

The Paradox of the Cross in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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Abstract: In *Native Son*, two controversial thoughts underline Wright's reflection on religion. On the one hand, some characters consider religion to be a source of emotional and spiritual comfort, which allows it to be interpreted as a symbol of redemption and compassion. And on the other hand, Bigger Thomas, the main protagonist, comes to believe that religion is a tool for exploiting black people, who are satisfied with their treatment here on earth in the expectation of better treatment in the afterlife. In this article, I demonstrate that the cross, which is one of the main symbols of the Christian religion, is a symbol of suffering and damnation for blacks, especially when the cross of Christ and that of the Ku Klux Klan become one and the same, turning as a crossroad of meaning and paradoxes for Bigger Thomas. From a deconstructive standpoint, I ultimately show the extent to which the cross can be a benefit for the black community, according to the Judeo-Christian religion.

Keywords: cross of Christ, redemption, reconciliation, crossroads of understandings, Ku Klux Klan, paradoxes.

Résumé: Dans *Native Son*, deux pensées controversées soulignent la réflexion de Wright sur la religion. D'une part, certains personnages considèrent la religion comme une source de réconfort émotionnel et spirituel, ce qui permet de l'interpréter comme un symbole de rédemption et de compassion. D'autre part, Bigger Thomas, le protagoniste principal, en vient à penser que la religion est un outil d'exploitation des Noirs, qui se satisfont de leur traitement ici-bas dans l'attente d'un meilleur traitement dans l'au-delà. Dans cet article, je démontre que la croix, qui est l'un des principaux symboles de la religion chrétienne, est un symbole de souffrance et de damnation pour les Noirs, surtout lorsque la croix du Christ et celle du Ku Klux Klan se confondent, devenant un carrefour de sens et de paradoxes pour Bigger Thomas. D'un point de vue déconstructif, je montre finalement dans quelle mesure la croix peut être un bienfait pour la communauté noire, selon la religion judéo-chrétienne.

Mots clefs: croix du Christ, redempction, reconciliation, carrefor de la comprehension, Ku Klux Klan, paradoxe

Introduction

Native Son (1940) is a novel written by Richard Wright, an African American author. The novel tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old African American boy who grew up in extreme poverty in an environment dominated by Christianity. In the novel, religion is ambiguous and stands as a paradox. While it is comforting for some characters, Bigger Thomas, the main protagonist, believes Christianity is not able to “break the chains of colonization” (Sandiswa 2022, 590). He holds that it rather contributes to the exploitation and oppression of black people. This dual meaning of religion also extends to the cross which is a key symbol “associated with Christianity” (Jason Johns 2019, 2).

Robert W. Reed (2019) defines the cross as a symbol that can be equated with “the gospel of Christ (2). According to him, preaching the cross of Christ is tantamount to saying that Jesus Christ died for our sins. More explicitly, the cross stands as the symbol of a set of blessings that “nourish our souls, revive our spirits and grant us eternal life” (Robert Reed 2019, 8). In other terms, through the cross, “religion constitutes a source of regeneration or re-humanization (...) a source of transformation (...); a symbol of freedom” (N’guessan Eugène 2021, 68). However, in this article I argue that these laudatory ideals of the cross of Christ are only true in the white world. When we juxtapose the image of the cross with Jesus Christ in the Bible and the one that the Ku Klux Klan parades in the racist US environment, is it not better for the researcher to see it also as a symbol of suffering and damnation for Black?

The meaning of the cross is slippery, unstable. While it is extolled by Reverend Hammond as the symbol of divine love and reconciliation, it simultaneously and paradoxically helps to reinforce the white hegemonic ideology initiated and supported by white supremacists when it finds itself in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, which uses it as an instrument of physical and emotional torture against blacks, leading in the process to trauma of all kinds. The article therefore examines this dual and paradoxical function of the cross in *Native Son*, which can be interpreted both as an instrument of redemption and compassion, and as a symbol of oppression, hatred, against the black community.

The cross of Christ has been the subject of numerous academic contributions. Yet, there is no unanimous agreement on the various symbolic meanings it may evoke especially for Blacks in America. While Gotthard Rosner (2011) insists on the ideals or qualities of the cross, which he presents as the symbol of love, and reconciliation between God and humanity; the symbol of hope and divine life for all. Rufus Burrow, quoting James H. Cone, rather defends

that such attributes cannot be achieved unless they are “done on black rather than white terms” (1993, 60).

In logical compliance with this position, Cone decided that he “was no longer going to allow white theologians and ethicists to tell him how to write and do theology and ethics. He would write and do theology and ethics for his own people” (1993, 65). His position defends that Christian religion in fact, only protects the interests of whites and is therefore not suitable or applicable to blacks if it cannot emancipate from the white hegemonic doctrine. He thus postulates that religion must renounce its function of domination and thus become a “precondition of reconciliation” (James H. Cone 1993, 60).

This study shows that the cross completely diverges from the ideals it was originally intended to embody and then highlights how it finally turns into a crossroads of meanings and paradoxes since the cross of Christ and that of the Ku Klux Klan are one and the same reality in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The work is organized in three main sections. The first section throws light on what should be the ideal roles of religion through the cross. The second part discusses how the cross takes on supremacist and oppressive roles. And the last section shows how the cross becomes ambiguous, and thus a crossroads of interpretations and paradoxes.

1) The Cross as a Gateway for Blacks’ Redemption

The symbol of the cross is known long before Christianity. Its true origins and meanings are even intriguing. It was one of “the most disgraceful and cruel methods of execution and was usually reserved only for slaves, foreigners, revolutionaries, and the vilest of criminals” (Edwards 1986, 1458). Before it became the Cross of Jesus and a symbol of recognition and reunion for Christians, it was a perfect “form of torture and capital punishment that was designed to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering” (Edwards 1986, 1458). The Romans therefore regarded crucifixion as a punishment reserved for troublemakers. However, the crucifixion of Jesus, according to the Judeo-Christian conception, confers a new and different interpretation of the cross from that of the Romans. For Christians, the cross is rather a symbol of redemption for those who believe in it.

Following Bigger’s arrest for the accidental murder of Mary Dalton and his probable death sentence, due to a justice system that condemns him in advance, he is urged to turn to Jesus as the only option for a modicum of emotional comfort. The Reverend Hammond and Mrs. Bigger stand as the defenders of the cross of Christ. For them, Bigger’s acceptance of the

Cross is the only opportunity to be reconciled with God, and “learn how to love and live the life eternal” (Wright 1990, 225).

Indeed, Bigger and his family have long suffered from the racial environment that rejects them and imposes many restrictions on them. Faced with this reality, hatred, resentment and a desire for revenge against his oppressors are feelings that naturally drive him. This indirectly leads him to commit reprehensible acts, such as the murder of Mary Dalton because of the moral and psychological suffering he has endured as a black man in America.

To repel frustration and hatred, the preacher urges Bigger to embrace the love of Christ who played the role of the lamb, the sacrificial scapegoat that died on the cross for the salvation of others. During a conversation he tells him: “fergit ever’thing but yo’ soul, son. Take yo’ mind off ever’thing but eternal life. Fergit whut the newspapers say. Forgit yuh’s black” (Wright 1990, 224). The Reverend invites him to turn to religion to alleviate his sufferings and integrate the ideals of the Cross for inward reconciliation as well as outward reconciliation with others as it “unites all opposites and creates unity with God” (Rosner 2011,2).

According to the Reverend, the love and compassion resulting from his identification with Jesus and the Cross will help Bigger deal with the internal crisis he is subjected to as a result of all the imposed socio-cultural and economic frustrations. Indeed, Bigger’s deepest aspirations diverge from the opportunities offered to him by the Eurocentric system. He “wanted to be an aviator once, but they wouldn’t let (him) go to the school where (he) was supposed to learn it” (Wright 1990, 277). He thus blames the system for preventing him from achieving his dreams. He is in a constant state of revolt, and needs to be reconciled with himself, and then with the other actors of the community.

To achieve this internal and external reconciliation the Pastor and Mrs. Bigger invite him to look at the cross as a liberatory symbol though there is “guilt in the rage that demands that (his) life be snuffed out quickly (Wright 1990, 300). They urge him to accept the pain and rage he may be entitled to direct towards those who have hurt him and pray that the Lord “enter they hearts’ n’ breathe compassion on they sperits! (...) ast this in the nama Yo’ Son Jesus who died on the cross” (Wright 1990, 223). The reverend encourages Bigger to accept the cross as a symbol of God’s love for the world which will help him to forgive and free himself from the negative impulses and destructive influence of all those who have hurt or devalued him.

For the preacher, Bigger’s acceptance of God will help him develop love, learn to contain his bitterness and frustrations, and relieve his internal emotional wounds, which shall enable him to forgive and reconcile more easily with those who persecute him. This

recommended posture to Bigger corresponds to that of Jesus described by John the apostle when he explained that through the cross, Jesus “has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, dividing the wall of hostility” (ESV Bible, Ephesians 2:14). In other terms, Jesus has reconciled Jews and Gentiles into one body which is called the Church.

Of course, the pastor is not asking Bigger to ignore the sufferings he has undergone, but he is suggesting that his tormentors, probably did not willingly and consciously hurt him, just like those who crucified Jesus “do not know what they are doing” (ESV Bible, Luke 23:34). For the pastor, Bigger Thomas’ tormentors are ignorant people, and he is urging Bigger Thomas to accept his condition as a victim, as a lamb.

This ideal of forgiveness seems difficult for Bigger to achieve. But if he were to concentrate on it, this would enable him to free himself of the negative energy still present in him because of his emotional wounds. Forgiveness would thus mean a sacrifice, a therapeutic and purifying act in the image of what Christ did at the cross to reconcile heaven and earth, God and man. The cross would thus become an accomplished redemption for Bigger, as by “pouring out his blood on the cross, Jesus forgave all our sins and brought (the humans) new life, divine life” (Rosner 2011, 2).

Bigger has not accepted God yet, the Reverend is trying to bring him to Christian conversion, and ultimately to play the role of the scapegoat for the black community. He must agree to play that role; that is the carrier of the sins of his community. And through his execution that would be a kind of sacrifice aiming to redeem the black community, he will be able to prove his love for his people just like God who “so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish” (ESV Bible, John 3:16). The preacher tries to convince Bigger that Jesus’s death on the cross, followed by his resurrection, is a symbol of how he can redeem those who follow in his footsteps. So, Bigger ought to be seen as role model, as the cross “is life-giving and unites heaven and earth. It is the summit of God’s love and care for humanity” (Rosner 2011 2).

It is this idealistic vision of religion that the reverend seeks to communicate to Bigger. Although Bigger will soon be sentenced to death; though his death is unjust as convicted only because “there’s an ocean of hot hate out there against (him.)” (Wright 1990,282), the preacher still insists that his death can be assimilated with the cross of Christ and will represent not only “the cross of salvation” (Wright 1990, 266) but also hope for the rest of the Black community. Just like Jesus’ disciples who are considered as “redeemed (...) from the curse of the Law” (ESV Bible, Gal. 3:13), and transformed from slaves who had to pay a ransom to people freed

from slavery, law and sin through his crucifixion, Bigger's unjust death would represent hope for the alleviation of the sufferings imposed by the white hegemonic power on the Black community.

Indeed, the cross of Christ has this symbolic meaning of place where Christians' sins are atoned for, and their salvation earned. As the reverend points out "Jesus had carried the cross, paving the way, showing how to die, how to love and live the eternal life" (Wright 1990, 265). It was on the cross that Christ showed the depth of his love and how far he was prepared to go and reconcile mankind with God. The cross of Christ is therefore the symbol of the supreme love that is supposed to lead Bigger to eternal life with God. Through Jesus' sacrificial death, Bigger's sins are forgiven, and, through his resurrection, Jesus conquers death and opens the way to life, as he is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (ESV Bible, John 1 :29).

According to preacher Hammond, the cross is also a symbol of hope and salvation, since if Bigger lets the "Lawd Jesus turn (his) eyes 'n' look inter the heart of this po' sinner" (Wright 1990, 223), the spirit of God will change his emotions and personality. By accepting to be a lamb and by identifying with the cross, Bigger shall triumph over hatred and conquer death. The cross thus symbolizes hope and love and recalls that God's love is present even in the trials and tribulations of the believers, helping them to heal from all their emotional wounds.

Of course, the Reverend is not asking Bigger to be perfect, because nobody is, but he does ask him to humbly confess his sins. He urges him to "let the light of (God's) love guide'im th'u (...) dark days (...) trying' to he'p'im (...) inter they hearts 'n' breathe compassion on they seprits" (Wright 1990, 223). God will not condemn him to death, and his forgiveness is total if he only allows "Gawd's love t' come into (his) heart" (Wright 1990 225).

So as Bigger is going through tribulation, the cross of Christ shall stand as a symbol of hope; a source of strength and comfort for him. It reminds him that Jesus, too, experienced suffering and death, but emerged victorious through his resurrection. Likewise, his probable death, like that of Christ, is an expression of love and compassion, and of the hope that his community can free itself from the difficulties of all kinds it is facing up to now. However, this idealistic view of the possible meanings of the cross, suggested by Reverend Hammond, is at odds with what Bigger believes the cross actually is: a symbol of white racism, an imperialist tool in white hands aiming at constantly ostracizing black people.

2) The Cross: A Symbol of Oppression and a Tool of Domination

Bigger Thomas seems to endorse Cone's thesis that the idealistic image of the cross as a symbol of love, hope and reconciliation can only be valid if the materialization of religion considers a "work of justice and liberation (as a) the necessary precondition of reconciliation" (1993, 2). While "the church promises eternal life" (Wright 1990, 280), Bigger trusts he will "be dead soon enough if (he were) religious" (Wright 1990, 280). So, although he neither systematically denies nor rejects religion, Bigger seems to defend the idea that the ideals of love, hope and reconciliation attributed to the cross can never be realized "as long as white Christians participate in the oppression of blacks and other groups" (Rufus Burrow 1999, 60). Thus, unlike the Reverend and his mother, Bigger rather views religion and more specifically the Cross, as a symbol of white oppression and domination. This leads him to "despise (...) religion, (and) appeal (...) to religious faith either bore or enrage him" (Wright 1990, 7). Clearly, he rejects all these attributes of eternal life, hope that religion presents as symbols of the cross and sees them as valid only for "whipped folks" (Wright 1990, 280).

Bigger's attitude of rejection of religion is mainly driven by the flaming cross he sees in the hands of white Ku Klux Klan members. As he confesses: "that was not the cross of Christ, but the cross of Ku Klux Klan (Wright 1990, 266). While he had a "cross of salvation round his throat (...), they were burning one to tell him that they hate him" (Wright 1990, 266). The cross thus shifts from its original symbol of redemption and love to that of torture and annihilation. As Swanson writes, "the burning cross symbolizes a sinister history of toxic racism reaching back to the Civil War" (1994, 2).

Indeed, as stated by Swanson, the cross represents danger in more ways than one, including violence, threats, robbed night riders, lynchings, and murder. It is in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan "a symbol of hate, designed to inspire in the victim a fear of bodily harm" (Swanson 1994, 2). This leads Bigger to be suspicious about religion, and to feel trapped and betrayed by his mother and the Reverend. While the pastor promises that God will save his soul, Bigger realizes that he is lost when he sees the cross burning in the hand of the Ku Klux Klan. This triggers a profound sense of anger in him, and he "gripped the cross and snatched it from his throat. He threw it away, cursing a curse that was almost a scream" (Wright 1990, 266). When the preacher tries to rebuke and reason with him, he shouts "I don't want you (...) I'll spit in your face if you don't leave me alone" (Wright 1999, 368). Finally, Bigger's hostile reaction is motivated by his belief that the cross of Christ has lost all credibility by becoming hegemonic, once in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, creating by so doing, an antagonistic

perception of what the cross was originally meant to signify according to Reverend Hammond and Mrs. Bigger.

As mentioned earlier, the Reverend Hammond and Mrs. Bigger symbolize that category of blacks who have passion for Christianity and believe in its redemptive mission. Mrs. Bigger sees it as a source of emotional relief for all the pain and constraints she endures under the white hegemonic system. Her devotion is reflected in the spiritual songs she sings every day and in the Bible-inspired advice she gives her eldest son to help him stay on the straight and narrow. Beyond just singing, these spirituals are a kind of exorcism, a way for her and the rest of the Black community to express the deepest grief that lies hidden in their subconscious and conscious minds. However, Bigger believes this is useless and ineffective as “all the colored folks do that, but it don’t get’em nothing. The white folks got everything” (Wright 1990, 279). That is why he feels disgusted whenever his mother sings religious songs.

The reverend's passion for religion is expressed in his urge to preach the good news to all and especially to Bigger. He even gets Bigger to agree for a moment to become a Christian and wear the cross that symbolizes his acceptance of Christ. But when the “the cross the preacher had hung round his throat (is) burned in front of his eyes” (Wright 1990, 268) by the Ku Klux Klan adepts, he realizes he does “not want religion” (Wright 1990, 183) anymore. He feels betrayed and ashamed, and his reaction seems to match with the position of Lerato Kobe (2022) who defends that the missionaries from Western Europe have only been successful in “distorting and making the Africans ashamed of themselves and their heritage” (292).

In fact, when Bigger looks at his mother's devotion to Christianity on one side and their precarious living conditions on the other, he concludes that his experience of Christianity is inevitably a negative one. He trusts Christianity just wants to marginalize and alienate him. He views it as something borrowed that does not acknowledge his Black identity. Consequently, “refusing to accept the consolations of religion (is) a sort of recognition of his personality” (Wright 1990, 320).

Bigger's views on religion are in total harmony with the Communist theory, which regards religion as a tool used by capitalists to repress and exploit the poor. In his early work: *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843,4), Marx famously characterizes religion as the “opium of the people”. Egwuajonwu Mark Emeka reinforces this idea of Marx by pointing that religion acts “as a source of untold misery to the human” (2025,1). Following this same idea, Bigger holds that religion is invented and false, leading him to reject the Judeo-Christianist doctrine that holds that Jesus “died on the cross (and) gave us the mercy

of (God's) love" (Wright 1990, 223). He rather trusts religion is fictitious and fake leading him to despise it and consider that to "appeal to religious faith either bore or enrage him" (Wright 1990, 7).

From his point of view as a black man perpetually threatened by the white power, religion or the cross of Christ is a threat, something unreal that doesn't correspond to reality. And anyone who defends it is also seen as a threat. Soon after the Reverend Hammond pays him a visit in prison, Bigger thus assimilates him with a white "preacher" (Wright 1990, 224) and "shut his heart and tried to stifle all feeling in him" (Wright 1990, 223). This attitude shows that he rejects and deconstructs the idea that Christianity is for the good of black people. His reaction also confirms that the interpretations of the cross as an expression of love, redemption and reconciliation are only true for white believers or those blacks who benefit from their protection.

When Bigger is taken to the court to be judged, he sees across the street, peoples with "flaming cross (es)" (Wright 1990, 265), he then realizes with revulsion that the black preacher's promise of salvation cannot be fulfilled. He realizes that a cross for everyone, including himself, that represent God's redemption through that it embodies "love and live eternal life" (Wright 1990, 265), cannot be fulfilled. In other words, he understands that the cross he wears is not only "the cross of Christ, but [it could also be that] of the Ku Klux Klan" (Wright 1990, 266); meaning there is no possible hope or redemption for him as the equivalent of the salvation cross.

Since the cross of Christ represents these antagonistic symbols of redemption and oppression, it is untrustworthy for Bigger. He therefore concedes that the preacher had lied to him leading him to "throw (the cross) away" (Wright 1990, 266). In fact, Bigger equates the cross with those burned in racist rituals by the Ku Klux Klan members, which turns out to be a white supremacist terrorist secret society that opposes the enforcement of equal rights between whites and blacks as advocated in the American Constitution.

Finally, by suggesting a paradox between the symbols of the cross for Ku Klux Klan members on the one hand, and the religious representatives on the other the moral realm of Christianity seems to be corrupted by the Western system of hegemony to the expense of blacks. The cross in the eyes of Bigger is nothing but a tool into the hands of whites to control and create a world where blacks do not have much to say. While Bigger just wants "to be happy in this world, not out it (...) white folks like for [him] to be religious then they can do what they want" (Wright 1990, 280).

In the end, the crossed is depicted from a Eurocentric perspective through his character Bigger and it reveals the role of oppression it takes on when it ends up in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan members. His position implies that he disagrees with this idea of a hegemonic religion that tends to ostracize a segment of the population. He therefore seems to plead for a revised conception of religion. Through the characters Mrs. Bigger, Bessie, and Reverend Hammond, Wright examines how religion shapes and influences Blacks' lives in the plot and demonstrates to the reader how religion is employed as a tool of dominance to obstruct and control Black consciousness. The cross is not finally for Bigger a symbol of hope, redemption, and reconciliation with God as stipulated by the Apostle Paul who hold that "since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (ESV Romans 5:9). It is a tool of oppression and domination and becomes a crossroads of paradoxes for Blacks

In *Native Son*, the meaning of the cross, shits from redemption to that of damnation when it becomes interchangeable with that of the Ku Klux Klan; when religion abandons its original ideal principles as stated in the Bible to endorse discriminatory and hegemonic roles towards blacks. While Bigger is urged to benefit from the redemptive character of the cross to survive and self-free emotionally, he who wishes God to transform him from a subjugated being into a spiritually, economically and socially regenerated one, he realizes that white people, though Christians "hated him" (Wright 1990, 266). A typical example of this hatred emanating from whites can be seen in the attitude of Mr. Buckley, the State's Attorney, towards Bigger.

Mr. Buckley, only intention is to save his career, exclude Blacks from the mainstream of society, and preserve the prerogatives of the white system. He purposely hastens Bigger's trial because he does not want the agitation over this case to continue and jeopardize his popularity and his hopes to be re-elected as state's attorney. When Bigger's case is referred to him, instead of investigating it properly to establish the truth, he forces Bigger to "sign (a) confession and get this over with" (Wright 1990, 238).

During the trial, Mr. Buckley does not even bother to declare "we've got enough evidence on him to put him in a dozen electric chairs" (Wright 1990, 229) while he is the one at the root of Bigger's confession. Additionally, Mr. Buckley didn't even hesitate to encourage white people to gather around the prison where Bigger is being held to put pressure on the court to deal with the case quickly. The hostility Bigger notices in the crowd's eyes, and the threats that emanate from them, lead him to wonder if the qualities of love and compassion advocated

by the Bible are ultimately valid only for blacks. As the reverend notices this enigma Bigger is trying to solve, he tries to comfort him:

“Lawd Jesus, turn Yo’ eyes’n’ lokk inter the heart of this po’sinner! Yuh said mercy wuz awways Yo’sn’ ef we ast fer it on bended knee Yuh’d po’ it out iner our hearts’n’ make our cups run over! We’s astin ’Yuh’po’out Yo’ mercy now, awrd! Po’ it ut fer this po’ sinner boy who stan’s in deep need of it! Ef his sin be as scarlet, Lawd, wash’ em white as snow! Fergive ‘im fer whatever he’s done, Lawd! Let the light of Yo’ love guide’im thu’ these dark days!” (Wright 1990, 223).

Yet, these words can’t take away the doubt and the “fear and panic” (Wright 1990, 225) Bigger is seized with.

Religion is also in a Eurocentric role toward Blacks when whites pretend to be obeying the Bible by performing philanthropic acts when in fact, they simply want to alleviate the guilt of their luxurious lives in response to the economic dereliction experienced by blacks in the South Side. In fact, they usually offer blacks only the bare necessities, and refrain from settling them into lasting comfort or independence. And Mr. Dalton is eligible to that category.

Mr. Dalton is a powerful and wealthy white man. He is Bigger's employer and reveals himself as a progressive, liberal white Chicagoan. He presents himself as a decent man but in fact, he just “trie(s) to salve his feelings by giving money” (Wright 1990, 304). He is the main shareholder in a real estate company that overcharges for rat-infested apartments in the South Belt neighborhood, where only poor blacks live. He frequently makes financial contributions to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a US civil rights organization that was established in 1909 as an attempt to advance African Americans' right to justice despite their race.

At first glance, Mr. Dalton may appear to be a living example of the principles of love and compassion advocated by the cross of Christ. But he is blind and deaf to the sufferings of the black community. He is a capitalist, looking for gain despite his outward displays of generosity and passivity. The relationship between the Thomas family and the Dalton family was that of tenant to landlord, customer to trader, employee to employer. Thomas’ “family got poor, and the Dalton family got rich” (Wright 1990, 304). Mr. Dalton’s attitude even leads Max, Bigger’s lawyer, to tell his wife “your philanthropy was as tragically blind as your sightless eyes” (Wright 1990, 304).

So, though Mr. Dalton presents himself as willing to help blacks free themselves from poverty, he won’t curiously allow Bigger and his family to live in any other part of the city except the South Side. As I have already suggested, he is indirectly against religious ideals and

enters a Eurocentric role when he remains passive and silent as regards the humiliations suffered by the black community. True, Mr. Dalton is not particularly evil or cruel, but rather than utilizing his influence to improve the lot of Black people, he just offers them “ping pong tables” (Wright 1990, 279). Finally, the cross turns into a crossroad of interpretations and paradoxes.

3) The Cross as a Crossroads of Meanings and Paradoxes

The cross turns into a crossroad of interpretations and paradoxes for Bigger when, at first, he regards it as a superstition with no effect on him and doesn't even understand why his mother is so attached to it, then realizes that religion naturally imposes on him as well. Religion has a “primitive form”. It is now ingrained in black people genes, leading Bigger to unwillingly and unconsciously turn to the cross of Christ for emotional comfort when he is locked up for the unintentional disappearance and murder of Mary and accused of raping two other white women. This attitude of unconsciously seeking comfort from the cross while in other scenes in the scenario, Bigger rejects it, is the expression of the ambiguity that troubles him. The cross thus ultimately becomes a crossroads between redemption and damnation, and this is precisely what justifies its ambiguity. In fact, Bigger faces the dilemma of whether the burning cross he witnesses that fateful means “White people wanting him to love Jesus too” (Wright 1990, 255) or that it is a threat from white society. Either way, it testifies to the ambivalence that the cross of Christ may represent.

The cross is a crossroads of meanings and paradoxes when it is presented as both a means of punishment and a means of absolution. Normally Bigger should be regretful for “the awful horror of (what he) had done” (Wright 1990, 93). Yet, the “daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time (...) a barrier of protection between him and the world he feared” (Wright 1990, 93). So, instead of feeling remorse and fearing the physical and spiritual punishment that could result from his actions, he feels above all a sense of absolution for all the emotional suffering he has endured for so long. And yet, when Mr. Max, the white communist lawyer quite surprisingly, offers to “handle (his) case” (Wright 1990, 272), Bigger tells him “you can't help me none. They got me” (Wright 1990, 272); meaning he considers there is no hope left for him. This answer shows that though he feels emotionally liberated, he is also aware that he will receive no mercy. When he sees the Ku Klux khan cross in front of his cell, he resigns himself to the tragic fate that white society has in store for him.

Finally, while the cross, in consideration of its Christian symbolic meanings, should be there to comfort him, even if he is guilty, and treat him with humanity and fairness, Bigger is

treated as if he were a total stranger to religion, as if the ideals of redemption, love and hope of the cross of Christ were reserved only for white people. Beyond his controversial stance on the cross, which he sometimes turns to for comfort and sometimes sees as a tool of oppression, his arrest, trial and execution also symbolize the life and death of the black man in America. Through the bitter, violent and angry character of Bigger Thomas, Wright also intends to denounce the racial hatred that has been part of black life for so long.

Clearly for Bigger, the cross has a controversial dual symbol of condemnation and redemption. Religion thus represents either white domination or the forced conversion of the black man to Christianity. Bigger's inner turmoil leads him to wish that the Ku Klux Klan's flaming cross were ultimately the same one he wore around his neck in his cell. The same cross that, for a time, provided him with emotional and psychological support through the Reverend Hammond sermons. In other words, Bigger wants both the cross of the Ku Klux Klan and the cross of Christ to embody uniquely non-racial ideals of compassion, love and reconciliation.

Conclusion

The ambivalent function of the Christian religion, and particularly, the cross of Christ, as a symbol of divine love, redemption and salvation, and as a symbol of hegemonic oppression and domination, is made explicit in *Native Son* through the characters Reverend Hammond, and Mrs. Bigger, on the one hand, and Bigger Thomas, on the other. While the two first cited embrace the ideals of Christianity and see religion as a source of comfort in the face of the crushing realities of life on the South Side, Bigger feels that the cross is a crossroad of meanings and paradoxes when Mr. Dalton, the white and wealthy man who is ostensibly a religious man, is also the subtle symbol of the white power structure that oppresses blacks. Additionally, the cross becomes ambiguous and a paradox for Bigger Thomas when he realizes that the cross of Christ is interchangeable with that of the Ku Klux Klan, and when religion abandons the ideals of the cross as originally expressed in the Bible to adopt hegemonic roles that discriminates against blacks.

My analysis focused on the following question: how does the Cross of Christ have a dual, ambiguous and paradoxical meaning, leading it, along with that of the Ku Klux Klan to be the face of the same coin in the black world? My investigation first discussed the ideal symbolic meanings of the Christian Cross. There, I showed how the cross of Christ could stand as an instrument of redemption and compassion. Next, I examined how the same cross in the

hands of Ku Klux Klan members can be interpreted as a symbol of oppression and a tool of domination against Bigger and, by extension, the entire black community. Finally, I discussed how the cross thus turns into a crossroads of meanings and paradoxes since it has an ambivalent meaning, shifting from salvation to a tool of oppression and emotional victimization.

In *Native Son*, the significance of the cross oscillates between the biblical ideals it is supposed to embody and the instrument of racial repression it represents in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan and the white hegemonic power as a whole. Instead of being an instrument that would enable Bigger to identify with Christ, the cross instead incites him to rebel against the ideals the reverend and his mother are trying to instill in him. From the standpoint of a deconstructive frame, Wright thus questions the interpretation of the cross as suggested by the Bible, and argues that it instead embodies suffering, repression and humiliation for Blacks. Finally, Wright's attitude in *Native Son* can be equated with what N'Guessan Eugène (2021) in his article: Figurations of Oppression and Liberation: The Ambiguity of Religion in Ernest Gaines' *In My Father's House*, calls the "dialectical potential of religion" (74), where religion becomes both a "site of spiritual liberation and a source of social domination" (2021 74).

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