he might, "the singing filled his ears; it was complete, self-contained, and it mocked his fear and loneliness, his deep yearning for a sense of wholeness" (238), and its "fullness contrasted so sharply with his hunger, its richness with his emptiness, that he recoiled from it while answering it. Would it not have been better for him had he lived in that world the music sang of?" (238). It was "his mother's world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have" (238), because he had done what he could to murder this haunting picture of life. But now the preacher was making it walk before his eyes like a ghost and creating within him a sense of exclusion. "Why should this thing rise now to plague him after he had pressed a pillow of fear and hate over its face to smother it to death?" (264). After he had smothered the preacher's haunting image of life, he had created a new world in which he could live. This first murder, his seminal murder of this picture, is the wellspring from which the other murders and killings come. He replaces the murdered picture with his new order, and it is no mistake that he makes the replacement in the presence of his mother. Before him is what he is saying no to, what he is choosing to murder; within him what he is saying yes to. When the preacher is making the story of creation and redemption walk before him, Bigger first feels awe and wonder, then gets upset: "How could he believe in that which he had killed?" (265). The preacher puts a cross around Bigger's neck.

Later, in his cell, he grips the "cross and snatched it from his throat. He threw it away, cursing a curse that was almost a scream, 'I don't want it!'" (312). The men gasp at him and look amazed. "'Don't throw that away, boy. That's your cross!'" "'I can die without a cross!'" (313), Bigger replies, verbally sealing his fate that has nothing to do with his murder of Bessie, his killing of Mary, or the numerous murders he committed within himself, and everything to do with his first murder, the murder that creates the story of Bigger Thomas, the killing of the preacher's haunting picture of life.

Bigger, in pressing a pillow of fear and hate over the preacher's haunting picture of life, smothers it to death. By this rejection and murder he sets himself free into a world without a center, a core, or an axis. He must create for himself a new world, and the world he chooses to create is one in which he acted as people thought he ought to act. Since he hates, he wants to kill, and, although he lives as the others live on the outside, he is murdering and killing many times on the inside. The natural progression, when circumstances conspire to provide him with a victim, is a very real, physical, visible and dramatic expression of his will, the killing of Mary. When Bessie finds out, Bigger's only concern is to protect himself, to settle things in a way which will not leave him in any danger, to make sure of Bessie, that is, to murder her.

In Bigger's final days he drives away his mother, the Negro preacher, and a white priest. "The priest had come to see others since then, but had not stopped to talk with him" (382). He felt that his making the priest stand away from him and "wonder about his motives for refusing to accept the consolations of religion was a sort of recognition of his personality on a plane other than that which the priest was ordinarily willing to make" (382). But what sort of personality is the priest recognizing? According to Bigger, it is one without a soul (314), one that came to the end of life without meaning, without anything being settled and without conflicting impulses being resolved. Bigger has, in the words of e.e. cummings, "reaped his sowing and went his came, sowed his isn't and reaped the same."

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