Bigger’s “Rebellious Complaint”:
Biblical Imagery in *Native Son*

Many critics have traced back the origins of *Native Son* and the impact of scientific discourses on Wright. He is recognized as the unquestionable champion of black literary protest and naturalistic fiction, the author who bluntly exposed a belief in art as a crucial arena to debate political and social questions. Ralph Ellison’s condemnation of Wright’s defense of novels as “weapons” as well as his opinion that “true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life” (114) are well-known. As such, many readings of the novel have capitalized on Wright’s negative view of the black community. Yet, what seems to have drawn little, if any, interest about *Native Son* is the deeply religious nature of Bigger Thomas’s plight. I want to argue in this paper that *Native Son* is firmly rooted in biblical models of narration and theme indicated by the protagonist’s spiritual isolation and despair. Bigger realizes most bitterly the breach existing between himself and others (family, friends, society in general) in scenes which recreate his alienation and show the corruption that white America inscribed on blackness.

*How many are my iniquities and sins?*

*Job*

*I am just a black guy with nothing.*

Richard Wright, *Native Son*

In 1945 Richard Wright wrote an introduction to Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake’s study of African American Chicago, *Black Metropolis*. In it he highlighted two relevant facts: the importance of the research of the Chicago sociologists as an inspiration for his works and the weight of their influence in his own creation and formation as a writer:
I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me. I encountered the work of men who were studying the Negro community, amassing facts about urban negro life, and I found that sincere art and honest science were not far apart, that each could enrich the other. [...] It was from the scientific findings of the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew the meanings for my documentary book, *12,000,000 Black Voices*; for my novel, *Native Son*; it was from their scientific facts that I absorbed some of that quota of inspiration necessary for me to write *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Black Boy*. (xvii-xviii)

The findings of these sociologists, Wright asserts, explained to him the otherwise hidden illegibility of the environment and *Black Metropolis* served to illuminate and justify his narrative texts:

If, in reading my novel, *Native Son*, you doubted the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book; if, in reading my autobiography, *Black Boy*, you doubted the picture of family life there, then study the figures on family disorganization given here. (xx)

Thus, the writer emphasized the scientific origin of his literature and carved himself a niche within the pantheon of past and contemporary realistic writers.

Many critics have traced back the origins of *Native Son* and mentioned the impact of scientific discourses on Wright. He is recognized as the unquestionable champion of black literary protest and naturalistic fiction, the author who bluntly exposed a belief in art as a crucial arena to debate political and social questions. Yet Ralph Ellison’s condemnation of Wright’s defense of novels as “weapons” as well as his opinion that “true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life” (114) are also well-known. As such, many readings of the novel have capitalized on Wright’s negative view of the black community. Unfortunately, what seems to have drawn little, if any, interest about *Native Son* is the deeply religious nature of Bigger Thomas’s plight. I want to argue in this paper that *Native Son* is firmly rooted in biblical models of narration and theme indicated by the protagonist’s spiritual isolation and despair. Bigger’s most bitter realization is the breach existing between himself and others (family, friends, society in general) in scenes which recreate his alienation and show the corruption that white America inscribed on blackness.