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**The American Nightmare: An Analysis of
Racism and Injustice in Richard Wright's
*Native Son***

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ABSTRACT

The American Dream is an ideal that has crossed borders and has become a worldwide reference. Influenced by movies, music, and books, an altered and exaggeratedly idealized version has reached many countries. Therefore, the main objective of this thesis is to dismantle this dream by showing the harsh reality of this utopian model. Injustice and racism are just two of the many barriers that separate African Americans from achieving the American Dream. This paper will outline the main factors that prevent the black community from thriving in American society. To this effect, the novel *Native Son* written by Richard Wright has been analyzed, concluding that indeed, race, age, sex, and economic status are factors that influence the accessibility to the American Dream.

Keywords: American Dream, Richard Wright, Racism, *Native Son*, Analysis, Bigger Thomas

RESUMEN

El Sueño Americano es un ideal que ha traspasado fronteras llegando a convertirse en una referencia mundial. Influenciado por el cine, la música y los libros, una versión alterada y exageradamente idealizada ha alcanzado a numerosos países. Por ello, el objetivo principal de este trabajo de fin de grado es desmantelar este sueño mostrando la cruda realidad que entraña este modelo utópico. La injusticia y el racismo son tan solo dos de las muchas barreras que separan a los afroamericanos de alcanzar el mencionado Sueño Americano. En este trabajo se expondrán los principales factores que impiden a la comunidad negra prosperar en la sociedad americana. A tal efecto, la novela *Hijo Nativo* escrita por Richard Wright ha sido analizada, llegando a la conclusión de que efectivamente, la raza, edad, sexo y situación económica son factores que influyen en la accesibilidad al Sueño Americano.

Palabras clave: Sueño Americano, Richard Wright, Racismo, *Hijo Nativo*, Analisis, Bigger Thomas.

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To my uncle Sergio, who has always been like a big brother to me.
Thank you for introducing me to the world of literature and sharing your passion for
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	3
2. Historical context	5
2.1. The American Dream	5
2.2. Exploring the life of Richard Wright	7
2.2.1. Richard Wright	8
2.2.2. <i>Black Boy & American Hunger</i>	9
3. Analysis	13
3.1. <i>Native son</i>	13
3.2. Marginalization and racial oppression	15
3.3. Lack of opportunities	18
3.4. Corruption and violence inherent to the American system	20
3.5. The unfeasible American Dream	23
4. Conclusion	26
5. References	28

“Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step”

Amiri Baraka, *Black Art*

“O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.
The land that’s mine—the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again”

Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again*

1. INTRODUCTION

As of today, when one mentions the United States, ideas such as the land of opportunity, where everything is possible and everyone has a place to build a prosperous future come to mind (Warner, 1950). Strongly linked to this hackneyed perception is the image of the American Dream, a concept that, although it is present in series, television programs, movies, and indeed in books, not many people are aware of its origin and even fewer can give a real definition of what its concept was in the beginnings. The aim of this last-year-dissertation is to contribute to put an end to this unawareness.

The main aims of this paper are to a) frame the concept in its historical context and to explain how it emerged as well as to provide a clear and concise definition of the American Dream; b) identify and determine whether the American Dream is indeed an ideal that reflects the reality or, on the contrary, is merely a dream.

To accomplish these objectives a variety of articles along with the original and historical publications that shaped the concept of the United States have been read and analyzed. Accordingly, one of the main sources of my analysis includes the novel *Native Son* (1940) by the African-American writer Richard Wright (September 4, 1908 – November 28, 1960). To this analysis, the figure of Bigger is essential not only because he is the protagonist of the story but also because of the background in the creation of his character. Arnold Rampersad (1993) explains in the introduction of *Native Son* how Richard Wright condensed a whole range of the 'black community' in the figure of Bigger Thomas: "there were literally millions of him everywhere" (10). So I consider that the events Bigger suffered and the feelings he experienced are grounded on real life and substantiated facts that represents the main ideas of the American society. As the lawyer Max argues, Bigger is not alone in suffering the marginalization and oppression as I will analyze in section 3: "Is he an exception? Or are there others? There are others, Your Honor, millions of others" (Wright, 1940:309). His family, his girlfriend Bessie, and his colleagues Gus, G.H. and Jack have all suffered. And like them, so have all African-Americans. All of the elements that I have discussed, the oppression, the lack of opportunities, and the corrupt system on which America bases its ideals, have contributed to ensure that African Americans have never felt free in the land of liberty:

"Not only had he lived where they told him to live, not only had he done what they told him to do, not only had he done these things until he had killed to

be quit of them; but even after obeying, after killing, they still ruled him. He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored life and dictated the terms of death” (Wright, 1940:261)

This dissertation is organized into multiple chapters, each focused on a specific topic. First, I will provide an exploration of the historical context, focusing both on the concept of the American Dream and its influence on American society, as well as the persona of Richard Wright. The latter will explore his life, his autobiographies *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, and Wright’s interpretation of the American Dream. Then, I will continue with an analytical exploration of the novel *Native Son*. This section will include a concise summary of the novel, followed by four subsections, each focusing on the marginalization and racial oppression, the lack of opportunities of black people, the corruption and violence within American system, and some of the characters’ perceptions of the American Dream. Finally, I will encapsulate the key findings of the analysis in a concluding chapter.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1. THE AMERICAN DREAM

“It gets easier. Every day, it gets a little easier. But you gotta do it every day. That’s the hard part. But it does get easier”

BoJack Horseman, season 2, episode 12

This quote closes the second season of the popular Netflix series, *BoJack Horseman*. This adult animated psychological comedy-drama produced by Lisa Hanawalt and Raphael Bob-Waksberg premiered on August 22, 2014, deals with the life of BoJack Horseman a drug addict, alcoholic and old star of the 1990s Hollywood (Netflix, Inc., 2014). This show portrays the day-to-day life of mainly, people from Los Angeles, California, but it also depicts the general culture of the United States. This series is characterized not only by faithfully reflecting human life but also by reflecting a very specific humankind, the American society. At the end of the second season BoJack who is desperately trying to change his lifestyle, decides to start by picking up some habits, among which is running. Physically and metaphorically defeated, a monkey-like elite runner approaches him and pronounces the words mentioned above. The American society depicted in the show is often burdened with huge clichés but if one stands out amongst them all, it is the pursuit of success and happiness. Two fundamental concepts that underpin the definition of the well-known American Dream which according to Rank et al. (2014:1), “lies at the heart and soul of the country” and hence, is so deep-rooted and accepted that it is often sketched in everyday matters such as television series as it may be *BoJack Horseman*.

In 1931 James Truslow Adams published *The Epic of America* now considered as a compilation of “narrative histories of the United States in which the political, military, diplomatic, social, and economic strands are skillfully interwoven” (Amazon, Inc., 2012). The conception of this book took place at a crucial time for the expansion of American ideals; its development was bordered by the depths of the Great Depression in the spring of 1931. This broad economic catastrophe as

Samuelson (2012: 36) defines it, “produced high unemployment from which there is no easy and obvious escape”. Adams seized this tenuous situation and exploited it to push his ideas and promote American ideals in *The Epic of America*. In this book, Adams first coined the term “American Dream” as this was his main argument that would enable the nation to achieve unity. Adam (1931) wrote:

If, as I have said, the things already listed were all we had had to contribute, America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind. But there has also been the American *dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. (317)

For Adams, America stands as a land of opportunity in which, regardless of one’s circumstances, one can succeed and achieve the highest goal: to live a “better and richer and fuller” life. However, in order to achieve the American Dream, more than just intentions are required; hard work, optimism, and skills are for Adams the three essential attributes to reaching it (Rank et al, 2014). This advertising slogan was not only utilized by its creator to revitalize the spirits and bring new hope to the nation, but numerous historical figures contributed to the entrenchment of this motto in the American culture. While Thomas Jefferson pioneered the journey after being the first who attempted to establish the American Dream, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, or Woodrow Wilson followed in his stead (Crittenden, 1932). According to Crittenden (1932), a mass audience will be attracted to it as it is written in such a way that it appeals to everyone. Additionally, Rank et al (2014) suggest that this phenomenon is caused due to the attainability of the discourse, the American Dream is presented as a reachable target for any man inasmuch as “we commit ourselves to hard work and perseverance” (2); analogously, to the way the monkey character tells BoJack “[b]ut you gotta do it every day. That’s the hard part. But it does get easier” (Bob-Waksberg & Hanawalt, 2014, 00:24:24).

Today, the American Dream continues to be deeply rooted not only in America but all over the world. Numerous economists have suggested that “the American Dream may be the United States’ primary ‘export’ to other nations in the modern world economy”. Although these nations are often not fully reflected in

American society, multiple sociologists have uncovered a pattern that would seem to indicate that certain ‘cultural goals’ and ‘lifestyle practices’ are followed and mimicked abroad (Hauhart, R. C, 2015: 65-66). Yet many scholars such as Rank et al (2014) have expressed concern over whether the American Dream is just that, a dream rather than a reality. The truth is that although Adams (2017) initially implied that everyone regardless of economic status, race, or gender can succeed, that is not veracious. This thought has been voiced by such disparate figures as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous speech *I Have a Dream*, singer Nina Simone in her song *Mississippi Goddam*, and the author Richard Wright in his novel *Native Son*. Although Adams believed in equal opportunity for everyone, black people still have a long way to go to be fully accepted. Adams’ American Dream will not be a reality until racism disappears completely, and that is for Richard Wright to know all too well.

Wright views the American Dream not as a road to be travelled to achieve success and happiness, but as a tool that must be utilized. A sharp pencil and a critical lens through which to examine and write the arduous road Afro-Americans have to endure as they confront the clear inequality that plagues America. In consequence, in this paper I will analyze through the lens of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and his own life experiences, his perspective on the American Dream as well as the importance and consequences of racism.

2.2. EXPLORING THE LIFE OF RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright (1945:219) wrote, “[a]ll my life, had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel”. That is why in order to have a better understanding of Wright's work, I consider it necessary to allude to his life as well as to two of his most famous autobiographies, *Black Boy* (1945) and *American Hunger* (1977). Therefore, this section will be subdivided into two parts. The first will deal with the life of Richard Wright based on mere facts that befell his life. Getting to know the author’s life from a subjective point of view will not only enable the reader to know how he lived and the education he received but will also give a deeper and

more personal context to his work. On the other hand, the second part will focus on his two most famous autobiographies mentioned above. These two writings will contribute to explaining the way Wright understood his life, his interpretation and opinion about the American Dream, and how this concept was influenced and shaped by his living.

2.2.1. RICHARD WRIGHT

The novelist and short-story writer Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908, near Natchez (Mississippi). He was born into a racially segregated southern family (Britannica, 2024). His grandparents had been slaves and as he recounts in his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), which I will discuss in greater depth in the next section. His father Nathan Wright left his family to move in with another woman when the young Wright was only 4 years old. His abandoned mother was left in charge of her children, making it very difficult for her to support the family both economically and emotionally. This delicate situation in which his mother was involved, led Wright to wander from place to place to a different relative from time to time. In 1927, when he was under the care of his aunt and uncle, they headed north in the Northward Migration in which thousands of African Americans fled north in search of a higher quality of life and better opportunities. So, at the age of nineteen, Wright traveled first to Memphis, Tennessee, and finally settled in Chicago (Wright, 1945). It was there that he was presented with the opportunity to work on his great passion, writing. Through the Federal Writers' Project, he gained experience that he later used to his credit when he moved to New York in 1937 (Britannica, 2024). There he worked as editor of the *Communist Daily Worker* in the Harlem district. This was not the first time he had been involved with communist political issues, as five years earlier he had joined the Communist Party. During his tenure at the journal, he wrote about how inequalities, in particular those concerning African Americans, that were being addressed everywhere. Nevertheless, this affiliation in the party lasted until 1944, when he would eventually abandon it. A few years later, expatriated, he moved to

his ultimate residence, Paris, where he died on November 28, 1960, of a heart attack at the age of 52 (Britannica, 2024).

2.2.2. BLACK BOY & AMERICAN HUNGER

As Thaddeus explains, “there are two kinds of autobiography, defined and open. In a defined autobiography, the writer presents his life as a finished product [...] while in an open autobiography he [the author] does not wish to supply a fulcrum, does not proffer conclusions and solutions” (Thaddeus, 1985:199). An example of a defined one would be the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) written by the widely known author Frederick Douglass. In this slave narrative, the ex-slave recounts his life with a specific structure and envisions to achieve a plateau. This means, he moves from “self-denial to self-discovery” (Thaddeus, 1985:199) and concludes the novel with a reflection that brings to a close a lifetime of personal development; “you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (Douglass, 1845:57). On the other hand, *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, stand as examples of open autobiography. Even though some authors such as Thaddeus consider the novel to present some kind of metamorphosis, one of the requirements necessary to consider an autobiography defined (Thaddeus, 1985); the main purpose of Douglass was no other than just simply narrating his life as he points: “It [*Black Boy*] is honest. Straight. And many people say it to themselves when they see a *Negro* and wonder how he lives... *Black Boy* seems to me to be not only a tittle, but a kind of heading of the whole general theme” (Fabre, 1973:254).

Both *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* are autobiographies that narrate Wright’s life. Nevertheless, a long list of differences sets them apart. The former, published in 1945, was an “instant best-seller” that compiles the early life of Wright, including his childhood and young manhood while living in the South (Britannica, 2024). Some scholars such as Lewis Gannett consider it to be “one of the great American autobiographies”, others like Stephen Butterfield consider it

to be “one of the modern survivals of the pattern of the slave narrative” and therefore, other academics refer to it as “easily misread” or “violent” (Thaddeus, 1985:201, 211-213). *American Hunger*, on the other hand, was published in 1977, seventeen years after the author’s death. It includes the passages that cover his march from the time he fled to the North, yet the book was censored and many of its original and controversial passages were removed before it was published (Britannica, 2024). This autobiography, however, was not as well received as *Black Boy* as Thaddeus (1985) explains:

Although pieces of the end of the original *American Hunger* were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Mademoiselle* before *Black Boy* itself actually appeared, it obviously could not reach as large an audience as *Black Boy* itself. (211)

“One of the things that made me write is that I realize that I’m a very average *Negro*... maybe that’s what makes me extraordinary” (Thaddeus, 1985:202). This is Richard Wright’s self-perception of himself; an “average *Negro*” who simply narrates his experiences so that other people can imagine what life is like for a *Negro*. Wright’s whole life has been shaped by dichotomies: North & South, human & animal, clean & dirty, tender & cruel, peaceful & violent, etc. And it is these dichotomies, that have been present not only in his work but also in his own persona, “Wright’s experiences have made him strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful” (Thaddeus, 1985:201). But if one of these combinations stands out from the rest, it is the pair of Black & White. The contrast between black and white has obsessed and haunted the author of *Native Son* since he was a child. The figure of the white men and the concept of whiteness tormented Wright to the point that he could not avoid mentioning it in his daily life.

Black Boy opens with an initial paragraph in which this is made clear: “[...] I crossed restlessly to the window and pushed aside the long, fluffy white curtains - which I had been forbidden to touch [...]” (Wright, 1945:3). With a simple sentence, the author already reveals the apprehension he has against the concept of whiteness. The importance here does not lie in the curtains themselves but in their color, which he bothers to mention: the curtains are neither blue nor brown

but white. Just a few pages further on we see the consequences of this: “Now I was wondering just how the long fluffy white curtains would look if I lit a bunch of straws and held it under them [...] I had just wanted to see how the curtains would look when they burned” (Wright, 1945:4-5). Every instance he mentions something white, the author refers to its ‘opposite’, black. So the fluffy white curtains contrast with the blackness of the ashes after being burned. Another clear example of this is the blackboard of the school he attends. Wright could mention only the blackboard but instead mentions the white chalk as well (Wright, 1945). When he hears that they have to travel to Memphis by boat, his first thought turns to the same issue, “What color is the boat?” “White” answers his mother. But once again the obsession is stronger in his mind and although the boat is clearly white, he can only see a “tiny, dirty boat” (Wright, 1945:8-9). In this way, in his head the white color is associated with cleanliness and good and the black color with dirt and evil, thus creating unlimited opposite dichotomies that confront each other, white and clean against black and dirty.

Another concept that plagued Wright’s life and works is his sense of wander and although it may seem very universal, it is remarkably characteristic of black people as Florette Henri noted “American blacks had always been moving from one part of the country to another, and also out of the country, looking for freedom and opportunity” (Yarborough, 1981:35-36). That sense of wander is partly triggered by his joining in the previously mentioned northward migration (Britannica, 2024). Just like a large part of the African American population that migrated northward in the hope of finding better living conditions and opportunities, Wright expected a similar fate, but when he arrives in Chicago, all hopes and dreams of finding a home are dashed: “My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies” (Thaddeus, 1985:211-212). This discomfort pursued Wright in Chicago, but as Thaddeus (1985) rightly mentions, he could not find that comfort in Chicago or anywhere else in the United States (212). After the Second World War, settled in Paris, all those opportunities and hopes that he does not find in America seem to come to him in France. In a letter he sends to his editor, Richard Wright wrote the following about the place, “Ed, Paris is all I ever hoped to think it was [...] There

is such an absence of race hate that it seems a little unreal. Above all, Paris strikes me as being truly a gentle city, with gentle manner” (Thaddeus, 1985:212).

All of these life experiences partly recounted in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* formed the conception of the notion of the American Dream for Richard Wright; “the American dream which Wright could not honestly elicit in the last pages of his *Black Boy* simply did not exist for him” said Thaddeus (1985:212). It was not until he settled in Paris and moved away from ‘the mud and scum’ that was America and in which he grew up that he was able to find the opportunities and freedom he craved for so long.

3. ANALYSIS

Once the historical context and the life of Richard Wright have been analyzed in previous sections as well as the emergence and establishment of the American Dream both in the United States and in the rest of the world, this section seeks to analyze the way in which racism and injustice are manifested in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. This book has a great abundance of autobiographical data and real experiences that the author himself has taken as a reference when writing. This not only offers a much more intimate and personal insight but also provides a true and accurate portrait of how American society was during Richard Wright's lifetime, that is, from the beginning of the twentieth century to almost the end of it. As Arnold Rampersad (1993) points out, "*Native Son* was not an entertaining detective story, as some has supposed, but a serious, even harrowing, text" (12). *Native Son* tried to be a sort of guide aimed at confronting an imminent danger that threatened America: the possibility that a nation as large and powerful as America could not recognize the complexity of the racial relations that were spreading and growing throughout the territory.

My analysis will focus mainly on three aspects in addition to providing a summary of the novel in order to facilitate the understanding of these three points. The first part constitutes a brief synopsis which includes the main events experienced by Bigger Thomas and the rest of the characters. The second part will deal with the marginalization and the racial oppression suffered by black people. The third part will concern the lack of opportunity of those; and finally, the fourth part will address the corruption and violence inherent to the system.

3.1. *NATIVE SON*

Known to be Richard Wright's most widely read and analyzed novel, *Native Son* follows the life and story of Bigger Thomas, a twenty-years-old African-American boy from an all-black, low-income family on the South Side of Chicago who accidentally murders Mary Dalton, the only daughter, and heiress to the Dalton family fortune for whom Bigger works as a chauffeur. The edition I have used

constitutes the last non-edited version that Richard Wright wrote. Of special mention is the scene in which Bigger and Gus enter a movie theater and masturbate in the auditorium. As mentioned in the 'Note on the Texts' section at the end of *Native Son* (1940), this scene naturally caused a lot of commotion and tension because of its explicitness and Wright was encouraged to edit it out. Many other sections were also revised or directly deleted. *Native Son* is divided into three parts called books, each with its title: "Fear", "Flight", and "Fate". Although each chapter is the continuation of the previous one and all of them are part of the whole which is *Native Son*, each has its climax from which the plot develops. The first climax is the murder of Mary Dalton, followed by the second climax which consists of the discovery of her mortal rests along with the murder of Bessie, although this is practically overshadowed. Last but not least, the third climax, comes up with the trial and death sentence of Bigger.

As I mentioned, *Native Son* narrates the life of Bigger Thomas who opens the novel by waking up in his tiny apartment in which he lives with his mother and his two younger siblings, Buddy and Vera. Due to the family's social and economic vulnerability, Bigger is forced to take a job as a chauffeur in the household of the Daltons, a white well-established, and wealthy family. His main duties are chauffeuring the family, especially Mary who is enrolled in college, and tending to the furnace that provides the main heating for the house. On his first week of employment, Bigger is asked to take Mary to school but on the way, she demands him not drive her and instead meet Jan, a young communist with whom she has a relationship. In the process they get drunk and Bigger ends up carrying Mary home with such bad luck that Mrs. Dalton wakes up. Although she is a blind woman, she notices that her daughter has arrived and goes to her room where Bigger and Mary are. In a desperate act to keep himself from being caught in a white woman's room, Bigger puts a pillow over Mary's face to prevent her from making any noise. Eventually, he ends up accidentally suffocating her and therefore achieving the first climax and the end of the first chapter.

The second chapter begins with an alarmed and hysteric Bigger who does not know how to get out of the situation he has gotten himself into. He decides that his best option is to stick Mary in the furnace until her body is charred away and no evidence of the murder is left. To Bigger's surprise the head protrudes from the stove

and he is forced to separate it from the body, creating one of the most violent, bizarre, and visual scenes in the entire novel. During the rest of the chapter, the Daltons and Jan find out about Mary's disappearance and to keep suspicious away from him, Bigger chooses to fake a kidnapping in which, in addition to instilling Jan, forces Bessie to contribute in. When this is heard by the media, a group of journalists bursts into the Dalton's house. Throughout this meeting, Bigger is photographed, interviewed, and targeted as a suspect in the disappearance of the young woman. Mary's remains are eventually discovered in the furnace by a reporter and Bigger flees knowing he will be blamed. He is reunited with Bessie and the two flee together. Desperately fearful of being caught and Bessie will turn him in, Bigger kills Bessie by hitting her over the head with a brick numerous times. At the end of the chapter, Bigger is caught, beaten, and brought to justice by the police.

The third chapter revolves around a single action, Bigger's trial in which Max, a Jewish lawyer friend of Jan's represents him. Even though he does his utmost efforts to save him, Bigger cannot avoid his tragic fate and is condemned to the electric chair. Regardless of the absence of action, this chapter is more of an existential narration rich in dialogues that contribute to the final climax of the novel; Bigger's death.

3.2. MARGINALIZATION AND RACIAL OPPRESSION

The discussion of marginalization and racial oppression is inevitable once we read *Native Son*, as it is present throughout the entire narration. Bigger, as well as the rest of the members of 'the black community' are systematically disempowered and suppressed by a white society that simultaneously promotes the American Dream as something attainable for everyone. This governing group benefits from privileges in American society oppressing those on the lower rungs of the ladder physically, intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, and sometimes unconsciously. Deserving special mention is the fact that those on the lower echelon are not only African Americans, but other groups are also included: Communists, Jews, or simply people coming from different countries with different cultures, languages, and physical traits. Among these, Jews face especially oppression. As Max explains,

they are hated for the mere fact of being Jews: “Oh, they’ll hate me, yes,” said Max. [...] “I’m a Jew and they hate me” (Wright, 1940:282). And in his case, Max is hated for being a Jew who defends a *Negro* as well “And, because I, a Jew, dared defend this Negro boy, for days my mail has been flooded with threats against my life” (Wright, 1940:299).

All in all, these last two groups, Jews and foreigners, live in fact alongside African Americans in the same district as it is mentioned in the novel: “Almost all business in the Black Belt were owned by Jews, Italians, and Greeks” (Wright, 1940:202). This area called Black Belt, as I will explain thereupon, is essential to imagine the degree of marginalization to which African Americans are subjected. In consequence, this section of the analysis seeks to identify those instances in which black characters have been or have felt oppressed.

Marginalization is perhaps the most obvious result of racism that we can find in this novel. The way in which it is portrayed is also very visual and explicit because it is not only mentioned directly but it is a physical phenomenon called the Black Belt. The Black Belt is a neighborhood made for black people to live there, although, as I have mentioned, different ethnicities and races cohabit. Bigger lives in a small room where he sleeps with his mother and his two younger siblings Buddy and Vera. This is a very precarious situation that has been widespread and normalized throughout the families of the neighborhood. Bigger himself realizes this when hiding from the police he sees through the window a couple having sex in front of their three children; altogether living in a single room: “It was familiar; he had seen things like that when he was a little boy sleeping five in a room” (Wright, 1940:201). The fact that the ‘black community’ lives in these poor conditions is not something accidental, but rather that white people, more specifically the ones who hold wealth and power, have forced them to live apart from society. Many characters such as the police officers conducting the investigation are convinced that their actions are of no consequence and that the reason why black people live in the Black Belt has nothing to do with them but rather is their own choice: “Don’t you see it? These Negroes want to be left alone and these Reds are forcing ’em to live with ’em, see? [...] “Say, I’m slanting this to the primitive Negro who doesn’t want to be disturbed by white civilization.” (Wright, 1940:180). Heading the group of those who are convinced that African

Americans want to live apart, we find Mr. Dalton who, in addition to being Bigger's employer, is also the owner of the South Side Real Estate Company. This Corporation holds ownership of the majority of accommodations and buildings rented for black residents within the Black Belt (Wright, 1940:148). In his own words: "I don't think they'd like to live any other place [...] I think Negroes are happier when they're together" (Wright, 1940:257). Based on his speculations and thinking and choosing the 'black community', Mr. Dalton made a fortune by keeping the *Negroes* isolated on the South Site, the place where the Black Belt is settled. This not only benefits the company financially but also ensures that the separation between the black and white communities is preserved: "No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live" (Wright, 1940:202).

The fact that the Black Belt is a place, in other words, that a special neighbor has been constructed to separate both communities and segregate black people, directly influences the psyche of the black characters. The only aspect they retain is a sense of community, especially since the black-only areas belong to white people, as we have seen in the example of Mr. Dalton. Black people have become accustomed to living apart from society to such an extent that they only want to cohabit with people of their own social status and race. Hence, when white people enter the area that is supposed to be considered their safe space, they feel violated and out of place in their own homes. Just as Mary and Jan went to Ernie's Kitchen Shack restaurant where Bigger and his friends used to frequent: "Jan and Mary were eating. Bigger picked up a piece of chicken and bit it. When he tried to chew he found his mouth dry. It seemed that the very organic functions of his body had altered" (Wright, 1940:71). Although in the case of Jan, Mary, and probably most of the characters, this oppression is not meant to be conscious, both the continued mistreatment and a lifetime of living in the same marginalized environment take toll on the psyche of the African Americans. Hence, when we get into Bigger's thoughts, we can see how tense, uncomfortable, and vigilant he is around white people: "He felt that all of the white people in the room were measuring every inch of his weakness. He identified himself with his family and felt their naked shame under the eyes of white folks" (Wright, 1940:232-233). These stress levels cause Bigger to be under permanent

pressure that makes him feel constantly watched, judged, and oppressed. Not to mention the time Bigger felt even accused by the white cat that owns the Dalton household: “Bigger was still, feeling that the cat had given him away, had pointed him out as the murderer of Mary” (Wright, 1940:170). Concomitantly, when he is the one who enters the ‘world reserved for white people’, this internalized oppression makes him somehow know how to behave ‘correctly’, almost in a robotic way: “There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did” (Wright, 1940:50). For Bigger, the streets and neighborhoods inhabited by white people represent a world different from his own, a world that instills terror and fear in him: “He had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him” (Wright, 1940:48). It is precisely this lack of familiarity that makes him fearful, which in turn, provokes a violent reaction: “He was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness.” (Wright, 1940:46).

3.3. LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

As I explained in 2.1, the core of the American Dream lies in making people believe that with effort, determination, and, in short, hard work, success can be achieved. This statement could not be further from the truth, as there is undoubtedly a series of systemic barriers that prevent Bigger, his family, and his friends from prospering. In 3.2. we have observed one of these barriers which is also the only physical that I will mention: The Black belt. However, there is a long list of invisible obstacles that constantly affect these characters. In this section, I will focus exclusively on the lack of educational, economic, and social opportunities that render social promotion for Afro-American characters unfeasible.

““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,” Gus said.” (Wright, 1940:25). This quote perfectly exemplifies those barriers I have mentioned. First, we see how Gus says to

Bigger “If you wasn't black”. This part represents the social barriers, that is to say, racism that separates and marginalizes part of the population because of their skin color. Following the quotation, Gus mentions: “if you had some money” representing the economic barriers because it is well known that African Americans living in the Black Belt are not known for having a strong economy. Lastly, we have “if they'de let you go to that aviation school” representing the social barriers but mainly the educational obstacles. Bigger's dream is to become an airline pilot as he later confesses to Max: “I wanted to be an aviator once. But they wouldn't let me go to the school where I was suppose' to learn it” (Wright, 1940:277). American society, through marginalization and oppression, prevents Bigger, a low-income black man, from joining aviation school: “[t]hey built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line. That kept all the colored boys out” (Wright, 1940:277). It's not just that Bigger was excluded from school, he was also excluded from the army and anywhere else that wasn't connected to serving a white man or outside the boundaries of the Black belt. As he explains, to eke out a living he had to “get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep streets; anything” (Wright, 1940:277). And still, that is not enough to live on.

An important consideration is that we might think the job that Mr. Dalton was offering constitutes an opportunity for Bigger, but this is a bit more complex than it might seem at first glance. On the one hand, this money indeed offers Bigger and his family greater economic stability: “You know, Bigger,” his mother said, “if you don't take that job the relief'll cut us off. We won't have any food.” (Wright, 1940:22). But on the other hand, at what point does being forced to take a job constitute a real opportunity? Bigger wanted to continue studying but due to the precarious situation at home, he needed to put himself to work to allow his younger siblings to continue studying. All Mr. Dalton did was show up at the right moment. He took advantage of the Thomas family's delicate situation, even though he convinced himself he did everything he could for this boy: “I did all I could, when I wanted to give your boy a chance at life” (Wright, 1940:236-237). In addition, Mr. Dalton donates millions of dollars that are invested in the education of Negroes. This might tip Mr. Dalton's scales of generosity were it not for the fact that as attorney Max says, he charges more rent to *Negro* families for the same type of homes he rents to white people, besides

such houses are often in a deplorable condition “Why is it that you exact an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep?” (Wright, 1940:257). This is directly related to the economic and social barriers aforementioned, as social climbing is virtually impossible if the ‘black community’ does not have decent jobs and homes that enable them to have an optimal quality of life. American society instead of supplying these opportunities, exploit them: “[...] black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats” (Wright, 1940:202).

Bigger grew tired of being rejected by society, of paying more for rent just because he is black, of not being free to choose what he wanted to do or what he wanted to devote himself to. Therefore, seeing himself deprived of opportunities, he went down a path he shouldn't have and was forced to create his opportunity: “They don’t give black people a chance, so I took a chance and lost” (Wright, 1940:280). Mary's murder constitutes for Bigger the only moment he could choose what to do, when, and in what way. He always wanted to do what everyone else did: “I wanted to do things. But everything I wanted to do I couldn’t. I wanted to do what the white boys in school did. Some of ’em went to college. Some of’em went to the army. But I couldn’t go” (Wright, 1940:278-279). He created his concept of freedom since the liberty offered by the American society had no place for a black man like him. “Maybe I would’ve been all right if I could’ve done something I wanted to do” (Wright, 1940:279), which means that perhaps if society had behaved slightly nicer with Bigger and the rest of the African Americans, Mary's murder could have been avoided.

3.4. CORRUPTION AND VIOLENCE INHERENT TO THE AMERICAN SYSTEM

In section 3.2. we have seen a very important quotation that will guide the elaboration of the main point of this section: “He was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness.” (Wright, 1940:46). I emphasized this quote

to underscore its importance in showing Bigger's reaction to white people, that is, through violent responses: "he would take his knife and his gun" (Wright, 1940:46). This is precisely what the novel intends to convey, how the continuation of certain actions can trigger violent responses in individuals. We have observed this in point 3.3. By the murder of Mary, Bigger liberates himself from the ongoing fear that white American society constantly inflicts on him: "[...] But I been scared and mad all my life and after I killed that first woman, I wasn't scared no more for a little while." (Wright, 1940:278). This is the core idea that this section aims to analyze: how the pursuit of the American Dream in a corrupted society can lead to despair and violence. First, we need to establish what are those "continuing actions that trigger violent responses in individuals". In section 3.2. and 3.3 I have analyzed the marginalization, the racial oppression, and the lack of opportunity, but in this section, I will analyze the corruption and violence inherent to the American system.

First of all, it should be emphasized that violence is not always physical, sometimes it can be done through words which is precisely what Richard Wright develops in this novel. The tabloid press plays a very important role both in the development of the plot and in this analysis. As we will see later, this type of journalism disseminates information in such a way that coerces the population putting them in a state of alert and predisposing them to hatred. When Bigger is caught by the police, rumors are quickly spread and it is the journalists who are in charge of communicating and reporting on any changes that occur. Bigger, who wants to follow the situation from prison, asks the agents for a newspaper and it is when we realize that impartiality is not the forte of American journalists. Instead of quality press in which clarity, precision, and above all reliable sources should guide the story; racism, deductions, and inventions fill the pages of the newspaper. To begin with, they describe Bigger as "[t]he Negro sex-slayer who gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. Five feet, nine inches tall, and his skin is exceedingly black" (Wright, 1940:221-222). The use of adjectives such as "abnormal" or "exceedingly black" denotes a rather obvious subjectivity. If you provide biased news to an already racist society, you run the risk of making the population even more prejudiced, which will make them more susceptible and less intolerant towards African Americans.

Secondly, as an example of corruption, I analyzed the trials through which Bigger has been judged for the crime he committed. From the beginning, we can already sense what the verdict of the trial and Bigger's fate will be. Although his lawyer sometimes struggles to convince Bigger he has a chance, he eventually confesses the cruel reality he must face: "I want to talk to you honestly, Bigger. I see no way out of this [...]" (Wright, 1940:271). This is simply because the trial is biased. The judge, Buckley who is the State's attorney and prosecutor, and the jury are all racially prejudiced. To begin with, Buckley constantly insists and pressures Bigger to confess to a crime he did not commit. Although he indeed killed Mary, she was never raped as Buckley would like him to confess: "I didn't do it!" Bigger screamed. "Why keep saying that? If you talk, maybe the judge'll help you. Confess it all and get it over with." (Wright, 1940:242). Blaming him for rape would only aggravate Bigger's situation because as he well recounts: "He knew that sex relations between blacks and whites were repulsive to most white men" (Wright, 1940:166). In addition to this, two other murders do not have any relation with Bigger and which the State's attorney wants to frame him for. Whilst this may be a strategy to condemn Bigger, its main purpose is to turn him into a danger to society in order to ensure the most severe punishment they can provide. In these interrogatories Buckley's self-righteousness and arrogance can be noticed, as well as his racism: "Buckley looked down at Bigger and said. "Just a scared colored boy from Mississippi." (Wright, 1940:243). As attorney Max says, "[e]very white man considers it his duty to make a black man keep his distance." (Wright, 1940:272), and if it were up to Buckley, every black man would end up like Bigger: "To me, a nigger's a nigger [...] they don't get a chance, if you ask me. They get enough trouble without it" (Wright, 1940:140).

Another aspect common to the tabloid press and the corrupt judicial system that should be mentioned is the insistence with which they try to generalize Bigger's lawsuit. That is, they try to make the population believe that Bigger's incident is not unique or specific to him, but that all black people are like him. For example, it can be seen in the news published by the press: "I'm convinced that death is the only cure for the likes of him" (Wright, 1940:222) or "Our experience here in Dixie with such depraved types of Negroes has shown that only the death penalty, inflicted in a public and dramatic manner, has any influence upon their peculiar mentality" (Wright,

1940:222). In the case of the trial, it is mentioned: “Well, this thing’s bigger than you, son. In a certain sense, every Negro in America’s on trial out there today” (Wright, 1940:288). As if they were not being oppressed and marginalized already, depending on the verdict of the jury and the judge as well as the punishment, so will the population act against Afro-Americans. This is a fact that has already been taken for granted by the ‘black community’ since a crime of this caliber committed by a man could not go unnoticed by white men, much less have any consequences for African-Americans: “Lissen, Jim. Ah’m a hard-workin’ man. [...] but the boss tol’ me he didn’t wan’ me in them streets wid this mob feelin’ among the white folks.... He says Ah’ll git killed [...] He [Bigger] made the white folks think we’s all jus’ like him!” (Wright, 1940:204).

Unfortunately, society does not need a final verdict to draw conclusions and act ‘accordingly’, and so, through a radio station Bigger and the reader find out that white people have begun to take action against black people: “It was reported that several hundred Negro employees throughout the city had been dismissed from jobs. A well-known banker’s wife phoned this paper that she had dismissed her Negro cook, “for fear that she might poison the children.” (Wright, 1940:22). These examples of corruption and injustice are yet another demonstration of how flawed the American system is, and therefore, how these carvings only accentuate and perpetuate social inequalities.

3.5. THE UNFEASIBLE AMERICAN DREAM

To encapsulate the final point of this analysis, I would like to explore the perception of the American Dream from the internal point of view of some of the characters. Throughout the novel, there are numerous instances in which different characters refer to the American Dream.

In the first place, we have the figure of Peggy, the Irish immigrant who works for the Daltons. She says of the Dalton family that “[t]hey’re Christian people and believe in everybody working hard” (Wright, 1940:57). As I mentioned in sections 2.1 and 3.3, the basis of the American Dream is the conviction that hard work makes

everything possible. Peggy, whether intentionally or unintentionally, instills in Bigger the illusions of the American Dream, accompanied by the illusory promise that solely effort is required to progress. In a second instance, we find the case of Bigger's girlfriend Bessie. She says, “[...] I ain’t done nothing for this to come to me! I just work! I ain’t had no happiness, no nothing. I just work. I’m black and I work and don’t bother nobody....” (Wright, 1940:153). With this declaration, we realize how detached from reality is the idea portrayed by Peggy. Bessie, a young African-American girl who has never done anything else in her life but work, laments in the presence of Bigger, “I ain't had no happiness, no nothing”. Only a few pages further on we can sense the sadness and despair that has accompanied this character all her life: “All my life’s been full of hard trouble [...] I ain’t never bothered nobody. I just worked hard every day as long as I can remember, till I was tired enough to drop; then I had to get drunk to forget it. I had to get drunk to sleep. That’s all I ever did. And now I’m in this” (Wright, 1940:191). Bessie, like Bigger, was inculcated with this primitive belief that effort can do anything, and after a lifetime of striving to work she has realized that it has served no purpose, she is unhappy, has nothing, and has to drown his sorrows in alcohol to keep on living. This self-surrender and lack of faith in the American Dream is well illustrated by Attorney Max, the third and last person I will talk about. He says:

“The buildings can’t unfold, can’t feed the dreams men have, men like you.... The men on the inside of those buildings have begun to doubt, just as you did. They don’t believe any more. They don’t feel it’s their world. They’re restless, like you, Bigger. They have nothing. There’s nothing through which they can grow and unfold. They go in the streets and they stand outside of those buildings and look and wonder....” (Wright, 1940:325).

In this fragment of the novel, Max is talking to Bigger about the passivity of the people, how they no longer have illusions and simply exist, “they don't believe any more”; American society has turned its back on them and they respond with submission and loss of illusion. The fact that the general response is passive does not imply that the contrary is not possible. As mentioned previously, continued social inequalities against an entire community can unleash unprecedented violence. For instance, Bigger has responded violently to the constant oppression that he and the

rest of the 'black community' endure day-to-day, and like him, more people can join his cause. For Bigger a violent response is a solution as legitimate as any other because to end the fear and shame that plague his people, brutality is the solution: "He was not concerned with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible avenues of escape. He felt that some day there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act and end fear and shame" (Wright, 1940:100).

4. CONCLUSION

I conducted an analysis of the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright through the lens of racism. Throughout this paper, I have delineated the historical context that shapes the socioeconomic background in which the American Dream was conceived and installed. This hybrid approach attempted to answer a simple but important inquiry about whether the American Dream is real or merely a dream.

Initially, the American Dream was presented to American society as an innovation intended to bring hope to the people and instill enough courage to be able to establish and thrive the emerging nation at its most critical moment of its settlement. As detailed in section 2.1., the American Dream was directed at all people regardless of race, age, sex, or economic status. However, delving deeper into American society, as I have done by researching Richard Wright's life and analyzing his writings, reveals that rather than a dream, for certain social groups, the American Dream becomes a nightmare. Both in the author's life and in his novel *Native Son*, there are clear examples of violence towards African-Americans, not only physical but also economic, social, and psychological.

In examining American society, particularly as depicted in *Native Son*, I have demonstrated how the white community exerts a systematic oppression not only against African Americans but against all those who do not belong to their ethnic group. These minorities are deprived of social and economic opportunities, rendering their promotion in the social ladder nearly impossible. The study concludes that the American society is deeply rooted in a corrupted system that perpetuates racism. This corruption is evident in the highly biased tabloid press and judicial system, which are the ideal environment for the growth of hatred and resentment.

Bigger Thomas, the protagonist, is a victim of the system. His resort to violence is a form of resistance and protest against the American society that denied him so many opportunities. Ever since he remembers Bigger has witnessed how his family and friends were deprived of necessities just for being black people, while white people had everything they desired. Violence, therefore, became their weapon of protest. This primitive form of resistance is for Bigger the only instance in which he can stand up for himself and achieve justice and agency. As a result, this analysis emphasizes the

importance of addressing the underlying system that perpetuates racial oppression and reforming the corrupt institutions that enable it.

After analyzing the novel, I have demonstrated that indeed Wright represents the dark side of the American Dream in his Novel showing how African-Americans are denigrated to the position of second-class- citizens. Consequently, although the founding fathers of the United States tried to establish an ideal of opportunity, acceptance, and inclusion, African Americans have been and are deprived of the political, social, and economic rights that were once guaranteed to all of America's citizens.

As a final note, this paper is intended not merely to analyze a novel but to broaden the perspective of anyone reading this undergraduate analysis. Similar to one of *Native Son's* central themes is to try to stop the oppression that subjugates African Americans, this analysis aspires to emulate the role of the lawyer Max. Dismantling systemic hatred, racism, and oppression is essential to the advancement of any nation. Society must protect and integrate all its members, thereby preventing the creation of external groups without rights within its structure.

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