

Spring 2018

## The Architecture of Confinement: An Exploration of Spatial Boundaries in Wright, Poe, and Foucault

Samantha Feig  
*Bard College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2018](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2018)



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [Landscape Architecture Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Feig, Samantha, "The Architecture of Confinement: An Exploration of Spatial Boundaries in Wright, Poe, and Foucault" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 230.  
[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2018/230](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2018/230)

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

The Architecture of Confinement:

An Exploration of Spatial Boundaries in Wright, Poe, and Foucault

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

By

Samantha (Samie) Feig

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018



## **Dedication/Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I thank my advisor, Donna Grover. She has been an incredible support system and has also fostered my ideas while giving them the right space to grow. Thank you to all of my professors who have given me the ability to grow as a writer and thinker over my time at Bard, those who have shown me great support and understanding during my journey as a student and individual at this institution. Thank you Peter L'Official, and Celia Bland. Thank you mom and dad. Thank you to my family. Thank you Angel. Thank you to the people who survived it all by my side, Alyx, Lily, Erin, Ciara, Rachel, Brad, Saint Marx, 40 East Market Street, Red Hook, Annandale, and lastly, thank you Bard. I hope this serves as a contribution to the Bard community and to the literary world.



## Table of Contents

Introduction to Overall Project.....	1
Chapter I: <i>Native Son</i> and the spaces that transform and confine Bigger Thomas .....	3
Chapter II: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House Usher” .....	35
Chapter III/Conclusion: A brief analysis of Foucault’s <i>Discipline and Punish</i> in regards to the real spaces of Eastern State Penitentiary; A conversation amongst the works to conclude .....	49
Works Cited.....	62



## Introduction to Project

Richard Wright's *Native Son* examines spaces of imprisonment, those that are internal and external. The spaces that our protagonist, Bigger Thomas, encounters, force him to confront his own identity within the Chicago landscape. The nature of my argument centers around these spaces as being both liberating and confining through their varying levels of constraint or uninhibitedness on Bigger's journey of self-exploration. I will examine these spaces with an eye for the ways in which Bigger evolves through the spaces he enters, and I will relate this to the spaces of confinement in America- a lens on the anatomy of prisons and punishment through a focus on Eastern State Penitentiary. After examining these spaces in Wright's work, *Native Son*, in Chapter II, I plan to examine how the spaces of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" dictate the creation of character and influence action through the character of Roderick Usher and through the unique viewpoint of Poe's narrator.

Wright was deeply influenced by Poe in his mastery over gruesome and absurdist literary genius<sup>1</sup>. The symmetry between space specific in the worlds depicted in these two literary works, shows how it actively oppresses and dictates the lives of the people within them. To finish, I will take us into the real spaces of confinement that exist today by focusing on the architectural spaces of Eastern State Penitentiary through the lens of Foucault, and his arguments made in *Discipline and Punish*.

In these narrative worlds created by both Wright and Poe, space is the determinant, and it can confine and deeply disturb our protagonists. In *Native Son* we are confronted with the large

---

<sup>1</sup> Refer to <https://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/p1971106.htm>



yet miniscule world of Bigger Thomas, a black man living in the racially segregated and impoverished South Side of Chicago, where the stereotyping and division amongst “ethnicities, races, and religions...caused tension to prevail as a daily ritual”<sup>2</sup>. Home, for Bigger and many others living in these social and physical conditions, was like living in a prison; there was no freedom to climb out of it, especially in the apartment that Bigger lived in with his family. Black people were, and historically have been, excluded from the liberties that white people so freely enjoy and flaunt. Bigger Thomas’ world is shaped by the roles he must play in order to fit into this white world, one where he can drive the car but not own it, one where his every move was scrutinized by the racially fueled world around him.

---

<sup>2</sup> Refer to [http://www.umich.edu/~eng217/student\\_projects/HeidiandJessica/native%20son.html](http://www.umich.edu/~eng217/student_projects/HeidiandJessica/native%20son.html)

## Chapter 1:

### *Native Son* and the Spaces that Transform and Confine Bigger Thomas

In Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* Wright notes that black people have been "influenced by the movies, magazines, and glimpses of town life, and they lack the patience to wait for the consummation of God's promise as we do. We despair to see them go, but we tell them that we want them to have a new life, yet we are afraid if they challenge the Lords of the Land, for we know that terror will assail them" (75), the "Lords of the Land" being white people. Wright's analysis of the places where black people moved to urban landscapes in order to be in cities and central areas to find opportunity, as well as community, is showcased via his unique voice in *Twelve Million Black Voices*. He makes note that during the 1920s and 1930s in Chicago, there was an influx of black people "by more than 125,000" within that year (93). He discusses the divide between whites and blacks within the city but claims that,

There are so many people. For the first time in our lives we feel human bodies, strangers whose lives and thoughts are unknown to us, pressing always close about us. We cannot see or know a *man* because of the thousands upon thousands of *men*. The apartments in which we sleep are crowded and noisy, and soon enough we learn that the brisk, clipped men of the North, the Bosses of the Buildings, are not at all *indifferent*. They are deeply concerned about us, but in a new way. It seems as though we are now living inside of a machine; days and events move with a hard reasoning of their own. We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people, a distance that words cannot bridge. No longer do our lives depend on the soil, the sun, the rain, or the wind; we live by the grace of jobs and the brutal logic of jobs (100).

The housing market, specifically in 1930s Chicago, limited African Americans to an area known as the “Black Belt”, housing upwards of 60,000 blacks that had migrated from the south in search of jobs ([chipublic.org/housing](http://chipublic.org/housing)). This not only applies to the 1930s Chicago landscape that Bigger’s narrative is set in, but also to the world we live in today, in 2018. We no longer depend on the nature that was once our livelihood and playground; now it is barely something we regard or remember while we consume and reap its benefits. In Bigger’s world, he does not rely on the “soil, the sun, the rain, or the wind” but he relies on a job, and an income, and so does his mother, sister Vera and brother Buddy. Yes, his apartment that his entire family shares is “crowded and noisy,” and they live “amid swarms of people” but the reality is that Bigger’s world is confined to him and only him. His world is his own prison; he is a black man living in America. We must analyze these spaces as playing a role in the development and actions of Bigger Thomas, these spaces facilitate emotion, opinions and behavior which influence the worlds that we must interpret through the analysis of the Thomas home and outside of its walls.

### **The Kitchenette**

As we move into the world of Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, we must know more about the background of the space he calls home. Bigger’s home is a space of confinement both physically and emotionally; he is expected to uphold a certain social role as both caregiver alongside his mother and as a man living in poverty in the south-side of 1930s Chicago. During the migration of blacks to the North from the South, millions of African-Americans seeking liberation found themselves in cultural hubs like Chicago where housing was built by a white male empire of scheming and wealthy investors looking to exploit the black communities that migrated to these cities. Old homes and dilapidated buildings were converted into “kitchenettes” by “Bosses of Buildings” (what Wright refers to them as). A seven-room apartment became

“seven small apartments, of one room each” which would cost whites only \$6 a week, but for black migrants from the South, the cost of living was up to \$42 a week (*Twelve Million Black Voices* 106). Wright remarks that, “The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks” (*Twelve Million Black Voices* 106). These spaces initially presented themselves as idealistic, but were built on greed, white power, and intention to segregate black individuals from the white cities that surrounded them.

Wright refers to the kitchenette as a “place where simple folk such as we should never be held captive” (*Twelve Million Black Voices* 105). In these tiny spaces, there is a sense of captivity that provokes “a war” in emotion; there is a feeling of pride in being in a city where opportunity exists in an ideal vision, and there is no longer a need to “bow and doge at the sight of the Lords of the Land”. But the high cost of living in these kitchenettes requires great responsibility upon those who live in them with no “security in return” (105). Wright argues in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, that, “The kitchenette blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them, blinds them to hope, creates problems whose effects can be traced in the characters of its child victims for years afterward” (105). This applies to Bigger’s character—his fate is decided for him by the world that he must divide himself from back home in order to survive in the city of Chicago. Richard Wright puts forth a strong political discussion on the imprisonment of black men and the surveillance that they are under at all times in the spaces they occupy. In the early scenes of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, we enter the world of our protagonist, Bigger Thomas, when a black rat wreaks havoc in his family’s one-room Southside Chicago apartment. Bigger’s mother instructs him to kill it, and despite his desire not to, he runs around the room chasing after it until it attacks him. After a chaotic chase for the black rat,

Bigger ultimately kills it and is eagerly begged by his sister and mother to get rid of the dead rat. Bigger is obviously affected by this space; the confines of the room he is forced to call home,

Bigger heard her trying to comfort his mother. He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair (*Native Son* 10)

Bigger is well aware of his living conditions and familial struggles and the shame that comes with it; despite the fact that he hears his sister Vera comforting his mother after their fight, he “shuts their voices out of their mind” because he knows he “was powerless to them”. The internal space of Bigger’s apartment is so small that he hears these familiar voices speaking about him, which forces him to put on blinders in order to ignore the voices that shame him.

This early scene of chaos shows the role that Bigger plays in his family and how he navigates his emotions by staying quiet, to silently act out against, yet remain submissive to his mother, sister, and brother. To assert a sense of control and power in the household, Bigger dangles the rat in front of his sister’s face. At this moment, we see how Bigger’s mother is provoked within the space of the apartment through her animosity and anger taken out on Bigger. She says in a moment of spite and rage, “Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you” (8). When Vera sees her mother shaming her brother, Vera chimes in, confirming her allegiance to her mother, and claims that “Bigger ain’t decent enough to think of nothing like that” (12), “that” being a reference to his lack of maturity to support his family. The one-bedroom apartment is a place of mental and physical confinement for Bigger as it is a space where his status is defined;

he is constantly under surveillance by his family, and must fulfill a certain familial role to uphold a level of power and respect amongst his siblings and mother.

In Wright's novel, space shapes and influences characterization. Bigger upholds a defined role as the son who asserts a certain level of responsibility in the space of his home. His mother blames her financial despair and the family's lack of food and adequate shelter on the fact that Bigger does not have a job to support their lives in this space. This blame turns into a critique on his masculinity, "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (8). Bigger's mother directly addresses his "manhood", which suggests their family values- that the men in the space of the home should bear most of the financial burden in order for the women to be homemakers and caregivers. This also applies to Bigger's role as a developing black man in a white world- eager to go against a white-established and perpetuated standard of blacks as being inferior, he is up against the white man's expectation. His mother continues to belittle him about his inability to find a job and support his family,

All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!...And mark my word, some of these days you going to set down and *cry*. Some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it'll be too late then (9).

His mother holds nothing back when commenting on Bigger's role in her home; she, herself, is confined to the kitchenette she has worked so hard for, and takes it out on Bigger. She warns him that "some of these days" he will wish he made something out of himself but by then it will be "too late". This early scene explicitly shows the toxic family dynamic that Bigger somehow fits himself into; one of pure disarray caused by a perpetual financial struggle and shame.

The family moves on quickly from the arguments they have, and collectively gather around the dinner table after the rat chase and fight with Vera. Bigger's mom returns to her critique of his work ethic, and nags him about the job at the Dalton's residence, "you going to take the job, ain't you, Bigger?" (11). Bigger seems used to her constant questioning, but has a moment where his calm and silent frustration is fractured; he stares at his mother across the table, blatantly puts his fork down and reminds her that he had already told her that he was going to accept the job the night before (11). This is a key moment where we get a glimpse into Bigger's frustration with the role that he must uphold in order to not disappoint his mother as he knows that she is struggling alone to keep the household intact.

Mrs. Thomas is pushed to make pronouncements in the tiny apartment that she and her children live in. She pressures Bigger constantly with the realities of the world that they live in and must fight against daily, "if you don't take that job the relief'll cut us off. We won't have any food" (12). Bigger is "sick of his life at home" (12), and as Wright notes in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, "the kitchenette fills our black boys with longing and restlessness, urging them to run off from home, to join together with other restless black boys in gangs, that brutal form of city courage" (111). This world at home pushes Bigger to gather with a group of his friends to forge a plan to rob whites. It drives him to a point of rebellion, as he is overcome by this immense "longing and restlessness", as he idealizes a world rid of the commotion at home.

### **The Movie Theater**

Bigger yearns to escape his life confined to his apartment. He is drawn to the outdoors, where he watches as two men put a poster of a white man on the signboard in front of him. The poster displays a white man named Buckley, whom Bigger recognizes as a familiar runner-up for State's attorney, "I bet that sonofabitch rakes off a million bucks in graft a year. Boy, If I was in

his shoes for just one day I'd *never* have to worry again" (13). The underlying spaces that Bigger navigates socially as a black man force him to imagine himself as the white man on the wall, a face that represents opportunity and freedom pointing directly at him. Just as he will fantasize in the Movie theater, Bigger fantasizes on the city sidewalk "in the sunshine, watching cars and people pass" (13), as he hopes for a world where he didn't have to worry about money.

Bigger stares at Buckley's face with an eye for detail, "the white face was fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passerby" (13). Wright politicizes the space of the city with Buckley's poster, as it not only physically lures each passerby in with its directness, but also invokes in Bigger a hatred of power and the white world that governs his life. Bigger is acutely aware of the crooked politics that oppress him, and mumbles at the poster of Buckley, "You let whoever pays *you* off win!" (13). Bigger is extremely affected by his environment and the spaces he enters and resides in; whether it be the one-room apartment of his home, or the outside spaces of the social and physical world where he is exposed to the politics and social standards he must uphold or deny. The outside world is dominated by Buckley's fear-inducing stare, a world where power is white and male. Yet, Bigger finds solace in the indoor space of the movie theater, a space where he "could dream without effort, all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open" (Wright 14). The movie theater frees Bigger from worry; he can recline and escape into a world of fantasy where corruption doesn't exist.

The inner walls of his shame-filled apartment occupied by four people, are overflowing with tension and resentment which forces Bigger to take refuge in movies, a luxury he doesn't have the money for. As this space has become, in Bigger's mind, akin to a sacred space, Bigger is determined to find the money to pay for his admission, "He wanted to see a movie; his senses



hungered for it” (13-14). In the movie theater, Bigger sits with his friend, Jack; Bigger masturbates in his theater seat as Jack glares at him, embarrassed by his friend’s misbehavior. Determined to explain his action (one that he has engaged in before), he explains that he “was polishing (his) nightstick” (30). One could assume that both the movie theater, the film on the screen and the act of masturbation allow Bigger to escape both his reality and the societal standards that he must uphold- he can physically and mentally relieve himself in this space of fantasy. Bigger uses his relationships to escape these daily realities as well; this homoerotic scene between Bigger and Jack and the lack of regard for the space of the public movie theater shows Bigger’s comfort in the space where the movie is shown. Bigger’s escapism is not mere escapism, as it stays with him. The spaces he exists in outside of this world of fantasy box him in and rob him of his own personhood; However, the movie theater allows him to be whoever he wants.

As images of rich white women play on the screen, Jack shares with Bigger his belief that, “them rich white women’ll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs” (33). Aware that he will be entering the home of rich white people, he imagines himself as an actor on the screen. The Dalton job will allow him to enter a world that he has only imagined, a world that he masturbates to from his movie theater seat. The two boys quickly move on to the topic of white women after they “finish” their session and are “slumped down” in their seats (30). Wright paints this space as a world that Bigger enters where he can be his goofy self; where he can pleasure himself both visually and physically.

Comfortable with Jack, he is able to transcend his apartment, entering a realm of limitless opportunity, or, at the very least, a sense of pleasure. Ignoring those around them, with a sense of

authority, Jack and Bigger engage in a conversation about the content before them. They watch as *Trader Horn* displayed a scene where,

...pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it. And rich white people were not so hard on Negroes; it was the poor whites who hated Negroes. They hated Negroes because they didn't have their share of the money (33)

Using the film as the catalyst, Wright allows Bigger to imagine racial integration and peace amongst both white and black worlds, "laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing". He also describes white people as being savvy when it comes to money, "they knew how to get hold of money" and were smart. There is a divide, as noted here, between the rich and poor white worlds, and the statement that poor whites hated negroes and rich whites didn't is fueled by the economic inequality that stands between all races and classes of people. An economic inequality amongst whites fueled a hatred of blacks by poor white people as there was a resentment towards the black people who did not provide them with "their share of the money". Bigger's imagination allows him to envision this divide as fused, replacing the racially charged images in front of him with those that are about becoming something he isn't. It's about the whiteness that seems accessible in front of his eyes, and the space of the movie theater deems itself as one of the most dangerous spaces in the novel as it permits Bigger to enter into the world of fantasy that

ultimately is his destruction. In the space of the movie theater, Bigger sits in darkness where he remains anonymous and limitless, where he can dream without fear.

### **The White World**

When Bigger is roleplaying with his friend Gus, Wright differentiates the worlds that not only Bigger navigates but Gus does as well, “Then they guffawed, partly at themselves and partly at the vast white world that sprawled and towered in the sun before them” (18), the “vast white world” is the world that Gus and Bigger are both confined to and alienated from. Bigger goes on to explain his feelings of fear against the white world, a fear that he literally feels in his stomach,

Naw. But I just can't get used to it...I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red hot iron down my throat. Goddamnit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot hole in the fence... (20)

Bigger addresses the divide between the black and white worlds; he feels this divide physically, like “somebody's poking a red hot iron down” his throat, and yet, he lives in a world where he must face these realities and the pain they cause. Bigger feels as though he is “on the outside of the world”, as if he is in a jail cell or “peeping in through a knot hole in the fence”- his physical world is one where he battles this divide on his journey of developing his own identity. He realizes that he must operate under the white system that has been put in place before him, one that forces him to confront the fact that his identity is shaped by the restricted space he is

confined to. He says to Gus, “I reckon we the only things in this city that can’t go where we want to go and do what we want to do” (21), as the color line divides them from the white world that they must conform to as black men. Again, Bigger can only indulge in white privilege by being the person who provides it; he is the driver of the car, not the owner.

In Wright’s, *How “Bigger” Was Born*, he distinguishes his reasons for writing this character and for detailing the spaces that Bigger is confined to- one of the reasons being because blacks “were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out, because they could not *help* but react in some way to its incentives and prizes, and because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timbre from the strivings of that dominant civilization, oppression spawned among them a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet, otherworldly submissiveness” (438). Bigger is alienated from the white world that separates him from true freedom; his oppression makes him react in an aggressive manner due to his fears of the white man and his experience with the space around him.. His “blind rebellion” is charged by these fears; yet, despite his rebellious desires and actions, Bigger remains submissive to the white man because he has no choice.

Wright also iterates his own personal experiences after he escapes Dixieland (the south) and is free of “the daily pressure”, and his “contact with the labor movement and its ideology” forces him to “see Bigger clearly and feel what he meant” (441). Wright describes the landscape of Chicago as having “more to offer” due to its “physical aspect”, as “noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment” yet the “segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South” (442). Bigger is able to rebel in this landscape as he is dazzled by its “taunting sense of possible achievement” (442). Wright mentions the power of one’s environment in shaping identity, “...I felt and still feel that the

environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction” (442). Bigger is shaped by his environment, whether it be the social landscape or in his little corner of Chicago.

Bigger’s life at home forces him to acquire this job at the Dalton’s, where he is at danger of falling victim to his idealization of the white world he has seen in magazines or movies. Although the Dalton family present themselves as liberal friends of the black man, they live in a world that is alien to Bigger; their space is one of luxury. Despite the fact that he went and followed through with his plan to acquire the job, Bigger feels the immense weight of the two worlds that he must abide by and establish himself in, and he begins to realize that his expectations are not reality, “He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him” (*Native Son* 45). He does not know how to behave in the new and alien space of the Dalton home which seeps luxury and philanthropy.

The space of Bigger’s imagination is one of innocence; his expectations of the Dalton family and of Mary in general come from the movies he has seen in the past. He visualizes each character of the Dalton family as if they are the characters he has seen in movies, but realizes that Mary is not at all what he had imagined, “She was not a bit the way he had imagined she would be” (52). He mentions the difference between the movies he had fantasized Mary’s character to be in versus her real existence, “On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here in her home she walked over everything, put herself in the way” (55). This highlights the juxtaposition that Wright is making between a person’s character outside of their home versus what they are truly like behind closed doors. One may be seen

stuffing their mouth at the dinner table in the comforts of their home but then altering their behavior in accordance with social standards when in the public eye. One may be seen living in the lap of luxury but could be as modest as they come; Peggy, the Dalton's cook, describes the family as living like "human beings" despite the fact that "they've got millions" (56).

During Bigger's first day on the job, Mary, the Dalton's daughter, questions Bigger's lack of membership to a "union" and claims that her father must be a capitalist (a word Bigger had never encountered before); Bigger is uncomfortable and questions his standing in the house (52). Mary's openness, a behavior that Bigger has never experienced when engaging with a white person, provokes fear- a fear that he will lose that which the Dalton's had given him, his own space.

### **A Room at The Dalton's**

Fear pushes Bigger's decision to enter the Dalton home with a gun and knife. The white man's spaces are unknown to him so he must protect himself. He fears for his life and feels safer knowing he has the safety net of these weapons, "He was going among white people...it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness" (43). Everything he knows about the white world comes from the movies he masturbates to; on the screen, rich white people live in spaces that are closed to him. His idealization of this world of money and material is realized to be false, when he surveys the Dalton's neighborhood when going to work for them. He realizes that the mystery that was so attractive to him about these rich white neighborhoods was lacking in that of the Dalton's, despite its "quiet and spacious" (43) nature. Along Bigger's journey to the Dalton's residence, he realizes how distant and cold the white world around him is, "a world of white secrets carefully guarded" (44). Then, when he finally gets to the residence, he is divided by a "high, black, iron picket fence" (44) from the world that

he enters willingly, and discovers that in fact, it “was not his world; he had been foolish in thinking that he would have liked it” (44). The “high, black, iron picket fence” represents division explicitly through its imagery, detail and purpose- the fence is not only high, but it is “black” and “iron”. Its purpose is to keep outsiders away, as a protection for its inner grounds. The fence represents wealth and class division through its gaudy appearance. In order to work, Bigger must physically open the fence and enter the space of the Dalton family. It is this entry that serves as a reminder to the white world, a world to which he will never truly belong but one that he must navigate.

When Bigger enters the Dalton home, he is guided to his new room almost immediately and is told of the past tenant/worker that assisted the Dalton family, Mr. Green. This almost ghostly presence of Mr. Green haunts Bigger’s newly acquired room as indicated by the absence of any information on Mr. Green’s present-day whereabouts. Bigger is told of Mr. Green through the explicit “walls covered with pictures of girls’ faces and prize fighters” (58) that were left before him, and told that he “kept things nice” (58). Yet, we as readers are left wondering what truly happened to Mr. Green after he left the Dalton residence with intentions to pursue an education. Yet, his presence within the room is made distinct by the posters that are left hanging for Bigger to marvel at, and provide him with a familiar sense of fantasy.

The posters on the wall make Bigger feel confident, just as the space of the Movie theater provides him with a freedom to dream. Bigger observes the new space at the Dalton’s with a sense of wonder and excitement,

The room was large and had two radiators. He felt the bed; it was soft. Gee! He would bring Bessie here some night. Not right at once; he would wait until he had learned the ropes of the place. A room all to himself! He could bring a pint of liquor up here and

drink it in peace. He would not have to slip around any more. He would not have to sleep with Buddy and stand Buddy's kicking all night long (59)

He marvels at the opportunity within the four walls, a place where he can be at peace and finally feel the freedom of privacy, away from his family's crowded apartment in the city's Southside. This new space was "large and had two radiators" with a comfortable bed and no one around him to cast judgment on his actions in privacy- he could fantasize whenever he wanted, and indulge in dangerous acts that he had not been able to experience before.

The Dalton family are described as being modest people with a social conscience, constantly reminding Bigger of their white liberalism, especially seen through their descriptions of Mr. Green as being representative of black self-improvement. Yet, Bigger enjoys the surprisingly kind and generous treatment from the Daltons, but is keenly aware of Mary, through her provocative nature which scares him,

Ohhhh... This was not going to be bad at all...Oh boy! This would be an easy life.

Everything was all right, except that girl. She worried him...In all of the white women he had met, mostly on jobs and at relief stations, there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar. But this girl waded right in and hit him between the eyes with her words and ways (59)

Wright foreshadows the pivotal incident that comes almost 40 pages later, Mary's death. Bigger is aware of the limitations the white world generates. He is lured in by Mary's open and blunt nature in comparison to his experiences in the spaces of work where white women held a "certain coldness and reserve". She is not like what he expected, and begins to fantasize Mary's



fascinating character as he has in the movies. Bigger's decision to take the job has little to do with taking care of his family but in realizing a fantasy that the space of this new world allows.

### **The Car**

Bigger seemingly feels a sense of freedom when driving the car, "...the feel of a car added something to him. He loved to press his foot against a pedal and sail along, watching others stand still, seeing the asphalt road unwind under him. The lights flashed from red to green and he nosed the car forward" (63). This imagery of the traffic light flashing from red to green is indicative of Bigger's acceleration into self-exploration, his transformation through self-identification is in the works. Bigger's excitement about his new surroundings and the various opportunities that await him begins to dissipate when he is reminded of the true divide between the white and black worlds. Despite feeling somewhat comforted by Mary's refreshing presence as a white woman who seems to respect him, Bigger keeps his guard up as he must maintain his role as chauffeur.

We can see immediately that Mary is a woman without boundaries as she chooses to sit inches away from Bigger in the backseat and then when they arrive to pick up Jan, she moves even closer to Bigger in the front seat. Bigger finds comfort in her confident and fearless but is also cautious, waiting for Mary to showcase the typical white traits he is used to,

She was an odd girl, all right. She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person. But why? Was this some kind of game? The guarded feeling of freedom he had while listening to her was tangled with the hard fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do (65)

Bigger mentions the divide when considering the possibility that Mary's seemingly kind intentions could turn negative as she is a white and rich woman, a part of a world of people who dominate Bigger's life and role in society; but there is something about Mary's humanity that Bigger is entranced by.

When Bigger is introduced to Jan, he shakes Bigger's hand tightly, and tells Bigger to call him by his first name (66). Despite this being an attempt to show comradery, Bigger assumes that it is out of sheer mockery,

He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this?...Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon (67)

Bigger questions every single moment in the car; he is acutely aware of this gap between him and Mary and Jan, the "No Man's Land" that he could enter into. He questions his "black skin" after only knowing a life where white people "despised" him for his "badge of shame". After Jan insists on driving the two of them, Bigger is forced from his role as chauffeur as he moves from his space of freedom behind the wheel to a constricted space, where he sits sandwiched between the two white people, "There were two white people to either side of him; he was sitting between

two vast white looming walls. Never in his life had he been so close to a white woman” (68). These “vast white looming walls” on either side of Bigger force him to be extremely cognizant of his physical position in this cramped space; the car becomes a space dominated by Jan and Mary. This claustrophobic space of the car is similar to Bigger’s apartment where he feels this familiar sense of confinement- yet, within the realm of the car, the white bodies next to him make him dangerously aware of his black skin.

Jan speaks from a place of privilege, and envisions an idealistic world through rose-colored glasses when he takes Bigger and Mary to look at the Chicago skyline; he claims that after the “revolution”, “There’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor” (68). Bigger knows that if he gives into his desire to believe Jan’s vision, it would “call attention to himself and his black body” (68). Bigger does not want to remember or acknowledge the role he has been given as a black man in America, and yet, when both Jan and Mary request that he take them to “one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places” (Wright 69), Bigger is confronted with a physical integration between his two worlds- to take them to a familiar and local place, to show them “where colored people eat”. The car becomes a dangerous space for Bigger, as exemplified by the existence of “No Man’s Land”, where he is forced to change the original delineation of space where he could sit at a comfortable distance while doing his job. Bigger, in pain due to the jam-packed space of the car, takes them to “Ernie’s Kitchen Shack.” Mary proceeds to go on a diatribe about how she’s never “been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They’re *human*... There are twelve million of them.... They live in our country.... In the same city with us....” (Wright 70). Mary’s ignorance is apparent here, and reinforces a sense of alienation within Bigger.

After a night on the town with a very drunk Jan and Mary in his backseat, Bigger takes Mary home to her bedroom where, despite his fear that he will be seen holding her white body to begin with, he reaches in to kiss her. The space of Mary's room is one where Bigger has the privacy to do what he wants with this intoxicated and unconscious white woman. His choice to kiss her further represents Bigger's rebellious and angry side; he is entering the white world physically through this intimate action, but he is also acting against the inherent rules of his servitude by crossing this line. When Mrs. Dalton blindly searches for Mary's presence in her bedroom, Bigger's intentions to muffle the sound of Mary's voice turn into the deliberate downfall of his life- he accidentally suffocates Mary. Resembling the black rat in the beginning of the novel, Bigger must fight for his survival in this moment of fear of being caught; he is fighting on an animalistic level, just like the black rat wreaking havoc in the Thomas residence.

Bigger's appreciation for his new space at the Dalton's quickly turns to loathing after "He all but shuddered with the intensity of his loathing for this house and all it had made him feel since he had first come into it" (Wright 87). Bigger's inner-dialogue quickly centers around the space that he has entered, a space that has turned him into a murderer, "the reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place", the interior of the room becomes inherently connected to the white world he navigates on the exterior, and he is now truly disconnected from that world as he claims an identity as "black murderer" (87). Once Bigger commits this crime, he realizes it is him against the white world that will come after him.

Bigger mentally justifies his actions when he is back in the space of the Dalton's car after he leaves Mary's body in the Dalton's furnace, "He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being; he had not known her long or well enough for that. He felt that his

murder of her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel” (114). The space of the car is one that is essential to Bigger’s transformative thinking; he begins to realize this true divide between his world and that of white people. He begins to digest the experiences he has had speaking with other people of color on the streets, relating his own feelings of shame and fear to that of all of black people, “To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark” (114). Battling the shame associated with his identity as a black man, Bigger recognizes his alienation in a society run by white people,

Bigger feels as though he cannot surpass certain boundaries created by the white world, ...as long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it (114)

Although there were limits that “black folks did not go beyond”, Bigger is determined to escape the defined space that the “white force” has created to oppress him. In Bigger’s world, the spaces of the Dalton’s home, where the rules are set by the family, or the space of the car where the rules are set by Jan and Mary, effect not only his character but also the realities of his life as a black man in Chicago. This “prescribed corner of the city” where the Thomas’ lived, provides a safe haven from the facade that Bigger upholds every day in the white world that he lives in. He is able to navigate these two architectural landscapes by remaining painfully aware of his own capabilities when abiding to the limits set in place for him.

## On The Run

Bigger's sense of self grows from a need to hide from the guilt that could easily envelop his psyche; he grows into his aggression and apathy and becomes more willing to act against his old fears that once confined him. Yet, despite his acting out as being an act of rebellion, it is a way to protect himself from his overwhelming fears of the white world and the consequences of his actions. The space of the city is one where he travels freely and fearlessly after his crime has been committed and his interrogations have been faced, and he travels through the "Negro streets" with blindfolds on, ignoring the people who travel among him, as "they were simply blind people, blind like his mother, his brother, his sister, Peggy, Britten, Jan, Mr. Dalton, and the sightless Mrs. Dalton and the quiet empty houses with their black gaping windows" (173). Despite having the ability to leave and run away from all this, Bigger decides to stay, "even if that end swallowed him in blackness" (189), because he feels lost amongst the "blind people" that included his family.

Bigger upholds the role of an innocent man when being interrogated by Mr. Britten and company, confident that "he was just another black ignorant Negro to them" (212), and that as long as their heads were turned in Jan's direction, he could play this role well. Bigger decides to flee the scene in an attempt to preserve his freedom, "He had to save himself. But it was familiar, this running away. All his life he had known that sooner or later something like this would come to him. And now, here it was. He had always felt outside of this white world, and now it was true. It made things simple" (221). Bigger feels this alienation and exclusion from the white world, but it "made things simple" for him, as his ambiguous intentions have become clear now; he is a black man and has always felt "outside of this white world" but now, he was truly,

“outside”. He is a victim of his own fate; he anticipates an event such as this, one that would so bluntly show him the division between his world and the white world.

Bigger Thomas is confined to the environmental and figurative ideological space of society and Chicago/his neighborhood. His murder of the white woman is representative of a metaphorical attempt to extricate oneself from society, a resentment of the space, which he then leaves because of his actions, further isolating him from the environment. When Bigger Thomas leaves the environment with Bessie, (who he is able to convince to come with him because of their shared perception of their environment and the way his actions correlate to the larger picture of racial inequality) he is scared and even further isolated; the abandoned house is less a space than a structure. The space that Thomas attempts to inhabit then, is Bessie’s heart in order to stabilize himself and get out of trouble. When Bessie closes that interior space to him, he physically and metaphorically inserts himself into the space by sexually violating her, ignoring her requests for him to stop. He then, barred from her interior space, follows the same course of action he felt when rejected from the societal space of Chicago and murders her.

After killing Bessie, Bigger feels overwhelmed by the reality that it is him against the white world that is after him, he begins to think about his actions,

During the last two days and nights he had lived so fast and hard that it was an effort to keep it all real in his mind. So close had danger and death come that he could not feel that it was he who had undergone it all. And, yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power...In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes (239)

Bigger acts out due to the racist society that has silenced him for so long; he experiences “death and danger” and feels empowered by his choice to rebel against the white world. The two murders set him free of the chains of his world; his “impalpable but real” actions are a consequence of his place in the spaces that he has occupied willingly and forcibly.

He feels a sense of calm knowing who he is when battling these two worlds between self and society,

Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square; a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it, divide it, focus it. But only under the stress of hate was the conflict resolved (240)

Conflict forces Bigger to take action and seek resolution in every space he enters, and despite his actions being “futile”, they are how he deals with this overwhelming division. He realizes that “the world was too much for him”, that he “closed his eyes and struck out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back” (240). He finds comfort and shelter in the movies he watches and the magazines he reads, which allow him to find himself within the anonymity of the space of a movie theater or the literary space of magazines. When Bigger is in the space of the city during the night time, he feels free walking around the landscape, and wonders why he cannot feel this freedom all of the time,

Why should not this cold white world rise up as a beautiful dream in which he could walk and be at home, in which it would be easy to tell what to do and what not to do?...He felt that there was something missing, some road which, if he had once found it, would have led him to a sure and quiet knowledge. But why think of that now? A chance for that was



gone forever. He had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself  
(241)

Death is the limit that Bigger has to reach to obtain a true sense of freedom from the fearful realities of his oppressive world. His new world was one that gave him the ultimate freedom as he was a man not defined by any space; a man who has committed a crime against humanity. Yet, despite this facade of apathy, Bigger still imagines a space of unrestraint, a space where he can interact with his environment and city without fear of his black skin.

### **The Jail Cell**

Resisting containment, it is with bitterness that Wright puts Bigger into a cell where he will remain for the rest of his life. After being captured by the police and taken to various police stations, Bigger's transformation is complete, "Toward no one in the world did he feel any fear now, for he knew that fear was useless; and toward no one in the world did he feel any hate now, for he knew that hate would not help him" (273). Yet, despite fearlessness as having a positive connotation, Bigger is numb to the world that has imprisoned him physically and mentally. He is submissive in his prison cell, and remains silent when confronted by anyone, "He simply lay or sat, saying nothing, not noticing when anyone entered or left his cell" (273). Bigger is described as laying silently and unaffected, as being "in the grip of a deep psychological resolution not to react to anything" (274). His apathy is well-deserved after the hell he has experienced, but he remains victim to the white world's spectacle of him as a disobedient black man who must be killed.

Bigger is able to acquire a newspaper when he is under the watch of policemen, and reads about himself, "Thomas comes of a poor darky family of a shiftless and immoral variety. He was raised here and is known to local residents as an irreformable sneak thief and liar" (280). In the

contents of the newspaper, a comment on how the South would deal with Bigger's crime versus how the north would shows how people are sensationalizing his crimes to put forth a racist white agenda, "Crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating all Negroes in parks, playgrounds, cafes, theaters and street cars. Residential segregation is imperative. Such measures tend to keep them as much as possible out of direct contact with white women and lessen their attacks against them" (281). Bigger is condemned by his own world too, and even when he is confronted by Reverend Hammond from his mother's church, he feels the guilt rise within him, "he could not tell the difference between what this man evoked in him and what he had read in the papers; the love of his own kind and his hate of others made him feel equally guilty now" (282). Even though he refuses to listen to the Reverend's voice, Bigger knows that his words are reflective of his mother's, words that breed hope, and love but also made him feel "...as condemned and guilty as the voice of those who hated him" (283). In the prison walls, Bigger is truly alienated from the outside world, his family, his own actions, and himself. His ability to remove these penetrating thoughts is lessened by his experience in confinement as he ruminates on his place in a world that has only shown him pain.

When Bigger is confronted by Mr. Dalton, Buckley and his attorney, Max, he is in his prison cell, limited to his cot on which he sleeps and contemplates his every waking moment. Bigger remains silent and emotionless when the mob of men interrogate him, but when his mother walks in the door with his brother and sister, Bigger fills up with immense emotion, something he has not experienced since his world fell out from under him. Despite not wanting his mother to see him surrounded by white people of authority shaming him, Bigger runs into his mother's arms in an attempt to push her out of this space of disappointment, one that represents contrition and punishment. In the tiny space of his prison cell, Bigger sits on his cot as Mr. and

Mrs. Dalton, Buckley, the preacher, Jan, Jack, G.H., Vera, his mother, and Gus stand surprised at his state of affairs, feeling as though “all of the white people in the room were measuring every inch of his weakness. He identified himself with his family and felt their naked shame under the eyes of white folks” (296). Bigger attempts to comfort his devastated mother and brother, Buddy, while the white bodies stand against the wall of his prison cell, judging his every word and move. Bigger tells his family that this will all end soon, and that he’ll “be out of this in no time” (297). The expressive white faces against the walls display the truth, that Bigger’s fate is not freedom.

In an attempt to console her child, Bigger’s mother speaks hopefully, “son, there’s a place where we can be together again in the great bye and bye. God’s done fixed it so we can. He’s fixed a meeting place for us, a place where we can live without fear. No matter what happens to us here, we can be together in God’s heaven” (299) and tells him to pray. Bigger lies to her, despite his knowing that his “heart did not believe, knowing that when he died, it would be over, forever” (300). The only way to escape the guilt of his actions and the disappointment from his family and peers, is through death. The only way to escape these battling worlds is by physically exiting them.

When in the space of his prison cell, Bigger is accosted by many who interrogate and attempt to break him down to get him to provide answers and admit to his alleged crimes. When the prosecutors find Bigger guilty of murdering Bessie as well, they use it as “evidence”, as “...the white people did not really care about Bessie’s being killed. White people never searched for Negroes who killed other Negroes...Crime for a Negro was only when he harmed whites, took white lives, or injured white property” (331). Bigger is keenly aware of the reality of the white world he has violated, the world that oppresses him day in and day out. He is fed up with

his own submissiveness, as he has lived a life confined to racialized rules in a white dominated society,

Not only had he lived where they told him to live, not only had he done what they told him to do, not only had he done these things until he had killed to be quit of them; but even after obeying, after killing, they still ruled him. He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored life and dictated the terms of death (331-32)

Frustrated at his useless efforts to fit into the expected existence, it is clear that at the end he is still “their property”. “They”, here, is in reference to the white world that Wright makes apparent as being separate from that of Bigger’s. Wright uses “colored” and “dictated” to give additional importance to this world that governs Bigger’s entire being, one that even dictates the “terms” of his death. He is bound to this life in his prison cell; and, rather than accept his fate, he hopes for death.

When the jury decides that Bigger is guilty, his world, his space, is that of the four walls of his prison cell. He feels demonized by the eyes that stare at him through prison bars, “He heard a low murmur of voices and in the same instant his consciousness recorded without bitterness- like a man stepping out of his house to go to work and noticing that the sun is shining- the fact that even here in Cook County Jail Negro and white were segregated into different cell-blocks. He lay on the cot with closed eyes and the darkness soothed him some” (340). Bigger feels that he can only rely on himself at this point, and that he cannot “trust anybody or anything” (340), he is truly alone in this darkness, but finds solace in what the darkness brings, a moment away from the people who shame him.

After witnessing a grueling scene where a “brown-skinned negro” (342) is dragged by white prisoners in front of Bigger’s cell and thrown inside, Bigger watches as the man is then dragged out of his cell by a “group of men dressed in white” (344). This scene pushes Bigger to reach out to his lawyer, Max; previously, Bigger refused the attorney’s help. He craves companionship “for the first time in his capture” (344) and must immediately confront his lawyer, Max, in a small room with “one barred window” and “profound silence” (345). Bigger feels hopeless when he sits across from Max, as he watches his life being juggled in the hands of a stranger,

An organic wish to cease to be, to stop living, seized him. Either he was too weak, or the world was too strong; he did not know which. Over and over he had tried to create a world to live in, and over and over he had failed. Now, once again, he was waiting for someone to tell him something; once more he was poised on the verge of action and commitment... Even if Max tried hard and honestly, were there not thousands of white hands to stop Max? (345)

In the space of this fluorescent room, Bigger is adamant that his fate is hopeless in the “thousands of white hands” that would stop Max and anything that got in their way. Bigger’s world is truly limited by space, by the authorities that enslave him, by the white man who shames him and by the streets of Chicago which remind him of his low place in the world. Bigger finds himself comfortable enough with Max that he ends up revealing his apathetic attitude toward his killing of two women, and expresses that “for a little while I was free” (354). Bigger tells Max about his past dreams of doing “what the white boys in school did” (354). He has been confined in this world for so long that his actions are a result of the limitations that he

had to live with as a black man in America. He imagines a world without restrictions, a world where he could “feel at home, sort of” (355).

Bigger’s candor when speaking with Max is detailed by the spaces he recalls in his past, specifically the religious space of the Church that he attended with his mother in his youth. Max questions Bigger’s apprehensiveness to religion, and Bigger argues, “I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn’t want that kind of happiness. The white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want with us” (356). Despite the assumption that the “inclusive” nature of the church would give Bigger a sense of freedom, we see Bigger open up about the reality that this is not the case for him. He feels even more isolated in a religious environment as religion requires a sense of other-worldliness that he had fought so hard against—all he wanted was to belong in the world that he was born into. Max asks Bigger, “Do you feel...that somehow, somewhere, or sometime or other you’ll have a chance to make up for what you didn’t get here on earth?” to which Bigger replies, “Hell, Naw! When they strap me in that chair and turn on the heat, I’m through, for always” (356). Bigger refers to his death in finite terms, expressing no belief in a spiritual afterlife and a comfort in knowing that that will be the end to his pain and suffering on earth.

As Bigger and Max’s conversation comes to a close, Bigger admits that his fate in the electric chair feels “sort of natural-like”, and that “something like this just had to be” (358), that “something” being his conviction, his shame, his death. When Bigger returns to his cell, the darkness that surrounds him provides him with a sense of relief. He wonders why hate and fear encases the world he lives in; why there “were so many cells in the world?” (361), referencing the cells that were both rampant in the darkness beyond his own cell and beyond the prison walls. There were “...screams and curses and yells of suffering and nobody heard them, for the

walls were thick and darkness was everywhere” (361). Wright details the sounds of “screams and curses and yells of suffering” to paint the picture of the prison space through its soundscape and detail the horror behind the prison walls. Behind these walls and beyond them, Bigger is both confined to his role as murderer and by his lack of “emotional resources” during the entire conviction process (364). Max speaks of Bigger’s trial as representing “every Negro in America” and Bigger walks into the courtroom to find a “small knot of black faces, over to one side of the room” (368). He enters this space to find himself challenged with “the lightning of silver bulbs” that flashed from the camera’s in front of him, and angry mobs of white people screaming for his death (368). The courtroom, for Bigger, is a place of immense shame as he is demonized in front of his family and black peers. In this space, “he felt the awful strain under which he had been while the men argued about his life” (378). Bigger is confined to his role as “black murderer” in the space of the courtroom, as he battles against the testimonies of the white witnesses before him. While mobs surrounded the courthouse, Bigger’s awareness of the world that despises him so deeply grows more profound and he is left with nothing but fear.

Max’s closing argument eloquently and powerfully illustrates the black social condition in America that influences and shapes Bigger’s identity and actions overall. Max mentions the spaces of confinement that Bigger has faced in his childhood, like the space of his apartment, or the social space that he had to conform to in order to survive.

Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variations, and for those Negroes who are completely under the influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people. But once you see them as a whole, once your eyes leave the individual and encompass the mass, a new quality comes into the picture. Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people; in

reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive *within* this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights (397)

Bigger is stunned by Max's dynamic address on behalf of him, yet he knows his fate is left in the hands of the jury and judge and that despite Max's attempt to spread the reasoning behind his actions, he will still be put to death. Bigger's last space that he enters is the space of his cell, where he says goodnight to Max and asks him to assure his family that he doesn't cry, and ends with a "faint, wry, bitter" smile on his face as the novel ends with the soundscape of the prison doors shutting loudly.

Wright attempts to make this a very naturalist novel, with scenes where nothing is happening in reality; whether it be the scene where an entire cohort of individuals convene around his prison bed, or Max's absurdly long and powerful rebuttal, Wright steps out from being a novelist and becomes a social activist. Wright does not follow by the rules of naturalism but employs his social activism by making a political point about the fate of black men in the United States. Each character in Wright's novel represent a form of social institution that has failed Bigger; the Dalton's represent white liberalism, the law is represented by Buckley, Mr. Dalton, and the judge, and the only people who do not fail Bigger are Jan and Max, who are communists. Even though these institutions fail Bigger, they force him to come to a point of self-understanding after he sees Max plead for his life in the courtroom; he comes to terms with his fate behind bars, "What I killed for must've been good!...I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (429). Bigger feels that the moments he killed were the most meaningful moments of his life as they provided him with a sense of power, freedom, and control over his ill-fated destiny as a black man in America.



We have seen Bigger battle numerous spaces over the course of the novel, but the space of the prison cell is one dedicated to silencing and repressing him. This marked utility of place and space has a clear and intentional effect on a prisoner's mentality, as shown by various scientific studies that both examine and help to construct prison architecture and protocol to "rehabilitate" or rather, profit from, those who inhabit prison cells. Incarcerated individuals (for it is important to remember that incarceration is not equivalent to guilt) have their space, place, lives, and exterior environment as a whole calculated for "harmonious" social engineering. From the previous analysis of the novel, it is clear that Bigger Thomas searches for a space of his own along his journey. While he may not have imagined the cold walls of a prison cell, this cruel ending does provide Thomas with a space that he, ostensibly, could inhabit in a meaningful way. However, because of the engineering of the prison system, this space is infected with ideology, politics, and violence that disrupts any possible peace or rehabilitation. Bigger's death liberates him from the chains that have shackled him for so long, even though they are the reasons he must face this ultimate darkness.

As I will mention later in Chapter III, Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish* that "penal punishment is therefore a generalized function, coextensive with the function of the social body and with each of its elements" which generates an "unequal struggle" (Foucault 90). This "unequal struggle" lies among the forces and powers that deem the offender an enemy of the "social body" (Foucault 91). As we have seen in Richard Wright's novel, Bigger Thomas is condemned by the worlds that he has worked so hard to fit into by the social body he is up against; his humanity is limited to his prison cell.

## Chapter 2:

### Edgar Allan Poe and “The Fall of The House of Usher”

Having journeyed through the world of Richard Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, we can move into a disturbing and bone-chilling depiction of space that greatly influences character and action in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of The House of Usher” with (hopefully) a deeper sense of how space can be an agent in the creation of identity. Wright’s use of space is not merely claustrophobic, but space demonstrates Bigger’s lack of subjectivity. He does not act on his own but in concert with the space around him; he is physically the trapped rat at the beginning of the novel, with no clear path to freedom. He enters spaces of deception that give him a glimpse into freedom and limitlessness, such as the movie theater where he can dream, as well as the spaces that provoke anxiety within him, such as the kitchenette or the space of the car. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of The House of Usher”, we again see space as having the ability to articulate that which cannot be said. Poe’s narrator is our only way into this world; he reveals his experiences with the supernatural and the overtaking of human senses as he gives over his own subjectivity to the fantastic world both inside and outside of the Usher home.

We are brought into the Usher home and directed as readers and observers to see the world that is so distinctly outside and unknown to those who enter it as it is for those who read about it. Poe’s narrator captures the house’s forceful character as an entity of its own, and displays its powerful hold over each person within its landscape. Our narrator, an old friend of the owner of the “mansion of gloom” (Poe 2), Roderick Usher, proposes himself a “sojourn of some weeks” (Poe 2) in a response to a letter which he received a few weeks earlier from Mr. Usher requesting his assistance in alleviating his mental disorder as his “only personal friend”

(Poe 2). What is kept secret from Poe's readers are the true intentions of our narrator's visit to this house as he admits to not knowing Roderick well- he uses this space of unfamiliarity to hide.

### **The Haunted Outside**

During his approach to the grounds of the House of Usher, a gloomy and dreary scene is set for us from the start by our narrator, "It was a dark and soundless day near the end of the year, and clouds were hanging low in the heavens" (Poe 1). This dark, dull, and dreary day sounds like a perfect backdrop to a story such as this; our narrator's first sight of the house is plagued by a "heavy sadness" that "fills" his spirit. He maintains, "I looked at the scene before me- at the house itself- at the ground around it- at the cold stone walls of the building- at its empty eye-like windows- and at a few dead trees- I say, with a complete sadness of soul which was no healthy, earthly feeling" (Poe 1), the outside grounds of the home is like an enclosure. The outside space is described as a haunted space, and the narrator enters into the scene expecting a natural space but enters to find that it is unnatural to its core. He describes it as a "scene" before him, placing himself outside of it as a viewer experiencing it just like us. This feeling of sadness is one affecting his soul- a feeling that is described as unearthly and unhealthy, caused by the enclosure of the Usher home. This world of enclosure is so distinctly central to Poe's unnatural world of the House of Usher, as it makes those who enter react emotionally to the forces that lay within.

As the details of the home are revealed through the narrator's eyes, we see early on that the windows were "long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within", yet only "feeble gleams of encrimsoned light" made their way through the window panes (Poe 3-4). The interior space is dimly lit, having only "feeble gleams" that cast shadows on objects through windows that are "inaccessible from

within”, a prison inside. Not only are the windows almost useless, but the furniture that lay “profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered” (Poe 4) in the rooms of the home. Despite having several cultural objects such as instruments and books strewn around, the space lacks “any vitality” and the narrator “breathed an atmosphere of sorrow”, an “air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom” that “hung over and pervaded all” (Poe 4). From here on out, we enter a space of unique and powerful capabilities; a space with architectural and material differences.

### **The Haunted Space of The Narrator’s Mind**

The narrator has literally set a scene for a story that will include a premature burial and rumors of incest. Initial descriptions of the “house of usher” are seen when the narrator points out the house’s effect on him,

...there grew in my mind a strange fancy- a fancy so ridiculous, indeed that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me...there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity- an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn- a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued” (Poe 3)

Not only do we see the narrator’s growing obsession with the space here, but we also see his early encounters with insanity after being in this “atmosphere” that has “no affinity with the air of heaven”, but only an air of decay and death. Yet, his own motives for remaining in the Usher home are buried herein.

The forceful space of the home is described at great length through the narrator’s perception of Roderick’s experience, an heir to the Usher family home. Roderick’s mental

faculties have been greatly influenced by this space, and it shows, as his “superstitious impressions” of his home “enchained” him (Poe 5). The narrator describes the mansion as having full control over Roderick’s behavior through a force conveyed in “terms too shadowy here to be restated” (Poe 5), insinuating a certain darkness and unknown nature of the forces beyond conception that Roderick claims to be the cause of his mental state. The “superstitious impressions” (Poe 5) that our narrator refers to numerous times when he describes Roderick’s illness, stem from “an influence whose suppositious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated” (Poe 5), hidden from Poe’s readers through “shadowy” terms. This “influence” takes shape in the form of the mansion, and has the power to overtake the “morale of his (Roderick’s) existence” (Poe 5). He is “despaired to find a remedy” for this “morbid acuteness of the senses” and Poe’s narrator takes it upon himself to help him in this journey toward sanity (Poe 5).

The narrator refers to Roderick as “the master of the House of Usher” (Poe 6) and as their relationship blossoms, he tries to ease Roderick’s truly dark and disturbed mind, and experiences the House of Usher with Roderick as his guide. While the narrator experiences Roderick’s insanity, he begins to move into insanity himself. Roderick’s sister, Madeline, dies of an unrevealed death, but one presumably related to her illness, “a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character” (Poe 6)). This consistency in familial illness is revealed to be connected to the house as we explore it through the narrator’s eyes, especially when he chooses to assist Roderick in her premature burial; and unequivocally reveals his “harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution” (Poe 10) when doing so.

We are taken into what our narrator refers to as “the vault”, an underground space in the house that is “small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light” (Poe 10), a space that becomes the burial grounds for Madeline and for the burial of the truth. The narrator reveals his experience thinking about Madeline’s disease “which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, and left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death” (Poe 10). Her character is described as “cataleptical”, captured in a moment of death with a “faint blush upon the bosom and the face”. Madeline is described as dying with a “suspiciously lingering smile upon her face”, as this moment of death is a moment of relief and freedom from pain and illness brought upon in the confines of the Usher home, or that strangely enough she will triumph.

Roderick’s loss of his sister has a distinct effect on his character, and our narrator makes note of that. He sees that after Roderick experiences some “days of bitter grief”, “an observable change came over the features of the (his) mental disorder” (Poe 10), which leads to a great shift in his character. Roderick’s face is described as taking on a “ghastly hue” and “the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out” (Poe 10). Roderick’s gradual loss of spirit and will to live is greatly enhanced by his sister’s death. Not only does the narrator make note of Roderick’s shift in mental state, but his own personal shift into insanity induced by his experience watching and caring for Roderick.

The space of the House of Usher is transformed entirely once they choose to bury Madeline’s body within the confines of the home. The space becomes defined by this loss, further influencing the people within it. Roderick’s sensibilities and capabilities become disabling, and he is described as being found “gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude

of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound” (Poe 10-11), indicative of his transition into madness. Roderick is confined within the walls of this antiquated and dark architectural space, and the narrator voluntarily chooses to enter and be victim to its effect on Roderick. The narrator explores the world inside the Usher home and the ways in which its tenants have been emotionally and physically destroyed by grief, tragedy, and illness.

The narrator makes note of a defining characteristic of the forceful effect the house has on its tenants, the “morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances” (Poe 7). These “impromptus” happened when Roderick was experiencing one of “his wild fantasias” that stemmed from “particular moments of the highest artificial excitement” (Poe 7). The narrator details the lyrics of Roderick’s “rhapsodies” (Poe 7) as he remembers them, specifically to “The Haunted Place”, a song presumably about the House of Usher. Described as once being a “fair and stately place”, Roderick highlights the downfall of the architectural space through song, as “evil things, in robes of sorrow, Assailed the monarch’s high estate” (Poe 8). Each lyric highlights the downfall of the architectural space of the Usher home,

Once a fair and stately palace--

Radiant palace-- reared its head.

The narrator reveals that Roderick believes the song suggests a deeper meaning in regards to the sentience of the home itself, the “home of his forefathers” (Poe 9). The narrator is aware of the house’s powerful force through Roderick’s every action and behavior, and is educated through

lyrical composition. He envisions the grounds of the Usher home as once being lush and “radiant”, but the truth lies in the decaying “stately palace” that surrounds him.

After hearing this song of sorrow that references another one of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, *The Haunted Palace*, a story about a Knight who is afraid of the evil forces that confine him within his palace. The narrator, in regards to the sentient nature of the Usher home, goes on to say that the,

...method of collocation of these stones- in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around- above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence- the evidence of the sentience- was to be seen...in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him- what he was” (Poe 9)

The architecture is described through imagery that is revealed through narrative, the fungi over the stones, “the order of their arrangement”, or the “decayed trees which stood around” further the gloomy and dead nature of the Usher estate. The focus on the tarn that it is built on is notable as the house ultimately slips away amongst it, as well as the people within it, carrying out the “destinies of his family” that the narrator references here. These “destinies” are “moulded” by the “importunate and terrible influence” that are beyond human understanding as they are revealed to be supernatural. This influence shapes Roderick’s character, and also has a large effect on our narrator as the story reveals itself to us.



The narrator's experience in the house becomes fascinating as he grows "infected" by Roderick's condition, "I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (Poe 11). Within a matter of "around seven or eight days" (Poe 11) after Madeline's burial takes place in the vault, the feelings of "nervousness" and gloom start to creep up on our narrator. John Allison, author of "Coleridgean Self-Development: Entrapment and Incest in "The Fall of the House of Usher", claims that "Because both houses and family impose themselves on the narrator's mind, diminishing the independence of his imagination and will, his account magnifies the effect of terror, the threat of mental and physical dissolution that the Ushers' constitutional malady presents to society" (Allison 45). The narrator is affected emotionally by the overpowering influence of the architectural space he finds himself in, and his account of this experience is immensely determined by his loss of control over his "imagination and will". Allison states that, "By implication, any weakening of the imagination, primary or secondary, invites a domination over the mind by 'objects' that remain 'essentially fixed and dead'" (Allison 45), this "domination" is over each member of the Usher household through their relationship to the various spaces within the house that confine them.

Allison refers to the narrator as "the slave of a slave" (46) after he aids Roderick in the burial of Madeline in the basement of the Usher home. Roderick, also, is referred to by Poe's narrator as a "bounded slave" to the "deplorable folly" (Poe 5) that encases him and is "enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth" (Poe 5) into the spirits and their origins and the secrets of the house itself. The narrator, at this point, is under the influence of Roderick, who is under the influence of the house.

## The House of Usher

Early on in “The Fall of The House of Usher”, we see this loss of will and imagination when our narrator approaches the house initially, confronted with the “irredeemable gloom” (Poe 4) that the house exudes through its architectural aura. The narrator attempts to change his perception of the home but is unable to, thus, exemplifying the power of the house to control the perceptions of its victims. John Allison claims that “the real horror of Poe’s tale does not reside in stock conventions of gothic artifice. The real horror resides in the possibility that the imagination can be neutralized by the structures it imposes during the course of history” (Allison 45). Because perception is being altered, each character is experiencing the house differently, and thus, manifestations of a similar type of malady are present in each person that enters the architectural space. Allison remarks that the narrator “confronts a ‘specious totality’ of ‘crumbling’ parts- a kind of rotting corpse that he cannot bring back to life” (45), alluding to the house as a powerful force that omits an heir of death and gloom, one that takes over the imaginative mind.

The House of Usher is a place of confinement that infects its inhabitants with a sense of fear and self-reflection through its toxic forces that rid each person of their will. Allison contends that “The Ushers’ ruin and the narrator’s horror argue against the excesses of self-development, at least outside the realm of fiction. For Roderick, the consequences of sustained self-absorption are “fear, madness, and death” (Allison 46). This “self-absorption” is seen in the characters collective wallowing in sadness that is caused by a loss of control over the exterior forces of the house. Allison says that “sustained self-absorption” leads to “fear, madness, and death” and that is the cycle of Roderick’s transition into full insanity. The narrator experiences this fear and madness, but escapes before confronted with death.

The moment the narrator becomes worried about his own ability to overcome the powerful forces that lay present in his mind, he blames it on the bleak decor of the House of Usher in an attempt to “reason off the nervousness which had dominion” (Poe 11) over him. The “bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room- of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed” (Poe 11). Our narrator is “overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror unaccountable yet unendurable” (11) that forces him from his slumber and overcomes him to a point where he has to “pace rapidly to and fro through the apartment” (Poe 11). He ambulates through the house in efforts to get to the chamber where he buried Madeline, and describes a moment of terror when he confronts the “cadaverously wan” figure that is Roderick Usher, which he refers to as “Mr. Usher”, a man with a “species of mad hilarity in his eyes- an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor” that our narrator finds appalling and “preferable to the solitude which I (he) had so long endured” (Poe 11). This strange encounter with Mr. Usher allows us to see the narrator’s insanity growing more present in his narrative voice as he expresses his feelings of relief when he sees this cadaverous man of “restrained hysteria”.

Roderick and the narrator develop a relationship based off of mutual insanity in the home rather than a need to rehabilitate Roderick. Our narrator become uneasy, and Roderick attempts to calm him by reading *The Mad Trist* aloud. Roderick concedes that Madeline may have not been dead after all and that they actually buried her alive. Roderick continues to divulge to the narrator that he has heard sounds coming from Madeline’s coffin and has kept quiet, “Not hear it?- yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long-long-long-many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it- yet I dared not- oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!- I dared not- I dared not

speak! We have put her living in the tomb!” (Poe 14). Roderick is so overcome by the horror of his own words, and he is convinced that he buried Madeline alive due to the “feeble movements in the hollow coffin” (Poe 14). Screaming over and over, “madman!”, Mr. Usher is physically forced from his seat “and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul” (Poe 14), and he sees Madeline’s figure in the doorway.

The narrator describes this moment as if “in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell- the huge antique pannels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws” (Poe 14). This moment exemplifies the sheer superhuman quality of the cadaverous spirits that live in this home, being the tenants who are left, Madeline and Roderick. Physically crawling out of a hollow coffin, Madeline is “emaciated” (14) and ghostly, and falls onto her brother “in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated” (15). These “terrors” that Roderick predicted throughout his residency at the Usher home were the terrors of true death- a place where he inevitably goes once the house’s powerful supernatural sentience takes over.

As readers, we assume that the narrator will fall victim to the powers that be on the grounds of the Usher home as even the clouds fall heavy and grey over the castle, enshrouding its architecture with gloom and terror. Our narrator flees from the house after being witness to the horrors that unfold in front of him. On his journey out of the grounds of the Usher house, he notices a “path of wild light” illuminated by the “blood-red moon” (Poe 15), that appears to be coming from the “once barely-discernible fissure...as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base” (15). This “blood-red moon” that extends from the roof of the home in a “zigzag direction” resembles a lightning rod that strikes down upon the Usher home.

The narrator describes “a fierce breath of the whirlwind- the entire orb of the satellite burst” and the “mighty walls” crumbled in front of his eyes. He describes both the visual detail of the home “rushing asunder” as well as the sound, “there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters- and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher’” (Poe 15). The house is a place of contention that disintegrates along with the people within it. The narrator’s fate is not to die with the Usher family, but to live and watch the disease that is the Usher home fade away into the effervescent tarn that lay fervent behind it. He not only watches as the home’s structure crumbles in front of his eyes, but he watches as the bodies of the Usher family atomize amongst the remnants.

The Usher home is a place where death seeps from its walls and darkness hangs low amidst a cloud of sorrow and an ill-fated destiny. Our narrator takes us into these walls and beyond to show us the true horror of being a tenant amongst a family who is infected by the home’s architecture and sentience. Not only does Poe paint a detailed and unique picture of horror through the Usher home, but his inspiration for the story is one that cannot go unannounced. Poe was deeply influenced by the real story of the home of Hezekiah Usher, a Boston man who was the first bookseller in British America (Oxford Reference). One could say that the drawing of Hezekiah Usher’s house looks like a picturesque version of what Roderick Usher’s home of confinement looks like.



MANSION ERECTED BY HEZEKIAH USHER IN 1684 ON WHAT IS NOW THE CORNER OF TREMONT STREET AND TEMPLE PLACE

<sup>3</sup>It is

This drawing shows a mansion protected by walls that close off outsiders from its inner grounds, located in a seemingly tranquil and scenic area but in reality, remains in Poe's story as a dismal space that causes its tenants great inner distress.

Similar to the architectural landscape of a traditional (Quaker style) prison, this space of the Usher Home (both fictionally in Poe's work as well as literally in the story of Hezekiah Usher) resembles a guarded enclosure intentionally made to contain individuals as seen through the home's instrumentality in its tenants' decline in mental health. The concept of free-will is not existent within this narrative, as even the narrator, a man who is presumably sane, is greatly affected by the forces within. Each member of the Usher household develops a sort of melancholic insanity that overtakes their consciousness and creates an incredible amount of suffering. As described through the eyes of our narrator, the forces in this destructive home have the power to consume the Usher family, but the narrator makes it out to tell his story. The narrator tells of Roderick's story with an eye for detail and imagery, through which Roderick's condition (the fear that left him and his sister cataleptic) is unveiled to readers. Unlike the

---

<sup>3</sup> Refer to citation of Chapter II for picture source

narrator's escape from the destructive world of Usher, in Wright's novel, Bigger Thomas does not make it out of the confines of his prison cell.

## Chapter III:

### Applying the literary works of Wright and Poe to Eastern State Penitentiary and Punishment in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*

#### Introduction to Chapter III

We have ventured through the fictional spaces that have proven to be oppressive and destructive to the psyches of the protagonists within them, especially seen through the narratives of Bigger Thomas and Roderick Usher. We see Bigger Thomas in jail before he is physically in his prison cell; his life is defined by his blackness; thus, he is driven to killing as a way to liberate himself from the limits of his existence. In Poe's work, we are taken into the house of Usher and watch as Roderick withers away within its haunted and powerful walls through the narrator's description of his experience. The points of contention between space and body seen in both of these literary works can be applied to the real world example of an architectural space built for the purpose of penitence and punishment, a place known as, Eastern State Penitentiary. While exploring the links between the historical space of ESP and the worlds that both Wright and Poe have crafted deliberately to confine the individuals within their narratives, we will keep a keen eye toward Foucault's definition and analysis of punishment presented in his work, *Discipline and Punish*.



## Eastern State Penitentiary and The Origins of Prison

I have chosen the space of Eastern State Penitentiary as it holds a horrific history of terror and torture beyond its walls; Eastern State Penitentiary (“ESP”), opened over 180 years ago, has marked itself in history as a place known for its walls which bore witness to a reign of terror and torture. Paul Kahan, one of the first people to write about Eastern State Penitentiary, described the prison as comprised of the “hundreds of obscure articles, out-of-print books and little-used oral histories” (Kahan 9) to provide the public with a detailed documentation of the prison itself. In his work, *Eastern State Penitentiary: A History*, Kahan writes of his own discovery of the prison when walking to a lunch meeting one day, shocked at “what appeared to be a castle” and in “awe of the towering walls”(Kahan 9). His narrative mirrors the approach of Poe’s narrator in *The Fall of The House of Usher*. Both enter into a foreign space unsure of what they may encounter, but informed by the heavy tension of the atmosphere. Recall in Poe’s work the narrator’s overwhelming sense of “sadness” that fills his spirit upon approaching the space of the Usher home. Kahan’s approach to Eastern State Penitentiary filled him with the same “profound sense of gloom” (Kahan 9).

In his first chapter, which details the origins of Eastern State Penitentiary, he places us in a period where prison reform is driven by prominent thinkers and philanthropists with Quaker ideals, who were fed up with the squalid conditions of prisons during the eighteenth century. According to John Howard, “an English aristocrat who investigated Europe’s jails” in 1773, there was a sense of disorder and “inattention” that posed an “unregulated boundary between the prison and the community” (Kahan 13). This unregulated boundary applied to original conceptions of the prison spaces in Philadelphia at the time, as the lack of boundaries intended to physically separate inmates from one another, gave rise to the spread of disease. Howard’s

experience touring English county prisons, brought prison reform into the social consciousness; he was the “most prominent promoter of the idea that incarceration was the ‘natural’ and humane form of punishment” (Kahan 14). His work, *State of the Prisons in England* aided in the passing of the Penitentiary Act of 1779 which employed Howard’s suggestions for “salaried administrators, separate confinement for prisoners at labor and religious instruction” (Kahan 14) in two penitentiaries around London.

In the colony of Pennsylvania, a growing hatred of capital punishment grew out of Enlightenment ideas after criminal indictments “spiked in the 1780s”. This extensive increase in executions, criminal accusations, and indictments led to the creation of Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Jail in 1780; America’s first penitentiary (Kahan 15). After the institution of laws that promoted the chain-gang and forced labor mentalities of American prison systems, reformers such as Benjamin Franklin and other prominent scholars built a council of men devoted to reform through their shared frustration with the legislature<sup>4</sup>. The complaints of this society of intellectuals and politicians paralleled the concerns of John Howard, and pushed for the reform of the Walnut Street Prison. The Act of 1790 “mandated that inmates be separated from one another and labor while in prison” and required the segregation of men and women, those convicted of misdemeanors from those convicted of felonies, and for prisoners to be ‘bathed, cleaned and quarantined for a period to prevent disease” (Kahan 20). Kahan remarks that these reforms were highly successful as no one escaped from the Jail in a period of four years, while at the High Street Jail, more than one hundred inmates had escaped (Kahan 20). The Walnut Street

---

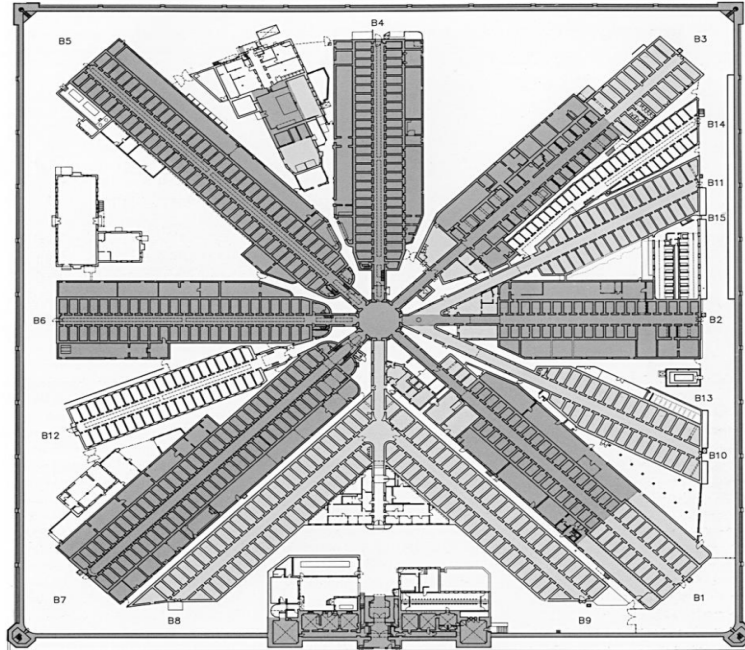
<sup>4</sup> As described in Kahan’s work, *Eastern State Penitentiary: A History*, Philadelphia legislature passed “The Wheelbarrow Law” which enforced inmates at the Walnut Street Jail to engage in labor “in streets of cities and towns, and upon the highways of the open country and other public works” (Kahan 15-16). The law required inmates to wear matching clothing that distinguished them from the outside world, and for cannonballs to be chained to their bodies so they could not escape. Yet, the first day the law was in effect, “fifteen prisoners escaped” and chaos reigned in Philadelphia, forcing this group of “prominent Philadelphians” to ban together in 1787 (Kahan 16).

Jail was a place where these Quaker ideals of prison reform manifested and were carried out successfully.

Despite over two decades of positive effects due to the Society's implementation of new legislature, by the 1820s, many of these founding members had passed away, giving way to "a new generation of leaders" who filled their roles (Kahan 21). This disruption to the council that invested mainly in prison reform contributed to the overcrowding of the Walnut Street Prison, and thus, its deterioration by virtue of this new governing body's lack of oversight. During the War of 1812, an increase in riots and an atmosphere of violence in the prison forced Pennsylvania legislature to confront the need for a prison in Pittsburgh, "which came to be known as Western State Penitentiary" (Kahan 23). After opening its innovative architecture to the public (with cells lining up against the eight-sided prison wall and a "great courtyard in the center (23)), the Penitentiary failed greatly because of its very design. The thin prison walls allowed inmates to interact rather than meditate on their individual crimes, and the layout of the prison cells made it hard for the surveillance of prisoners.

While Western State Penitentiary was being constructed in 1819, moves to create another penitentiary that would "serve the eastern part of the commonwealth" (Kahan 24) were being made. After entering a contest created by the eleven commissioners of this new Philadelphia prison, John Haviland, an architect from England, won. Haviland's goals "in designing the prison were convenience, ease of surveillance, economy and good ventilation" (Kahan 25). Haviland's architectural plan is objectively influenced by John Howard's ideas of a radial prison, one that has a center. Yet, what made this architectural design so significant was "the marriage of these improvements to the needs of the Pennsylvania System, or the creation of specifically designed buildings to suit a penal philosophy" (Kahan 26). Not only did Haviland's design

consider a “penal philosophy” that previous designs had left out, but it reflected the “Gothic Revival sweeping America at the time” (Kahan 26).



John Haviland's radial design (Kahan 27)

Haviland's radial space is centered around an area that serves as a point of surveillance, where one can stand and see the various rows of cell blocks just by turning their head. This design influenced the architectural designs of many prisons outside of Philadelphia; Eastern State Penitentiary served as a vision of rehabilitation and architectural genius. Despite its “high bounding-walls” that loom over the prisoners within the city of Philadelphia, positive accounts of prisoners being “allowed to plant flowers in their yards” and read in the courtyard under the sunshine, go against opposing accounts of torture and maltreatment from guards (Kahan 41).

Located near but not directly in the “congested city center, accessible to city oversight, but distant-enough to avoid contamination of either city residents or vulnerable outcast” (8),

Eastern State Penitentiary was constructed with concealment and isolation in mind. By building it in the outskirts of the city, the country landscape creates a sense of isolation from the industrial world that lies beyond the prison walls. Confinement is used as a tool for rehabilitation, thus, the further from the city and from the thriving world within it, the more one is able to think on their actions in pure isolation. During the prison's architectural conception between 1821 and 1836, the space needed to represent an "optimistic future", and thus it was a "work of large men and large ideas impressively commanding the efforts of others as their instruments" (11). John Haviland designed a contemporary structure that was based on former designs of solitary spaces, expressing themes such as sleep and work within the prison cell with "attached outdoor yards, contrived to maintain full separation of inmates during their confinement" (11-12). It "borrowed the language of medievalism to provoke desired associations in the viewer, but it did not look old" (11), it was a place constructed from an amalgam of previous architectural traditions with technological modernization in mind.

A report released in 1994, entitled, *Eastern State Penitentiary: Historic Structures Report* examines the root of humanity's "hedonistic pain-pleasure calculus" which explains our society's use of incarceration as a tool in prescribing punishment. Thus, the prison is a space designed with these hedonistic needs in mind; to serve as a facility that confines an offender for the purposes of "useful work and good habit formation, and from his labor the prison would pay for itself" (*ESP report* 33). The proper severity of punishment is determined based off of the severity of the offense; the Quakers believed that the prevention of these crimes was through imprisonment. The components of a prisoner's sentence would include "painfulness, labor, watchfulness, solitude and silence" (*ESP report* 34). According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, "In the old system, the body of the condemned man became the king's property, on

which the sovereign left his mark and brought down the effects of his power. Now he will be rather the property of society, the object of a collective and useful appropriation” (Foucault 109). Foucault’s detail of this new system of punishment posed by reformers that stressed “public works” as a way to utilize an offender for labor, thus, profiting society, parallels the initial establishment of labor in prisons (such as the Walnut Street Prison) as a form of rehabilitation.

In the introduction of the report mentioned above, Eastern State Penitentiary is described as an architectural space that adapted to the social sphere surrounding it, and its issues were representative of the “concerns of the 1820s and 1830s, nationally and locally” (*ESP report 5*). Its powerful architecture has proven to be malleable based off of its social needs; in the past, it has allowed for social reconstruction through its mobilization of prison rehabilitation programs and construction of distinct penal policies within its walls. It attracted the public’s attention in the 1830s with its innovative engineering design, built in a time where “everything from banking to the education of the deaf was becoming specialized, professionalized, systematized and controlled” (*ESP report 7*).

Eastern State Penitentiary’s mark on society began when the conversations about the “relationship between a criminal’s physical environment and his/her rehabilitation” (9) began. Despite its “secular, even civic character”, ESP’s purpose was to bring men to a more “moral vision of their role” (*ESP report 11-12*). It’s architectural design looks almost like a castle- with a “strong boundary and controlled gate” (*ESP report 11*) that isolated its walls further from society’s reach, which allowed offenders to meditate on their criminal behavior in a disciplined environment. The cells were to be segregated; separating serious and less serious offenders, and female from males, to further isolate offenders from any “normal” social system. According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, prison developed from the idea of discipline through the

deprivation of freedom and the control over man's rehabilitation. The prison is a space that is defined by both reformation of man and penal justice - capital punishment begins to take form as "rehabilitation" in isolation. Foucault replaces "prisoner" with "delinquent", distinguishing the offender as being created by the carceral system and distinctly separating them from society. By separating the offender from the common people, the system is allowed to control inmates without as much oversight, and the function of discipline becomes greater without the bounds of society.

Overcrowding, chaos, gang violence and the various prisoner escapes over decades of being in existence, greatly contributed to the corrosion of Eastern State Penitentiary and its reputation as the first American penitentiary to enforce the Quaker belief in prison as a space for rehabilitation and penitence. Eastern State "had mutated from a penitentiary- an institution designed to inspire regret and rehabilitation- to a mere holding pen for some of Pennsylvania's worst offenders" (Kahan 75). Once the Pennsylvania System was abolished in 1913, Eastern State had abandoned everything "that made it unique" (Kahan 95), being its architectural design and rehabilitative efforts. There was no longer a separation between inmates, no longer a structure distinguished by the architecture, no longer an environment that could house any rehabilitation of any sort. The nature of the prison shifted from penitence to punishment- a distinct increase in crime in the twentieth-century made it hard for rehabilitative efforts to remain a central part of the prison system, thus forcing Eastern State Penitentiary to close its doors in 1971.

Despite closing in the early 70s, Eastern State Penitentiary has become a spectacle for tourists year-round to trod through the haunted halls of the wards and the enclosed grounds, in order to maintain its social significance. According to this report, Eastern State Penitentiary is

“an example of 19th-century institutional theory and architecture, as a technological solution, as an institution within its neighborhood, as the product of the individuals and groups who shaped and administered it, and, finally, as the environment of inmates who occupied the penitentiary” (*ESP report 2*). John Haviland’s innovative architectural design allowed for revolutionary changes to be made to a pre-existing system that confined individuals to a life behind walls home to chaos and corruption.

We can take Eastern State Penitentiary’s design and execution as a lesson on the flaws of social isolation as an answer to the growing crime rate, “As two hundred years of experimentation with incarceration should have taught us, the answers must be found in dealing with the root causes of crime in the context of the community” (*ESP report 21*). According to *Four Walls and What Lies Within: The Meaning of Space and Place in Prisons*, “the ordering of space in buildings is really about the ordering of relations between people” (3). This correlates to the community that Bigger Thomas grows up in, one that forces him to feel so alienated mentally that he affirms his fate as a black man in America, fated to die. The use of the spaces that we inhabit allow for a place to be formed; whether it be in the space of the Dalton’s car where Bigger sits squeezed between two white bodies, or when he enters into the seemingly boundless space at the Dalton residence, space forces Bigger to act.

The movement from open-air prisons to single cells was made to achieve two separate goals: to “minimize the spread of sin (as well as more palpable ailments) whilst also allowing for the categorization of prisoners” (Fiddler 2). Inspired by strong Quaker beliefs which expressed that an offender was a “child of God who should be treated with compassion and love” (*ESP report 32*), the move to partition prisons into separate cells provided offenders with an opportunity to develop a closer relationship to a spiritual deity or higher power. Yet, despite the



religious influences that lay inherent to Quaker ideals of prison and punishment (that lay under a facade of rehabilitation), American penitentiaries have become overcrowded spaces where people are just bodies circumscribed to their cells.

### **Isolation with a Purpose vs. Purposeful Isolation**

Detailed in the *Eastern State Penitentiary: Historic Structures Report*, punishment serves two purposes: “Expressive” and “Defensive”. “Expressive” punishment “allows the law violator to expiate his sin through suffering and helps the community unite around the norms and values that it expects all its members to uphold” (30), thus, putting the fate of the offender in the hands of the social body<sup>5</sup>. This function of punishment is the most ancient form, as it contains the concept of “Retaliation”, which allowed for the community to express “its anger with the offender through vengeance, fulfilling the biblical injunction of ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’” (*ESP report* 30). Despite retaliation as being more deeply rooted in history and religion as a function of punishment, it has not become obsolete despite efforts over time that have pushed toward more rehabilitative forms of punishment and not those fueled by anger and hatred. Bigger’s “discipline” is very Foucauldian, as he is under surveillance at all times, which one would expect to make him feel like more of a danger to society, yet his reaction is oddly opposite; Bigger feels like what he “killed for must’ve been good!” (Wright 429).

“Defensive” punishment “aims at the control and prevention of crime” through two main routes: “Incapacitation”, which meant removing the offender from society so that they can be

---

<sup>5</sup> Within the category of “Expressive” punishment, there are several subcategories that define each facet of the community’s involvement in the offenders “Retribution”, and “Restitution and Compensation”. “Retribution” emphasized the notion of punishment as fitting “the crime in order to satisfy the public’s demand for equitable justice” (*ESP report* 30). “Restitution and Compensation” emphasized the “deservedness aspect of punishment by requiring the offender (or the state) to restore the social situation to what it was before the offense was committed, usually through some form of direct payment to the victim or the victim’s family or through service to the community” (30).

“out of circulation” and unable to further commit any crimes (30), and “Rehabilitation (Treatment/Resocialization/Reintegration)” which focused on imprisonment as a way to facilitate change within the offender in a positive way that will affect their behavior in the long run when they are outside of the prison walls. While many of these functions of punishment aimed toward retribution and incapacitation (which did not “require any change in the offender in order to accomplish their goals”), these functions deterred offenders through “the fear of future punishment or through clinical or social intervention” (*ESP report* 30-31). Yet, we see in Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son*, that prison is not a space of rehabilitation for Bigger Thomas, it is a space where he must carry out his days in a cell where his only company are the thoughts that fill his head.

Punishment, for Bigger Thomas, is both “Defensive” and “Expressive”, as his fate is determined by his community and he is removed from society completely. Bigger’s punishment is purposeful isolation, rather than isolation with a purpose; he experiences “Retaliation” from his community as Max fights for his livelihood against an unforgiving jury. Yet, he is sentenced to a life behind bars over the death sentence- Wright makes a social commentary about the non-existent resources for rehabilitation of black men in the American prison system. During Max’s closing argument, he claims that,

Sending him to prison would be the first recognition of his personality he has ever had. The long black empty years ahead would constitute for his mind and feelings the only certain and durable object around which he could build a meaning for his life. The other inmates would be the first men with whom he could associate on a basis of equality. Steel bars between him and the society he offended would provide a refuge from hate and fear” (Wright 404)

Despite the Judge's decision to give Bigger the death sentence, Bigger must carry out the rest of his life (marked by a death date) in the confines of his cell. Yet, Max argues that a life in prison would not be any different from Bigger's life as a black man in the Southside of Chicago; he has always been imprisoned. Bigger reassures himself that he will die for something that made him feel liberated- because he knows of his fate, he must change his perspective on his actions to digest and live with his impending death. Prison, for Bigger Thomas, does not work in the rehabilitative ways that Eastern State Penitentiary and John Howard have confirmed as primary to punishment; however, prison commits Bigger to death, where freedom lies in this final form of escapism.

In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of The House of Usher", we can relate the House of Usher to the spaces of American penitentiaries through its notably high-walls that enclose and separate the Usher family and the narrator from the outside world. Poe's narrator attempts to rehabilitate Roderick Usher, a man who is isolated in his home and overcome by an insurmountable amount of fear and anguish. Despite his efforts, the narrator leaves the Usher home as it disintegrates into the tarn behind it. It is a space of true horror; and we can refer to previous descriptions in Chapter II to reinforce this notion. Both Roderick and Madeline Usher deteriorate physically and mentally within the prison they call home, and their bodies become one with this prison in Poe's final scene of elaborate decay and destruction.

Ironically enough, Eastern State Penitentiaries facilities have been left victim to the environment it lays abandoned in; all of its electrical and plumbing systems have been "rapidly destroyed by water intrusion...What the environment failed to accomplish, time itself achieved" when demolition costs were too high (*ESP report* 280). The parallels between the fictional spaces of Wright's novel, *Native Son*, Poe's short story, "The Fall of The House of Usher", and

the real spaces of Eastern State Penitentiary showcase space as an agent in identity formation and human action due to its power to confine and oppress.

My creation of this project stemmed from my interest in African American Literature (specifically slave narratives) and my curiosity in prison reform. I wanted to utilize the literary genius of both Wright and Poe to showcase the spaces that can overtake an individual's physically and mentally. By examining Eastern State Penitentiary's history and remarkable contributions to both prison reform and architectural applications of Quaker conceptions of punishment, we can see the real spaces of terror that physically imprison individuals and apply them to the spaces of the literary. While both Wright's novel and Poe's short story were written some time ago, the themes of both works are relevant today. The US incarcerates more individuals than any other country in the world, many of those prisoners looking like Bigger Thomas (i.e. black, poor and marginalized).

Like Usher in Poe's story, those who find themselves behind the high walls of prison, may be mentally ill, unable to truly recognize the situation they are in. When we see images of contemporary penal institutions, we see massive structures with wire fences and few windows. Outdoor space, if there is any, is limited with usage determined by the guards of the prison. In certain prisons, those that are maximum security, inmates are left in their cells for 23 hours per day with only one hour of "exercise time." It is easy to take the experience of our fictional character in Wright's novel and compare it to the experience of the inmate in 2018 - space defines life, life occurs solely within defined space. Space can serve to free us or, like in the literary works analyzed, imprison us both internally and externally. It is in these spaces that characters are developed, live, grow and ultimately die.

## Works Cited

### Chapter I

Fabre, Michel. "Text: Michel Fabre, 'Black Cat and White Cat: Richard Wright's Debt to Edgar

Allan Poe," from *Poe Studies*, June 1971, Vol. IV, No. 1, 4:17-19." *Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore - Poe Studies - Poe Newsletter - Richard Wright's Debt to Edgar Allan Poe*, [www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/p1971106.htm](http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/p1971106.htm).

Heidiand, Jessica. "Native Son: Bigger Thomas' World." *Bigger Thomas' World*, Umich, 19 Apr.

2004, [www.umich.edu/~eng217/student\\_projects/HeidiandJessica/native%20son.html](http://www.umich.edu/~eng217/student_projects/HeidiandJessica/native%20son.html).

Wright, Richard, and Edwin Rosskam. *12 Million Black Voices*. Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2008.

Wright, Richard. "'How 'Bigger' Was Born' by Richard Wright, The Saturday Review, Saturday, June 1st, 1940." *UNZ.org*, 1 June 1940, [www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1940jun01-00003](http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1940jun01-00003).

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

Wright, Richard, and Edwin Rosskam. *12 Million Black Voices*. Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2008.

"Housing and Race in Chicago." *Chicago Public Library*, [www.chipublib.org/housing/](http://www.chipublib.org/housing/).

### Chapter II

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, University of Florida,

<http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/pdf/passage/5312/the-works-of-edgar-allan-poe-055-the-fall-of-the-house-of-usher.pdf>.

Allison, John. "Coleridgean Self-Development: Entrapment and Incest in 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'" *South Central Review*, 1 Apr. 1988, [www.jstor.org/stable/3189432](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3189432).

"Hezekiah Usher." *Oxford Reference*. 2010-01-01..Date of access 6 Apr. 2018,

<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803114941146>>

PICTURE SOURCE: "Hezekiah Usher Home." [Http://Hezekiahusher.com/](http://Hezekiahusher.com/).

Spitzer, Leo. "A Reinterpretation of 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'" *Essays on English and American Literature*, edited by ANNA HATCHER, Princeton University Press, 1962, pp. 51–66. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183q0g6.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183q0g6.7).

### Chapter III/Conclusion

Kahan, Paul. *Eastern State Penitentiary: A History*. History Press, 2008.

Fiddler, Michael. "Four Walls and What Lies within: The Meaning of Space and Place in Prisons." *Academia.edu*, [www.academia.edu/662622/Four\\_walls\\_and\\_what\\_lies\\_within\\_the\\_meaning\\_of\\_space\\_and\\_place\\_in\\_prisons](http://www.academia.edu/662622/Four_walls_and_what_lies_within_the_meaning_of_space_and_place_in_prisons).

Thomas, Marianna M., and Jeffrey A. Cohen. *Eastern State Penitentiary, Historic Structures Report. I*, 1994.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1995.

