

The Character of Chicago in "Native Son"



Photo Credit: Library of Congress

The events of *Native Son* take place in December of 1939 - a moment in time that signaled the end of one era and the start of the next. The tumultuous rise and fall that had marked the period following World War I's end in 1918 - the roaring '20s, Prohibition, the stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression - was coming to an end. At the same time, a new tumult was on the horizon. Just as Bigger Thomas' own drama was playing out on the streets and in the homes of South Chicago, across the Atlantic Ocean, the Nazis were invading Poland. World War II was beginning.

There are few places in America where the collision of eras, of histories and cultures and heritages, is more strongly felt than in Chicago. It's a city that has always served to represent a crossroads, lying as it does squarely in the middle of the country. The city has also long served as a cultural meeting point, the winds of history, change and opportunity pushing various groups across it in mass movements. That constant, shifting, roiling melting pot animates Chicago, giving it depth and character. In *Native Son*, the city is so alive it practically becomes its own character.

And the city is a fierce character whose impact is felt throughout the story, a violent and angry character befitting the violence of its collisions. One feels it in the weather, the way Chicago's famous cold seems to stab at Bigger whenever he faces it. One feels it too in the city's architecture and the way its buildings seem to loom over the story's action. Many of those buildings were, in fact, empty at that time, a quality that features prominently in the plot of *Native Son* and a tragic irony which speaks directly to the condition of the city's African American population.

Decades before, as World War I got under way and soldiers shipped off, the resulting labor shortages had created jobs for minorities and brought with them the promise of a brighter future. Hearing that call, the first generations of African-Americans not born into bondage began to move from the plantations and rural communities of the South to great industrial centers of the North like Chicago. This decades-long relocation of more than 6 million people came to be known as The Great Migration, and it's one of the most important economic and cultural shifts in American history.

The Great Migration led to the establishment of new communities for black families within these cities, vital communities that in turn, led to vital cultural expressions like those that came out of the Harlem Renaissance or Chicago's own Bronzeville neighborhood. But this movement brought with it opposition as well. Following the end of the war a few years later, the returning soldiers were looking for jobs and homes too and competing with African Americans just arriving from the South. Opportunities were snatched up. Frustration and animosity grew, and violence and crime came with it. Racism, always a part of the fabric of American life, took an especially tight hold.

The summer of 1919, presumably the year when Bigger was born, is known as "The Red Summer" to mark the dozens and dozens of race riots that occurred then. The highest number of fatalities occurred in the rural area around Elaine, Arkansas, where Native Son novelist Richard Wright had spent time as a child. And in Chicago, one riot killed 38 people and injured 500 more.

As this kind of horrific unrest persisted, white property owners responded by enacting racist housing covenants. Condoned by the city, these covenants allowed owners to prohibit the purchase, lease or occupation of their premises by any African Americans. Even when the Great Depression swept in and buildings emptied out, black families found their options increasingly limited by this artificial housing shortage, hemmed in to a small section of Chicago's South Side. It led to extreme overcrowding, with a 1934 census estimating that black households contained 6.8 people on average, whereas white households contained 4.7. This, in turn, led to unsanitary and unsafe living conditions, the very kind of situation that Bigger's family finds themselves in and that we witness in the early parts of *Native Son*.

The evil of this segregation is crystal clear to Bigger as soon as he leaves his family's one-room apartment and begins to move through Chicago. He's on his way to meet with the Daltons, the affluent, white family in the sprawling home whose fate will cross with his soon enough. They live not even two miles away, just a hop on the trolley, and yet the Thomases and the Daltons are worlds apart. Of course, Bigger can see the differences plain as day, just as he can everyday. It creates an anger and fear that hangs over him like Chicago's towering buildings. It stabs at him like its bitter winds, and it's unquestionably part of what leads him down the path he travels in *Native Son*.

By Dylan Southard

Dramaturg