

## Great Books: *Native Son*: Teacher's Guide

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Curriculum Focus:** Literature

**Lesson Duration:** Two or three class periods

### Program Description

Set in Chicago in the 1930s, Richard Wright's novel takes a candid look at inner-city poverty and feelings of hopelessness and what it means to be black in America. It tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man who is caught in a downward spiral after he kills his white employer's daughter in a moment of panic.

- I Introduction (12 min.)
  - II. A Love Story (12 min.)
  - III. A Murderer Is Born (14 min.)
  - IV. An Expatriate in Paris (12 min.)
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### Lesson Plan

#### *Student Objectives*

- Students will understand that authors use personification as a literary tool to convey underlying meanings and messages.
- Students will understand that a persuasive essay is an attempt to sway an audience to agree with the stated point of view.
- Students will understand that persuasive arguments include a clearly stated position, evidence or examples of that position, a refutation of the opposition, a restated position, and a conclusion of the position.

#### *Materials*

- *Great Books: Native Son* video and VCR, or DVD and DVD player
- *Native Son*, by Richard Wright
- Paper
- Pens and pencils

## Procedures

1. Begin the lesson by discussing *Native Son*. Talk about how Richard Wright uses his books' characters to paint a portrait of racism in America and what aspects of society each of his major characters represents. (For example, Jan and Mary may be interpreted as personified versions of communism.) A good way to introduce the concept of personification in *Native Son* is to view segments of the DVD.
2. Ask students: Do you think Bigger Thomas should have been put to death for Mary Dalton's murder? Which characters do you think would want Bigger severely punished for Mary's murder? Which characters would see Mary's murder as an accident and would not want Bigger put to death for it? As a class, discuss the personalities and attributes of the novel's major characters.
3. Tell students that they will be writing persuasive essays about whether Bigger should be prosecuted for Mary's murder. The essays will be written from the point of view of one of these characters in *Native Son*.
  - Mary Dalton
  - Mr. Dalton
  - Bessie
  - Max
  - Bigger
  - Jan
4. Review or explain the structure of a persuasive essay and what the author does in each section.
  - Introduction: State the facts surrounding the issue.
  - Position: Clearly state your position on the issue. Cite evidence and examples that defend the validity of your position.
  - Refute the opposition: Examine the other side of the argument and use evidence and examples that provide flaws in the opposing case.
  - Restatement: Restate your case once you have refuted the opposition.
  - Conclusion: Conclude with the reasons why your position is the right one; do not add any new information in the conclusion.
5. Allow students time in class and at home to research their characters' perspectives and to write their essays. Talk about the types of evidence that they can use to write their essays: quotes from Wright, scenes from the book, and quotes from the characters they are writing about or from scholars and others who have interpreted these characters.
6. Once the essays are complete, divide students into groups according to the characters they chose – a group of students who wrote from Bessie's perspective, one that wrote from Mary's point of view, etc. Have students read their essays aloud to their groups and discuss why they

chose the position they did. If all the students in a particular group did not take the same position in their essay, have them discuss their reasons.

7. When group discussions have finished, have students share their essays and group comments with the whole class.

## Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students actively participated in class and group discussions; wrote well-written and well-structured persuasive essays that correctly included all five components of a persuasive argument; drew insightful conclusions based on the lesson.
- **2 points:** Students participated somewhat in class and group discussions; completed their essays with at least three of the five components of a well-written persuasive argument; drew some conclusions based on the lesson.
- **1 point:** Students did not participate in class or group discussions; were unable to complete their essays or correctly included two or fewer components of a well-written persuasive argument; had difficulty drawing conclusions based on the lesson.

## Vocabulary

### communist

*Definition:* A member of the communist movement or party; an organization that advocates the elimination of private property

*Context:* Wright was initially drawn to the American communist movement because the community offered encouragement, support, and opportunity for African American intellectuals.

### composite

*Definition:* Combining the typical or essential characteristics of individuals making up a group

*Context:* Bigger Thomas is a composite of many African American men Wright came into contact with.

### Jim Crow laws

*Definition:* Ethnic discrimination, especially against blacks, by legal enforcement or traditional sanctions

*Context:* Jim Crow laws enforced a segregated society in America and contributed to the anger and hostility African American men, like Wright's character Bigger Thomas, felt toward white society.

### personify

*Definition:* To represent an idea or abstraction in or as if in bodily form; to be the embodiment or perfect example of

*Context:* Wright used Max, Bigger's white lawyer, to personify the issue of racism in America.



**racism**

*Definition:* Belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities

*Context:* *Native Son* is Richard Wright's commentary on racism in America.

**Academic Standards****Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)**

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit link:

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media; Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process, Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing, Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions, Gathers and uses information for research purposes; Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
- Life Skills – Thinking and Reasoning: Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument

**The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)**

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association have developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching the English language arts. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>

This lesson plan addresses the following NCTE standards:

- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.



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## Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>
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## DVD Content

This program is available in an interactive DVD format. The following information and activities are specific to the DVD version.

### *How To Use the DVD*

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

**Play Video** – This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

**Video Index** – Here the video is divided into four parts (see below), indicated by video thumbnail icons. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. Brief descriptions and total running times are noted for each part. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

**Curriculum Units** – These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher's Guide. Total running times for these segments are noted. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

**Standards Link** – Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

**Teacher Resources** – This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

### *Video Index*

#### **I. Introduction (12 min.)**

An introduction to author Richard Wright and to the story told in his literary portrait of racism in America, *Native Son*.



## II. A Love Story (12 min.)

After driving Mary and her boyfriend around while they are drinking heavily, Bigger helps Mary to her room. Afraid of being caught with a white girl, Bigger accidentally suffocates Mary when her mother enters the bedroom.

## III. A Murderer Is Born (14 min.)

Bigger kills his girlfriend Bessie after they flee when Mary's remains are found. Authors and scholars discuss the two murders and the symbolism behind the white lawyer Bigger meets when he is thrown in jail.

## IV. An Expatriate in Paris (12 min.)

Wright parts ways with the communists and becomes a dangerous man to the FBI. He moves to Paris where he speaks out against France's colonization of Africa and once again becomes a marked man.

## Curriculum Units

### 1. Introduction: *Native Son*

*Pre-viewing question*

Q: Were African Americans truly free once slavery was abolished?

A: Answers will vary.

*Post-viewing question*

Q: What did *Native Son* represent?

A: It was a composite portrait of black men in America. It represented the social injustice and racism felt by Richard Wright and other African American men he knew.

### 2. An Accidental Murderer

*Pre-viewing question*

Q: Can fear change a person's behavior and personality?

A: Answers will vary.

*Post-viewing question*

Q: How does Bigger's personality change when he is around the Daltons?

A: He becomes subservient and humble. He hides his anger and appears meek.

### 3. Bigger's Fate

*Pre-viewing question*

Q: Bigger is sentenced to death for murdering Mary. Would the outcome of his story have been the same if *Native Son* had been set in the 1990s?

A: Answers will vary.



*Post-viewing question*

Q: How is Bigger changed by his violent acts”?

A: In a strange way, being labeled a murderer frees Bigger and gives him an identity. He is no longer a faceless black man in white America.

**4. Richard Wright: America's Native Son**

*Pre-viewing question*

Q: What were the Jim Crow laws?

A: These laws of racial segregation were first enacted in the late 1800s. Also known as Black Codes, Jim Crow laws barred African Americans from obtaining employment and denied them access to many public and private facilities, including certain hotels, restaurants, and railroad cars.

*Post-viewing question*

Q: Why wouldn't Wright sell *Native Son* to Hollywood?

A: The Hollywood producers wanted to make Bigger Thomas a white male. Wright felt the integrity of his book, and his own personal integrity, would have been lost if he allowed this change.

**5. An Expatriate in Paris**

*Pre-viewing question*

Q: How did *Native Son* change American culture?

A: It brought to light the violence and racism that existed in American culture and forced Americans to come to terms with it and do something about it.

*Post-viewing question*

Q: Why did Wright's freedom in Paris begin to end?

A: Wright became involved with the liberation movement in Africa, where France had much control. French authorities were worried that he was too interested in their African colonies and were afraid of a massive African revolt, much as American authorities had been afraid of a U.S. race revolt led by Wright.