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Marxist Monsters in *Native Son*

Matthew Martz '02

## Introduction:

One of the hallmarks of post-modernism is the fragmentation of meaning. This splintering has opened everything up for interpretation, even the monsters that go bump in the night. Our culture defines its post-modern monsters as tightly as midnight slashers and as loosely as anything that is other than the self. Since the monster acts as a palimpsest on which we layer our fears, scholars often think of the monster as only a cultural construct that morphs along with the culture that created it. Although cultures assign monsters many of their attributes, I do not believe that they are solely cultural constructs. As a culture rests on top of a specific economic base, so do its monsters. In order to understand a monster and the culture that rejects it, one must first look at their shared economic origins.

During this essay, I will reevaluate Jeffery Cohen's "Monster Culture" from a Marxist perspective in order to show that the economic base, not the superstructure, created Bigger, the monster in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In order to do this, I will first fuse Cohen's theory and a Marxist understanding of base and superstructure. This will uncover the economic essence of monsters. As a logical repercussion, this finding will depreciate "Monster Culture" because Cohen's theory hinges on the idea that the monster is solely a cultural construct on which a culture writes its fears. After I have established this Marxist-Monster theory, I will then use it to reveal how the economic base in *Native Son* created Bigger, instead of the superstructure. This essay will conclude with a deconstruction of Bigger so as to show how he threatens both the economic elite's privilege and the class structure that created him.

## Marxist-Monster Theory:

In Marxist theory, the superstructure encompasses all social and ideological structures such as religion, law, art, and monsters. It is often referred to as culture. The base comprises all the interactions between production and consumption. In simplified terms, it is the economy. The base supports the superstructure while it influences its shape. Ron Strickland from Illinois State University reaffirms this interpretation of Marxist theory when he states "that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life"(Strickland). Cultural scholars often try to uncover hidden maxims or unsaid metanarratives to clarify cultural phenomena such as monsters, but those maxims are still part of the superstructure, and there-

fore they still originated from a specific base that can only uphold a limited number of superstructures. Since the nature of the base determines the possible superstructures, I find it necessary to explore the base in order to interpret the superstructure's monsters.

Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" effectively investigates monsters and the superstructures that engender them, but since it only concerns itself with monsters as cultural constructs it is unable to address the monster's economic essence. Although all seven theses relate to the base, this essay focuses on the first thesis because it has the most significant connection with the base and it triggers the last six theses. The first thesis states that "the monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read"(Cohen 4). I do not doubt that reading what the superstructure considers as other or as an outsider can produce significant findings, but when monsters are linked to their base, they move out of the realm of cultural theory and into the material world. The monster becomes more than just the other; it becomes a rival economic subject to be feared.

When readers view monsters from an economic perspective as Wright does in *Native Son*, they find that within capitalism the monsters are almost always the economic abject. The superstructure fleshes out its monsters by adding sharp fangs or the race that is "just plain dumb black crazy"(Wright 8). The monsters can signify a multitude of anxieties, but the essence of capitalism's monster is its poverty, where it is "devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights"(Wright 397). Superstructures place their fears on monsters in layers, but they do not create them, the base does. Monsters have an economic skeleton before they have a cultural body so that within a capitalistic society the monster is forged out of the industrial working class.

The working class monsters threaten the affluent by competing for economic privilege and by attacking the class structure. Both threats are economic rather than cultural, but only the second is directly concerned with the base. In regards to the first threat, the monsters stay within the class structure and take economic power through private or public revolution so that "Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal is a plot or a conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection"(Wright). When the monsters take economic control, they also take control of the superstruc-

ture. In this reversed position, a new group of monsters emerges from the dispossessed. A revolution of this kind essentially exchanges one ruling class for another, but it does not cause any significant changes to the class structure. The one-time monsters can become the affluent while the one-time affluent can become the monsters with what Max, defense attorney, calls the same "imperial dream of a feudal age that made men enslave others" (Wright 389). This unveils the first fear of monsters to be the possibility that the monsters could usurp the affluent's privilege and force them into poverty. The first threat does not refer to cultural interpretation, as Cohen would believe, but to economic status.

The second threat that monsters pose is also an economic one, but instead of attacking the affluent they attack the class structure itself. The monsters begin by rejecting their working class identity and defining themselves within the superstructure's volatile web of meanings. This act threatens the wealthy because when the monsters define themselves so that there is "no white and no black...no rich and no poor," they destroy the base that creates both poverty and wealth (Wright 68). Capitalism cannot exist without a working class to produce goods to be consumed. By destroying the base the monster destroys the class structure that a culture uses to define itself and its monsters. Although devils and claws are threatening, the true threat is not to the victims' moral or physical well-being but to their economic well-being.

#### *Native Son:*

Richard Wright's *Native Son* was published just before World War II pulled the entire world out of the Great Depression. A decline in production and spending along with a rise in unemployment marked the depression. This caused farmers from the south and west to migrate to the industrial centers of the northeast in search of work. These economic changes thickened the barriers between classes and created a general anxiety that hardened cultural binaries on such topics as race, gender and political belief. John Steinbeck addressed these topics from a migrant farmer's perspective in *Grapes of Wrath*, while Wright chose to focus on industrial workers in *Native Son*. Both of which are socialist texts written for capitalist audiences.

Although cultural constructs such as race, gender, and religion all temper the interactions between the characters, class dominates *Native Son* by supporting the entire social structure. All cultural characteristics like race or sex are tacked onto the tail end of class: a rich white woman, a poor black man, a middle-class Jewish Communist because they are all of secondary importance. The class structure spawns them.

The protagonist's existence threatens this class structure in two ways. First, Bigger's presence as the "other," as the economic abject, allows for the possibility of rebellion. The oppressed could become oppressors. Second, he disrupts the interactions between classes when he rejects his class identity and kills two women, one poor and the other wealthy. By asserting his identity as an individual outside of his class, Bigger poses a threat to the class structure, itself, and therefore, anyone with privilege within the class structure. From the wealthy white perspective, this makes him a monster worthy of slaying, but he is not actually executed until after two murders and a formal trial. If his existence threatens the class structure, then why do the affluent, who have the most to lose, allow him to exist?

In order to survive, capitalism creates a working class, a group of monsters that produces goods that both the affluent and the impoverished consume. This maintains the base and therefore the class structure. The dominant class maintains the working class by cordoning it off in a ghetto with limited or false opportunities and mind numbing releases that convince it constituents that they deserve their economic station. The poor must live in rat-infested apartments on the South Side of Chicago. They must eat overpriced food. They must work at low paying jobs. They must do all of this because it maintains the base. This idea is often buried under the cultural constructs like race or religion. The type of construct that Mr. Dalton refers to as "an old custom" when Max asks him why he only rents certain apartments to black families (Wright 327). These metanarratives reinforce the class structure in order to maintain production and consumption levels.

The dominant class makes the working class feel guilty with metanarratives about individual responsibility that contradict the economic base so as to keep the monsters working. The monsters are ashamed of who they are for two reasons: the poverty that the wealthy have forced upon them and the American belief in the worth and ability of the individual. The first is an economic reality while the second is a cultural myth. The working class believes in its role as the impoverished to the extent that rebels like Bigger must prevent himself from feeling the "fulness [of] how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives" or else "he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (Wright 10). The base and the superstructure create a paradox that the poor cannot reconcile, so they blame the victims; they blame themselves.

From within their poverty, the working class only has releases that affirm their abject station with more cultural myths and explanations. Bigger's senses hun-

ger for a movie because "in a movie he [can] dream without effort," he can escape the harsh reality of his life (Wright 14). Movies offer mindless escapes to beautiful worlds, but while they entertain they also instruct. They provide fantasies that promise better lives to the impoverished just so long as they continue to work hard. They tell Bigger lies that blacks are the savages of *Trader Horn* and that life is "all a game and white people [know] how to play it" (Wright 33). With cultural or pseudoscientific explanations, the movie convinces Bigger that the secret to success is hidden, waiting to be found with hard work and cunning. It convinces him that the culture is real while the economic forces that make him abject are not.

Religions possess many of the same attributes as movies, but instead of promising a better life to the hard working, they promise a perfect afterlife to the moral. Religion does not dupe Bigger in the same way that the movies do. He does not believe in "the old voice of his mother [that tells] of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world" (Wright 283). He knows that "the white folks like for [the working class] to be religious, [because] then they can do what they want to with [them]" (Wright 356). He knows that the hope for heavenly recompense blocks the energies for earthly justice. In both the movies and the religions, the monsters look for a way to either escape or improve, but in actuality, their fantasies and false hope only lock them in the prison cell of their class. The hope and fantasies blind the poor to the capitalist forces that flow below their culture. They cannot see that wealth perpetuates wealth and poverty perpetuates poverty without regards to effort but to capital.

If these fantasies fail the disadvantaged monsters, like they did for Bigger and his lover Bessie, then they turn to the physical releases of sex and alcohol that let them check out of their reality of shame even if they do not let them check into a fantasy for a new world. Where the fantasies blind the poor with lies, the alcohol numbs them so that they cannot feel the injustice that the base allows. Bessie reaffirms this interpretation when she states:

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 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 (Wright 229).

The idea that work will improve her life does not enter Bessie's thoughts, but the idea that work is the essence of her being is branded on her mind. There is

no opportunity for a better life. It is her identity. Instead of using fantasies to escape her reality, Bessie uses alcohol to supplement the life that she misses because she is constantly working. She tries to improve her life by trying to forget it. Bigger and Bessie are similar in their need to escape their poverty so that where Bessie "wanted liquor...he wanted her" (Wright 139).

The only difference between the two is how they create their escapes. Where alcohol numbs in order to mollify, sex physically stimulates the working class. Both prevent it from pooling its physical and economic resources in order to instigate a revolution. Bigger does not use his energy and limited funds to better his economic situation or call the class structure into question because he uses them to "give [Bessie] liquor [so] she would give him herself" (Wright 139). Max finds that they are both trapped because "they [are] physically dependent upon each other" (Wright 401). One needs alcohol while the other needs sex, so they can blot out their lives. Max understands that "if it were not for the backwaters of religion, gambling and sex draining off [the laborers'] energies into channels harmful to them and profitable to us, more of the them would be [on trial for murder]" (Wright 394). What they want to be an escape becomes a way to reaffirm their abject economic status.

The channels for legitimate economic advancement such as education and work are not available to the working class monsters, but they are presented as if they were in order to sustain the base. The characters in *Native Son* work without any opportunity for advancement.

[Bessie] worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led (Wright 139).

She has no illusions as to what her life is. She knows that she will never move outside of her class and most likely she will work herself to death. When she says, "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" she knows that all she can hope for is that she does not slip any lower on the economic scale than she already has (Wright 180). She knows that the American dream to pull herself up by her bootstraps and succeed does not pertain to her. She knows that it is a lie.

The hope that education can free the monsters from their poverty becomes another lie that is dressed up to look like an opportunity when actually it only solidifies the class structure by increasing production.

The education that is open to the working class is all vocational training. Bigger's sister, Vera is taking "sewing classes at the Y," but this education only teaches the monsters how to produce more without necessarily making any more money (Wright 298).

Even when education gives the working class student skills that are valuable in the marketplace, the custom still dictates whether or not the affluent will initiate the educated monster into their class. Mrs. Dalton claims, "the last man who worked [at her house] went to night school and got an education" (Wright 61). But the education does not transfer into a better life because after Mr. Dalton answers no to Max's question: have "you ever employed any of the Negroes you helped to educate," the reader knows that an education is as worthless to the monster as hard work. Wealth not only supplies opportunities, but it also sustains them until the individual can take advantage of them. Without wealth to support opportunities such as education, the opportunities become elaborate lies that further trap the monsters in their class.

The monsters that escape their poverty and assimilate into the dominant class do so at the expense of their identity. The Daltons have never hired a disadvantaged man to a job higher than a chauffeur, even after they have educated him, but they let members of the working class come to their home as if money and education could act like a green card. Although it may seem as if these men's lives have improved because they possess opportunities that are similar to those of the dominant class, they only exchange one role for another that is just as restricting. The working class's ex-patriots have wealth and opportunities, but they only have them at the pleasure of the dominant class. The liberal wealthy let the monsters visit their class "to slave the ache of [their] own conscience", to fool themselves into thinking that they are not oppressing the laborers (Wright 328). Bigger elaborates on this point when finds that the dominant class is only happy when the poor forsake their identity so that "they [are] almost like white people" (Wright 357). These ex-patriots become nothing more than beggars and minstrels that the wealthy find amusing. This is why Bigger hates Mary when "she did not hate him with the hate of other white people" (Wright 82). Bigger hates the hypocrisy of her class that would give him education in order to take away his identity. The Dalton's liberalism makes a final attempt to destroy the monster by making it believe that they can take away its class identity and assimilate it into the dominant class. In this instance, the monster does not improve its economic status. It has moved from the fields to the plantation house, but it is still a slave.

Economic conditions along with false opportunities for advancement and release create the working class monster that threatens to either take the affluent's privilege or destroy all privilege with a revolution that rejects the base. Although it may be difficult to believe that a working class as oppressed as it is in *Native Son* could rise up and take the wealth for itself, the mere fact that there is a monstrous other makes it possible for the affluent to be dispossessed. Since it is possible, it can be feared and attacked. Bigger cannot stage a widespread rebellion, but he finds that "the thing to do [is] to act just like others [act], live like they [live], and while they [are] not looking, do what you [want]" (Wright 106). Bigger finds this power when he realizes that all people are blind, "blind like his mother, his brother, his sister, Peggy, Britten, Jan, Mr. Dalton, and the sightless Mrs. Dalton", because all they see is class (Wright 173). As long as Bigger looks like he is part of the working class he can do anything he wants. This is how he gets away with killing a rich white girl for as long as he does, and how he begins his revolt against the rich white world.

When Bigger asserts his identity outside of class and moral codes, the dominant class executes him in order to drive out any doubts that might lead to a rebellion against the class structure that the moral codes stand upon. Bigger releases himself from his class identity with his crime that "[weighed] him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence... He was outside of his family, over and beyond them" (Wright 105). Max supports Bigger's feelings when he finds that "[his killing] was an act of *creation!*" an act of subject formation (Wright 400). But this subject formation threatens the wealthy class because to have an identity without class is to be a threat to all classes. The upper class destroys Bigger in hopes that his death will prevent other defectors, other Biggers that move into their own societies that define people by their acts instead of their wealth. When Buckley pleads with the judge to "slay the dragon of doubt that causes millions to pause tonight, a million hands to tremble as they lock their doors!" these millions are not afraid of Bigger (Wright 414). They are not afraid of one killer. They are afraid of losing the classes from which Bigger, the dragon of doubt, releases himself. They are not protecting their lives so much as their wealth.

The threats that make a monster like Bigger scary for capitalist societies, have less to do with layers of moral meaning and cultural taboo, than they have to do with the economic base. Present day capitalist America dresses up its monsters in the same way that past superstructures have. They may not have fangs and fur,

but we still make signs for our monsters. Our present day Boogie Man has not changed much from the Boogie Man that Wright presents because the United States' economic base has not changed significantly in the last sixty years. Bigger, the black man with a knife, still lurks at the end of our dark alleyways waiting to rape and murder. But it is my belief that if his face were white, if he did not have a knife, if he were without every symbol with which we mark the monstrous, he

can still terrify Americans just so long as he is still part of the working class. Just so long as he is still poor. The monster does not threaten our spiritual or moral well-being. Its threats are more basic. They go deeper. We are afraid of the monster because it threatens our ability to earn and spend. We are afraid because the monster is a sign of our blind reliance on the class structure that the base generates and our oppression upholds.