

**DUMB HEROES AND THE THEME OF HOPELESSNESS  
IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON AND J.M.  
COETZEE'S LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The creation of inspiring heroes has always appealed to readers and critics alike. The hero is the one we wait on, measure his life with ours and find a place for him in our hearts. Depending on his performance, we adjust his clime with ours. This is what makes literature delectable and a sign post for every generation. Literature has expectations and that is why we appreciate some, those that meet our expectations; and we reject others; those we find objectionable. Bigger Thomas in Native Son by Richard Wright and Michael K. by J.M Coetzee we find are characters who task our senses. In between, we are trapped between the creative ability of their makers and what we know of our world. Recent global events will make us even query some of their actions. But where does heroism begin and dumbness manifest? Society has something it looks up to in every individual no matter the milieu he is born into as he has certain expectations.*

**KEYWORDS:** Dumb Heroes, Hopelessness, J.M. Coetzee

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The creation of inspiring heroes has always appealed to readers and critics alike; but the mission of dumb heroes task even the credulity of critics. The hero towers above ordinary human configurations and his image prefigures that which we fear; just as his unjustifiable sufferings make us uncomfortable. We are prepared to go the extra mile with him as we navigate with the compass of realism in our senses over the challenges that confront him. As the hero is close to our hearts, so also is his condition in the story which makes greater meaning for us. The limitations of life notwithstanding- the inequality in social, cultural and political settings, we are still prepared to wait, to feel his life and to draw inspiration from what his life teaches. Both J.M Coetzee and Richard Wright have a lot to say of the other side of the hero but is the reader ready to wait in Native Son and the Life and Times of Michael K.? It is true the system is made of iron as Michael K. later gets to know, but there are still some good white people even when the carrot offered is to further their an end. In this case then, is the system really the one to blame when the hero is incapable of a sound judgment and is unable to access a genuine offer that can lift his life and condition? It is what this essay is out to examine and the extent to which we can hold a system accountable.

Bigger Thomas in Native Son and Michael K in Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K. are unique characters. Both heroes in the novels are characters pushed beyond the brink of poverty. As their lives are emblematic of the growing suffering of the oppressed class, they are natural heroes to attract our sympathy. If Richard Wright is the first twentieth century writer to deal decisively with the economic and moral problems of the Negro in the United States, J.M. Coetzee is his exact

opposite in South Africa. The morality of the question raised by both writers shows the height racism has reached in working against the psychology of the black man. Both writers address how oppression can castrate the morality of blacks and set them on the long road to perdition; as Bigger's mother tells him: "We couldn't have lived in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (*Native Son*, 13).

American system isolates the black American and charts a course for him to follow, usually a sad end. Since Bigger has a little education, a good job is beyond his reach; and gangsterism becomes a feature of his adolescent life. Richard Wright warns Bigger through his mother as he extends the same message to all black boys of his generation, "You 'll regret how you living some day"; she went on "if you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right you' ll end up where you never thought you would. You think I don't know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling boy. Just remember that" (13).

Bigger refuses this piece of advice just as he refuses that of Mrs. Dalton to further his education. The simple explanation is that while the American system oppresses him, his problem is further compounded by his dumbness, his inability to take a good course of action when he sees one. The result is that he rambles on, not acting better than a Robot and incapable of a sound judgment.

Killing Bessie is not the last option open to Bigger as her death does not make his case better. His inability to see his murder streak as getting compounded and his escape more difficult are good reasons why we should downgrade him from the status of a hero to the position of a villain. Even in a jungle, animals show some civility. By smashing the head of Bessie with a brick shows the level of Bigger's inhumanity, and the condition of his mind bares it all - "The monstrosity of the second murder exhilarates Bigger all the more" (77). The act itself shows he is no longer reasoning.

When Bigger comes to take the Dalton's job, his replies to the blind Mrs. Dalton show he does not know what he really wants out of life:

"How far did you say you went in school, Bigger?"

"To the eight grade, mam"

"Did you ever think of going back?"

"Well, I gotta work now, mam"

"Suppose you had the chance to go back?"

"Well, I don't know, mam"

"The last man who worked here went to night school and got education"

"Yessu m"

"What would you want to be if you had education?"

"I don't know, mam"

"Did you ever think about it?"

"No m"

"You would rather work?" (53)

The Daltons mean well, but they represent the oppressive class that Bigger and the black people of his generation suspect. Although they support black causes and do things that can elevate the status of blacks, they have no radical plans to break the shackles of oppression that everywhere cage blacks. Rejecting the offer, is it the best way to solve his problem?

Bigger's stupidity lies deep in his inability to see a strong network between security forces and the system he has offended. He does not see beyond the present or a possible capture in the future after those brutal murders he has committed. Bigger's inability to strike a balance between his limitations and the gargantuan forces around him is the principal cause of his anti-hero actions. A hero who is on the wrong side of the law through brutish actions loses all appeals of good conscience. The hero is what he is because he fights a good cause. If he is caught up with the law, it is because he is doing a good job. But Bigger in this case is a villain. Although he is fighting an oppressive system, he is not doing it in a way that will appeal to our conscience. His actions instead provoke our hatred. His monologue offends our conscience:

*All one had to do was be bold, do something nobody thought of. The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it. Now, who on earth would think that he, a black timid negro boy, would murder and burn a rich white girl and would sit and wait for his breakfast like this? Elation filled him. (102).*

Bigger's unwitting acceptance of guilt is outrageous because the entire murder scene is nothing but an accident. By gloating over the deed instead of seeking a way out is at the heart of his weakness as a person. By following this accident with another willful murder gives him out as an anti-hero. By not feeling sorry for Mary Dalton and for feeling that he has achieved a great deed through the murder, Bigger Thomas without knowing it has taken a plunge for the worst.

In the same way, one of J.M. Coetzee's sterling qualities as a writer is that he creates characters that are truly products of their age. Exceptions might be made in the case of Life and Times of Michael K. Coetzee's attempt at the beginning of the novel is to cast K. in the mould of the anti-hero. Without exceptional skills, physical and intellectual capacity, he attracts little of our admiration. The author sets him out not as a shining figure but a pitiable character whose existence no one will envy. His poverty and that of his mother make them unenviable blacks in apartheid narrative. He is born with disfigurement and his witless spirit makes his mother to withdraw him from school. He is committed to the protection of Huis Norenius in Faure at the expense of the state where other mentally retarded children are kept to learn "elements of reading, writing, counting, sweeping, scrubbing, bed making, dishwashing, basket weaving, woodwork and digging" (4).

With his mental state, K. is clearly unemployable but he is fortunate to get a job at the age of fifteen with Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as gardener, grade 3 (b). He leaves this job and spends another three years lying on his bed and looking at his hands. After a long period of unemployment, he gets a job as a public lavatory attendant on Green market square. Unconscious of the dangers around him, he is beaten black and

blue one Friday night while returning from work and all he has dispossessed off him. He foolishly quits this job instead of relocating to a more convenient neighbourhood to secure a job he has steadily risen to as gardener grade 1. Without female friends because of his face, K. maintains a solitary life which compounds his problems. His only outing is when he goes to see his mother.

K. has no mind of his own and believes he has been brought into the world to look after his mother and do her bidding. The creation of K. has been seen as emblematic of Coetzee's recourse to the allegorical by fashioning weird stories of South Africa under apartheid. B. Parry says it is "powerful moral critique under apartheid" (19). Coetzee's opposition to the apartheid policy is not in doubt, but he appears riding on this crest to a stage where he makes his hero lose all appeal. Events and the dice happen so fast that we realise that K. is unable to handle them. When the reader sees the artist as unfair to his creatures, we begin to doubt his sincerity and sense of purpose. It is perhaps for this reason that D. Donoghue posits that, "there is a certain fictional haze between the events and their local reference" (37).

Everybody appears to be against Michael K., including the air and plants around him. His mother's illness, refusal of wheelchair by hospital attendants for him to assist her, the permit that does not come and the violence against K., his mother and the desolated landscape vacated by whites all combine to oppress him. While waiting for the permit, K. wanders aimlessly until he takes his destiny in his own hands. Hungry and distraught, K. shows his mother a "picture of a gleaming flank of roast pork garnished with cherries and pineapple rings and set off with a bowl of raspberries and cream and a gooseberry tart".

'People don't eat like that anymore,' his mother said. He disagreed. 'The pigs don't know there is a war on', he said. 'The pineapples don't know there is a war on. Food keeps growing. Someone has to eat it' (6)

Dumb heroism is everywhere abundant in the life of Michael K. Although Coetzee does not place a tag on his race, we feel he is portraying K. as a black South African youth under apartheid. If Coetzee denies this charge, he will at least agree that K. is a representative of the oppressed class. Barnett argues that,

*Compared both to standard figures of black resistance in South African literature, and to the heroes in the work of Kafka, with whom Coetzee is routinely related in literary reviews, Michael K. is thought to be simply not heroic enough. The charge that Coetzee fails to adequately represent black South African political struggle is most forcefully articulated in Gordimer's review of the novel. For her, Coetzee's novel represents a retreat from a commitment to political solutions and is marked by a refusal to see an active black presence in South African society. (295)*

In some instances, Michael K. shows signs of assertiveness. Compelled to work in a labour camp, K. challenges those who brought him there, "Why have I got to work here?", K. said. His head scam; the words seemed to echo from faraway"

The overseer shrugged. "Just do what you are told", he said. He raised his stick and prodded K. in the chest. K. picked up his shovel (42). Similarly, he declines the lordship of one of the grandsons

of the Visagies. When he sends him to Prince Albert to buy something, K. bolts with the money. To the white boy, the Visagies grandson, he refuses to be his hunter and cook — “You wouldn’t get yourself dirty, not even your little finger” (63). K. abandons the four dead birds he killed for him to dress up if he wants to eat it. The Visagies grandson is infuriated by K.’s arrogance:

“What the hell does that mean?” said the Visagie grandson.

“What the fuck do you mean? If you want to say something, say it. Put those things down, I ‘ll take care of them.” So K. laid the four birds down on the step at the front door and departed. (63)

Pocketing his money and refusing to serve him are ways of getting back at him and rejecting white supremacy.

Coetzee seizes any opportunity to emphasize K.’s lack of direction and sense of purpose. Short of saying that K. is stupid, Coetzee in almost every page demonstrates his stupidity:

*He did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next, now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait. (67)*

K. strikes a relationship with Robert at the camp, but like all others, it shows how mentally retarded he is. He gave half his wages to Robert and carried the other half about in his pocket. There was nothing he wanted to buy; he never went to town. Robert still looked after him in various ways but spared him his speeches about the camp. (84) Robert’s patronizing statement is “I have never seen anyone as asleep as you”. (84)

With the barricades, labour camps, beatings and the deployment of security forces, K. seems not to see that the forces around him can effectively contain him. He does not still see why his liberty is being curtailed, ‘So can you open the gate?’ K. said. ‘The only way to leave is with the work party’, said the guard.

‘And if I climb the fence? What will you do if I climb the fence?’

‘You climb the fence and I’ll shoot you. I swear to God I won’t think twice, so don’t try’. (85).

Robert is kind enough to tell K. what he thinks of him and how the whites see him. K. is not better than a child:

‘You are a baby’, said Robert. ‘You have been asleep all your life. It’s time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your eyes aren’t opened, you don’t see the truth around you. (89).

An intelligent man does not need more to rouse him to reality but this does not mean anything to Michael K.

K. ‘s greatest weakness is not only his refusal to grow up but his inability to live up to his responsibility as a man. Uninspiring jobs are his preference. If it is possible for him to eat without any physical exertion he will gladly accept it. Only fencing thrills him. He loves wires and all the drudgery attached to it at the labour camp. The farmer sees this aspect of him and so patronizingly

takes Michael K. aside saying: 'You have a feel for wire', he said. 'You should go into fencing. There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what. If you carry stock, you need fence; it's as simple as that' (95).

Seeing his low intelligence quotient, the white farmer feels it will be a great service recommending him as a fencer. He does not believe he is qualified to be a lawyer, doctor or an engineer. Even K. does not feel he has both the education and the capacity to tower above the status of a fencer in South Africa.

In order not to confront his adversary or apply himself to meaningful living, K. escapes from camps, eats insects and roots. He eats beetle- grubs, grasshoppers, lizards and drinks dew. This level of meaninglessness appeals to him and he is conscious that his life has no value: "*There were my father, and my mother is buried and not yet risen. That is why it is a good thing that I, who have nothing to press on, should be spending my time here where I am out of the way.*" (105).

Surely, this kind of meaningless existence is not what Coetzee is recommending for South African youths. If his charge is that the South African apartheid creates the scenario, how far has K. worked to redeem himself? The truth is that Michael K. lacks both the will power and the mental capacity to live a meaningful life. 'I live in the veld, I live nowhere' (120) K. replies when he is found. As a vagrant, he has no philosophy and no code of conduct. He is a representative of the lost South African youths who have lost faith both in themselves and their country.

K. escapes from Jakkalsrif where he is captured by captain Oosthuizen. He calls K. Michaels and tries to link him with the terrorist organizations operating underground in South Africa. He is incapable of separating a simpleton like Michael K. and a hard core militant. At several times, K. does not provide any meaningful explanation for his lifestyle but the security agents are insistent: 'Ask him again', said the officer turning away. 'Keep asking him. Ask him when his friends are coming. Ask him when they were last here. See if he got a tongue. See if he is such an idiot as he looks'. (122)

K.'s looks and his answers portray a dumb character obviously. The doctor is also in agreement with this assessment as he tells Noel: 'This Michaels is an idiot. This Michaels doesn't know how to strike a match. If this Michaels was running a flourishing garden, why was he starving to death?' (131). Noel thinks K. is an arsonist and an escapee from a labour camp who runs a flourishing garden to feed a guerilla population.

K.'s case is not ordinary. The world over, music is known to be therapeutic, but not in the case of K. 'The music made me restless', he said. 'I used to, fidget, I couldn't think my own thoughts'. (133) On interrogation about the thoughts he wants to think, K. says: 'I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch out my arms and think I was flying over the fences and between the houses. I flew low over people's heads, but they couldn't see me. When they switch on the music, I became too restless to do it, to fly'. (133)

Just as Bigger Thomas suspects Boris Max, the white lawyer defending him, so K. suspects the doctor who has been trying to explain his position. In a sense, the dumb — hero cannot distinguish

between a friend and a foe because he lacks the intellectual capacity to make an analytical judgment. The doctor sums up K.'s existence thus: 'No papers, no money, no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy'. (142).

K. on his part wonders why the doctor has taken so much interest and liking of him. The doctor replies thus: '*---Do you want your freedom? If we turn you loose, if we put you out on the street in your condition, you would be dead within twenty four hours. You can't take care of yourself, you don't know how. Felicity and I are the only people in the world who care enough to help you. Not because you are special but because it is our job. Why can't you co-operate?*' (145)

In a post — Apartheid reminiscence, Coetzee romanticizes with the dumb nature of Michael K. At the beach with some friends, K. experiences love and care for the first time in an abolished racist South Africa. Coetzee urges K. and all blacks to look forward and to ask without fear, 'it is difficult to be kind', he said 'to a person who wants nothing. You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it. That is my advice to you, my thin friend'. He gave K. a pat on the shoulder'. (179)

In conclusion, both Wright and Coetzee have explored deep sociological and psychological traits to bring Bigger Thomas and Michael K. to light. Although their character traits loom large, we are left with images of personalities who could have done better in life. If the intention of the two writers is to create weak heroes, what kinds of inspiration are we expected to draw from them, if they are in their dialogues and behaviours lesser than us? One of the glories of literature is that it is a source of inspiration. Bigger Thomas and Michael K. are sources of pity and typify dumb heroes. If on the other hand they are exercises to deconstruct great human virtues, both novels are master pieces.

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