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Desire, Strain, and Delinquency in Native Son from a GST Perspective

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Abstract

Richard Wright (1908-1960), a prominent African-American novelist, has made significant contributions to American literature, particularly in his exploration of race, identity, and social injustice. His works often depict characters struggling with fear, anger, and frustration due to poverty, racism, and segregation. Through vivid portrayals of oppression, Wright examines how these hardships lead African-American characters to respond violence and delinquency.

Wright's landmark novel, *Native Son* (1940), delves into the relationship between individual aspirations and societal constraints in 1930s Chicago. It highlights the racial injustices faced by African Americans in a Jim Crow society, a reality Wright himself experienced. Through the character of Bigger Thomas, the novel explores how personal desires and environmental strains shape actions and choices, illustrating the complexities of the human condition.

This study, utilizing a descriptive-analytical method, applies General Strain Theory (GST) to analyze the interplay between desire, strain, and delinquency in *Native Son*. It focuses on how Bigger's thwarted desires, influenced by systemic racism and societal constraints, manifest as strains that lead to delinquent behavior. The research seeks to answer how Bigger's unfulfilled desires contribute to his strain and criminal actions, and how GST provides insight into his motivations within a context of systemic oppression.

The findings demonstrate that three key sources of strain in Bigger's life—his inability to achieve valued goals, the loss of those goals, and exposure to negative stimuli—trigger significant negative emotions. These emotions, including fear, anger, and frustration, drive Bigger to engage in violent and delinquent behavior as a means of coping with his circumstances.

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رغبة، التوتر، والانحراف في رواية "ابن البلد" من منظور نظرية الأنظمة العامة (GST)

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ريتشارد رايت (١٩٠٨-١٩٦٠) ، الروائي الأمريكي من أصل أفريقي، قدم مساهمات كبيرة في الأدب الأمريكي، خصوصاً في استكشافه لقضايا العرق، الهوية، والظلم الاجتماعي. أعماله غالبًا ما تصور شخصيات تكافح مع الخوف، والغضب، والإحباط بسبب الفقر، والعنصرية، والفصل العنصري. من خلال تصويراته الحية للاضطهاد، يدرس رايت كيف تؤدي هذه الصعوبات إلى استجابة الشخصيات الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي بالعنف والانحراف.

رواية رايت الشهيرة "ابن الوطن" (١٩٤٠) تتناول العلاقة بين الطموحات الفردية والقيود الاجتماعية في شيكاغو خلال ثلاثينيات القرن الماضي. تسلط الضوء على الظلم العنصري الذي يواجهه الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي في مجتمع جيم كرو، وهو واقع عايشه رايت بنفسه. من خلال شخصية بيجر توماس، تستكشف الرواية كيف تشكل الرغبات الشخصية والضغوط البيئية الأفعال والاختيارات، موضحة تعقيدات الحالة الإنسانية.

تطبق هذه الدراسة اسلوب تحليلي وصفي باستخدام نظرية الضغط العام (GST) لتحليل التفاعل بين الرغبة، والضغط، والانحراف في رواية "ابن الوطن". تركز الدراسة على كيفية تأثير الرغبات المحبطة لدى بيجر، المتأثرة بالعنصرية المنهجة والقيود الاجتماعية، على ظهور الضغوط التي تؤدي إلى سلوك انحرافي. تسعى الدراسة للإجابة على كيفية تأثير الرغبات غير المحققة لدى بيجر في ضغطه وتصرفاته الإجرامية، وكيف تقدم نظرية الضغط العام (GST) رؤى حول دوافعه في سياق الاضطهاد المنهج.

تُظهر النتائج أن هناك ثلاثة مصادر رئيسية للضغط في حياة بيجر— وهي عدم قدرته على تحقيق الأهداف المعتبرة، فقدان تلك الأهداف، والتعرض للمحفزات السلبية—والتي تثير مشاعر سلبية كبيرة. هذه المشاعر السلبية، مثل الخوف، والغضب، والإحباط، تدفع بيجر الى الانخراط في سلوكيات عنيفة وانحرافية كوسيلة للتعامل مع ظروفه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العرق، الرغبة ، الإجهاد ، الجنون ، الاضطهاد المنهجي

Introduction

1.Insights into Richard Wright's Biography and Native Son

Richard Wright, an influential African-American writer, used his compelling narratives to address systemic racism, poverty, and violence, offering sharp critiques of inequality and inspiring change. Born on September 4, 1908, in the Jim Crow South, Wright's upbringing in an oppressive environment shaped his literary voice. His early exposure to poverty, racial discrimination, and familial instability profoundly influenced his perspective (Fabre, 1993; Ray & Fransworth, 1973). Encouraged by his mother and grandmother, Wright found solace in literature, describing books as a means of escape and intellectual development (Wright, 1945, p. 226; Bloom, 2006).

Wright's migration to urban centers like Chicago and New York exposed him to new cultural and political ideas, fueling his literary career and activism (Butler, 1991; Garcia, 2014). Immersed in leftist political circles, he embraced socialism and communism, finding solidarity across racial lines and advocating for social justice: "For the first time I could speak to listening ears" (Wright, 1965, p. 106). However, disillusionment with Communist Party strategies led to his departure in the 1940s (Warnes, 2007).

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) marked a literary breakthrough, addressing systemic racism and the psychological toll of oppression on African Americans. Its protagonist, Bigger Thomas, reflects the dehumanizing effects of poverty and discrimination. The novel sought to provoke societal change, aiming to be "not a book but a bomb" (Embree, 1944, p. 25). Despite acclaim, some critics, including James Baldwin, argued it reinforced stereotypes: "Below the surface of this novel…lies a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (Baldwin, 1955, p. 22).

Wright's later works, including his autobiography Black Boy (1945), expanded his exploration of racial and social issues. Disillusioned with the U.S., he moved to Paris in 1946, finding intellectual freedom and addressing global concerns like colonialism and human rights in works such as *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain* (1956).

Wright's realist style and commitment to social critique reflected his struggles with racial oppression, isolation, and alienation (Rowley, 2008; Ramya, 2015). His impact transcends literature, shaping the Civil Rights Movement and fostering discussions on race relations in the U.S. Despite his death in 1960, Wright's legacy endures, solidifying his status as a pivotal figure in American literature (Rinehart, 2019).

2. Socio-Economic Conditions and Racial Tensions in *Native Son*

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) is a cornerstone of American literature, renowned for its unflinching exploration of institutionalized racism and its psychological and societal toll on African Americans. Set in 1930s Chicago, the novel follows Bigger Thomas, whose anger and despair, fueled by systemic oppression and limited socioeconomic opportunities, lead to tragic consequences. Wright's narrative critiques the pervasive racial prejudice of the era, emphasizing its damaging effects and solidifying the novel's significance as a critical reflection on race relations in the United States.

Wright's use of urban naturalism underscores the impact of external forces on individuals' lives. The story unfolds during a time of significant hardship for African Americans, particularly those who migrated to urban centers like Chicago during the Great Migration in search of better opportunities. Despite leaving behind the overt racism of the Jim Crow South, African Americans faced restrictive housing policies, economic discrimination, and continued prejudice in the North (Ellis, 2006). These challenges intensified during the Great Depression, linking economic decline with increased racial violence. Stephen Michael Best observes, "One could read causally the relation between declining economic conditions and white terroristic violence, suggesting that the former increased idleness and irritability and led ultimately to the latter" (1996, p. 114). This pervasive fear of violence, evident in the history of lynchings and attacks, resonates throughout *Native Son*, where Bigger's actions are shaped by an acute awareness of societal boundaries and their dire consequences.

Simultaneously, the 1930s witnessed the flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that empowered African Americans to challenge racist ideologies and assert their identity (Milne, 2009). Wright, an active participant in this intellectual awakening, captured the tension between the harsh realities of African American life and the emerging cultural pride and defiance. However, systemic racism persisted, influencing the legal, social, and psychological experiences of African Americans.

The novel vividly portrays the psychological toll of this environment. Economic insecurity, fear of racial violence, and systemic prejudice fostered anger and helplessness. Irving Howe comments, "In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture" (1963, p. 323). Bigger's actions, driven by fear, rage, and a need for agency in a dehumanizing society, reflect these psychological strains. This aligns with Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992), which explains how various stressors elicit negative emotions and lead to deviant behavior.

Through *Native Son*, Wright skillfully captures the interplay between systemic oppression, psychological strain, and societal constraints, presenting a harsh critique of racial injustice and its enduring effects.

3. Analysis of Bigger Thomas's Strain in *Native Son*

Wright's groundbreaking novel *Native Son*, vividly depicts the terrible conflicts that arise between African Americans and the dominant White society in the United States, which are mostly caused by institutionalized prejudice. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, embodies the intense psychological and social pressures exerted by systematic racism on Black individuals. Through Bigger's experience, Wright demonstrates the negative effects of an oppressive society on the mental and emotional well-being of African Americans, emphasizing the tragic consequences of such pervasive discrimination.

According to General Strain Theory, adolescents are driven into delinquency by the "negative affective states-most notably anger and related emotions that often result from negative relationships" (Agnew, 1992, p.49). This theory suggests that when individuals cannot accomplish socially acceptable goals or desires through legitimate means, they feel pressure or stress, which can result in negative emotions and sometimes deviant behavior. In *Native Son*, Bigger faces severe stress which is reflected in his feelings of negative emotional states like, fear, rage, and hopelessness. These emotional responses drive his actions throughout the novel, highlighting the wider effects of institutional racism and the failure of society to offer fair opportunities. To understand the interplay between Bigger's unmet desires, his experience of strain, and subsequent delinquency, it is crucial to examine the origins of his strain.

3.1. Sources of Bigger Thomas's Strain in *Native Son*

Prior to applying Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) to analyze the strain experienced by Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, it is essential to first comprehend the concept of strain itself. Strain, as defined by GST, refers to "relationships in which the individual is not treated as he or she wants to be treated" (Agnew, 1992, p.48). Such aversive relationships can lead to negative emotions like anger, frustration, and depression. These emotions, whether experienced, subjectively or objectively, can significantly influence behavior, often resulting in deviant or criminal actions as individuals seek to cope with their adverse circumstances.

Bigger Thomas's life is characterized by a deep-seated fear and hatred toward White people, which negatively affects him constantly. According to Agnew's GST, Bigger's strain results from three types of sources: the failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presence of negative stimuli. By investigating the types of strain Bigger encounters, we can gain deeper insights into his motivations and subsequent behavior depicted in the novel. Furthermore, this analytical approach helps to demonstrate how the persistent pressures of his environment contribute to his eventual acts of violence and rebellion.

3.1.1 Failure to Achieve Positively Valued Goals

General Strain Theory (GST) suggests that strain arises when individuals cannot achieve culturally valued goals through legitimate means. According to Agnew (1992, p. 51), strain occurs from "the inability to achieve certain ideal goals emphasized by the (sub)cultural system." This inability generates adverse emotions such as anger, frustration, and disappointment. These negative feelings may lead individuals to engage in deviant behavior or crime as a way to cope with or alleviate their emotional distress. The failure to achieve positively valued goals manifests in various forms, each contributing to the experience of strain.

1. Disjunction between Aspirations and Expectation

Wright's *Native Son* illustrates strain through the character of Bigger Thomas, whose aspirations for a better life are thwarted by systemic racism, economic hardship, and social limitations. This concept aligns with the classical strain theory developed by Merton (1938), Cohen (1955), and Cloward and Ohlin (1960), which posits that lower-class individuals encounter significant barriers in achieving culturally prescribed goals through legitimate means (Agnew, 1992). Bigger's unmet desires and societal constraints exacerbate his helplessness and anger, driving him into a catastrophic confrontation with his environment.

The novel introduces readers to Bigger's challenging living conditions, situated within the segregated Black Belt of 1930s Chicago. Bigger and his family reside in a cramped, rat-infested apartment, where the lack of privacy serves as a metaphor for the systemic marginalization faced by African Americans. Early scenes reveal Bigger's frustration, as he lashes out at his sister and endures his mother's condemnation for the family's poverty: "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (p.12). His inability to secure meaningful employment, confined to menial jobs like serving as a chauffeur for white families, further heightens his despair and alienation.

Bigger's anger extends to his family and himself. He hates their suffering, knowing he is powerless to help: "He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (pp. 13–14). His frustration is compounded by systemic barriers to aspirations like becoming a pilot. When his friend Gus reminds him that racism prevents such ambitions, Bigger responds with anger, criticizing the systemic injustice: "Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships" (p.23).

Wright drew on his experiences as a poor southern migrant to authentically depict these struggles. As Ellis (2006) notes, "Wright was uniquely situated to capture the overwhelming fear and frustration among the black urban poor" (p. 182). Like his character Bigger, Wright, an African American from Mississippi, relocated to Chicago in search of better opportunities.

Discriminatory housing and limited educational access exacerbate Bigger's struggles. Having completed only the eighth grade, his intellectual and personal development is stunted. His lament, "They don't let us do nothing" (p.22), encapsulates the systemic control that white society exerts over Black lives, perpetuating feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Through Bigger, Wright demonstrates the psychological toll of systemic racism and the devastating consequences of unmet aspirations.

2. Disjunction between Expectations and Actual Achievements

In *Native Son*, Wright highlights the strain caused by the disparity between expectations and reality, particularly through Bigger Thomas's experiences with employment and systemic racism. This strain becomes evident when Bigger takes a chauffeur job with the wealthy Dalton family, believing it might lead to upward mobility and a better life. However, the job only deepens his frustrations, revealing the systemic oppression underpinning his circumstances.

Bigger's mother pressures him to accept the job, stressing that it could improve their living conditions and prevent the family from starving. Though resentful of being manipulated, Bigger reluctantly agrees. In a moment of optimism, he imagines the role of providing financial stability and dignity, thinking, "Say, maybe I'll be working for folks like that if I take that relief job. Maybe I'll drive 'em around… " (p.33). However, the reality of the job falls short of his aspirations.

Mr. Dalton, while presenting himself as a philanthropist who supports organizations like the NAACP and employs young Black men, is complicit in perpetuating the systemic issues that constrain Bigger. As a landlord and key shareholder in the company managing the overcrowded and overpriced apartments on Chicago's South Side, Mr. Dalton profits from racial segregation and exploitation. Despite his charitable facade, his philanthropy serves to ease his guilt, as Bigger's attorney Max observes: "And in some of us, as in Mr. Dalton, the feeling of guilt, stemming from our moral past, is so strong that we try to undo this thing in a manner as naïve as dropping a penny in a blind man's cup" (p.363).

The gap between Bigger's hope for self-improvement through this job and the harsh reality of continued exploitation fuels his dissatisfaction and frustration. This entrapment, driven by systemic racism and economic disparity, exacerbates the choices and actions that define Bigger's tragic trajectory.

3. Disjunction between Just/ Fair Outcomes and Actual Outcomes

The strain model in *Native Son* is underscored by the inequities in societal and judicial treatment of Bigger Thomas. While justice theoretically entails fairness, societal biases against African Americans, rooted in systemic racism, result in a prejudiced response to Bigger's actions and trial. His accidental killing of Mary Dalton triggers a public outcry, fueled by racial stereotypes and discriminatory narratives.

Bigger's crime, motivated by his fear of white societal perceptions of a Black man in a white woman's bedroom, leads to his killing of Bessie Mears and subsequent capture. Public reaction, shaped by pervasive racial prejudices such as the "rape complex" from Reconstruction, assumes sexual motives, sensationalizing the incident as a "sex crime" in media coverage (Takeuchi, 2009). Bigger's admission to Bessie that society will presume, "They'll say you raped her" (p.227), highlights these ingrained attitudes. Wright reflects on these stereotypes in *How Bigger Was Born*: "If a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched, and the reason…is usually called 'rape'" (p.vi).

Despite Boris Max's defense, which emphasizes the role of systemic oppression in shaping Bigger's emotions and actions, the trial's outcome reflects societal inequities. Max argues that: "This Negro boy's entire attitude toward life is a crime; the hate and fear which we have inspired in him…have become the justification of his existence" (pp.366-6).

However, the prosecution perpetuates racial tropes, likening Bigger to a "half-human black ape" who threatens white society (Wright, p.408). Media coverage in outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* further reinforces these biases, depicting Bigger as a "jungle beast" driven by "sex passion" and calling for his lynching (p.260). Furthermore, the article includes a racist statement from Edward Robertson, editor of *Jackson Daily Star*, who proposes strict segregation and restricted education to control African Americans and supports public executions as an intimidation (261). This reflects the intense prejudice and systematic discrimination that Bigger and other African Americans experienced in society.

The judicial process fails to provide an equitable trial. Bigger is swiftly condemned to death without consideration of the societal and psychological factors that contributed to his actions. This disparity exposes the inability of the legal system to deliver impartial justice, mirroring the broader effects of systemic racism and inequity in American society.

3.1.2. Removal of Positively Valued Stimuli

According to General Strain Theory, strain arises from the loss or anticipated loss of positively valued stimuli, leading individuals to respond with delinquent behaviors to manage negative emotions or regain what was lost (Agnew, 1992, pp. 57–58). In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas experiences significant strain from the loss of his father and his transition into the predominantly white world of the Daltons, both of which profoundly shape his emotions and actions.

The loss of Bigger's father, likely killed in a racially charged riot (p.74), deprives him of guidance, stability, and emotional support. This loss forces Bigger into the role of breadwinner, which he resents. Mrs. Thomas's expectation that Bigger takes a job with Mr. Dalton to prevent the family from starving intensifies his feelings of powerlessness: "Yes, he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve" (p.16). This job, however, is a painful reminder of the systemic racism that led to his father's death: "He felt that they had tricked him into a cheap surrender" (p.15). His inability to process this loss or express his emotions openly, especially to Jan Erlone, reflects his internalized anger:

"And what was done about it?" Jan asked.

"Nothing, far as I know."

"How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know." (pp.74–75)

The strain from entering the Daltons' white-dominated world also exacerbates Bigger's alienation. His transition from the familiar South Side ghetto to the affluent Dalton home marks a profound shift in his environment, intensifying his anxiety and discomfort. Bigger feels out of place, overwhelmed by the luxury and social expectations of his new surroundings: "He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable" (p.47). This discomfort manifests in his deferential behavior, such as stooping and avoiding eye contact (p.50). Interactions with the Daltons magnify his strain. For instance, Mr. Dalton's scrutiny during the interview leaves Bigger conflicted and self-conscious: "Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this" (pp.49–50).

Mary Dalton's well-meaning but naïve attempts to treat Bigger as an equal further heighten his discomfort by underscoring the socio-economic divide between them. This transition from his community to the Daltons' world represents a loss of familiarity and belonging, creating a profound source of strain that contributes to his eventual delinquency and Mary's murder. Ultimately, Bigger's compounded losses—his father, his sense of agency, and his familiar environment—drive his negative emotions and actions, demonstrating the impact of strain on his life trajectory.

3.1.3. Bigger's Presentation to Negative Stimuli

This type of strain refers to the introduction of adverse conditions or events that cause stress and frustration, which can lead to deviant or criminal behavior as individuals attempt to cope with these strains (Agnew, 1992, pp. 58-59). These harmful stimuli can take various forms, such as child abuse, criminal victimization, negative relations with parents, or stressful life events. Agnew emphasizes that deviance results not only from these negative stimuli but also from an individual's inability to handle them in socially or legally acceptable ways.

In *Native Son*, Wright portrays several negative stimuli that contribute to Bigger Thomas's emotional turmoil, eventually leading to his delinquency and tragic fate. One significant source of strain is racial discrimination and oppression, as Bigger lives in a society divided by race and class. He reflects: "We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail" (p. 23). The stark division between Black and White communities forces Black individuals like Bigger into a life of deprivation and entrapment.

Bigger's frustration grows as he realizes that African Americans are excluded from opportunities in society, with racial discrimination preventing access to economic advancement. He expresses: "I'd like to be in business. But what chance has a black guy got in business? We ain't got no money. We don't own no mines, no railroads, no nothing. They don't want us to" (p. 327). The racial and economic inferiority breeds anger and powerlessness, which is further illustrated when he thinks, "Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat" (p. 23).

Wright also critiques the role of popular culture in perpetuating racial stereotypes. In one scene, Bigger and his friends watch a movie depicting Black people as primitive, contrasting them with White characters portrayed as sophisticated: "He looked at Trader Horn unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances" (pp. 35-36). These media depictions reinforce the perception of Black inferiority, which contributes to Bigger's feelings of self-loathing and inadequacy.

Bigger's interactions with wealthy White individuals like Mr. Dalton and Mary further expose his strained relationship with the dominant White society. During an interview with Mr. Dalton, Bigger is nervous and ashamed, stammering and lowering his eyes, reflecting his discomfort and the racial divide: "He stammered, trying to show that he was not as stupid as he might appear" (p. 51). His anxiety continues when he reacts to Mary's overtures of friendship: "She was an odd girl, all right. He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him" (p. 65). The tension increases with Mary's communist boyfriend, Jan, whose friendly gestures, like shaking hands, unsettle Bigger due to his deep-seated fear and mistrust of White people: "What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin" (p. 67).

Despite their good intentions, Mary and Jan's actions only heighten Bigger's racial alienation. He feels dehumanized, unable to reconcile their treatment of him as an equal with the rigid racial norms that dominate his world: "He felt that he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (p. 67). In this way, Wright portrays how societal pressures and racial inequality contribute to Bigger's tragic downfall, with his reactions to White people shaped by a complex blend of fear, resentment, and frustration.

3.2. Bigger's Coping Strategies for Strain and Delinquency

Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory suggests that experiencing negative emotional states, especially anger, due to three primary types of strain—failure to achieve positively valued goals, removal of valued goals, and presentation of negative stimuli—can lead individuals to seek corrective actions to alleviate these emotions. Delinquency, including behaviors such as theft, aggression, and drug use, is one possible response, as individuals try to achieve goals, retrieve lost stimuli, or escape negative experiences (Agnew, 1992, p.60).

However, Agnew argues that strain does not always result in crime. The individual's response depends on factors like whether they attribute strain to others and view it as unjust, the availability of legitimate coping resources, and the individual's predisposition toward crime. Those who perceive strain as unjust and have few social coping resources are more likely to resort to criminal behavior, while those with strong social support are less likely to do so.

The likelihood of strain leading to delinquency also depends on the characteristics of the strain, such as its magnitude, recency, duration, and whether multiple strains occur in close succession. More intense and recent strains, as well as chronic and clustered stressors, are more likely to lead to negative psychological outcomes and delinquency.

Agnew identifies several coping mechanisms—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies—that individuals use to manage strain. The choice of coping strategy significantly influences whether the individual will engage in delinquent behavior. Proactive coping strategies can reduce strain without leading to deviance, while ineffective coping strategies may increase the likelihood of criminal behavior. This framework can be applied to analyze Bigger's coping mechanisms in *Native Son,* categorizing them into cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses.

3.2.1 Cognitive Coping Strategies

Bigger Thomas's cognitive coping mechanisms reveal how individuals under intense emotional and societal strain may reframe their realities to alleviate psychological distress. According to Agnew (1992), cognitive adaptation involves reinterpreting stressors that minimize their perceived adversity, often through strategies like de-emphasizing the importance of stressors, maximizing positive outcomes, or internalizing responsibility. Bigger employs these mechanisms to manage the oppression he faces as a Black man in a racially segregated and socioeconomically unjust society.

One method Bigger uses is his distorted perception of White society, influenced by depictions in media like *The Gay Woman*. He idealizes wealthy White people as "smart" and capable of success, contrasting them with poorer Whites, whom he blames for his oppression. This reframing allows Bigger to shift responsibility for systemic racism away from all Whites and instead attribute it to class differences, providing him temporary relief from feelings of victimization. As seen in his reflections, Bigger rationalizes that "rich white people…knew how to treat people," minimizing their role in perpetuating racial inequality.

Bigger also applies cognitive reframing to his criminal actions, particularly the murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears. He reinterprets these acts as transformative, empowering events that gave his life purpose and autonomy. As he tells his lawyer, Mr. Max, "What I killed for must've been good!... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things had enough to kill for 'em" (Wright, 429). By focusing on the perceived positive outcomes, such as a newfound identity and power, he diminishes the negative emotional consequences, like guilt or fear of punishment.

Additionally, Bigger compares his current state of agency, however destructive, to his past life of passivity and helplessness, framing his actions as a significant improvement. Reflecting on the murders, he concludes, "In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him... Never had his will been so free" (Wright, 225). This temporal comparison aligns with Agnew's

observation that individuals may view current adversity as favorable when contrasted with prior suffering (1992, p. 68).

In summary, Bigger's cognitive coping strategies highlight the psychological mechanisms individuals use to endure systemic oppression. By reinterpreting White society and his deviant actions, Bigger mitigates the emotional burden of his circumstances, temporarily escaping the confines of racial and economic inequality. These strategies exemplify Agnew's framework of cognitive adaptation, demonstrating the power of mental reframing in managing strain.

3.2.2 Behavioral Coping Strategies

Bigger Thomas's behavioral coping strategies in *Native Son* illustrate the interplay between systemic oppression, personal fear, and deviance. Behavioral coping, as defined by Agnew, involves actions to alleviate strain, either by addressing its sources or through acts of revenge. In the racially segregated Chicago Black Belt, systemic barriers prevent Bigger and his community from accessing socioeconomic opportunities. As a result, he turns to criminal activities like robbery with his friends. However, their avoidance of targeting White individuals reflects the racial boundaries that instill fear and restrict their actions: "It was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes" (p. 17).

When the gang contemplates robbing a White-owned delicatessen, Bigger's fear intensifies, and he redirects this fear into violence against Gus. Accusing Gus of cowardice, Bigger asserts, "Sometimes I'd like to cut his yellow heart out… He's just scared… Scared to rob a white man" (p. 36). Gus retaliates by exposing Bigger's fear: "You are calling me scared, so nobody'll see how scared you is!" (p. 29). Wright notes that Bigger avoids confronting this fear directly: "His courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness" (p. 44). This projection of fear into aggression demonstrates how Bigger's actions reflect an internalized struggle with systemic oppression.

Bigger's behavioral coping escalates with the accidental murder of Mary Dalton. When Mrs. Dalton enters Mary's room unexpectedly, Bigger panics at the thought of being discovered with a White woman: "The door behind him had creaked. He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike" (p. 84). Driven by fear of the racial consequences, he suffocates Mary to silence her: "He had to stop her from mumbling or he would be caught… He caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly" (p. 84). Baldwin describes this act as emblematic of Bigger's existence: "All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape" (1955, p. 22).

Following the murder, Bigger briefly feels empowered: "The shame and fear and hate which Mary and Jan and Mr. Dalton and that huge rich house had made rise so hard and hot in him had now cooled and softened" (p. 141). This newfound control is fleeting, as Bigger's attempts to manipulate the situation—such as framing Mary's boyfriend Jan and extorting the Daltons with a ransom note signed "Red"—fail when evidence implicates him. His violent tendencies resurface in his interactions with Bessie, culminating in her rape and murder. Reflecting on systemic racism, researchers Allal and Derguini assert, "Violence emerges from the accumulation of all horror, terror, and fear that they [African Americans] were exposed to" (2020, p. 51).

During his trial, Bigger acknowledges the societal forces driving his actions: “I didn’t want to kill! But what I killed for I am!” (pp. 391-392). To his lawyer, Max, he admits, “I hurt folks ’cause I felt I had to; that’s all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn’t give me no room” (p. 388). This recognition highlights how systemic racism, fear, and frustration shaped his violent coping mechanisms. Though these strategies offer temporary relief, they ultimately exacerbate his downfall, reinforcing the devastating impact of structural oppression on marginalized individuals.

3.2.3. Emotional Coping Strategies

Emotional copings encompass efforts to alleviate the adverse emotions generated by strain rather than confronting the source of strain or its consequences. Agnew outlines several emotional coping techniques which include the use of drugs, physical exercise or simply playacting to defuse tension. According to Agnew (1992), the main goal of these strategies is to minimize strain rather than changing the circumstances that gave rise to them: “The focus is on alleviating negative emotions rather than cognitively reinterpreting or behaviorally altering the situation that produced those emotions (p.70). Indeed, emotional coping is likely to occur when alternative coping mechanisms, such as cognitive and behavioral, are unsuccessful or unattainable.

Native Son, Bigger frequently attempts to escape the unfavorable circumstances and social constraints imposed on him. One of the earliest manifestations of Bigger's emotional coping mechanism can be seen in his act of "playing White", a kind of game in which he and his friends mimicked " the ways and manners of white folks"(p.21). Trapped in Chicago's Black Belt, where opportunities for employment and education are extremely restricted, Bigger and his friends Jack, G.H., and Gus are unable to confront directly the fundamental causes of their desperate situation and internalized hopelessness. Instead, they turn to the streets and public places for solace and comfort. Their habitual activities, such as, acting out stressful scenarios, attending movies, spending time at the nearby poolroom, or simply hanging around, serve as emotional coping mechanisms that help them temporarily manage the strain and adversity that they daily encounter . With regard to this, the American historian and scholar, Nelson Manfred Blake notes: "These Negroes found an outlet for their frustration in gambling, drinking and wenching" (1969, p.228), emphasizing how Black people assimilated into roles that were placed upon them by white culture.

In the opening scene, Bigger tries to get Gus involved in this "playing white" game where they seek to temporarily mock and challenge the exact system that subjugates them. In a humorous yet insightful performance, they assume the personas of prominent white figures, imitating their speech patterns and mannerisms. When Bigger plays the role of a general, giving Gus military commands, and together they engage in a fantasy of power and control, it reflects their inner desires to rise above their marginalized position in society. The most striking part of their playacting occurs when Bigger takes on the identity of J.P. Morgan, while Gus impersonates a detached businessman:

“Hello,” Gus said.
“Hello,” Bigger said. “Who’s this?”
“This is Mr. J. P. Morgan speaking,” Gus said.
“Yessuh, Mr. Morgan,” Bigger said; his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect.
“I want you to sell twenty thousand shares of U. S. Steel in the market this morning,” Gus said.
“At what price, suh?” Bigger asked.

“Aw, just dump ’em at any price,” Gus said with casual irritation. “We’re holding too much.”
“Yessuh,” Bigger said (pp.21-22).

This ridiculous parody of a business leader emphasizes the absurdity of their circumstances. In this humorous conversation, Gus's frivolous command to sell massive amounts of stocks and Bigger's submissive responses reflect the arrogance and indifference they perceive in successful white businessmen. Through this satirical discussion, they temporarily shift the balance of power by using comedy to attack the economic hegemony from which they are constantly excluded. Their sincere laughter conceals bitterness which serves both as a brief distraction from and a sharp reminder of their marginalized status in society.

The emotional relief they derive from this playacting becomes evident when they switch to a new scene in which Bigger assumes the role of the U.S president and Gus plays along as the Secretary of State. Although their conversation initially appears humorous it soon becomes overshadowed by the harsh reality of their lives as their imagined roles gradually reveal the systematic racial discrimination they experience:

“This is the President of the United States,” Bigger said.
“Yessuh, Mr. President,” Gus replied.
“We’ve got to do something with these black folks [. . . .]” Bigger said, suppressing laughter.
“Oh, if it’s about the niggers, I’ll be right there, Mr. President,” Gus said. (Wright, 23)

The above conversation highlights the fundamental racial conflicts that underlie their reality. Bigger's portrayal of the president calling a cabinet meeting to discuss the "nigger problem" is a powerful metaphor for the institutionalized prejudice that he and Gus encounter. According to Aimé J. Ellis, an associate professor of African and African American studies at Michigan State University, the act of "playing white" symbolizes " an appropriation and “internalization” of the central attributes not simply of whiteness but of “white patriarchal power”-authority, property ownership, conquest, control-whereby Wright’s native sons attempt to personify powerful white men as a means of escaping their racial invisibility and impotence (2002, p.28). Through their sarcastic mimicry of the most powerful man in the country, Bigger and Gus expose the ridiculousness of a social system in which race remains the key determinant of power and status. Even though their mockery is funny, it also powerfully conveys the harsh reality of the racial discrimination they experience. In this situation, their laughter serves as a mechanism for coping with the anger and frustration that would otherwise become intolerable.

Moreover, Bigger's habit of attending movies with his friends serves as another form of emotional coping mechanism to manage the crushing impact of systematic racism. Watching films offers Bigger a fleeting escape into a fictional world where races and social strata do not matter. This goes in line with Agnew’s (1992) concept of emotional coping which emphasizes the role of psychological distancing from stressors. Hence, the scene from The Gay Woman, where Bigger and Jack are captivated by the glamorous portrayal of the white world, exemplifies this desire for escapism. Bigger's remark: “I’d like to be invited to a place like that just to find out what it feels like,” (p.33) reveals his longing for a life beyond his marginalized existence and fantasy of wealth.

Nevertheless, this method of escape carries deeper consequences. Indeed, Bigger is ruthlessly reminded of the unpleasant racial stereotypes, as evidenced by Jack’s remark: “Man if them folks saw you they'd run... They’d think a gorilla broke loose from the zoo and put on a tuxedo” (33). The cinematic images he watches on the screen fuel his feelings of alienation and resentment since the glittering white

world he observes seems completely unattainable. Bigger's observation: “I bet their mattresses are stuffed with paper dollars,” (34) emphasizes his acute awareness of the economic gap that separates him from the lives of the wealthy. Thus, intensifying his inadequacy. Consequently, the laughter he shares with Jack: “They laughed, again, then fell silent abruptly”(34), provides only a momentary escape from the harsh reality of their situation.

In addition to his desire to ‘play white’ and seek refuge in cinema, alcohol becomes a crucial method of escapism for Bigger, enabling him to temporarily distance himself from the terrible pressures of his everyday life. Early in the novel, Bigger and his friends are depicted occasionally resorting to alcohol to alleviate the feelings of powerlessness and despair imposed by their tough circumstances. For instance, when Bigger expresses frustration over the lack of freedom and opportunities available to black people, asking: “What in hell can a man do?”, Gus advises him to avoid thinking about it, suggesting instead that he: Get drunk and sleep it off” (p.24). This pattern of using alcohol as a means of escape intensifies following his murder of Mary Dalton. Bigger turns to alcohol as a way of alleviating his feelings of guilt and dread. The whisky provides him not only physical warmth and numbing but also a brief sense of emotional detachment. Wright effectively captures this moment when he observes: “The whisky heated him all over, making his head whirl” (p.217), and later he experiences a brief sensation of peace from his internal conflict: “The whisky lulled him, numbed his senses...he lay quietly, feeling the warmth of the alcohol spreading through him” (p.218). However, this emotional relief is brief since even in this intoxicated state, Bigger remains tense and aware of his deeper tensions: “It was as though he had been compelled to hold himself in a certain awkward posture for a long time and then when he had the chance to relax he could not” (p.218). Thus, Bigger's addiction to alcohol helps as a superficial escape, providing only a fleeting escape from the unpleasant reality of his life.

Like Bigger, Bessie is caught in a life of solitude and hard work as a maid. In an attempt to escape the pain and futility of her life, she resorts to alcohol as a means of coping and seeks solace through her sexual intimacy with Bigger. Her profound hopelessness and constant suffering are most effectively expressed when she reflects: “All my life’s been full of hard trouble. If I wasn’t hungry, I was sick And if I wasn’t sick, I was in trouble… I had to get drunk to forget it. I had to get drunk to sleep.” (p. 215). For Bessie, Alcohol becomes the primary means of numbing the pain and suffering of her harsh circumstances. In addition to alcohol, her acquiescence to Bigger’s sexual desires serves as a different coping mechanism, providing her with security and stability in a society that marginalizes and oppresses her. Through their lovemaking, Bessie offers Bigger a temporary emotional comfort which enables him to emerge "renewed to the surface to face a world he hated and wanted to blot out of existence" (p. 135). This intimate connection, though motivated by her innate urge to survive, offers her a brief relief from the turmoil and helplessness that challenge her life.

In contrast to Bigger and Bessie, Mrs. Thomas, Bigger's mother, turns to religion as an emotional coping to deal with the strains arising from poverty, institutional racism, and her son's delinquency. As Harold Bloom, the American writer and literary critic, observes: "His [Bigger's] mother escapes in religion; Bessie escapes in alcohol. Both give their autonomy over for temporary comfort"(2007, pp.40/1). Religion offers Mrs. Thomas comfort and hope amid despair in an oppressive world. She attempts to remain resilient through payers and religious hymns, believing that a greater force will ultimately rescue her and her family from their misery.

Finally, Bigger Thomas's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping strategies in Native Son, demonstrate the depth of his response to the strain he experiences. His cognitive methods for coping include rationalizing his behavior, and making analogies between his previous and current situations, will offer him momentary psychological comfort. Through violence and delinquent behavior, he behaviorally tries to gain control in a world that denies him freedom. Bigger also adopts emotional escapism, engrossing himself in playacting, attending movies, and drinking to momentarily relieve his anxiety and frustration. In general, analyzing Bigger's response within the framework of Robert Agnew's general strain theory, shows the complex interplay between individual desires, societal constraints, strain, and the choice of coping mechanism in shaping delinquency.

3.3. Factors Influencing Bigger's Desire for Delinquency

Strain theory suggests that strain can lead to crime, but it doesn't explain why only some individuals resort to delinquency. Critics (Hirschi, 1969; Cole, 1975; Kornhauser, 1978; Bernard, 1984) argue that Merton and others fail to clarify why only some strained individuals turn to crime. Agnew (1992) responded by emphasizing that internal and external factors determine whether individuals adopt delinquent or nondelinquent coping mechanisms. In *Native Son*, Wright portrays Bigger Thomas, whose response to stressors is shaped by structural constraints, his social environment, and his disposition, as explained by Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST).

3.3.1 General Structural Constraints to Nondelinquent and Delinquent Coping

Robert Agnew differentiates between delinquent and nondelinquent coping strategies, highlighting constraints such as goals, values, personal resources, and social support that influence how individuals handle strain. Agnew asserts that when strain affects one’s goals and values, and when alternatives are limited, delinquency becomes more likely.

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas faces strain due to limited educational and job opportunities, compounded by racial barriers. His frustration is evident when he speaks to Gus: "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" (p. 20). This lack of access to his goals contributes to his eventual criminal actions.

Bigger also lacks essential coping resources like self-confidence and problem-solving skills. This deficiency leads him to react with violence rather than rational solutions. After accidentally killing Mary, Bigger is overwhelmed with fear: "He stood with her body in her hands in the silent room and cold facts battered him like waves sweeping in from the sea, she was white, she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black, he might be caught; he did not want to be caught, if he were they would kill him" (p. 88). His fear drives him to further criminality, such as burning her body.

The absence of positive social support exacerbates Bigger’s struggles. Lacking emotional support from his family, particularly his mother, who says, "Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do" (p. 11), he has no constructive means to cope with his challenges. This lack of guidance leads him to adopt violence as a coping strategy.

Finally, Bigger’s use of weapons, like knives and guns, gives him empowerment in a hostile, racially segregated world. Wright describes this coping mechanism: "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" (p. 44). His reliance on violence is also evident in a fight with Gus: “Bigger’s hand moved so swiftly that nobody saw it; a gleaming blade flashed" (p. 40). Later, he uses a knife to mutilate Mary’s body: "He got his knife from his pocket opened it, and stood by the furnace, looking at Mary’s white throat" (p. 90). This highlights how Bigger’s access to illicit tools propels him toward further delinquent behavior.

3.3.2 Large- Scale Social Variables Associated with Delinquency

Robert Agnew (1992) argues that broader social contexts influence the likelihood of individuals adopting delinquent coping strategies. These environments shape values, beliefs, and perceptions of adversity, while limiting non-delinquent coping. In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas’s coping strategies are shaped by the 1930s Chicago social environment, which prioritizes wealth and status but confines him to poverty due to racial segregation. Wright captures this frustration when Bigger reflects, “Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me” (p. 23). His frustration deepens, and he feels inevitable harm: “It’s like I was going to do something I can’t help” (p. 24).

Agnew’s theory also highlights how social environments can promote violence as a coping mechanism. In Chicago's South Side, pervasive poverty and racial segregation foster fear and defensiveness, leading individuals like Bigger to adopt delinquent responses. His violent encounter with Gus illustrates this: “Bigger’s band moved so swiftly that nobody saw it; a gleaming blade flashed” (p. 40). The violence reflects Bigger’s internalized fear of white authority, influencing his behavior.

Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton demonstrates how social structures shape responses to adversity. Convinced by racial taboos that he is trapped, he views murder as his only escape. Wright describes the transformation: “He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own” (p. 101), giving him power and control.

Agnew’s theory also explains how certain social settings hinder cognitive coping. Bigger's interactions with Mary and Jan, though well-meaning, deepen his inferiority: “This white man... held him up now to look at him and be amused” (p. 68). This perception increases his vulnerability and fuels a “dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate,” pushing him toward delinquency.

Finally, Agnew notes that certain social settings restrict escape, especially for the urban poor. In *Native Son*, Bigger is confined to a segregated Black neighborhood, which limits his options. He reflects, “He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat” (p. 233), illustrating the entrapment that drives him toward destructive actions. These examples highlight how social factors, like racial strain and limited coping options, push Bigger toward delinquency, shaping his responses to adversity.

3.3.3 Determinants of Bigger’s Disposition to Delinquency

The choice between delinquent and nondelinquent coping strategies in response to strain is influenced not only by the broader structural constraints and social environments but also by an individual’s disposition towards particular behavior. Agnew (1992) suggests that temperament, prior experiences, and internalized beliefs influence whether a person adopts delinquent coping mechanisms. In *Native Son*, Wright demonstrates how these factors shape Bigger Thomas’s predisposition for delinquency.

Bigger's impulsive temperament, marked by ambition, fear, and aggression, makes him prone to delinquent responses to strain. His violent reaction to a rat in his apartment: "he kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed… Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: 'You sonofabitch'" (p.10)—foreshadows his later reckless actions, including Mary Dalton's murder.

Bigger's violent tendencies extend to his family, as shown in his mocking behavior toward his sister, Vera: "Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear" (p.11), and his aggressive response to his mother's demands: "Aw, don't start that again" (p.12). These interactions reveal his inability to handle stress constructively.

Bigger's violent and impulsive nature is evident in his confrontation with Gus, where his fears manifest as aggression. Gus criticizes Bigger's temper, saying, "You see. Bigger, you the cause of all the trouble... It's your hot temper... You scared I'm going to say yes and you'll have to go through with the job" (p.29). This highlights his tendency to respond to anxiety with violence. Additionally, Bigger's history of criminal behavior, such as robbing peers within his community: "They had always robbed Negroes" (p.20), reinforces his delinquent coping mechanisms.

Bigger's perception of racial injustice also influences his violent responses. When confronted with Mary and Jan's friendliness, he reacts with anger and confusion: "He flushed warm with anger. Goddam her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? What was it that they wanted? Why didn't they leave him alone?" (p.67). This internalized belief in racial hierarchy fuels his violent actions.

Ultimately, Agnew's theory explains how Bigger's temperament, past experiences, and perception of strain shape his tendency toward delinquent behavior. These factors limit his ability to cope with strain in healthy ways, leading to his violent actions throughout the novel.

.**Conclusion**

Wright's *Native Son* offers a compelling examination of the intersection between desire, strain, and delinquency through the life of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man struggling with systematic oppression in 1930s Chicago. Through the lens of GST, it becomes clear that Bigger's desires for social mobility, self -determination, and reverence are constantly thwarted by the oppressive social systems that marginalize him because of his race and class. The failure to achieve these valued goals, along with the loss of positive stimuli such as familial support and the dehumanizing effects of living in a racially segregated society, creates a strain that manifests in anger, frustration, and hopelessness. These negative emotions result in the subsequent escalation of his criminal actions as devastating responses, including the murders of Mary Dalton, and Bessie Mears.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights how Bigger's coping strategies, whether cognitive, emotional, or behavioral, contribute to his descent into delinquency. His rationalizations of violence, emotional escapism, and impulsive behavior all serve as maladaptive attempts to manage the strain imposed by the socio-economic reality. Examining these coping strategies in the context of GST makes it clear that Bigger's engagement in delinquent behavior is not merely an individual failing but a tragic consequence of a broader

societal failure to provide African Americans fair opportunities under a system that oppresses them based on race.

Finally, the examination of Bigger's behavior through the GST paradigm shows the profound impact of societal and structural variables on personal behavior. The novel indicates that delinquency, particularly in the context of marginalized groups, is not an inherent trait but a complex response to oppressive circumstances. Bigger's tragic fate reflects the destructive potential of an environment that offers no outlet for the expression of legitimate desires, highlighting the urgent need for social and systematic change. In this sense, Native Son not only presents a psychological depiction of one man's internal struggle but also uncovers the larger social factors that shape and constrain the lives of oppressed people. Ultimately, this study confirms the applicability of GST by providing a valuable framework for understanding the complex relationship between societal strain and criminal behavior in Wright's novel, revealing the deep-rooted consequences of racial and economic inequality in America.

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