

An Analysis of Existentialism in Richard Wright's Novel the Outsider

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ABSTRACT

Why were some people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be'? (Wright 24). This question posed by protagonist Cross Damon in Richard Wright's novel *The Outsider* (1953). It illustrates his alienated position from society and his feeling that he has lost his control of his life; this is a representation of the segregated position of the African American.

Key words:

Existentialism, African American Community, segregation, White dominance, racism, inferiority complex

Perspective of existentialism

Wright's move to France enabled him to obtain a distanced perspective of the African American experience and get in touch with the philosopher Sartre. After a successful literary life in the United States, Wright, an African American author, pursued his writing career in France among French existentialists from 1946 onwards. Wright has continued his literary career in France where existentialism dominated intellectuals and the public sphere (Baert 640). Under this circumstances Wright wrote *The Outsider*, which will serve as the primary source for this paper, this novel depicting the daily struggle caused by apartheid and offering the solution provided by existentialism. The position of Cross in *The Outsider* is the position of an outsider in an irrational universe: he is considered a stranger by the African American community as well as the American white culture. Cross represents the individual's attempt to find meaning in an

irrational world (Bailly 1). The reason I chose this novel is the fact that through the perspective of existentialism, Wright's view on the position of the segregated African American can be seen more clearly. Although Wright has never stated that *The Outsider* was intended as autobiographical, the novel shows striking resemblances between author and protagonist: both deemed a radical move necessary in their life, were closely connected to Marxism and communism, and deemed elements of the philosophical school of existentialism a solution for the segregated African American.

Influence of existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical school of thought that stemmed late in the nineteenth century and reached its pinnacle after World War II, under the influence of Sartre who stated that no individual can disclaim their responsibility towards others, which was the case during World War II (Baert 639). The significant influence of existentialism was not only limited to philosophy, but extended to several creative disciplines, like the literary arts (Wolf). Existentialism opposes any situation in which people, organizations, etc., impose ethics and morality on others, restricting their individual freedom and it stresses the importance of the human being as a unique individual (Macquarrie 67). The essence of existentialism lies in an understanding of the human subject, as living in an incomprehensible world that lacks any purpose. The individual subject becomes the centre of his world, allowing him to determine his laws and, consequently, enabling him to opt for living without constraints.

Analyzing *The Outsider* from an existentialist perspective will provide the reader with Wright's solution to the segregated position of the African American community. The situation Wright opposed in his works is the imposition of constraints on the African American community by the distant, dominant white culture. The existentialist elements of dread, alienation, and freedom of choice (which will be explained and analyzed in more detail later on) return clearly in the character of Damon, the protagonist of Wright's novel, whose personality develops throughout the plot as a result of fundamental changes in his life that are closely related to, and can be seen more clearly through, the philosophy of existentialism.

Damon's existential difficulties have become an internal conflict. He disavows his ethnic background and takes full responsibilities for his choices, such as the rejection of religion, the killing of four antagonists, and the sexual intercourse with a minor.

In *The Outsider*, Wright uses the existentialist elements of dread, alienation, and freedom of choice to disclose a dynamic change of the protagonist's character. First, this paper will explore the existential field and relate this to Wright and the African American experience. Subsequently, the existentialist nature of Wright's *The Outsider* will be analyzed and related to the character development of the protagonist. The character development can be seen more clearly which is fruitful because it provides an exemplary case of how segregated minorities can change their perspective on their situation and change their perspective on themes of equality and freedom. The emphasis will be to what extent the character development shows existential elements.

Resistance to the white dominance

Wright's *The Outsider* provided the African American with an alternative perspective on their segregated position. Fabre states that Wright's personal deep understanding of the vicissitudinous existence of many African Americans brought him naturally close to 'people with concern about necessity, freedom and engagement' (39-40). Wright personally experienced segregation and racism in his childhood and later he would meet a lot of left-wing Communist writers who felt segregated and alienated from society as well. African Americans still experienced the burden of apartheid and colonialism during the inter bellum and World War II and the cry of fear, the call for resistance to the white dominance, and the desire for individual freedom showed striking similarities to the existentialist philosophy (Kersten 13). Wright's earlier works *Native Son* and *Black Boy* depict these emotions and desires, but with *The Outsider* he also provides the African-American community with the existentialist perspective on the human being and, consequently, a critical perspective on their position as a segregated minority.

Wright's childhood and upbringing were 'a bitter and fearful experience' (58). He was raised by his mother, as well as his uncle, due to the fact that his mother suffered from a stroke and the fact that his father left the family when Wright was six years old. Moreover, he started

attending high school late and his employers racially abused him. He experienced the racial segregation caused by the Jim Crow laws in Mississippi personally. According to Hoelscher, despite the fact that Mississippi had the fewest number of Jim Crow laws, it was ‘the most racially restrictive and oppressive state during the entire segregation period’ (659), which indicates to what extent racism was rooted in the customs of the white South. Wright was reluctant to describe this racial segregation as ‘The Negro problem’, but called it ‘a white problem’ instead, meaning that the white feeling of superiority was the problem rather than the African-American feeling of inferiority’ (Wright qtd in Hoelscher 662). Wright’s literary career started after his move to Chicago in 1927, where he worked in a post office. In Chicago he met members of the Marxist writers’ organisation John Reed Club and in 1933, Wright joined the Communist Party. As a result of his proactive attitude and participation in the Communist Party, he quickly developed a distinctive perspective on political and social matters (Graham 18). Wright left the Party because his ideas on individual action and self-responsibility diverged from the Communist emphasis on collectivity.

. As a writer, Wright was deeply convinced that all literature was protest and that all literature ‘should be an instrument of social progress’ (Moskowitz 61). His influence as a writer is summarized by McCall: ‘Wright is the father of the contemporary black writer because when we come to Wright’s best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America’ (McCall qtd. in Moskowitz 61). This central question concerns what it means to be an African American in a racist and segregated society. Wright always addressed the segregated African Americans as a group, without making any further distinctions. He moved to Paris in 1946 and established a friendship with French philosophers Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus, which resulted in Wright’s particular interest in their philosophy called existentialism (Graham 22). According to Graham, Wright regarded existentialism as a philosophy that could become a solution to the oppressed, in this case the segregated African American (22). Considering the fact that Wright moved to Paris at the height of the ‘enormous popularity of existentialist philosophy between 1944 and 1947’.

In this paper, the three main Sartre an existentialist elements alienation, anguish and the previously discussed freedom of choice, will be used as perspectives to analyze *The Outsider*, because these elements are emphasized by Sartre himself in his aforementioned lecture and keep

resonating in *The Outsider* as well (25). Firstly, a human being is able to alienate himself from religion, society, and people, when he has individual freedom of choice. Sartre mainly focuses on alienation or abandonment in the context of the absence of a God. He accuses some unspecified French intellectuals of suppressing God and simultaneously believing that the status quo of morality, ethics, and social values would remain.

Anguish, or despair, stems

According to Sartre, the existentialist 'finds it embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven' (Sartre 28). The ramification of this insight is that the human subject is free from any restrictions posed upon mankind by God. In the absence of a God, any action and type of conduct is allowed, but, similarly, behavior cannot be justified anymore; hence Sartre defines this situation as 'man is condemned to be free' (29). Secondly, anguish, or despair, stems from the responsibility and the consciousness that the taken decisions influence the entirety of mankind (Sartre 25). The responsibility someone bears inflicts or influences more than only the decision-taker. This does not prevent people from acting, but presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities' (27). Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of dread as 'a condition for action', rather than a state of paralysis (27), which returns in the first part of the novel, when Cross is subjected to his fear. In addition, the absence of a transcendent God is one of the essential reasons why freedom of choice plays a role in existentialism: 'You are free 'to invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do' (Sartre 33). With Sartre's view on existentialism explicated, it is now also important to analyze Wright and the context in which he wrote *The Outsider*.

Wright not only developed his perspective on existentialism through his contact with Sartre in France, but his personal experience with racial segregation in his early life played a major role as well. Coles argues that Wright was already acquainted with existentialism before his post-war move to Paris (53). Due to his personal experience of racial segregation, which was legalized by Jim Crow laws, he had developed several ideas and principles that could be classified as existentialist independently from the French philosophers. This experience became his intrinsic motivation for exploring existentialism thoroughly after having encountered it personally at its pinnacle in Europe for the first time. It is true Wright had already encountered Sartre and his

ideas in the United States before they met in Paris, but the French philosophers were definitely not the only ones to inspire Wright.

The development of existentialism was catalyzed by World War II, the tensions during its aftermath and the Cold War. Despite the fact that existentialism has always been related to philosophers like Kierkegaard and Sartre, the existential school was not an invention of individuals, but a way of thinking developed during and after World War II up to the time of the Cold War (Baert 620). It was a period marked by the racial segregation of Jews, Romani people, the segregation of homosexuals and people with disabilities, resulting in the desire for individual freedom irrespective of race or gender. The commencement of the Cold War has been one of two major external influences that were crucial to the writing process of *The Outsider* and should therefore not remain unmentioned. Wright's move freed him from the American right-wing press, enabling him to think without its constraints in a literary and philosophical sphere that was dominated by the Marxist and Communist thinkers he was interested in (Baert 635).

The Outsider was written at the pinnacle of McCarthyism in the United States, which marks a period of anti-communism: communists like Wright were under intense governmental scrutiny from which he was freed after moving to France. Wright's close relationship with Sartre was based on friendship as well as their shared political ideology of the non-Communist left. Wright fostered a close relationship with several French philosophers, including Camus and De Beauvoir, but he was especially close to Sartre (Fabre 42). Beside the literary interests, what bound them most was their left-wing political preference for the communist ideals of equality and the classless and stateless society. Beside this, Sartre and Wright were also anti-American in the sense that they both demanded unlimited independence for the African American, which can be seen as the predominant extrinsic motivation for growing intellectually towards each other (Fabre 44-45).

The Outsider is a novel in which the protagonist develops into an amoral, lawless, individual human being as a result of a deliberate choice to distance himself from society. The protagonist in *The Outsider*, Cross Damon, becomes gradually limited in his freedom by the efforts of his blackmailing ex-wife and pregnant underage girlfriend. He decides to take advantage when his identity is mistaken for death at a subway accident, giving him the opportunity to take up a new

identity (as Lionel Lane, a name he steals from a grave) and embark on a fruitless pursuit of truth. Since he thinks that the end, protecting his new identity, justifies the means, this leads to the killing of four people. He moves away from his miserable position in Chicago and discovers the Communist Party where he meets Eva Blount, the wife of party member Gil Blount who was forced by the party to marry her in order to profit from her intelligence. Cross eventually murders Gil in order to free Eva. Cross then meets district attorney Ely Houston who suspects him of murder. She is reluctant to judge him and believes that ignoring his actions is a harsher punishment. In the end, he is shot down by Communist Party members and, while dying, admits to Houston that the alienation was no solution: 'The search can't be done alone' (585).

Dread is an important theme because it designates the existentialist character of the novel as a whole, and it is the state Cross finds himself in before the accident and the decision to create a new identity. He dreads everything in his life, which evolves catastrophically, caused by the aforementioned attempts of his underage pregnant girlfriend, blackmailing ex-wife, and mother who curtail his freedom. The first clear example of dread found in *The Outsider* occurs when Cross heads for his mother's home, contemplating the religious way in which she raised him and especially her over-protection regarding sex and living a dissolute life, cautioning him that it would lead to his eternal perdition (22). It had given rise to his double-consciousness: a struggle for identity, where the character is divided between how others see them and the way they regard themselves, meanwhile struggling to merge these two perspectives. On the one hand Cross has a sensuality and hunger for sexual pleasure, but on the other hand he stills feels restricted by his mother (22). Despite her religious attempts to subjugate him, he realizes that his sensuality increasingly dominates him causing his desire and fearlessness to turn into dread (23).

After a heated discussion with ex-wife Gladys, Cross recapitulates his first encounter with Dot, his underage girlfriend of seventeen: he had erotic contact with her and he was able to relate to the state she found herself in: "she was trembling slightly and he knew that she was claimed by a stated he knew well: dread" (41). The dread found in *The Outsider* is closely related to Cross's alienated position from his routine, the world, and most of all, himself. For instance, after having decided to take advantage of his mistaken identity Cross reveals in a monologue his conviction that dread and alienation are strongly interrelated: 'The relationship of his

consciousness to the world had become subtly altered in a way that nagged him uneasily because he could not define it. His break with the routine of his days had disturbed the tone and pitch of reality 'And now he was seeing an alien and unjustifiable world completely different from him. As we can see, the disappearance of his routine causes anguish, and results in even more distance between him and the world. Even as a well-educated person, Cross is not able to account for his existential dread rationally, and the realization that his existence is set in an irrational universe overwhelms him (Widmer 15). His state of dread seems innocent at times, but it is not. For example, after his near-death experience, Cross regards committing suicide the only solution, had he lost the massive amount of money he was carrying with him during the train accident.

Prior to Cross's decision to alienate himself, his freedom is restricted by external factors such as his habits and his family: his mother, his ex-wife Gladys and his underage girlfriend. He becomes increasingly aware of the destructive force habits can have on his life. He feels trapped in the habits of his job as a postal clerk and his excessive alcohol consumption (4). He draws the conclusion that he has to break with his habits immediately (114). This feeling that he is not in charge of his life results finally in self-hatred (71). Cross is only able to escape through radical change, and he gradually becomes aware of the responsibility he has as a human being. A passage in which Cross's reacts to his wife Gladys attending a 'white party' together illustrates this: "It's up to us to make ourselves something", he argued. "A man creates himself." (65). Cross develops into a person who is conscious of his freedom to choose. The realization that becoming an outsider is the necessary solution to his problems is evident: 'he could only get out of this world or stay in it and bear it' (27). After having taken up his new identity, Cross permits himself any conduct. For instance, after Cross ruthlessly kills one Communist Party member because he was fighting another member, he decides to kill the second member as well, because 'his imperious feeling was not fulfilled' (303).

The existential idea of freedom of choice can also be related to the African American experience of racial segregation with respect to the imprisoned feeling without the view on a possibility for change in the near future. According to Coles, existentialism was in potential the school of philosophy that could be the solution to the oppressed (53). In addition, Wright regarded both existentialism and exile as means to the end of escaping the current miserable life

(Coles 52-53). Existentialism offered human beings the freedom to determine their own fate and create a meaningful life. Exile, or alienation, is one of the means to this end. Thirdly, the alienation of Cross in *The Outsider* is the origin of his problems, as well as the solution to his segregated position. Although we have seen that Cross regards himself as an outsider because he is restrained by his habits and his family, one could also argue that Cross is less alienated after his decision to adopt a new identity and alienate himself from his former life. Cross, under his alias name Lionel Lane, seems to move closer to people again, like Houston and Blount, than he could have done as the former Cross. However, we cannot draw the conclusion that this less alienated life is preferable, which follows from Cross's overview on his life: 'I wanted to be free 'To feel '. What living meant to me 'and what did you find'? Nothing' (585). The irony of alienation as an element of existentialism is the fact that alienation is problematic as well as a potential solution.

Despite the fact that Cross feels distanced from his environment, he finds the solution in the decision to move away from his friends and family, which is most evident in the scene where Cross isolates himself from the citizens of Chicago, afraid of being recognized after killing a former friend who debunked his alias (107 -108). Cross's growing alienation is highly significant to *The Outsider*, because it marks the existentialist character as a whole. Glicksberg argues that Cross's alienation is the key problem in *The Outsider*: 'He is 'introspective to the point of nihilistic alienation. If he kills 'it is not out of racial rage but out of his sense of isolation, his feeling that he is beyond human law. 'That is his tragedy!' (qtd. in Adell 394). Although Cross initially appears to thrive as a result of his isolated position (99), he gradually becomes conscious of his solitude and the consequences of his immoral behavior that follow (148).

Conclusion

The analysis of Wright's *The Outsider* by means of a Sartrean existentialist perspective undertaken here, has provided new insights into the significance of Cross's character change and the relationship between Wright's literary work and the racial segregation of African Americans. Further research should be carried out to establish to what extent Sartrean elements can be found

in Wright's later work, because in his later life he felt that Sartre and other existentialists disregarded new changes of the African American community and the African continent.

An inquiry into Wright's work from the perspective of Heidegger or Nietzsche's philosophical views would also be fruitful, because they emphasize the power of the individual as well, and also address the dangers and power of mass culture. This thesis has focused on Sartre's existentialism as explained in his speech *Existentialism is Humanism*; a more comprehensive analysis of Sartrean existentialism in relation to Wright's work could be fruitful. Sartre thought that man has responsibility towards anyone, and is not only limited to himself.

This idea resonates in the end of *The Outsider*, when Cross takes a retrospective look at his life, and says: 'I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others' (585). What could be taken up in further research is that Wright here acknowledges the need for individual freedom, and diverges from Sartre's view, calling for solidarity instead of solitude'.

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