Genre in/and Wright’s *Native Son*

Ever since *Native Son’s* initial publication in 1940, critics and audiences have held wide-ranging views on the novel’s generic classification. *Native Son* has been labeled as a work of social protest fiction, a crime fiction, a courtroom drama, and a *bildungsroman*. Ultimately, though, the novel resists any easy generic classification, precisely because Wright violates all of these genres as they are traditionally understood: *Native Son* is a protest novel with a not wholly sympathetic protagonist (in fact, Bigger Thomas is an anti-hero, of sorts), a crime novel/courtroom drama where justice does not prevail, and a *bildungsroman* without any of the traditional outcomes (Bigger is ultimately incapable of either flight or escape and he does not reach maturity, at least in any traditional sense of the word). By examining the diverse ways that *Native Son* has been characterized over the past six and a half decades, this essay analyzes the complexity of genre in *Native Son* and explores how genre itself is complicated by how readers approach texts.

Since the novel’s initial publication in 1940, critics and audiences have taken a wide range of views on both *Native Son’s* theme and its generic classification. In their assessment of the novel as a whole, critics have placed it into several different categories; it has been called, among other things, a work of social protest fiction, a crime fiction, a courtroom drama, and a *bildungsroman*. When critics evaluate the three separate books within the novel—“Fear,” “Flight,” and “Fate”—individually, they further complicate the question of *Native Son’s* generic classification. Even those critics who confidently make pronouncements about how the novel should be categorized reveal—through the peculiar ways in which they discuss the book—that *Native Son* resists any easy generic classification.

Part of this difficulty may stem, as Edward Margolies suggests in his book *The Art of Richard Wright*, from Wright’s own conflicted views about ideology (which, in turn, have an impact on both the messages he wants to convey in *Native Son* and the generic traditions
he chooses to employ). Margolies argues that the “chief philosophical weakness of *Native Son* is [...] that Wright himself does not seem to be able to make up his mind” (113). *Native Son*, however, is also difficult to categorize because it simply does not fit into any one generic group. Instead, Wright uses several different generic forms within the novel. *Native Son* functions, at various points, as a *bildungsroman* (a novel of formation), a social protest novel, and (though, perhaps to a lesser extent) a crime/courtroom drama. By combining these genres, Wright is able to successfully make a political statement—both an assessment and a critique—about not only Bigger Thomas, as a character and a type, but also about the society in which he lives (Bigger’s society encompasses both his immediate environment—Southside Chicago—and the greater society to which he belongs, that is mid-twentieth century America).

Though *Native Son* functions—at different points—as each of these genres previously mentioned, the novel also violates all three genres as they are traditionally understood. *Native Son* is a *bildungsroman* without any of the traditional outcomes: Bigger is ultimately incapable of either flight or escape and he does not reach maturity, at least in any traditional sense of the word. *Native Son* is a protest novel with a not wholly sympathetic protagonist: Bigger is an anti-hero, of sorts. It is a crime novel/courtroom drama where justice does not prevail: Bigger ends up being executed for his accidental killing of Mary and, at the novel’s end, his family seems to be in much the same situation—at least socially and financially—as they were at its start (and, further, after Bigger’s death they no longer have the hope that he may one day be able to provide for them).

In conjunction with his use of various literary genres, Wright relies upon setting, descriptions, and characters in such a way that they also contribute to the novel’s theme (and overall effect). He employs realistic settings and scenarios in “Fear,” the first section of *Native Son*; this heightens the political aspect of the novel. In “Flight” and “Fate,” the second and third sections of the novel, Wright, already having set the events into motion that will lead to Bigger’s conviction and execution, largely abandons the early part of the novel’s realism to emphasize *Native Son*’s political and social messages. Wright’s technique only adds to the fact that *Native Son* remains a complicated novel to classify, yet it is precisely because of his employment of these various techniques and generic forms that Wright is able to create his finished product. A closer examination of each potential genre will illustrate my contention.