

Abstract

Richard Wright's *Native Son* & the Dialectics of Black Experience

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The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the ways in which dialectical materialism informs Richard Wright's major fictional work from the 1930s, *Native Son*. While an explication of the dialectics of *Native Son* can proceed in a number of directions, my goal here is to focus on Wright's dialectical representation of *black experience*, a concept that by the 1930s had already become somewhat of a fetish object. It is precisely his dialectical representation of black experience that cuts to the heart of a kind of racial positivism produced by the outpouring of literary works during the Harlem Renaissance. Wright's both depicts a uniquely *black* experience and surpasses it through characterization and a narrative technique that reveals black experience as a moment in an historical dialectic of social relations governed by political and economic power. That is, the novel's development involves Bigger's own emergence from a racial positivism that coincides with a narrative that moves from thick description of narrative details to a dialectical-theoretical presentation of black experience. In both cases, the novel shows black experience as mediated by non-racial class forces and relations. Consequently, *Native Son* both affirms and negates the very notion of black experience and presents a challenge for those then and now who want to affirm black experience as somehow self-contained and

others who want to liquidate it in some universal category, whether in Americanism or in a reductive Marxist class analysis.