

NATIVE

STUDY GUIDE



RICHARD WRIGHT & PAUL GREEN

PHOTO BY ALEXANDER M. RIVERA



Native

Native, The play by Ian Finley and EbzB Productions, details the metamorphic debate between Paul Green and Richard Wright. The authors are originally brought together by the Mercury Theatre to adapt Wright's novel, *Native Son* for the Broadway stage. Green, a white southern professor who advocates for social justice, and Wright, a self-educated African-American with communist sympathies, forge a deep respect for each other as they discuss systemic discrimination of African-Americans. They start their collaboration in Chapel Hill, NC like a "house on fire." Then in 1941, with World War II on the horizon, the two authors meet again in New York for rewrites. Orson Welles' Broadway production is already in rehearsal. Differences over a single page of the script create an impasse between Green and Wright. A life-changing dialogue about who has the right to tell the story of race, politics and social class ensues. In spite of their common goal to affect social change, the scintillating revelations dissolve the friendship of the two influential social justice authors.

Native Son, The novel by Richard Wright, 1940 is a landmark work of literary naturalism. It follows the life of young Bigger Thomas, a poor Black man living on the South Side of Chicago. Bigger is faced with numerous awkward and frustrating situations when he begins working for a rich white family as their chauffeur. After he unintentionally kills a member of the family, he flees but is eventually caught, tried and sentenced to death. The book has been challenged or removed in at least eight different states because of objections to "violent and sexually graphic" content. In 1996 *Native Son* was challenged as part of the reading list for Advanced Placement English classes at Northwest High School in High Point, N.C.

Discussion: Which ending of the play *Native Son* would make audiences commit to taking personal responsibility for the way they solve deeply rooted problems of social injustice?

Vocabulary

Appropriation
Broadway theater
Bigotry
Capitalism
Collaboration
Communism
Determinism
Dynamo Electric Chair
Free Will
Humanism
In The Bosom of Abraham
Jim Crow
Lynching
Playwright
Prodigy
Pulitzer Prize
Revolutionary
The Lost Colony
Topiary
Treason
World War II
Uncle Tom
Uncle Tom's Children



PAUL GREEN

Paul Eliot Green (March 17, 1894 – May 4, 1981) was an American [playwright](#) best known for his depictions of life in North Carolina during the first decades of the twentieth century. He received the [Pulitzer Prize for Drama](#) for his 1927 play, *In Abraham's Bosom*. The first of his outdoor symphonic dramas, *The Lost Colony* (1937) is still played during the summer in an outdoor theater at [Fort Raleigh National Historic Site](#) near [Manteo, North Carolina](#). *The Lost Colony* is the oldest outdoor historical drama in the United States.



RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright (September 4, 1908 – November 28, 1960) was an American author of controversial novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction. His literature concerns racial themes, especially related to the plight of African Americans who suffered discrimination and violence in the South and the North. Literary critics believe his work helped change [race relations in the United States](#). His novel *Native Son* was published in 1940. After publication, *Native Son* was selected by the [Book of the Month Club](#) as its first book by an African-American author.



COLLABORATION

Playwright and professor Paul Green had a strong interest in black folk culture and improving race relations. The black novelist Richard Wright asked Green to collaborate on adapting his novel *Native Son* (1940) for the stage. In 1941, Green invited Wright to Chapel Hill for that purpose. They worked together at Green's home and in his office in Bynum Hall. Because of segregation laws, Wright could not stay in Chapel Hill hotels, so he boarded with a black family in Carrboro. When the play opened on Broadway, it was a critical and commercial success.

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**Native Son On Broadway**

Native Son is a 1941 [Broadway](#) drama written by [Paul Green](#) and [Richard Wright](#) based on Wright's novel [Native Son](#). It was produced by [Orson Welles](#) and [John Houseman](#) and directed by Welles. It ran for 114 performances from March 24, 1941 to June 28, 1941 at the [St. James Theatre](#). This is the last time Welles and Houseman, co-founders of the [Mercury Theatre](#), ever worked together.

Photos: <http://eileendarby.com>

1941 People & Places

Count Basie
Al Capone
John Houseman
Joe Louis
Glen Miller
Paul Robeson
Franklin D. Roosevelt
Bertrand Russell
Orson Welles
Hotel Edison
Mercury Theatre
St. James Theatre
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC
Carrboro, NC
Chicago, IL
Vichy France

“Negro”

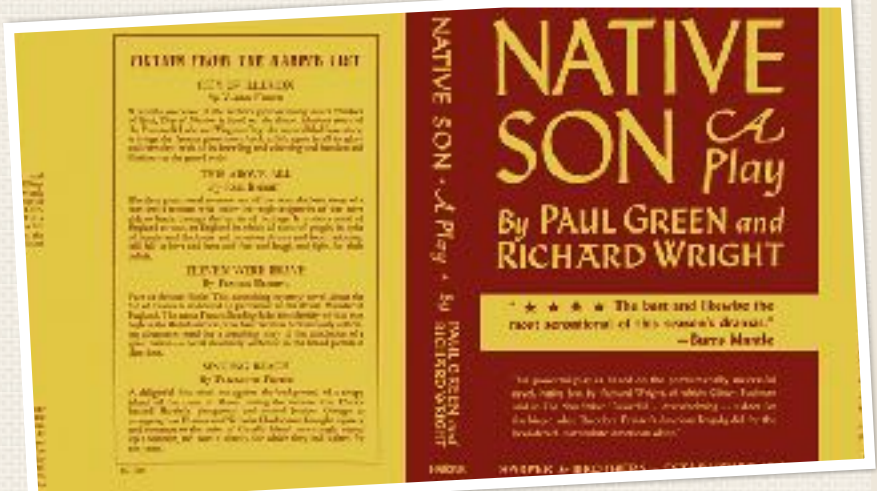
The word "Negro" was accepted as normal, until the late 1960s, after the later [Civil Rights Movement](#). One example is the identification by [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) of his own race as "Negro" in his famous "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech of 1963. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, some black American leaders, notably [Malcolm X](#), objected to the word *Negro* because they associated it with the long history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that treated African Americans as [second class citizens](#), or worse.^[9] The word *Negro* fell out of favor by the early 1970s.

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Canada Lee as
“Bigger Thomas” in
Native Son on
Broadway, 1941.

The Broadway
performance used
Richard Wright’s
preferred ending.



The published Version of *Native Son* contains Paul Green’s version of the ending.

