

**Teacher's Rationale**

School: Arrowhead

Teacher: Balistreri/Budzein

Title: Native Son

Grade or Course: AP ENGLISH

Approximate date(s) a book will be used:

\_\_\_\_\_ Semester 1

\_\_\_\_\_X\_ Semester 2

This book will be (check one or more):

\_\_\_\_\_X\_ studied by the whole class.

\_\_\_\_\_ studied by small groups.

\_\_\_\_\_ placed on a reading list.

\_\_\_\_\_ placed in a classroom library.

\_\_\_\_\_ recommended to individual students.

\_\_\_\_\_ part of a larger study of (explain):

\_\_\_\_\_ other (explain):

**Ways in which the book is especially appropriate for student in this class:**

Richard Wright's examination of the results of racial hatred, white naivety, black alienation and society's failure to address these problems is appropriate for AP students since understanding other radically different perspectives from our own is key to understanding literature. Understanding multicultural literature is key to doing well on the AP English test.

**Ways in which the book is especially pertinent to the objectives of this course or unit:**

The test surveys literature from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, with equal representation of British, American, and post-colonial writers. The College Board includes African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American writers of both genders when it selects the passages for the test. Native Son is 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American, and male. An excerpt from another Richard Wright book has appeared on the test.

Passages from this book are great examples of how an author can use point of view, dialogue, symbolism, or action to reveal character. In fact, the book is full of symbolism, which is one of the more difficult concepts we have to teach in AP ENG.

**Special problems that might arise in relation to the book and some planned activities that handle this problem:**

The descriptions of Bigger's murder of Mary, of his disposal of her body, and of his rape and murder of Bessie are all disturbing, but they relate directly to an open-ended essay question on the AP exam from a few years ago. (I paraphrase) "In great literature, no scene of violence exists for the sake of violence alone. Pick a work of accepted literary merit and explain how violence contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole."

Also, Bigger has problems with Christianity. He sees a KKK-style burning cross and rejects the message that he had begun to accept from a minister. This episode, however, helps to illustrate the alienation from traditional Christian beliefs that leads some African Americans to turn to other faiths or, in the 1930's, to turn to atheistic communism.

**Some other appropriate books an individual student might read in place of this book:**

In AP, we would expect that students read the required works. However, there are many great 20<sup>th</sup> century books dealing with the African-American experience. Here are just a few:

The Song of Solomon – Toni Morrison

Beloved – Toni Morrison

The Color Purple – Alice Walker

The Invisible Man – Ralph Ellison

**Summary of the book:**

Bigger Thomas, a poor, alienated, amoral and violent young black man from the South Side of Chicago in 1940, is hired by a rich, liberal, well-meaning but naïve white family to be a chauffeur. Because of a series of misunderstandings, he accidentally kills the boss's daughter. Already in deep trouble, Bigger makes things progressively worse through his attempts at lying and extorting, and his brutal treatment of his girlfriend Bessie.

The investigation, police chase, arrest, incarceration, prosecution, conviction and execution of Bigger all reveal the nearly hopeless state of race relations in the USA. While the book never exonerates Bigger for his crimes, it does suggest that our prejudices and our social and economic injustices create people like Bigger. He's a Native Son of our culture.

**Reviews and/or awards of the book or author:**

“...However, it was Wright's 1940 novel, Native Son, that stirred up real controversy by shocking the sensibilities of both black and white America. The reaction to Uncle Tom's Children had disappointed Wright—though he had worked hard to describe racism as he saw it, he still felt he had written a novel “which even bankers' daughters could read and feel good about.” With his next work, Native Son, he was determined to make his readers feel the reality of race relations by writing something “so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.” The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, hails from the lowest rung of society, and Wright does not infuse him with any of the romantic aspects or traits common to literary heroes. Rather, given the social conditions in which he must live, Bigger is what one might expect him to be—sullen, frightened, violent, hateful, and resentful.

In his essay “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright explains that Bigger is a fusion of men he had himself known while growing up in the South. Confronted by racism and oppression and left with very few options in their lives, these men displayed increasingly antisocial and violent behavior, and were, in effect, disasters waiting to happen. In Chicago,

removed from the terrible oppression of the South, Wright discovered that Bigger was not exclusively a black phenomenon. Wright saw, just as Bigger does in *Native Son* that millions of whites suffered as well, and he believed that the direct cause of this suffering was the structure of American society itself. *Native Son* thus represents Wright's urgent warning that if American social and economic realities did not change, the oppressed masses would soon rise up in fury against those in power." (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/nativeson/context.html>)

Of all black American novelists, and indeed of all American novelists of any hue, Richard Wright reigns supreme for all profound political, economic, and social reference. **Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (1968)**  
(<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAwrightR.htm>)