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# The Clue Undetected in Richard Wright's "Native Son"

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## ***The Clue Undetected in Richard Wright's Native Son***

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In his *Black Boy*, Richard Wright relates the story of a forged note he wrote at the age of eighteen in order to check out books at a library in Memphis. Wright told the white man whose library card he was using what he was planning to do. He would forge a note to make it appear that the white man was making the request: "I finally wrote what I thought would be a foolproof note: *Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy – I used the word 'nigger' to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note – have some books by H. L. Mencken? I forged the white man's name.*"<sup>1</sup>

Wright's fictional creation, the twenty-year-old Bigger Thomas of *Native Son*, also forges a white man's name to a note he has written. This note, however, is a ransom note concerning Mary Dalton, a young woman whom Bigger has already killed. Just before he forges the name "*Red*" – which is meant to turn everyone's attention to Jan Erlone, the communist – Bigger writes, "*Do what this letter say.*"<sup>2</sup> While there is certainly little similarity between the intellectual capacity of Wright at eighteen and his protagonist, one can not help noticing that Wright's forged note shows an awareness of the "typical" white man's diction, while Bigger's note fails – that is, should have failed as a forgery – in one important respect concerning the grammar of the ruling class.

Although it is only the absence of one letter required by Standard American English that constitutes the piece of evidence that could point to the murderer, the clue looms large on the page. The legibility of Bigger's handwriting is not at issue: "He should disguise his handwriting. He changed the pencil from his right to his left hand. He would not write it; he would print it. . . . he printed slowly in big round letters" (p. 166). With Mary Dalton dead, the authorities' two principal suspects, after questioning Bigger, are Jan Erlone and Bigger himself. No matter how the note was signed, it seems obvious that the authorities would realize that Bigger's vernacular, not Jan's, would produce, "*Do what this letter say.*"

Wright, responding to an article which was critical of his novel, wrote: "If there had been *one* person in the Dalton household who viewed Bigger Thomas as a human being, the crime would have been solved in half an hour. Did not Bigger himself know that it was the denial of his personality that enabled him to escape detection so long? The one piece of incriminating evidence which would have solved the 'murder mystery' was Bigger's humanity, and the Daltons, Britten, and the newspaper men could not see or admit the living clue of Bigger's humanity under their very eyes!"<sup>3</sup> Although Wright is arguing the larger issue of Bigger's humanity, his word choice also intimates that a reading based on conventions of the detective story might well be profitable. One learns from *Black Boy* that when Wright first began to read he was interested in mysteries and that his reading included *Flynn's Detective Weekly*.<sup>4</sup> In a recent study, Robert Felgar notes, in a discussion of *The Outsider* and *Native Son*, "how much Wright's fiction owes to the conventions of the detective story."<sup>5</sup>

John G. Cawelti mentions "crime and clues" as one of the six primary elements in the pattern of the classical detective story and writes of their "paradoxical relationship": "First, the crime must be surrounded by a number of tangible clues that make it absolutely clear that some agency is responsible for it, and, second, it must appear to be insoluble."<sup>6</sup> Although pieces of Mary's bones would later be found in the furnace as well as one of her earrings, the first and only clue until that time which points to criminal activity is the ransom note composed by Bigger. Yet when the bones and earring are discovered, Bigger is standing among the men near the furnace. A paradox exists, but it is not the paradox which Cawelti mentions in his discussion of the classical detective story. Wright's paradox is ironic. He has spelled out a tangible clue; however, rather than making the crime seem "insoluble," the paradox is that no one sees the obvious.

Having overlooked a piece of solid evidence, the prosecution turns to what the reader realizes is ludicrous, trumped-up "evidence": "Five white men came to the stand and said that the handwriting on the kidnap note was his; that it was the same writing which they had found on his 'homework papers taken from the files of the school he used to attend'" (p. 351). Bigger's conscious attempt to disguise his handwriting by switching the pencil to his left hand could not, it seems, deter these specialists! Having failed to read the sign of Bigger's identity, the five white men do appear to find one clue: the authorities intend to have Bigger Thomas convicted one way or another, with or without legitimate evidence.

The instance of black vernacular in Bigger's ransom note is no linguistic error; it is a direct transcription of the Black English Vernacular that he speaks.<sup>7</sup> However, Bigger's use of BEV in this particular situation can be considered an "error" when read in conjunction with the conventions of the detective story: his error would have been – had it been discovered – that he slipped up in trying to mask himself linguistically. J. L. Dillard records that Black English differs most from the dialects of white Americans in "the system of its verbs."<sup>8</sup> The white authorities fail to read one of the most blatant of linguistic clues on two levels: intellectual and moral.

Since the white men had received educational opportunities denied to Bigger on the basis of race and since their linguistic environment would increase the possibility of their detecting Bigger's deviation from Standard American English, they fail on an intellectual level. Beyond their lack of sensitivity to language and their deficient detective skills, the authorities are morally culpable for their prejudice that prevents them from understanding that Bigger Thomas is a human being with a potential for action beyond their limited perception of him.

Their failure helps Wright illuminate a mystery of race relations: that the white men did not know Bigger's language tells the reader that they did not know him. Bigger makes this complaint to Max, his attorney: "White folks and black folks is strangers. We don't know what each other is thinking" (pp. 324-25). What avenue could be more telling toward discovering who a person is than that person's language? In a small and concrete sense, the authorities overlook the clue which they could have used for their own limited ends to solve the mystery of Mary Dalton's murder. In a larger sense, they overlook a clue concerning Bigger's humanity. The failure of the authorities to read that clue is evidence of their guilt in race relations and, ultimately, the guilt which they share in Mary Dalton's murder.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), p. 167. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me," *Atlantic Monthly*, 165 (June 1940), 828.

<sup>4</sup> *Black Boy*, pp. 141-42 and 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Richard Wright* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 81 -82 and 85.

<sup>7</sup> William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 271.

<sup>8</sup> *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 40.