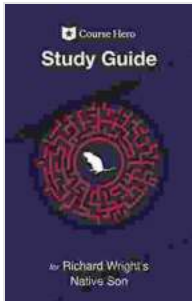


# The Ultimate Study Guide for Richard Wright's Native Son



## Study Guide for Richard Wright's Native Son (Course Hero Study Guides) by Caroline Lawrence

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

Language : English

File size : 1370 KB

Print length : 25 pages

Lending : Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported



Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, is a powerful and unflinching exploration of race, identity, and social injustice in America. This study guide is designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the novel's themes, characters, symbolism, and historical context. By delving into these elements, students can gain a deeper appreciation for Wright's masterpiece and excel in their academic pursuits.

## Themes

### Race and Identity

At its core, *Native Son* is a novel about race and identity. Protagonist Bigger Thomas, a young black man living in Chicago, struggles to find his place in a society that devalues black lives. The novel explores the ways in which race shapes Bigger's experiences, from his interactions with white people to his own internal conflicts about his identity.

## **Social Injustice**

Native Son also shines a light on the social injustices that African Americans faced in the early 20th century. The novel depicts the systemic racism and poverty that pervade Bigger's community. Wright shows how these conditions contribute to Bigger's feelings of alienation and despair.

## **Existentialism**

Beneath its social realism, Native Son is also an existentialist novel. Bigger is a complex and deeply flawed character who grapples with questions of free will, responsibility, and the meaning of life. The novel explores the ways in which Bigger's choices shape his destiny and ultimately lead to his downfall.

## **Characters**

### **Bigger Thomas**

Bigger Thomas is the central character in Native Son. He is a young black man who is struggling to find his place in a racist society. Bigger is a complex and contradictory character, capable of both violence and compassion. His actions throughout the novel are driven by a deep-seated sense of alienation and anger.

### **Mary Dalton**

Mary Dalton is the daughter of a wealthy white family. She is a kind and compassionate woman who tries to help Bigger after he accidentally kills her sister. Mary represents the possibility of redemption for Bigger, but his own fears and insecurities ultimately prevent him from accepting her help.

### **Mr. Dalton**

Mr. Dalton is Mary's father. He is a wealthy and powerful man who is deeply prejudiced against African Americans. Mr. Dalton represents the white establishment that oppresses Bigger and his community.

## **Jan Erlone**

Jan Erlone is a white Communist who becomes involved in Bigger's case. Erlone believes that Bigger is a victim of society and that his actions can be justified. Erlone's involvement in the case raises questions about the role of ideology and social activism in the fight for racial justice.

## **Symbolism**

### **The Rat**

The rat is a recurring symbol in *Native Son*. It represents Bigger's feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt. The rat also symbolizes the oppressive forces in society that are closing in on Bigger.

### **The Basement**

The basement in the Dalton family's home is where Bigger hides after killing Mary. The basement represents Bigger's sense of isolation and confinement. It is also a place where he confronts his own inner demons.

### **The Fire**

The fire at the end of the novel symbolizes the destruction of Bigger's life. It is also a symbol of the racial tensions that are tearing the city of Chicago apart.

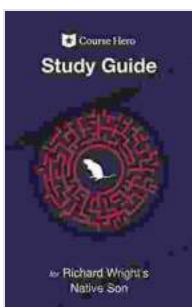
## **Historical Context**

Native Son was written during the Great Depression, a time of widespread economic hardship and social unrest in the United States. The novel reflects the growing frustration and anger among African Americans over the continued racism and discrimination they faced. Native Son also helped to raise awareness of the plight of African Americans and contributed to the civil rights movement that emerged in the years following its publication.

## Study Questions

\* How does Native Son explore the themes of race and identity? \* What are the major symbols in the novel and what do they represent? \* How does the historical context of the novel influence the characters and events? \* What are the different perspectives on Bigger Thomas that are presented in the novel? \* How does Native Son challenge the traditional notions of black identity?

Richard Wright's Native Son is a powerful and enduring work of literature. This study guide has provided a comprehensive overview of the novel's themes, characters, symbolism, and historical context. By engaging with these elements, students can gain a deeper understanding of Wright's masterpiece and its enduring significance.



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