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The Figure of the Outsider in Richard Wright's Major Works

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	7
I - The figure of the outsider.....	8
II - Philosophy: Existentialism.....	11
III - Sociology: Strain Theory and Labeling Theory.....	15
IV - Literature: Blake and Dostoevsky.....	17
CHAPTER 1 - <i>Native Son</i>	19
1.1 - Bigger Thomas outside his family.....	19
1.2 - Bigger Thomas outside his community.....	21
1.3 - Bigger Thomas outside the dominant community.....	24
1.4 - Bigger Thomas outside his own self.....	29
CHAPTER 2 – <i>Black Boy</i>	34
2.1 - Richard outside his family.....	34
2.2 - Richard outside his community.....	40
2.3 - Richard outside the dominant community.....	42
2.4 - Richard outside his own self.....	45
CHAPTER 3 - <i>The Outsider</i>	49
3.1 - Cross Damon outside his family.....	51
3.2 - Cross Damon outside his community.....	53
3.3 - Cross Damon outside the dominant community.....	55
3.4 - Cross Damon outside his own self.....	58
CHAPTER 4 - The Outsider Underground: Surrealism and Invisibility.....	65
4.1 - “The Man Who Lived Underground”.....	66
4.2 - Invisibility and its ramifications: <i>Invisible Man</i>	72
CONCLUSION.....	77
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79

ABSTRACT

The dissertation aims at describing the evolution of the figure of the outsider in Richard Wright's major works: *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945) and *The Outsider* (1953); the novella *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942) is also included. An outsider can be defined as a person who is not accepted as a member of a group and feels different from those people who are accepted as members. Bigger Thomas, Richard, Cross Damon and Fred Daniels experience estrangement from their social environment and find themselves outside three different social groups: their family, their community and the dominant (white) community; furthermore, they experience estrangement from their own self. The thesis investigates the nature of the estrangement and the rebellion of the outsider against a hostile social environment, considering also the profound impact which existentialism has on Wright's intellectual development. Racial identity plays an essential role, since it is the main cause of the dramatic existence which the outsider cannot tolerate. There is an existentialist connection between *Native Son*, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, *Black Boy* and *The Outsider*, even though Wright came in contact with French existentialist writers only before writing *The Outsider*. *Angst* and *despair*, negative feelings due to restriction of human freedom and loss of hope, persecute the outsider who fights for an *authentic existence* (based on an authentic understanding of the world). The dissertation also provides a brief analysis of the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952), essential in order to gain a better understanding of invisibility, a condition which corresponds to an *anonymous existence* based on stereotypes and triggers the outsider's rebellion.

The analysis exploits the technique of close reading, focusing on the most significant passages of each work. The main chapters are divided into four sections, pertaining to the outsider's estrangement from his family, his community, the dominant community and his own self. The novels, the autobiography and the novella are examined in order to underline and understand the teleological effort made by Bigger, Richard, Fred and Cross, who strive for the creation of new social networks in a racist environment, generating a world governed by their own rules. As a result, it has been possible to obtain substantial evidence of a series of recurring elements regarding the outsider's actions and reactions, such as the resort to

violence or the inability to tolerate and play with stereotypes. The analysis demonstrates the existence of a connection between the protagonists of the works mentioned.

The study shows that the figure of the outsider and its existential implications are not only pertinent to *The Outsider*, but evolve and develop with Bigger, Richard and Fred, who struggle to establish their identity and obtain freedom. The outsider is an exceptional individual with unique qualities and his tragic quest for an *authentic existence* in a racist environment plays an essential role in Wright's work.

ABSTRACT - versione italiana

La Figura dell' Outsider nelle Opere Principali di Richard Wright

La tesi descrive l'evoluzione della figura dell'outsider nelle opere principali di Richard Wright: *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945) e *The Outsider* (1953); viene anche inclusa la novella *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942). Un outsider può essere definito come una persona non accettata come membro di un gruppo, che si sente diversa dalle persone accettate come membri. Bigger Thomas, Richard, Cross Damon e Fred Daniels sperimentano un distacco dal loro ambiente sociale e si trovano al di fuori di tre diversi gruppi: la loro famiglia, la loro comunità e la comunità dominante (bianca); inoltre, sperimentano un distacco a livello della propria identità. La tesi investiga la natura di questo distacco e la ribellione dell'outsider verso un ambiente ostile, considerando anche il profondo impatto che l'esistenzialismo ha sullo sviluppo intellettuale di Wright. L'identità razziale riveste un ruolo importante, considerando che è la principale causa della drammatica esistenza che l'outsider non riesce a tollerare. È possibile notare una connessione esistenzialista tra *Native Son*, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, *Black Boy* e *The Outsider*, anche se Wright venne a contatto con gli scrittori esistenzialisti francesi soltanto prima di scrivere *The Outsider*. *Angoscia e paura*, sentimenti negativi dovuti alla restrizione di libertà e perdita di speranza, perseguitano l'outsider che combatte per un' *esistenza autentica* (basata su una reale comprensione del mondo). La dissertazione propone anche una breve analisi del prologo e dell'epilogo di *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952), essenziale per avere un'idea più precisa di che cosa sia

l'invisibilità, una condizione che corrisponde ad un'*esistenza anonima* basata su stereotipi e che scatena la ribellione dell'outsider.

L'analisi sfrutta la tecnica del close reading, concentrandosi sui passaggi più significativi di ogni testo. I capitoli principali sono suddivisi in quattro sezioni, relative al distacco che l'outsider sperimenta verso la sua famiglia, la sua comunità, la comunità dominante e la sua stessa identità. I romanzi, l'autobiografia e la novella sono esaminati con l'intento di sottolineare e capire lo sforzo teleologico compiuto da Bigger, Richard, Fred e Cross, che combattono per la creazione di nuove reti sociali in un contesto razzista, generando un mondo governato da nuove regole. Come risultato, è stato possibile ottenere una quantità sostanziale di dati relativi a una serie di temi ricorrenti che riguardano le azioni e le reazioni dell'outsider, come il ricorso alla violenza o l'impossibilità di tollerare e sfruttare gli stereotipi. L'analisi dimostra l'esistenza di una connessione tra i protagonisti delle opere menzionate.

Lo studio dimostra come la figura dell'outsider e le sue implicazioni esistenzialiste siano non soltanto pertinenti al romanzo *The Outsider*, ma si sviluppino con Bigger, Richard e Fred, che combattono per stabilire la loro identità e ottenere libertà di azione. L'outsider è un individuo eccezionale dotato di qualità uniche e la sua tragica ricerca di un'*esistenza autentica* in un contesto razzista riveste un ruolo importante nei lavori di Wright.

INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright was one of the most prominent African-American authors of the twentieth century, capable of addressing delicate racial issues during a difficult period. His extensive work includes: novels, such as *Native Son* and *The Outsider*; essays, such as *Introduction to Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945) and *White Man, Listen!* (1957); non-fiction works, such as *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941) and *Pagan Spain* (1957); and it also includes poems, recently collected in *Haiku: This Other World* (1998). Wright chose to leave the United States and moved permanently to France in 1946, where he met existentialist writers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. During his life as an expatriate he wrote one of his most controversial books: *The Outsider*, which elicited mixed response after its publication in 1953. The novel narrates the story of Cross Damon, an intellectual colored man haunted by negative existentialist feelings in a racist environment, who assumes another identity in pursuit of freedom. Scholars have been studying the novel and its existentialist implications, producing essays and articles such as: “Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and the Kierkegaardian Concept of Dread” (Adell, 1991), “Richard Wright's 'The Outsider': A Novel in Transition” (Coles, 1983), “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists” (Fabre, 1978), “Haunted by innocence: the Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright's 'Other Novel', *The Outsider*” (Kynch, 1996), “Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt” (Rubin, 1981), “Christian Existentialism in *The Outsider*” (Tate, 1993). Existentialism plays an essential role in Wright's “other novel”, a book accused of not paying enough attention to racial issues. On the contrary, the main reason why Damon becomes an outsider is the color of his skin: racial discrimination causes *angst*, *despair* and calls for desperate actions, in a world dominated by absurd stereotypes. Damon is *the* outsider, a man who lives on a separate dimension and attempts to create a new world for himself.

The dissertation argues that Damon is not the only outsider in Wright's work and studies *Native Son*, *Black Boy* and *The Man Who Lived Underground* alongside *The Outsider*, in order to highlight a connection between Bigger, Richard, Fred and Cross Damon. All of them are unique individuals who cannot tolerate invisibility, a life built on blind hope and

restriction of freedom; they choose rebellion in the attempt to achieve a more *authentic existence* and fight for their racial identity, fundamental in order to reassert their status as human beings. The analysis exploits the technique of close reading and provides a careful examination of the most significant passages which describe each outsider, underlining their differences and similarities. The thesis discusses the evolution of a complex figure, its philosophical implications and demonstrates a connection between the protagonists of Wright's major works.

The next sections of the introduction provide a philosophical, sociological and literary background to the analysis.

I - The figure of the outsider

An outsider can be defined as a person who is not accepted as a member of a group and feels different from those people who are accepted as members. Several questions arise from this definition, regarding: *acceptance, feeling different* and what has to be done in order to be part of a group. Bigger Thomas, Richard and Cross Damon experience estrangement from their social environment and find themselves outside three different social groups: their family, their community and the dominant (white) community. Furthermore, they experience estrangement from their own self. These four dimensions are explored in the chapters pertaining to *Native Son* (1940), *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942), *Black Boy* (1945) and *The Outsider* (1953). It is useful to reflect on the figure of the outsider from a broader perspective, in order to understand the mind of an individual who builds a new world outside the ones he cannot access.

The outsider's attitude toward society is peculiar and hostile: he does not accept a system which condemns him to uncertainty and humiliation. Given that premise, the arguments presented by Escobar in *Metamorfosi della Paura* (1997) can be exploited in order to speculate on the outsider's refusal of his social environment. Escobar discusses the nature of human society, and describes it as: “una ragnatela simbolica che, sovrapposta all'insignificante, lo trasforma in uno spazio securizzato” (90)¹. Even though Escobar's

¹ “A spiderweb of symbols that, superimposed on meaninglessness, transforms it into a secured space” [my

definition is debatable, it provides fascinating insights into the outsider's world: mankind, a faulty species incapable of living according to its instincts, has to build a series of artificial relationships to make sense of the chaos which governs the world. Society uses institutions, rituals and myths to placate the unavoidable insecurities of human nature:

Non potendo contare su comportamenti automatici e adeguati all'ambiente, cioè su risposte istintive agli stimoli dell'esperienza, l'uomo *creò se stesso* come animale culturale, ossia come animale che si fa guidare da programmi mediati simbolicamente: progetti e prescrizioni di cui è creatore e destinatario. [...] Senza cultura, gli uomini sarebbero inguaribili mostruosità, casi mentali disperati, in balia dei pericoli che li aggrediscono dall'esterno e anche dall'interno, in forma di paure, emozioni, suggestioni, rabbia: ombre vane, effimere creature senz'ali. (73)²

Without an artificial culture men would be incurable monstrosities, mental cases at the mercy of fears, emotions and rage. The dramatic psychological state described in the quote is a trigger, the outsider realizes he cannot belong to a group whose existence is based upon predetermined responses to the environment. Escobar uses “A Descent into the Maelström” by Poe (1841) as an example and compares a chaotic world not secured by an organized social environment to a deadly whirlpool, which frightens and destroys: human beings need a “spiderweb of symbols”, a structure of certainties in order to survive. The outsider is dangerous because he plunges into the Maelström and faces the true nature of the world, Bigger and Cross after killing other people experience a sense of freedom, almost joy, because for the first time they have the opportunity to choose and exist outside a closed social structure based on artificial institutions, rituals and myths. This is how Poe describes the seaman's feelings:

It may appear strange, but now, when we were in the very jaws of the gulf, I felt more composed than when we were only approaching it. Having made up my mind to hope no more, I got rid of a great deal of that terror which unmanned me at first. [...] After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a wish to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see. (113)

translation]

² “Not having the possibility to count on automatic and adequate responses to the environment, i.e. instinctive reactions to environmental stimuli, man created himself as a cultural animal, that is an animal guided by programs mediated symbolically: projects and regulations of whom he is creator and recipient. [...] Without culture, men would be incurable monstrosities, desperate mental cases, at the mercy of external and internal perils, in the form of fears, emotions, suggestions, rage: empty shadows, ephemeral creatures without wings” [my translation]

The seaman enjoys the whirl when he is *in the very jaw* and becomes *possessed*, just as Bigger and Cross are absorbed by a new dimension of their existence. It is important to notice how the seaman's *principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions*, just as Cross's principal grief is not being able to: “make a bridge from man to man” (*The Outsider*, 585). The reason why the outsider leaves the Maelström and attempts to create a new artificial system based on a personal spiderweb of symbols is that: “the search can't be done alone [...] never alone... alone a man is nothing... man is a promise he must never break” (*The Outsider*, 585). The outsider breaks the promise, plunges into the Maelström and comes out with a subtler conscience, a different perspective and a renewed sense of freedom. He has no other option, it is either the creation of a new existence or a life dominated by fear and despair, in an artificial world which does not accept him.

According to Escobar, society hates outsiders, because they prove the artificial nature of the spiderweb which rules social existence: “qualcuno davvero può scorgere la possibilità di sfuggire alla normatività dell'illusione biografica, la tentazione di sconfinare da ogni luogo comune, di scardinare ogni centralità, di spezzare ogni catena”³ (159). Outsiders become scapegoats, harmful individuals who must be eliminated in order to reestablish the precarious order acquired through years of teleological efforts. Death becomes a cathartic ritual, as it strengthens social bonds and eliminates dangerous characters: “la comunità, precipitata nel disordine dal contagio speculare dei desideri in conflitto, riversa e concentra l'odio e la violenza contro quel singolo rivale, uccidendolo collettivamente”⁴ (181).

The complex moral, physical and social condition of Wright's outsiders is explored in the main chapters, the introduction provides some philosophical and sociological theories which can ease the discussion. A section is also devoted to some of the most relevant literary works which influenced the author.

³ “Someone can really get a glimpse of the possibility to escape the biographical illusion, of the temptation to exceed any commonplace, to demolish any centrality, to break any chain” [my translation]

⁴ “The community, fallen into chaos because of the specular contamination of conflicting desires, pours and concentrates hate and violence on that single rival, killing him collectively” [my translation]

II - Philosophy: Existentialism

Wright's relationship with French existentialist writers developed after his first trip to France, in 1946. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gertrude Stein invited him to Paris, where he traveled to in May. In Paris he was welcomed by almost all the important literary societies and had the opportunity to meet, among the others, Simone de Beauvoir and André Gide. De Beauvoir visited Wright in New York the following year in the spring, before he decided to move permanently to Europe with his family. In 1948 he began to read more existentialist writers, including Heidegger and Kierkegaard. In Paris he met Jean Paul Sartre and appreciated Albert Camus's work. Wright was particularly impressed by Camus's *The Stranger* (1942) and began to work on an existentialist novel, eventually titled *The Outsider* (1953).

As Abbagnano and Fornero suggest in their text *Filosofi e Filosofie nella Storia* (1992), existentialism is a philosophical movement which has its roots in the 19th century and flourishes between the two World Wars, especially after World War II. It is more than a philosophy, it is a cultural milieu which holds that the individual and the experiences of the individual must be the starting point of philosophical thinking. According to existentialist theories moral and scientific thinking do not suffice to understand human existence. Existentialism concentrates on the constraining or negative elements of human life, it is characterized by a strong sensibility to human finitude and to its inherent stages, such as birth and death. Two existentialist concepts are fundamental in Wright's work: *angst* and *despair*. *Angst*, also called dread or anguish, is a negative feeling due to a restriction of human freedom or possibility; *despair* corresponds to loss of hope in reaction to a breakdown in one's self or identity. The first book of *The Outsider* opens with a quote by Kierkegaard on *dread*: *angst* and *despair* haunt Cross Damon not only as a consequence of human finitude or restriction of human freedom, but also because of racial discrimination. Racism impacts Cross's existential condition in a powerful fashion, generating more complex personal and sociological issues. Coles, in his essay "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: A Novel in Transition" (1983), argues that:

Modern existentialism was the likely philosophy that could be developed into an ideology for the oppressed. It was also a philosophy rooted in the problems of modern humankind which were, after all - though somewhat intensified - of most Afro-Americans. [...] So, existentialism, at least various elements of it, was the perfect philosophy for explaining the Afro-American's modern racial condition. (55)

The key word in the passage is *intensified*. While it is true that existentialism could be developed into an ideology for the oppressed, is also true that the Afro-American's modern racial condition goes beyond a literary experiment. *The Outsider* is not merely the result of Wright's infatuation with a philosophical movement, and existentialism does not explain the Afro-American racial condition: it is the Afro-American modern racial condition which expands the application of existentialist principles. In order to gain a better understanding of this subtle difference it is useful to mention the main existentialist writers read by Wright.

Heidegger was a German philosopher who conducted extensive research on the question of being. In his best known book, *Being and Time* (1927), he argues that existence is always an individual experience, defined by a set of possibilities which forces man to choose. The world can be interpreted either according to personal feelings and reflections or according to other people's sets of rules: in the first case the result is an authentic understanding of the world, in the second case it is an *anonymous existence*, characterized by a fictitious and conventional way of being. *Anonymous existence* causes the fall of man to the level of earthly elements, it is not an original sin or an accident which can be corrected, it is an essential part of being human; such a condition causes a series of emotional breakdowns, which often lead to angst and despair. On the contrary, *authentic existence*, according to Heidegger, understands and accepts the essential nonentity of man's existence. The understanding of the radical impossibility of existence allows man to embrace existence as it is, without fighting its true nature. Heidegger, deepening the observations made by Kierkegaard in the 19th century, states that choice is not only a manifestation of man's personality but also a fundamental part of the formation of man's conscience. In other words: man is not what he is but what he chooses to be (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992). In *The Outsider* Cross does not have the possibility to choose, at the beginning of the book he is trapped, forced to live an *anonymous existence* regulated by other people's rules; he tries to create a new life for himself in order to obtain an *authentic existence*.

Sartre, a French philosopher, playwright, novelist, screenwriter and literary critic, in his works posits that human life is paradoxical, because man is not free to be free. Man can choose how to shape his existence, but he cannot *choose* his existence, the fact that he is thrown into the world. Even though mankind has tried to solve the problem with metaphysical theories and religions, the awareness of this condition is inside every man as an undeclared but unequivocal truth. In one of his most famous books, *La Nausée* (1938) Sartre writes:

Exister, c'est être là, simplement; les existants apparaissent, se laissent rencontrer, mais on ne peut jamais les déduire. Il y a des gens, je crois, qui ont compris ça. Seulement ils ont essayé de surmonter cette contingence en inventant un être nécessaire et cause de soi. Or aucun être nécessaire ne peut expliquer l'existence: la contingence n'est pas un faux-semblant, une apparence qu'on peut dissiper; c'est l'absolu, par conséquent la gratuité parfaite. Tout est gratuit, ce jardin, cette ville et moi-même. Quand il arrive qu'on s'en rende compte, ça vous tourne le coeur et tout se met à flotter.⁵ (84)

Contingency is not apparent or something which can be avoided, when the real essence of man's existence is fully absorbed nothing makes sense anymore. The reasons for man's existence have been invented after man appeared on earth, and man's efforts are therefore useless (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992). Powerlessness plays an important role in *The Outsider*: one of the reasons why Cross flees and kills, deceives and lies, is that he feels the need to overcome the impossibility of being free.

Camus, a French author, journalist and philosopher, is often associated with existentialism even though he rejected such a label, opposing the philosophy of nihilism (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992). While existential nihilism argues that life is without objective meaning or purpose, Camus highlights the importance of rebellion in his essay *The Rebel* (1951) and believes in the possibility of an ultimate purpose. Rubin, in "Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt" (1981), claims that in *The Stranger* Mersault experiences existential estrangement from his life, is incapable of grieving for his mother's death and does not show compassion; he kills a man, is sentenced to death and refuses to turn to God before his execution. There are many similarities between *The Stranger* and *The Outsider*, where

⁵ "To exist simply means being there; existing creatures appear, meet, but it's not possible to interpret them. There are people, I believe, who understood this. Only they have tried to overcome contingency by inventing a creature that is necessary and cause of its own self. No necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a fake, an apparition that can be dispersed; it is the absolute, and as a consequence perfect gratuity. Everything is gratuitous, this garden, this city and myself. When we understand it, our heart melts and floats" [my translation]

Cross lives outside all social groups, kills and seems free of remorse. Nonetheless, the two novels differ in their conclusion and ultimate message: while *The Stranger* refuses any kind of nihilistic auto-commiseration, *The Outsider* focuses on a dramatic and inevitable hopelessness.

Wright exploits many of the theories and concepts advanced by his existentialist colleagues, such as: the need to choose in order to create one's self, angst and despair, powerlessness, the absurdity of life; however, the racial component in *The Outsider* deepens and broadens his existentialist philosophy. Cross Damon is outside two societies at the same time and experiences a more complex kind of estrangement, as Coles (1983) observes:

It is inconceivable to imagine a figure who is more alienated than Damon. Damon is racially outside (a black man living outside of a dominant white racist society), spiritually outside (an atheist living outside of Christianized-Western society), materially outside (a postal worker who is deeply in debt), and emotionally outside (involved in a marriage-family situation which he abhors). If this weren't enough, Damon is also outside of himself as well as the entire human community. (59)

Damon is *spiritually* and *racially* outside, his identity is lost. He rebels in order to fight a condition which condemns him to uncertainty, angst and despair. As Coles argues, Damon is alienated from the entire human community.

The Outsider is deeply influenced by existentialism and is technically the only existential novel written by Wright; however, many of the issues presented in *The Outsider* are also present in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. Miller, in his dissertation "The Struggle for Identity in the Major Works of Richard Wright" (1976), notes that: "the philosophical issues caused by the novel are an extension of the basic questions with which Wright had been grappling since *Native Son* (1940)". The impossibility to choose, alienation, invisibility, the need for an authentic existence, rebellion, the struggle to achieve freedom and all the other battles fought by Cross are also fought by Richard and Bigger. In other words, there is an "existentialist connection" between *Native Son*, *Black Boy* and *The Outsider*, even though Wright came in contact with French existentialist writers only before writing *The Outsider*.

III - Sociology: Strain theory and Labeling theory

Wright's work is not only relevant to literary or philosophical studies. As Cappetti (1993) points out: “a reciprocal interest between sociology and literature marked much of the writing of the 1930s” (255) and Wright was associated with the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, which studied human behavior as influenced by social and environmental factors. Sociology, the study of human society and its origin, deals with the figure of the outsider from various standpoints: it is possible to consider the outsider either as a man fighting against a group and its rules, or as a man pushed outside of a group. In other words, the outsider can be perceived either as a passive individual who is not suitable for peaceful cohabitation or as a dangerous person who tries to subvert a given order. The outsider's behavior deviates from general social assumptions, therefore it is studied as a deviance.

Merton in 1957 proposed the *strain theory*, analyzing the pressure exercised by societal institutions on individuals due to goals which cannot be achieved. According to Merton the outsider strives to be accepted, but it is impossible for him to fulfill the societal requirements. In Wright's novels *Bigger Thomas*, *Richard* and *Cross Damon* struggle with racial, social and economic inadequacies; as a consequence, they commit crimes and break rules. Merton identifies five ways of coping with the pressure: conformity, innovation, retreatism, ritualism, and rebellion. The main strategy adopted by outsiders is rebellion: rebels create new goals to overcome social pressure. Camus in his essay “The Rebel” (1951) writes: “la révolte métaphysique est le mouvement par lequel un homme se dresse contre sa condition et la création tout entière. Elle est métaphysique parce qu'elle conteste les fins de l'homme et de la création”⁶ (39). Rebellion links philosophy and sociology in a quest for freedom which generates outsiders, individuals who contest creation because of its unacceptable flaws. Rubin, in his article “Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt” (1981), identifies *Bigger Thomas* as the archetypal rebel and argues that:

⁶ “Metaphysical rebellion is the movement man develops to rebel against his condition and creation. It is metaphysical because it challenges man's goals and the goals of creation” [my translation]

Native Son is as much a study of an alienated and lonely individual struggling to understand his existence, as it is an examination of racial prejudice and its effects. Bigger is forced into an alien existence because of the irrational and unjust nature of the society in which he lives. [*Native Son*] Written in 1940, the novel gives an early indication of Wright's existential vision and the themes that were to preoccupy his thinking in the years to come. (16)

Rubin mentions Wright's existential vision, specifying that it developed independently, influenced by American society and its inconsistencies. Rebellion is triggered by *alienation*, the estrangement or distancing of people from each other. Alienation can be associated with other sociological conditions: *powerlessness*, the perception that the individual does not have the means to achieve his goals; *meaninglessness*, a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about the future outcomes of behavior can be made; *normlessness*, a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals (Seeman, 1959). *Social isolation* and *self-estrangement* can be added to the list, respectively the feeling of being segregated from one's community and the psychological state of denying one's own interests, according to Kalekin-Fishman (1996). In Wright's major novels *Bigger*, *Richard* and *Cross* experience in different ways these sociological disorders, because of their precarious status as outsiders.

During the 1960s Tannenbaum and Becker developed the *labeling theory*, which focuses on minorities and how they react when society labels them (Macionis, 2011). According to Tannenbaum and Becker, labeling individuals as deviants cause them to identify themselves with the label and internalize it; as a consequence, the deviant displays a negative behavior, following the label. While this theory describes deviants as passive individuals destroyed by the pressure, Wright's outsiders do exactly the opposite thing: they refuse any kind of label, creating a new social environment which suits their needs. *Bigger*, *Richard* and *Cross* create new social networks, generating a world governed by their own rules; nonetheless, the act of creation is not arbitrary, it is necessary in order to escape the pressure exercised by society. They are anti-heroes, protagonists who lack heroic qualities and strive for freedom in unconventional ways.

IV - Literature: Blake and Dostoevsky

The complex figure of the outsider developed by Wright is indebted to several genres and authors, Fabre in *The World of Richard Wright* (1985) makes a list of the writers who influenced Wright the most. Elements coming from Gothic detective stories can be found in the most gruesome acts committed by Bigger or Cross, and Mencken's sharp satire might have inspired some of the speeches and reflections present in *Native Son*, *Black Boy* or *The Outsider*. In addition, movements such as Romanticism played an important role insisting on passion, the innermost human feelings and providing a model for the irreducible rebel. Wright often inserts quotes as an opening for the chapters of his novels, and as an introduction to *The Outsider* he chooses a quote by William Blake:

“Cruelty has a Human Heart,
And Jealousy a Human Face;
Terror the Human Form Divine,
And Secrecy the Human Dress.”

Blake is admired for his creativity and the mystical elements of his work. The stanza comes from the poem “A Divine Image”, from *Songs of Experience* (1794), a poetry collection which contrasts with *Songs of Innocence* (1789). While in *Songs of Innocence* Blake shows how the human spirit blossoms when allowed its free movement, in *Songs of Experience* he shows how the human spirit suffers after it is forced to conform to rules (Behrendt, 1992). The quote introduces one of the main topics of *The Outsider*: the weakness of human nature and its corruption. Blake mentions *cruelty*, *jealousy* and *terror*, feelings which haunt both Cross Damon and Bigger Thomas. Wright was inspired by other authors, such as: Poe, Henry James, Hemingway, Crane, Dos Passos, Stein, Conrad, Hardy. It would be impossible to mention all of them and their influence in this brief introduction, however, there is one Russian author who has to be mentioned: Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky was a Russian novelist and essayist and is considered one of the greatest psychologists in world literature. Fabre (1978) argues that Wright was more influenced by Dostoevsky than French existentialists, and it is possible to find a lot of similarities between *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Outsider*. Both Cross and Raskolnikov are college dropouts in their mid-twenties with widowed mothers, a rebellious temperament and

psychological issues. Lynch, in his article “Haunted by innocence: the Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright's 'Other Novel'” (1996), writes: “most of Wright's work, especially *The Outsider*, demonstrates Dostoevsky's influence in the idea that individuals have an irrepressible psychological and spiritual need for self-assertion, especially in oppressive circumstances - even if it results in the individual's harm or destruction” (261). The psychological need for self-assertion is explored in depth in *Crime and Punishment*, where the protagonist experiences mental anguish and moral dilemmas after the murder (Kenneth, 2004). Cross is apparently at ease with his murderous activities, but his conscience is altered by their consequences. Violence and its justification are essential issues discussed in both novels: Raskolnikov believes that some privileged individuals, with superior intellectual qualities, have the right to commit murder; in *The Outsider* Cross is always debating whether his actions are justified in the name of a superior class of human beings, forced to stand outside the world. Another dimension explored in both novels is dreaming: Cross's and Raskolnikov's dreams have a symbolic meaning, suggesting a double interpretation which reveals important insights.

Wright in 1942 wrote a novella titled *The Man Who Lived Underground*, which presents a series of similarities with *Notes from the Underground* by Dostoevsky (1864). The unnamed narrator and protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* and Fred Daniels, protagonist of Wright's novella, live on a separate dimension underground, experiencing physical and psychological estrangement from a societal environment which has crushed their spirits. *Notes from the Underground* is considered to be the first existentialist novel, and *The Man Who Lived Underground* becomes as a consequence an essential text in order to study Wright's outsider figure.

CHAPTER 1 - *Native Son*

Native Son, published in 1940, became an immediate best-seller and consecrated Wright as a successful author. The protagonist of the novel, a young colored man, accidentally commits murder and shakes the foundations of an unfair social system, based on inequality and racial discrimination. Bigger Thomas represents one of the most important outsider figures crafted by Wright, he struggles in order to recuperate his identity as a human being and is forced to live outside his world.

1.1 - Bigger Thomas outside his family

In “How Bigger Was Born” (1940) Wright mentions how difficult it was for him to come up with a suitable beginning for *Native Son*; he chooses a family scene, where the protagonist is a rat which is killed. In Bigger's apartment the filthy animal becomes a key element, and introduces a dramatic scenario where people coexist with decay. Wright allows: “the rat scene to disclose *only* Bigger, his family, their little room, and their relationship” (30). Family is the basic social group, Bigger lives with his mother, his sister and his brother but is not at ease, because he does not share their beliefs and goals. Bigger and his mother cannot communicate, she wants him to find a job and a position in a society which he refuses: “-Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you- she said bitterly. Bigger looked at her and turned away. -Maybe you oughtn't have. Maybe you ought to left me where I was” (38). Bigger cannot stand to look at his mother, he *turns away* from her and what she represents, her advice and convictions. He questions his birth and wonders whether she should not have spared him a painful existence, his words are marked by a strong sense of powerlessness and he has no hope left, from the very beginning of the novel. Bigger turns away because he is ashamed:

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 help 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. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain (40).

Bigger shuts their voices out of his mind, he does not want to feel the *shame* and *misery* of their lives and fights back *fear* and *despair*. The existentialist concepts mentioned in the introduction, angst and despair, persecute Bigger, who tries to escape a restriction of human freedom and possibility (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992). While Bigger's mother wants him to find a place in the world assuming restriction of human freedom is inevitable, he refuses this assumption and lives behind a *wall*, a curtain. A wall separates Bigger from his family, he is outside, in a world where he does not allow himself to feel in order not to be *swept out* of himself. Bigger experiences estrangement from his own self, even though he tries not to acknowledge it.

The protagonist works for Mr. Dalton because of his mother's insistence: “-You going to take the job, ain't you, Bigger?- his mother asked” (41). Ironically, the job which could have brought him closer to his family is the one which severs all connections. Bigger goes back home only once, after murdering Mary Dalton, and understands that he does not belong to his family any longer:

He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him. Yes; he could sit here calmly and eat and not be concerned about what his family thought or did. He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not. He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of even thinking that he had done such a deed. (135)

The scene is completely different from the one described at the beginning of the novel: the murder has changed Bigger, who is not concerned and can sit calmly. He no longer hates his family, because he has done something which clearly states a *difference* between him and them. At the beginning of the novel he has to shut their voices out of his mind, now the issue has resolved and *fear* and *despair* have disappeared. Bigger is not only spiritually but also physically and mentally outside of his family: *his crime was an anchor* weighing him safely. While his family members are incapable of even thinking that he had done *such a deed*,

Bigger actually creates a new life for himself. The scene is utterly dramatic, Bigger has to kill in order to live, a paradox which demonstrates how his existence actually corresponds to a non-existence: he has no control over his life, everything is out of reach and he welcomes any act, even the most despicable, because it means having something which is *all his own*, for the first time in his life. Destruction means creation in Bigger's world.

While Bigger embraces the true nature of his life, his family: “wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above the others; and they were blind to what did not fit” (136). According to the existentialist theories discussed in the introduction, Bigger's family is imprisoned in an *anonymous existence*, characterized by a fictitious and conventional way of being. The result is *blindness*, faithful observance of a preconceived order which does not correspond to reality. Hope is futile, frustrating and unjustified because their life is not worth living; Bigger acts like Nietzsche's Übermensch, he accepts the true nature of his existence and the chaos which governs the world, killing and creating a new life for himself (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992). When Bigger compares his brother and his sister to Jan and Mary, two successful individuals belonging to the dominant community, he feels ashamed of them. Buddy: “went round and round in a groove and did not see things. [...] Looking at Buddy and thinking of Jan and Mr Dalton, he saw in Buddy a certain stillness, an isolation, meaninglessness” (138). His brother is still, meaningless and is not going anywhere, because his life has no purpose. Vera is in a worse condition: “How different Vera was from Mary! [...] she seemed to be shrinking from life in every gesture she made”. The focus is on her shrinking *from* life, she is not living. Buddy and Vera are lost, blind to what does not fit and Bigger rebels in order not to end up like them.

The wall which separates Bigger from his family confirms his status as an outsider, he exploits his position and gains a different perspective, creating a new life for himself, away from blind hope and resignation.

1.2 - Bigger Thomas outside his community

Bigger's relationship with his community is similar to the one he has with his family: he

is disappointed in a social group characterized by meaninglessness and blindness, when compared to the white status quo. It is important to study the dynamics of this relationship and its social and philosophical implications, in order to understand the protagonist's rebellion.

At the beginning of the novel Bigger has an important discussion with his friend Gus, a young black man who shares age and background with him. They both complain about how colored people are treated, but Bigger's reaction is very different: “- Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships...- Gus hunched Bigger with his elbow and mumbled good-naturedly, -Aw, nigger, quit thinking about it. You'll go nuts” (50). *They* refers to white people, who confine colored people in *one corner of the city*. Bigger is restless, he wants to fly planes and run ships, he yearns for freedom and the opportunity to choose. Gus, on the contrary, does not want to think about it and tells Bigger to *quit thinking*, to avoid going crazy.

Bigger wants to change his condition, but he is scared; when he flirts with the possibility of going crazy, fear holds him back: “he hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery” (55). They plan to rob a white man but are afraid of interfering with who has the power, the unfair social system seems impossible to overcome. Even though Bigger is haunted by the non-existence inherent in his social environment, he is not ready to rebel until he kills and goes so far away from his friends and family that he cannot go back. “Fear”, as the title of the first book indicates, lays hold of Bigger's life in the first section of the book; however, after he murders Mary:

Gus and G.H. and Jack seemed far away to Bigger now, in another life, and all because he had been in Dalton's home for a few hours and killed a white girl. (134) [...] He waved at them and swung through the door. He walked over the snow, feeling giddy and elated. His mouth was open and his eyes shone. It was the first time he had ever been in their presence without feeling fearful. He was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves were hungry to see where it led. (142)

Bigger's friends play a delicate role, they remind Bigger of his old life and allow him to realize that he has gone far away: murder has changed his existence. Bigger feels *giddy* and *elated*, for the first time the presence of his friends does not mean feeling fearful. *Fear* and

angst, feelings associated with existential malaise (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992), disappear from the life of an outsider who is following a strange path into a strange land. The adjective *strange* questions Bigger's awareness, indicating that he is not completely aware of what he has done; he is *hungry* to see where the path goes, after experiencing a new sense of life and freedom, but he cannot foresee the tragic consequences which naturally arise from his actions. Nonetheless, the fear which was in him before the murder has gone away, he has finally stood up to the people who forced him to live in one corner of the city. He has *gone nuts*, he has decided to turn non-existence into existence.

George, in his article "The Horror of Bigger Thomas: The Perception of Form without Face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (1997), points out how the people in Bigger's life: "are no longer people but things: his mother someone to deceive and put off concerning his employment, his girlfriend Bessie someone to *use*" (497). Bigger lives behind a wall and uses his family and his friends, in order to forge a new life. Wright exploits Bessie to create a contrast between the average, working-class colored girl and Mary, a white girl belonging to a higher class. George (1997) claims that: "Bessie Mears is never really an individual to Bigger, but merely a means of sexual escape and a tool in extorting money from the Daltons, an object to use rather than a person to respect" (500). Bessie is *an object* to use, she comes from Bigger's neighborhood and lives in the same corner of the city. While Bigger simply does not care about Bessie, he hates Mary because she dares try to save him after having psychologically and sociologically killed him. Bessie: "only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her the liquor and she would give him herself" (169). Bessie longs for intoxication, she has given up; Bigger's family is blind to what does not fit, his friends do not want to fight and his girlfriend only cares for moments of drunkenness. Bigger uses her in order to *feel* something, because strong sensations are the only thing which can win over fear and desperation for a brief moment: liquor for sex is a bargain, an empty shell made of inevitable pain and avoidance of truth. Bigger feels hatred toward what Bessie *does*, not toward her as a person, her drunkenness is like her mother's religious obsession: "he hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion. He did not want to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep" (271). Bigger hates Bessie and his mother because, while they tolerate a shameful life and put hope in praying and

drinking, he wants to destroy any kind of hope and embrace the truth. Trust is not a part of Bigger's life to such an extent that murder, the most despicable action, becomes an act of creation.

Bigger embraces the absolute nonentity of colored people's existence:

There were rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him. He would dream of making a stand against that white force, but that dream would fade when he looked at the other black people near him. Even though black like them, he felt there was too much difference between him and them to allow for a common binding and a common life. Only when threatened with death could that happen; only in fear and shame, with their backs against a wall, could that happen. But never could they sink their differences in hope. (144)

Solidarity with other black people is relegated to rare moments and *dreams*. The white force is what brings Bigger and his people together, but the truth is: it is only a dream which will inevitably fade, the white force is too powerful and only when no other choice is available solidarity is an option. Bigger cannot even consider a common life because of a difference in *hope*, senseless longing for choice and freedom when there are no such things. The protagonist is forced to murder and rape in order to feel himself, his existence, his life and this is why he does not believe in his community. In prison a colored preacher tries to talk to Bigger, but his words of wisdom only make him more angry: “-I don't want you! - Bigger shouted. -Son!- The preacher admonished. -I don't want you! - - What's the matter son?- -Take your Jesus and go-” (368). Bigger clings to what he has done, the only freedom he experiences is linked to the murder, religion has never been capable to alleviate his sufferings: “Never again did he want to feel anything like hope. That was what was wrong” (369). Jesus and hope belong to a world which Bigger cannot access and he renounces them, in order to obtain an *authentic existence*.

1.3 - Bigger Thomas outside the dominant community

Bigger Thomas lives outside the white supremacy. It is important to analyze this obvious relationship, because the *white force* is what compels Bigger to live outside his community and family. Miller, in his essay “Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard

Wright's *Native Son* (1986), claims that Bigger's attempt to rebel and react against white people is what allows him to articulate his thoughts, using not only words but also gestures and attitudes to express his feelings. He argues that: "it should be clear that Bigger Thomas is far from the inarticulate character many critics claim him to be. Bigger is sullen, brooding, brusque, and sometimes violent in his attitude toward his family and immediate community, but he is definitely not inarticulate" (502). Wright in "How Bigger Was Born" (1940) clarifies that he: "restricted the novel to what Bigger saw and felt, to the limits of his feeling and thoughts [...] such a manner of rendering made for a sharper effect, a more pointed sense of the character, his peculiar type of being and consciousness" (28). Considering what Miller and Wright say, it is possible to understand that it is not only what Bigger says that allows him to articulate his thoughts, *feelings* and *attitude* contribute to the expression of his peculiar type of being and consciousness. As an example, it is useful to consider the unexpected bursts of laughter which characterize Bigger's and Gus's discussion of how white people treat colored people.

- I *could* fly a plane if I had a chance,- Bigger said.

- If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane,- Gus said.

For a moment Bigger contemplated all the "ifs" that Gus had mentioned. Then both boys broke into hard laughter, looking at each other, through squinted eyes. (46)

The two friends are discussing a dramatic topic: their lives and the barrier which prevents them from achieving something they would like to achieve. Normally such a thing would arise anger and violence, not laughter. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) Freud describes comparison as one of the processes which lead to laughter, and argues that comic is the result of a comparison between two different conditions. Bigger and Gus are making a comparison, they are comparing their opportunities to the opportunities which white men have. The situation is dramatically comical: they know they could fly, just as white men do, but they also know they are not allowed to. The white men mentioned do not consider the situation as comical, according to their standards Gus and Bigger are inferior: they could not fly a plane, even if they wanted to, and their lives are exactly how they should be. Gus and Bigger, on the contrary, feel that the color of their skin does not imply that they could not fly a plane and it is therefore absurd, from their point of view, that white men can

fly while they cannot. This is why they laugh: “-It is funny how the white folks treat us, ain't it?- -It better be funny- Gus said” (47). In the expression *it better be funny* the laughter is fully explained: in front of the absurdity of their condition and the natural anger which it breeds, the only thing that Gus and Bigger can do is laugh.

At the beginning of the novel Bigger is afraid and angry:

Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, 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... (50)

The passage describes a constant physical and psychological violence, Bigger feels his throat burning every time he thinks about his condition. The reason is simple and tragic: *we black and they white*. The verbs which complete this harsh truth are *to have got* and *to do*, they have things and they can do things. Whereas white people can make decisions and shape their life how they want, Bigger and Gus are imprisoned, their existence lacks the necessary premises. The possibility of choosing is out of reach, beyond the *fence*, and as a consequence Bigger has the impression of being in jail, he feels like he is *outside of the world*. Rebellion and violence are natural responses to this condition, however it is not easy to overcome the anxiety and fear associated with the white taboo. Bigger and his friends plan to rob a white man, but they are scared: “they had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them” (44). The white world is unknown, an *alien world* incredibly dangerous, a mythical dimension which Bigger and his friends are afraid of entering: “it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to” (44). A challenge means fighting, questioning a whole world, and not everybody can fight.

When Bigger starts working for Mr. Dalton he actually enters an alien world, he is forced to live in a social context which he cannot manage. He cannot communicate with the white people he meets, he does not understand them and they do not understand him: “Bigger listened, blinking and bewildered. The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language. [...] It made him uneasy, tense, as though there were influences and presences about him which he could feel but not see. He felt strangely blind” (77). Bigger

doubts his own self, he feels tense and uneasy. Sight is a fundamental sense in the novel, the ability to see and look people in the eye is a precise indicator of the characters' feelings: "he had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton's face once since he had been in the house. [...] his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things" (79). Bigger is afraid of raising his eyes, he is limited to the *surface of things*. He doubts his own self because he is controlled and ruled by people who have no idea of who he is, and this generates blindness and invisibility:

He felt that 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. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. (98)

Invisibility, the feeling of being *naked* and *transparent*, is due to stereotypes. White people do not *see* colored people, they only see preconceived and biased images, artificial stereotypes which do not correspond to reality. Bigger hates being a *badge of shame*, he does not want to continue on a path which relegates colored people to no physical existence. His family and friends, with their resignation and senseless hope, contribute to the preservation of a barbaric status quo and this is why Bigger abandons them and lives in a shadowy region, a *No Man's Land*. He kills Mary Dalton and feels alive because murder reasserts his existence, beyond the stereotypes which imprison his community. However, in doing so Bigger ironically embraces two of the worst stereotypes related to black men: he becomes a rapist and a murderer. To the outer eye, he is no different from any other *black beast*, even though his tragic reaction demonstrates he is capable of choosing and taking action.

Bigger is questioned several times, after the murder. He is treated as if he had no physical existence and as a consequence feels anger, shame and violence rising in him again: "There was just the old feeling, the feeling which he had had all his life; he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they could soon accuse him" (249). There is no need to prove anything, Bigger knows *white men* are going to accuse him because he was born guilty: *he was black* and had automatically *done wrong*. Bigger kills in order to become visible, he kills because he does not want to be strangled by a net of asphyxiating stereotypes: "it was the old feeling, hard and constant again now, of wanting to

grab something and clutch it in his hands and swing it into someone's face" (249). Butler, in his article "The Function of Violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (1986), argues that in *Native Son* Wright uses violence: "as a necessary and powerful reflector of the deepest recesses of its central character's radically divided nature", indicating how important Bigger's violent outbursts are. Violence is not unjustified, it is a natural reaction to the psychological and existential pressure which Bigger is forced to bear. After Bigger's capture the newspapers feed the crowd stereotypes which generate more invisibility: "his lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast. His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees. [...] He looks at the world with a strange, sullen, fixed-from-under stare, as though defying all efforts of compassion" (310). The trial is already finished, the sentence was written before it began. Sight, in a literal and figurative meaning, is used as an example of the bestial qualities which characterize a monster such as Bigger, who looks at the world without understanding it. Stereotypes justify the social order and give white people the right to rule, they play an essential role in the dominant social system.

Bigger dies hating the people who forced him to kill, who left him outside their world. Tragically, he feels haunted until the very end: "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" (361). However, even though they *still ruled him*, even though *he was their property*, Bigger puts up a fight. He does not surrender, he does all he can to change his existence and does not regret it:

I don't know. Maybe this sounds crazy. Maybe they going to burn me in the electric chair for feeling this way. But I ain't worried none about them women I killed. For a little while I was free. I was doing something. It was wrong, but I was feeling all right. Maybe God'll get me for it. If He do, all right. But I ain't worried. I killed 'em 'cause I was scared and mad. But I been scared and mad all my life and after I killed that first woman, I wasn't scared no more for a little while. (384)

Bigger seeks freedom: for a little while he was free. For a little while he was feeling all right and, more importantly, he was not worried. The dominant community pushed him outside and the result was an unforgivable sin, perpetrated in order to taste life.

1.4 - Bigger Thomas outside his own self

It is not simple for Bigger to feel at ease with his own self, given his tragic social environment. At the beginning of the novel he is not only ashamed of his family, he is also ashamed of himself: “he knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough” (40). The sentence resembles the one which refers to his family members, Wright chooses a similar structure: *he knew that the moment he allowed* followed by *he would*. The construction foreshadows denial, a powerful and dangerous psychological mechanism which represses anger and dread. Bigger has to deny his own self, otherwise meaninglessness and hopelessness would destroy him. Butler (1986) discusses Bigger's complex personality and argues that it is split into two opposite parts: “one trapped by environmental determinants and the other aspiring to a better life and a more fully realized self” (10). Unfortunately, Bigger's better part is only hypothetical, he is not allowed to express it because it would necessarily mean embracing his consciousness. Bigger is trapped, he is forced in a box and is *not allowed* to build his own self: “these were the rhythm of his life, indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger” (58). There is no articulation or consciousness, Bigger's life alternates between *indifference* and *brooding*, a phase of resignation, and *violence* and *desire*, a phase of uncontrollable urges.

As previously mentioned, *Native Son* anticipates the existential themes which preoccupy Wright later on during his life (Rubin, 1981). Bigger is haunted by a sense of purposelessness and dread which can be associated with existential anguish and despair, he rebels because his non-existence does not allow him to feel anything. However, he subconsciously knows that if he decided to act according to his anger he would never get the chance to develop his *better part*, the one his mother always talks about. It is a tragic paradox: Bigger is not only afraid of the white man, or worried about trespassing an *alien world*, he is also afraid of losing a part of his own self. When he kills Mary Dalton he kills fear and hope and is not worried, because he is outside of everything; nonetheless, being outside of everything means losing that hope which comes from being haunted by hopelessness. Bigger was born ready to kill:

His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this. It was no longer a matter of dumb wonder as to what would happen to him and his black skin; he knew now. The hidden meaning of his life - a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide - had spilled out. (136)

The crime seems *natural*, the hidden meaning of Bigger's life emerges when he destroys it. It is a meaning hidden inside of him, dictated by his *black skin*: he knows he cannot allow himself to feel what his life means, but when he does that his world changes. Bigger embraces hopelessness and meaninglessness, losing fear in the process: "he felt that he had his destiny in his grasp. He was more alive than he could ever remember having been; his mind and attention were pointed, focused toward a goal" (179). Bigger apparently enjoys his new life as an outsider, but he does not choose it. All of his life has been *leading to* something like this, he is forced to live outside and embrace his outsider status.

The first murder happens by accident, Bigger does not want Mary to make noise and presses a pillow on her mouth, until she is dead: "Mary's fingers loosened. He did not feel her surging and heaving against him. Her body was still" (117). Fear gets hold of Bigger when Mrs. Dalton enters the room and he ends up killing Mary, he is so sure his presence in the room would cause trouble that he tries to make himself invisible, and kills in the process. Death and invisibility change Bigger's perspective, he realizes he can exploit his invisibility and alter the asphyxiating pattern controlled by white people: "he smiled a little, feeling a tingling sensation enveloping all his body. He saw it all very sharply and simply: act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted" (142). Bigger envisions a future made of action and creation, rebellion against fear and abuse, an existence where he can finally choose and be free, outside of the cruel schemes which imprison colored people.

Unfortunately, it is not easy for Bigger to lose a part of his own self. He lives outside and kills in order to live but his crime is a consequence of non-existence, a condition which is hard to control even if embraced, especially at an unconscious level. Wright makes a careful use of dreams in the novel, to release information on Bigger's psychological state after the murder. Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) describes dreaming as a complicated intellectual activity and a perfectly valid psychic phenomenon, which represents an important part of human intellectual state. Dreams are often incomprehensible, obscure, they are not easy to interpret because their real content is censored by a psychic force which prevents the dream-wish to manifest itself in its authentic form, a form which the dreamer cannot accept.

Dreams are timeless and shapeless, governed by basic principles which struggle in order to free themselves from the censorship exercised upon real life and Bigger, who is not in full control of all the psychological implications of his new life as an outsider, struggles with all the feelings he represses:

He felt an urgent need to run and hide as though the bell were sounding a warning and he stood on a street corner in a red glare of light like that which came from the furnace and he had a big package in his arms so wet and slippery and heavy that he could scarcely hold onto it and he wanted to know what was in the package and he stopped near an alley corner and unwrapped it and the paper fell away and he saw – it was his *own* head - his own head lying with black face and half-closed eyes and lips parted with white teeth showing and hair wet with blood and the red glare grew brighter [...] he knew that very soon he had to find some place to hide but there was no place and in front of him white people were coming. (195)

The dreamlike atmosphere is accompanied by a change of register and style. Wright introduces poetic elements and suggestive expressions, such as: *lulled his blood, quiet ringing*; oxymorons and adjectives embellish a progressive reduction of the punctuation marks, until a stream of consciousness is reached. Bigger is aware of the unforgivable crime he has committed, deep down he knows he has killed and might end up killed, even though he does not allow himself to feel the implications of the murder he has perpetrated. The protagonist is running away, despite his newly-acquired fearless state he hides and is haunted by images pertaining his murder. *His own head* is in the package, Wright repeats it twice. While the *black face* is cut off *white teeth* are visible, in a tragic smile which confirms Bigger's greatest fear: they won anyway, white people are coming and there is no place to hide. Bigger's troubled consciousness fights against his outsider status in a battle which is already lost, fear has been replaced by an existence which comes from non-existence and therefore cannot give peace to Bigger: “there were two Biggers: one was determined to get rest and sleep at any cost; and the other shrank from images charged with terror” (283).

The *authentic existence* Bigger has acquired is not entirely authentic, because he is not completely aware of his own self; murders allow him to perceive the hopelessness inherent in his life, but the consequences are uncontrollable. However, his *anonymous existence* was tragic and dramatic up to such an extent that he does not regret what he has done: “he was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions” (270). Murder

becomes an act of creation in the paradoxical life of a human being who is not allowed to live and is forced to become an outsider, *not* seen by *blind eyes*.

The final capture allows Bigger to ponder what he has done: “some part of his mind was beginning to stand aside; he was going behind his curtain, his wall, looking out with sullen stares of contempt. He was outside of himself now” (298). In prison Bigger is forced to face all the instincts, forces and feelings which determined his reactions and actions; he longs for another chance in another world: “another orbit between two poles that would let him live again” (305) and has the opportunity to talk to Max, his lawyer, about what troubles him. Nonetheless, Bigger is never able to clearly articulate why he acted like he did: “again Bigger felt that his actions were not logical, and again he fell back upon his feelings for a guide in answering Max's questions” (382). Bigger's split consciousness rejects logical answers, because there is nothing logical about how his existence was conditioned. He does not know how to interpret what happened to him: “he brushed his hands across his eyes, hoping to untangle the sensations fluttering in his body. He lived in a thin, hard core of consciousness; he felt time slipping by; the darkness round him lived, breathed” (389). Bigger is confined into a *hard core of consciousness*, a secluded world; however, not even a hard core of consciousness can *untangle* the sensations fluttering his body. Living alone is no way of living, even if it is the only alternative to non-existence in a hopeless world:

Why was this strange impulse always throbbing in him when there was nothing outside of him to meet it and explain it? Why this eternal reaching for something that was not there? Why this black gulf between him and the world: warm red blood here and cold blue sky there, and never a wholeness, a oneness, a meeting of the two? (44)

Bigger dreams of red blood because he feels a strange impulse: an *eternal reaching* for something. He wishes for a wholeness, a oneness, he cannot forget about the *black gulf* which separates him from the world. The outsider lives a cursed life because he has no other choice: he fights fear, despair and anger to embrace a tragic, lonely existence. Bigger does not regret it: “I'm going to die. Well, that's all right now. But really I never wanted to hurt nobody. I hurt folk 'cause I felt I had to; that's all” (449). Bigger never wanted to *hurt nobody*, he was forced to embrace nothingness.

Max talks for Bigger in court, building a scarcely credible bridge between Bigger's vision and the white world which is accusing him; he discusses Bigger's “forms of dread out

of the night of fear into the light of reason” (412), confirming the existential anguish which haunted his existence. Nonetheless, Max's arguments seem artificial and unnatural, while Bigger is overwhelmed by what is happening to him. Siegel in 1974 publishes an article which titles “The Conclusion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*”, and argues that: “the prosecuting attorney's speech is not seen and heard from Bigger's point of view, which is otherwise rigidly adhered to in the novel, the vivid presentation of Bigger's visceral reactions” (4). While the speech only repeats what has already been said, reinforcing the main points which have been made, Bigger's tragic existence is rendered through the dramatic passages which describe his reactions and feelings: he suffers and rebels, trying to follow his basic instincts, and dies struggling for an authentic life.

CHAPTER 2 - *Black Boy*

Wright published his autobiography, *Black Boy*, in 1945. The protagonist of his memoir, Richard, is deeply influenced by personal and familial issues. Whereas in *Native Son* and *The Outsider* Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon are entirely fictionalized characters, Richard⁷ in *Black Boy* expresses more effectively the feelings which brought Wright to develop the figure of the outsider in the first place. This chapter addresses the first part of *Black Boy*: “Southern Night”, and highlights how Richard's troubled childhood influences his growth as a man and an outsider.

2.1 - Bigger Thomas outside his family

It is useful to compare the opening scenes of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, an autobiography and a novel, in order to appreciate differences and similarities between Richard and Bigger. They tackle in a different way similar issues, becoming two fascinating outsider figures greatly influenced by their families.

The opening scene of *Black Boy* is nothing like the opening scene of *Native Son*, the violent and repulsive image of a huge rat attacking Bigger's family is substituted by the image of an old woman, apparently inoffensive: “the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid” (3). Granny is only *apparently* inoffensive, she actually threatens Richard with her *white face* surrounded by black hair and an unusual halo, introducing one of the main topics of the book. Richard is afraid of her, she represents powerful and unknown forces which he cannot recognize. Butler (1983) claims that, while *Native Son* begins with a scene of paralysis, in *Black Boy* the central drives of the book are presented immediately: “human suffocation which is dramatized with images of stasis, and human possibility which is rendered by images of constant movement” (8). While it is true that *Native Son* begins with paralysis and a tragic scene characterized by hopelessness, it is also true that stasis is an

⁷ I refer to Richard as the protagonist of *Black Boy* and to Wright as the author.

essential triggers in the book and ultimately causes action: Bigger fights against stasis and reacts dramatically, trying to create a new life for himself. In *Black Boy* the opening scene begins with action right away, and describes an: “angry, fretful and impatient” (3) boy, who cannot stay still. The complex familial relationship which Richard has to endure forces him to react, as it happens to Bigger, even though he needs more time to act.

While in *Native Son* Bigger is presented as a young man who should provide for his family, in *Black Boy* Richard is a young boy full of energy and passion, whose nature causes a friction with the other members of his family. His mother scolds him and his younger brother complains about his attitude: “my brother – a year younger than I – was playing placidly upon the floor [...] -You better hush- my brother said. -You shut up,- I said” (3). The contrast between the different attitudes of the two brothers is strong: one is *playing placidly*, the other is *angry* and *fretful* and reacts badly when scolded. They are nothing alike, Richard has to do something in order to get rid of the suffocating paralysis which is choking him. He sets the house on fire:

Red circles were eating into the white cloth; then a flare of flames shot out. Startled, I backed away. The fire soared to the ceiling and I trembled with fright. Soon a sheet of yellow lit the room. I was terrified; I wanted to scream but was afraid. I looked around for my brother; he was gone. One half of the room was now ablaze. Smoke was choking me and the fire was licking at my face, making me gasp. (4)

The passage contains important references to Richard as a person and an outsider. The cloth eaten by the fire is *white*, of the same whiteness which makes him afraid when he looks at his grandmother. The *red circles* foreshadow a tragic conflict, the unconscious desire to destroy the white fabric of a weave which strangles Richard, who is not aware of it but cannot help it nonetheless. He sets the curtains on fire and finds himself alone: his *brother was gone*. Richard is fighting a battle by himself, his brother has abandoned him and he is *terrified*; however, he suffers the most devastating trauma after the accident, when he is severely beaten by his mother: “I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later i found myself in bed, screaming” (7). Richard is beaten to the point of losing consciousness by his own mother, he experiences hallucinations and terrible pain, thus starting to feel as an outsider in his own household.

Richard is not only traumatized by his mother, he also has a complicated relationship

with his father, a man who grows apart from his wife and children: “he was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote” (10). While in *Native Son* Bigger's father is never mentioned, in *Black Boy* the protagonist's father plays a significant role. Richard lacks a paternal figure, there is no warmth or understanding waiting for him at home, only tension and fear, and because of this situation he gradually feels the need to react, he cannot accept the authority of a man who does not care about his family. The noxious process based on fear and tension causes a disruption in Richard's perceptions, who fights evil with evil. Wright minutely describes the line of reasoning chosen by Richard, when he has to take care of a crying kitten: his father tells him to get rid of it and mentions killing, without meaning it, but Richard decides to take him literally in order to challenge his authority. Richard reverses all his anger on the defenseless animal and kills it, as an act of rebellion: “I had had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his word literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority.” (12). Richard cannot tolerate unjustified authority, the orders of a man who does not deserve respect; however, he commits a crime. Camp, in her article “The Rhetoric of Catalogues in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*” (1991), discusses how the kitten's murder scene demonstrates Richard's inclination toward brutality and highlights the devastating effect of his father's negative influence, in relation to the psychological development of a young boy.

Violence is an important component of the outsider's conscience, a physical refusal which creates a distance between an individual and other people. One of the main differences between Bigger and Richard is that he never commits murder, even though he has several violent outbursts. When Richard's father leaves, hunger gets hold of the devastated family; the complete absence of a paternal figure coincides with the absence of food, a condition which forces Richard to grow up and face reality. Wright includes, at the end of the first chapter, a flash forward where Richard and his father meet again twenty-five years after his abandonment, only to discover that they are nothing alike:

My mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realized that, though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality. [...] I was overwhelmed to realize that he could never understand me or the scalding experiences that had swept me beyond his life and into an area of living that he could never know. I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, [...] how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body. (34)

Richard meets a man who, even though has *shadows of his face* and *echos of his voice*, is a stranger. Father and son are strangers, because reality has shaped their lives in a way too brutal to be overcome. Richard is nothing alike in *mind* and *consciousness*, they are not of the same kind, they cannot communicate and speak a different language. The dissimilarities foreground a different consciousness: while Richard is an exceptional man, capable of challenging a tragic social reality, his father is imprisoned; nonetheless, his father's behavior plays an important role, because it *violently* shapes Richard's mind and consciousness. Richard and his father live on *vastly distant planes of reality*, while the scalding experiences which have swept Richard beyond his life forged his mind, his father only has the *simple nakedness* of his life. Richard's mind aches, it cannot tolerate the *imprisonment* of his father's soul, his chained actions and emotions. The protagonist frees his emotions, he strives to abandon the *animalistic impulses* of the body and to embrace an *authentic existence*.

Both Bigger and Richard have to deal with deeply religious mothers, who use faith as a means to cope with loss and fear: “after my father's desertion, my mother's ardently religious disposition dominated the household” (25). Richard, as Bigger, refuses to seek comfort in something which betrays weakness; however, while in *Native Son* the influence of a fanatic household is not explored in depth, in *Black Boy* faith and God play a prominent role. Religion, as Smith (1972) points out: “since it denies the self, applauds the selfless and promises heavenly fulfillment, devalues the needs of oppressed blacks in the here-and-now and counsels them to be content with their social position” (131). Richard does not sing prayers and hymns, he wants action: “what irked me was the ceaseless talk and no action. [...] there was only endless talk that led nowhere and I began to keep away from home as much as possible” (28). Richard's attitude is similar to Bigger's: “he did not want to sit on a bench and sing” (*Native Son*, 271), he begins to keep away from home and experiences estrangement from the safe environment of his family. The first symptoms of Richard's uniqueness are the

need for action and the impossibility to sit back and do nothing.

Richard's own household, as Hodges (1985) observes in his article "An apprenticeship to Life and Art: Narrative Design in Wright's *Black Boy*", is a source of fear and angst: "while the atmosphere of anxiety and dread stems at this point from within Richard's own household, we get the impression that it only presages the larger insecurities which he is to encounter in the outside world" (119). One of the sources of *anxiety* and *dread* in Richard's home is his grandmother, the woman who makes Richard afraid because of her *wrinkled, white and grim face*. Granny is a fanatic Seventh-day Adventist, who embodies the close-mindedness which Richard hates. He lives with his grandmother in several occasions, after his father's abandonment, and always finds it hard to accept her authority and attitude: "Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshiping her God" (102). Richard has to pretend in order to placate his grandmother and worship a God in whom he does not believe:

Before I had been made to go to church, I had given God's existence a sort of tacit assent, but after having seen His creatures serve Him at first hand, I had had my doubts. My faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life, anchored in the sensations of my body and in what my mind could grasp, and nothing could ever shake this faith, and surely not my fear of an invisible power. (115)

Wright chooses an ironic tone and questions God's existence and *His* creatures simply by saying: "I had had my doubts", implying a dramatic reality which cannot accept religious fanaticism as an answer. Richard's family is built upon the *fear* of an invisible power, promises and parables, but he mocks all these things. One of the defining characteristics of Richard as an outsider is his *faith* in his intellectual faculties: he does not believe only in the sensations of his body, but also in what *his mind* can grasp. While Richard tries to shape and understand the outside world by reading, writing and studying, Bigger in *Native Son* relies mostly on his sensations and plays a passive role: "the whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling" (*Native Son*, 136); "he was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves were hungry to see where it led" (*Native Son*, 142). Bigger does not rely on his mind, he experiences powerful and *simple feelings* and follows his *nerves*.

Wright uses not only irony but also a poetic, almost biblical style to highlight Richard's estrangement from his grandmother's religious and superstitious world: "It was highly likely

that the serpent of sin that nosed about the chambers of my heart was lashed to hunger by hymns as well as dreams [...] The church's spiritual life must have been polluted by my base yearnings, by the leaping hunger of my blood for the flesh" (113). The author describes a perfectly natural feeling (Richard's interest in an attractive older woman when he is a teenager) as a *serpent of sin* which noses about the chambers of his innocent heart, which has to be defended with prayers and devotion; however, hymns do not lash the serpent, they lash Richard's heart to *hunger*, a term repeated twice. Richard feels the hunger for the *flesh*, he lives outside of his grandmother's world and does not feel welcome in a house where he cannot live according to his rules: "whenever I found religion in my life I found strife [...] the naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn" (136). It is the *naked will to power* which disturbs him the most, the unjustified and hypocritical need for control and dominance.

Religion and close-mindedness are only a part of the negative influence exercised by Granny upon Richard, she also tries to deny him the opportunity to read and write: when Richard listens to the story of *Bluebeard and his Seven Wives* she threatens him, with hellish fire and damnation. Richard has to fight for literacy and imagination, essential elements of his consciousness. As Camp (1991) observes, imagination is fundamental to Richard's survival, a faculty fed by books and hopeful readings. Richard reads Dostoyevski, Mencken, Flaubert and Nietzsche to look at the world differently and create a new life for himself.

Other members of Richard's family, such as aunt Addie and uncle Tom, force him to rebel in order to assert his manhood and contribute to his coming of age: "- you're not going to beat me! I didn't do it!- -I'm going to beat you for lying!- -Don't, don't hit me! If you hit me I'll fight you!-" (108). As Camus (1951) and Merton (1957) observe, rebellion defines the outsider and allows him to discover his true identity; Smith (1972) comments on this remark and adds that Richard's: "violent encounters with his family are microcosmic reflections of his violent encounters with society at large" (127). Such an observation confirms Richard's estrangement from both his family and his community.

While Richard has to live in a complex familial environment, Bigger only deals with his closest kins. Confrontation with family members and a different social context influence the reactions of the two protagonists and their struggle as outsiders.

2.2 - Richard outside his community

It is not easy for Richard to have a relationship with his community, he would like to see his people live a better life but it is almost impossible for him to create a connection. Bigger in *Native Son* has the same problem: it is hard for exceptional individuals such as Bigger and Richard to share emotions with a community lost in fear and blindness. The estrangement from family and community are strictly linked:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. (100)

Richard reacts against poverty, ignorance and helplessness. His mother symbolizes a condition which interests the whole community, and by extension Richard himself. The protagonist refuses the *futile seeking*, the *endless suffering*, and his reaction defines him as an outsider; however, the *authentic existence* he is trying to achieve involves *fear* and *dread*, a life full of pain which derives from a dramatic awareness: “when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with men” (37). Richard cannot stand the attitude of the members of his community, he cannot play the subservient role of the ignorant Negro of the South only because it is convenient. He wishes for *love, honor, loyalty* and in order to obtain them he wants to fight, even if it means risking his own life: “no matter how often I witnessed it, I could not get used to it. How can they accept it? I asked myself” (179). When Richard starts to work for white people he resents his friends for *accepting it*, even though they do it only in order to survive.

Richard, as Bigger in *Native Son*, cannot accept it. *It* refers to stereotypes, preconceived and biased images which do not correspond to reality. In *Black Boy* Wright insists on stereotypes and discusses how Richard's community plays with them, wearing a mask. In the Southern states, where Jim Crow laws are active, colored people are even more invisible and expected to act according to predetermined paradigms: “why don't you laugh and talk like the other niggers?” (182). Richard has to learn how to please the white status quo and mock the unfair system: “Dick, you look black, black, *black*, see? Can't you understand that?” (183).

Grigg, a friend of Richard's, talks to him about the harsh reality, expectations and hidden truth: "when you're in front of white people, *think* before you act, *think* before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among *our* people, but not for *white* people. They won't stand for it" (184). The mere act of *thinking* demonstrates how all stereotypes are simply unfair and false, considering that colored people, according to biased and preconceived assumptions, should not be capable of logical reasoning. Grigg explains to Richard that he is just acting in order to survive: "you know, Dick, you may think I'm an Uncle Tom, but I'm not. I hate these white people, hate 'em with all my heart. But I can't show it; if I did, they'd kill me" (185). Grigg is faking his subservient role, playing with the stereotypes forced upon him and ultimately making fun of the white people who believe in them: "*all these white folks dressed so fine - Their ass-holed smell just like mine*" (185). Richard tries to understand and follow his friend's advice but he cannot pretend to be a slave, because that would mean losing his soul and consciousness: "I went into the sunshine and walked home like a blind man" (193). Stereotypes mean *blindness* to Richard, the same blindness experienced by Bigger when he is talking to Mr. Dalton: "it made him uneasy, tense, as though there were influences and presences about him which he could feel but not see. He felt strangely blind" (*Native Son*, 77). Richard is an outsider, he cannot follow his friends' example:

Pretending to conform to the laws of the whites, grinning, bowing, they let their fingers stick to what they could touch. And the whites seemed to like it. But I, who stole nothing, who wanted to look them straight in the face, who wanted to talk and act like a man, inspired fear in them. (200)

Richard wants to talk and act like a *man*, he cannot just pretend to conform to the laws of the whites. When one of Richard's coworkers plays with stereotypes in order to obtain money, he cannot accept the humiliation involved: "this black sonofabitch sure needs a quarter- Shorty sang ... You can kick me for a quarter" (228). Richard is taken aback: "but a quarter can't pay you for what he did to you" (229), even though Shorty fools the white man, the stereotype he exploits is still attached to him. According to Richard the joke is on Shorty, money cannot pay for what he did; nonetheless, Shorty's interpretation of the whole episode is diametrically opposite: "listen, nigger - he said to me - my ass is tough and quarters is scarce" (229). Richard is unique, exceptional, and it is impossible for him to communicate effectively with the members of his community. Hodges (1985) observes: "[Wright] is keenly aware that

wearing the mask, even when such action appears expedient, means a sacrifice of one's dignity and self-respect" (129). Dignity and self-respect are too important, the outsider cannot wear a mask. Richard is more aware of his condition than Bigger, he makes a conscious decision regarding stereotypes and flees before losing control.

In *Native Son* Bigger is attracted to Bessie, a simple young woman who "only wanted to get drunk" (*Native Son*, 169). In *Black Boy* Richard meets Bess, who is: "young, simple, sweet and brown" (211). Both Bigger and Richard cannot have a relationship with them, because they live on a different dimension: "-I wanna get married. I wanna love- she said. I had never met anyone like her, so direct, so easy in the expression of her feelings" (216). Marrying Bess would mean a house and a safe life for Richard, something very tempting for any other young boy in his situation, but he refuses and does not take advantage of her. Richard is not interested in Bess, just as Bigger was not interested in Bessie; nonetheless, Richard goes one step further and does not sleep with her. He resists her advances: "she was warm, eager, childish, pliable" (218) but: "I disengaged my hand from hers. I looked at her and wanted either to laugh or to slap her" (219). While Richard uses his mind and understands it would not be fair to have sex with a simple young woman, Bigger: "was swept by a sudden gust of passion and his arms tightened about her. [...] The loud demand of the tensivity of his own body was a voice that drowned her. [...] He was conscious of nothing now but her and what he wanted" (*Native Son*, 264). Bigger is overcome by passion, he cannot resist the *tensivity of his own body* and when passion gets hold of him he is *conscious of nothing*. Both Bigger and Richard are outsiders, they do not share life and common assumptions with their families or the communities they belong to, but Richard is strong enough to control his instincts and shape his life according to his exceptional qualities without losing sight of what is right.

2.3 - Richard outside the dominant community

While in *Native Son* Bigger is immediately presented with a *knife down his throat* (50), which symbolizes a full-blown hatred toward white people, in *Black Boy* Wright describes the genesis of Richard's resentment toward the white status quo and his life outside of it.

Richard discovers gradually the nature of such a relationship, at first he is not aware of it: “though I had long known that there were people called “white” people, it had never meant anything to me emotionally. [...] For the most part I never thought of them; they simply existed somewhere in the background of the city as a whole” (*Black Boy*, 23). White people move from the background of Richard's existence to the foreground, pushing him aside, creating a new kind of fear inside of him. Richard is aware of the conflict between white and colored people, even though white people never meant anything to him. At the beginning of the novel, after the fire and his mother's punishment, he dreams about: “a huge white boat floating on a vast body of water, but when my mother took me down to the levee on the day of leaving, I saw a tiny, dirty boat that was not at all like the boat I had imagined” (9). It is a premonition, Richard knows of the *huge white boats* but when he follows his mother he only sees a *tiny, dirty boat*. Richard feels inside of him the need to fight in order not to be confined to tiny and dirty boats and to go beyond what his mother is offering. Slowly Richard becomes aware of an unfair social system, white people have everything and colored people have nothing: “watching the white people eat would make my empty stomach churn and I would grow vaguely angry. Why could I not eat when I was hungry?” (19). Richard feels *anger*, the same which Bigger feels when he thinks about white people.

The protagonist of *Black Boy* is haunted by whiteness in his own household, by his grandmother's light skin complexion: “my grandmother was as nearly white as a Negro can get without being white, which means that she was white” (39). The Jim Crow system contemplated a different standard of treatment based on skin textures, and a lighter complexion meant privileges. Richard's mother explains to him something completely irrational, a society based on a color and shades of whiteness, and he learns to fear white people; however, the irrationality incidental to the social system he has to endure allows him to question and condemn it, in an intellectual and spiritual effort which defines his consciousness:

The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived; and my reactions to this hostility fed upon itself, grew or diminished according to the news that reached me about the whites, according to what I aspired or hoped for. (74)

The hostility of the whites persecutes Richard, who loses contact with his daily environment.

The psychological abuse is strictly connected to hopes and aspirations, which are inevitably crushed. Richard's mind and feelings are negatively influenced, in a vicious circle which demands for reaction or passivity. As Smith (1972) observes: "his longing to be an authentic self struggles against society's demand that he be a "nigger." The struggle sharpens his anger toward a hostile world as it taxes his inner resolve to overcome that world" (130). Richard strives for a position in the world which coincides with his own true self, a position which has to be created and seized through rebellion and anti-conformism.

Richard has to overcome *that* world and rebel against it in order to *be an authentic self*, but it is not an easy task, especially in the South, where colored people are considered animals: "black men are categorized as animals, a mentality inherited from the days of slavery. Not only are black people considered to be white people's servants, but they are expected to entertain white people as though they were animals in the zoo" (Hakutani, 1996, 122). Richard fully understands how hard it is to be treated like an inferior being when he confesses his aspiration to become a writer to a white woman: "-you'll never be a writer- she said -Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?- [...] The woman had assaulted my ego; she had assumed that she knew my place in life, what I felt, what I ought to be, and I resented it with all my heart" (147). A *nigger head* should not be interested in becoming anything, stereotypes determine what colored people should feel and what they should be, there is no possibility to change a reality set in stone. Richard acts and reacts because he has an *ego*, he has a *heart*, he does not want to be deprived of his humanity. The protagonist's consciousness is defined by his desire to become a writer, as Davis (1979) observes: "to survive in the larger, white-dominated society he must accept without questioning the inflexible system of southern mores and customs. Richard, rejecting these imperatives, responds to the demands of his own imagination" (95). Imagination is a unique quality, which allows Richard to *reject the imperatives* and fight the inflexible system of southern mores. Literacy provides strength and wisdom, but accelerates Richard's transformation and condemns him to a blessed outsider status. The outsider is blessed and condemned at the same time, because he has to pay the price of his exceptional consciousness.

Life in the South is painful and unbearable to Richard, a *powerless* man who realizes that white people manage not only to make colored people invisible, but also to have them fight between them. In Memphis the protagonist is tricked into fighting against another young

man of his age: “the shame and anger we felt for having allowed ourselves to be duped crept into our blows and blood ran into our eyes, half blinding us. The hate we felt for the men whom we had tried to cheat went into the blows we threw at each other” (243). Richard and Harrison try to *cheat* the white men, but end up throwing *blows* at each other. Metaphorically, the same thing happens with the stereotypes which colored people are forced to endure: they generate *blindness*, psychological injuries which creep into *blows and blood*, ultimately changing the cheater into the duped.

Eventually Richard has to flee in order to overcome Southern narrow-mindedness, because:

I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior. I had to feel and think out each tiny item of racial experience in the light of the whole race problem, and to each item I brought the whole of my life. While standing before a white man I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word. I could not help it. I could not grin. In the past I had always said too much, now I found that it was difficult to say anything at all. I could not react as the world in which I lived expected me to; that world was too baffling, too uncertain. (196)

The quote describes Richard and his outsider behavior: he is not *subservient*, he does not only feel but also *thinks* and realizes he does not want to figure out how to perform. He does not want his life to be a performance, he wants truth and authenticity, no more *grins* or pretense. The outsider cannot help it: he has to fight back, Richard's future depends upon his ability to react against the wrong expectancies of a baffling world. While Bigger in *Native Son* is guided by his instincts, the protagonist of *Black Boy* is capable of using his intellectual faculties and makes a conscious decision about his future.

2.4 - Richard outside his own self

Black Boy and *Native Son* belong to two different literary genres and Richard is different from Bigger, they are two outsiders with their own peculiar characteristics. Howland, in his article “Black Boy: A Story of Soul-Making and a Quest for the Real” (1986), argues that:

The book is most fundamentally about the development of Wright's soul and of the great passion which moves it, a passion which seems to respond to some powerful and sustaining source of attraction. This dimension of passion in response to a source of attraction, presented as it is in the form of autobiography, gives *Black Boy* the directed movement of a quest. (117)

Wright and Richard are not the same person, there is a distance between author and protagonist; nonetheless, they are intertwined in the *movement of a quest*: Richard's soul develop page after page and the reader is allowed to see how the conscience of a unique character evolves in a tragic social environment. The quest is what determines Richard's uniqueness, he is not only a young man driven by passion and instinct, such as Bigger, he gains a more complete awareness of his own condition and uses his mind, his imagination, in order to rebel against the unfair social system he has to endure. Even though Richard is more aware of his condition, this does not mean he is not affected by his outsider status; in fact, ever since he is a young boy he experiences estrangement from his own self and is haunted by fear and anxiety:

Dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being and my memory grew sharp, my senses more impressionable; I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others. I held myself in, afraid to act or speak until I was sure of my surroundings, feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a void. My imagination soared; I dreamed of running away. Each morning I vowed that I would leave the next morning, but the next morning always found me afraid. (30)

Richard has a *distinct personality* and understands he is not like other people: he is an outsider, his personality strives against others and he cannot avoid it. However, awareness means sufferance and causes a dramatic psychological reaction: he *holds himself in* and is *afraid* to act or speak, *dread* and *distrust* are in his life from the very beginning. It is not easy for Richard to come to terms with his exceptional nature, he feels suspended over a *void*, experiences uncertainty and confusion. *Imagination* assists the protagonist and plays an important role in his quest, he imagines, dreams and goes beyond the *fence* with his mind. Richard knows he cannot partake his mother's or his friends' attitude toward the meaninglessness of his life, but sometimes: "my morning anxieties drowned out my hunger. I wanted to rush back to the safety of the black faces I knew" (69). Richard feels the need to rush back to safety, but the *black faces* he knows cannot give him peace, they only cause him to feel self-estrangement and suspension over a void.

Bigger in *Native Son* is trapped, his life is out of control and violence becomes creation, he murders in order to be able to choose and feel his consciousness. Violence is Bigger's natural answer to a life characterized by: "indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger" (*Native Son*, 58). Bigger alternates between indifference and violence, *desire* substitutes a kind of reflection which Wright defines *abstract*, far away from the inner soul of a young man who is overcome by passion. On the contrary, at the age of twelve Richard: "had an attitude toward life that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical" (100). Richard is not indifferent, he has an *attitude toward life*. He is not overcome by periods of abstract brooding, he is *skeptical* and skepticism means doubting, considering a situation and having reservations. Richard is not relying only on violence in order to create a new life for himself, he *seeks* everything and is aware of his own course of action. Richard's spirit makes him: "strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful" (101), but there is a lack of abstract feelings such as brooding or indifference. While Bigger cannot allow "what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness" (*Native Son*, 40), Richard explores the spirit he has caught and thus constitutes a more complex outsider figure. Hodges (1985) argues that: "*Black Boy* is the story of a boy whose selfhood must be forged in the crucible of a hostile society which is determined to suppress any positive assertion of personhood" (114) and clarifies that Richard's effort aims at creating *personhood* in a hostile environment, taking into account environmental factors which have to be sought, tolerated and criticized.

Stepto, in his article "Literacy and Ascent: Richard Wright's *Black Boy*" (1991), argues that Wright wants: "to create a persona who experiences major moments of literacy, personal freedom, and personal growth while in a kind of bondage, and yet who maintains in a very clear-headed way his vision of a higher literacy and a better world" (108). While it is true that literacy means *personal freedom* and *personal growth*, it is also true that it means a more drastic estrangement from a family and a community which are not at ease with Richard's choice to read and write. Higher literacy is a priority, but it does not always mean a clear-headed vision: "in buoying me up, reading also cast me down, made me see what was possible, what I had missed. My tension returned, new, terrible, bitter, surging, almost too great to be contained. I no longer *felt* that the world about me was hostile, killing; I *knew* it"

(251). Literacy means greater awareness, a cursed gift which lets Richard see what is possible and what he has missed, *casting him down*. Awareness means *tension* in a hostile world which is constantly trying to destroy individuals such as Richard, outsider figures who threaten an order based on fear and ignorance.

Bigger in *Native Son* is destroyed by a *black gulf* which separates him from the world: “why this eternal reaching for something that was not there? Why this black gulf between him and the world?” (44). Richard, as Bigger, suffers because he has to leave everything behind:

Again and again I vowed that someday I would end this anger of mine, this apartness, this eternal difference; and I did not suspect that I would never get intimately into their lives, that I was doomed to live with them but not of them, that I had my own strange and separate road, a road which in later years would make them wonder how I had come to tread it. (126)

The quote expresses pain, regret, sadness. Richard wants to end the *apartness*, the eternal difference which separates him from the people he cares about. He is surprised because he did not expect to be always outside, *never into their lives*, relegated to the non-existent boundaries of his exceptional consciousness. Richard lives on another dimension, he has his own and *separate road*, just as Bigger was: “following a strange path into a strange land” (*Native Son*, 142). He is aware of the path he has to follow but sometimes wonders *how* he has come to tread it, *why* he has to be alone when all he ever wanted was to create a bridge and establish a connection between separate worlds.

CHAPTER 3 - *The Outsider*

In 1953 Wright published his most controversial novel: *The Outsider*. It is the story of Cross Damon, an outsider who kills like Bigger and reads like Richard, haunted by angst and despair. The evolution of the figure of the outsider in Wright's major works culminates with Cross, who is not only impulsive and restless, but also intelligent and clever. The publication of the novel coincided with harsh critiques, because of its focus on existentialism and a universal philosophy which seems to transcend the African American social condition; however, a careful analysis shows how existentialist principles enhance Wright's critique of racial discrimination. It is useful to cite a couple of the bad reviews which *The Outsider* received in order to understand the characteristics of this unique novel, which narrates the story of an exceptional man who tries to create a new life for himself. Marcus (1953) in his commentary writes:

[Cross Damon] devotes the remainder of his life to concealing who he really is. [...] *The Outsider* is full of inconsistencies and contradictions. Most of the book is very boring, with long passages of didactic and quasi-philosophical prose. The jargon of popularized psychology and existentialism washes over the characters without clarifying them. [...] instead of universalizing the Negro, he simply denies the Negro's experience and reality. It is impossible that a man should have no race, no soil, no culture and no ideas. [...] Mr. Wright has simply reasserted that African nothingness which represented the failure of earlier writers to come into living relation with Negro life. (37)

Marcus criticizes how Cross conceals his identity and interprets his choice as hiding, going away in order not to accept reality. However, Cross's quest represents the complete opposite: he flees and embraces a new life because the *anonymous existence* which he is conducting is not worth living. Cross's actions do not conceal, they create and aim to attain an authentic existence, even though the process of creation ultimately causes tragic losses. Wright in *Native Son* writes, referring to Bigger: "the hidden meaning of his life - a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide - had spilled out" (136). The same thing happens with Cross Damon, the meaning of his life spills out when he rebels and fights for his own life, even though *others do not see*. While it may be true that the book presents long passages of quasi-philosophical prose, which could have been rephrased in a less

didactic fashion, it is also true that such passages are fundamental in order to *spill out* what Cross feels and experiences. Existentialism does not wash over the characters, Wright insists on existentialist principles because they are useful in order to describe a condition characterized by dread, despair, powerlessness and blind hope. Cross's existence is emblematic and goes beyond existentialism, addressing racial and sociological issues which converge into the life of an outsider who is alone and persecuted by his *authentic existence*. As previously mentioned: "it is inconceivable to imagine a figure who is more alienated than Damon" (Coles, 59). Marcus argues that it is impossible that a man should have no race, no soil, no culture and no ideas, but Wright in *Black Boy* writes: "when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with men" (37). The author does not deny Negro's experience and reality, he analyzes and represents it carefully, going deeper than the early writers: *Negro life* can be characterized by a *lack of* tenderness, love, honor and loyalty; Wright faces *nothingness*, he does not run away from it.

Eastman (1953) in his review sustains that:

The hero is a rather incredible character to begin with, a prodigious highbrow, a man possessing both intellect and intelligence (in itself a hard combination, these days, to believe in), and yet not possessed of enough sense to refrain from murdering people just because he doesn't like what they stand for. [...] *What is a man?* Cross Damon asks this question and seems to be spending his short life hunting for the answer. This is what makes him an outsider - not his being a Negro. Race troubled him very little. (47)

Eastman is right when he says that the hero is a rather incredible character: he is exceptional, unique, and has the necessary strength to rebel and react. The critic also guesses right when he says that Cross possesses both *intellect* and *intelligence*, he reads books and has a vast knowledge which allows him to cope with delicate issues. Nonetheless, possessing intellect and intelligence has nothing to do with murdering people. Murder means creation, in the life of the outsider: "what I killed for, I *am!* It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder..." (*Native Son*, 453). Cross and Bigger kill for *what they are* and while it is true that Cross uses his intellect and tries to justify his murders, it is also true that he is overcome by an impulse of creation which ultimately destroys him, exactly as it destroys Bigger. Eastman argues that race troubles Cross very little, but it is not

true; the novel is based upon Cross's racial identity, white people's hostility and the inner racial conflict which haunts him. Cross's friends wonder: "what's a black man to a white man? An ape made by God to cut wood and draw water, and with an inborn yen to rape white girls" (35); Cross's ex-wife Gladys feels not at ease when she is in the presence of the whites: "they think they're *something* and we're *nothing*" (65) and Cross often debates his racial identity: "-Mr. Houston and I are very interested in your people- the priest said to Cross" (160). Cross is a Negro outsider, he wonders *what is a man* because he knows the color of his skin should not make a difference, but race matters and does make the difference in a novel which explains the figure of Wright's outsider.

3.1 - Cross Damon outside his family

Cross is twenty-six years old: he is not an experienced man, but he is older than Bigger and Richard (in the first part of *Black Boy*). The novel begins after his divorce and Wright does not insist on family life as much as he does in *Black Boy*, where Richard is constantly fighting against familial pressure. However, his relationship with his ex-wife and especially with his mother are essential. The first symptom of Cross's uniqueness is that he cannot communicate with his family: "to whom could he talk? To his mother? No; [...] his sense of dread would deepen. Could he talk to his wife? God, no! She'd laugh" (17). *Dread* and *laughter* would be the poor results of a discussion with his mother and ex-wife. Cross is aware, intimately and bitterly:

That his dread had been his mother's first fateful gift to him. He had been born of her not only physically but emotionally too. [...] As her son, he was much too far from her and at the same time much too close, much too warm toward her and much too cold. [...] His first coherent memories had condensed themselves into an image of a young woman whose hysterically loving presence had made his imagination conscious of an invisible God - Whose secret grace granted him life - hovering in space above him. (22)

Dread is the feeling which Cross associates with his mother, the spiritual condition characterized by fear and anxiety describes his relationship with the woman who birthed him. Tate, in her essay "Christian Existentialism in *The Outsider*" (1993), observes that: "Damon's

acute self-consciousness had been carefully nurtured over many years by his mother. [...] She believed that she was engendering a reverence for God, but ironically she actually awakened his sense of dread” (371). Religion causes estrangement, because of the same *invisible God* which also haunts Bigger and Richard: Bigger has to turn away in order not to be swept away (*Native Son*, 40) and Richard finds strife whenever he finds religion (*Black Boy*, 136). Wright chooses irony again, and mocks God's *secret grace* and his hovering in space above him. Cross feels persecuted and angry, he cannot tolerate his mother's blind faith and feels sad when he notices: “as he did each time he visited her, that she appeared to have shrunken a bit more” (23). It is interesting to notice how Wright uses the same verb to describe Bigger's sister Vera, who seemed to be *shrinking* from life (*Native Son*, 138). Religion is not the answer because Cross and his mother cannot live their lives as they want, they are forced to stand in *a corner of the city*, just like Bigger. Vera and Cross's mother *shrink* in their non-existence, they conform to a reality which makes them invisible and meaningless.

Gladys, Cross's ex-wife, never represents a solid figure in his life. They get married in special circumstances and grow apart, until Cross feels sorry for her and their relationship: “He felt increasingly walled off from her; but the more he felt it the more he sought to hide it[...] He did not love her and perhaps had never loved her... She had become for him an object of compassion” (71). Cross knows there is no love but he tries to hide it, he is afraid of his feelings even though he does not care for Gladys as a wife: she is just an *object of compassion*, their marriage does not mean anything, despite the family they have built together. The children are the only thing Cross cares about, but he cannot have a relationship with them either: “-I knew you were coming,- she announced, -so I sent them for the afternoon to the house of a friend of mine.- Her voice was a midnight bell tolling tidings of bad news to come” (84). Cross's children are far away, he cannot see them or talk to them and Gladys' voice is compared to a *midnight bell*, scary and ominous.

Cross severs all ties with his family, when Houston captures him and decides to use his wife and children in order to obtain a confession he does not react. The district attorney announces that Cross's mother is dead, and: “a churning wave went through his stomach, but he steeled himself against emotion [...] his mother had been dead for him for years” (512). Cross coldly realizes that his mother is dead to him, and *steels himself* against emotion in order not to succumb to the *churning wave* which goes through his stomach. The outsider is

alone, he embraces his uniqueness and rebels against his existence but he cannot avoid pain when he *feels* his condition, he lives outside of his family and has to endure endless agony because of his loneliness. When Houston calls Cross's sons:

His body was rigid. He had often imagined many kinds of confrontations, but he had never dreamed of this. To let his sons see him standing mute, stony... ! He could *kill* Houston! [...] All right, suppose they were his sons? He had given them up, hadn't he? He would make a supreme effort and remain cold, hard. Sentiment must not subvert him now. [...] Those frightened, little brown-faced boys were his sons, flesh of his flesh; they were the future of himself and he had rejected that self. (520)

Cross is *rigid*, he has to make a supreme effort in order not to attack Houston, who is torturing him, and denies a part of his own self: the relationship with his sons. Wright uses a free indirect speech to show Cross's inner conflict, the struggle of a man who has to remain *cold, hard*, and forget about all human sentiments. Cross's sons are his future and yet he lives in a timeless dimension beyond laws, seasons and punishments. The outsider rebels against injustice and creates a new world for himself, but in doing so he destroys part of his soul: “he would not react; he would not be human” (521).

3.2 - Cross Damon outside his community

As for Bigger and Richard, the relationship between Cross and his community is essential and defines him as an outsider. At the beginning of the novel Cross and his friends walk through the snowy streets of Chicago, enjoying themselves, but Cross cannot share his friends' feelings: “they tossed wild laughter amidst the milling flakes of snow. All of them laughed except Cross whose lips shaped themselves into an ambiguous smile” (3). While Cross's friends laugh he is incapable of letting himself go, he does not share their attitude toward life. Cross cannot smile or laugh, he cannot enjoy himself when his existence is unbearable: “Cross stood aloof as the others bent double with their goggles” (4); “Cross retained his nervous, ambiguous smile” (5); “they laughed musingly, their eyes resting on Cross's face which carried a detached smile” (6). Laughter is used to exorcise fear, anger and to mock white people, who constantly hurt colored people physically and spiritually. Bigger

and Gus laugh when they think about the *white folks*, because it “better be funny how they treat them” (*Native Son*, 47); at Cross's favorite bar: “Negroes rolled in laughter, feeling that the powerful white world had been lowered to their own humble plane by the magic of comic words” (35). Comic words allow colored people to deal with a dreadful reality, ridicule plays an important role in the attempt to lower the *white world*; however, Cross does not roll in laughter, he needs action. The outsider cannot adopt a passive attitude and longs for a reaction.

Cross is an exceptional man, educated and intelligent. Literacy constitutes another barrier between him and his friends, who do not share the same interests: “-Say, remember all them big, deep books he used to read and tell us about?- Joe asked looking from Cross to the others. -He used to use so many big words I thought he'd choke! Every time I saw 'im, he had a batch of books under his arm” (7). Cross speaks another language and seeks other ways to cope with his problems, as Richard in *Black Boy* wants to write and read in order to abandon the South and go beyond a life which means blindness and religious superstition, in a social environment regulated by absurd stereotypes and repression. When Cross discusses the Negro question with Houston he states: “the American Negro, because of his social and economic situation is a congenital coward. He's scared to reveal what he feels. He fears reprisals from his white neighbors” (170). The outsider accuses the members of his community of cowardice because he would like to see a reaction, not fear; Cross shares Richard and Bigger's attitude, he cannot stand uncertainty and meaningless pain, he cannot stand a world where white people expect colored people to act and behave like brainless clowns:

Cross batted his eyes stupidly. He saw that he was making this poorly paid clerk happy; his pretense of dumbness made the clerk feel superior, white. [...] In his role of an ignorant, frightened Negro, each white man - except those few who were free from the race bias of their group - he would encounter would leap to supply him with a background and an identity; each white man would project out upon him his own conception of the Negro and he could safely hide behind it. (217)

The role of the ignorant Negro is safe, it only requires acting. Cross plays a trick on the white clerk, who feels superior but is actually made a fool. White men need Negroes to play subservient roles, they need to project upon colored people stereotypes and supply them with a background and an identity, in order to feel powerful and safe. Cross obtains the birth

certificate but for a while loses his own identity, his own self is invisible while he bats his eyes stupidly. Bigger feels blind when he lets white people such as Mr. Dalton treat him like an invisible man, Richard argues with Shorty and maintains that money are not enough when it comes to human dignity. Outsiders do not come to terms with stereotypes and the *blindness* they generate, a surreal world where human beings pretend to be inferior in order not to anger the *white fools*.

Cross is a colored man and his outsider status is influenced by racial issues. Tate (1993) observes:

Existentialism in *The Outsider* does not reflect Wright's abandonment of racial themes, which had consistently appeared throughout his early work. On the contrary, *The Outsider* accentuates another dimension of this very theme. [...] Racism here is both a compelling social reality and as well as a striking metaphor for the forces at large which assault and, yet, man's growing awareness of his own humanity. In *The Outsider* Wright dramatizes these forces as the symbolic concept of psychological dread, and dread provokes Damon's violent metaphysical rebellion. (384)

Racial themes play an important role in *The Outsider* and they combine with dread, anxiety, fear and other existentialist themes which are developed in the novel. The outsider fights for *man's awareness* of his own humanity, he wants colored people to be brave and struggle for their existence. Cross is ashamed of a group of *congenital cowards* and his rebellions, metaphysical and social, are strictly intertwined.

3.3 - Cross Damon outside the dominant community

In *The Outsider* the incompatibility between Cross and the white supremacy is almost implied, it shapes his existence and influences his choices. While in *Black Boy* Wright insists on the genesis of Richard's hatred toward the dominant community, in *The Outsider* Cross's resentment is given as a fact: Cross lives outside the white status quo, he fights against it and struggles for his identity. Cross, Richard and Bigger fight the same battle, all three of them feel: “a poking red-hot iron” (*Native Son*, 50) down their throat; however, Cross is a grown-up, learned man and his superior intellect calls for a more philosophical retaliation.

At the beginning of the novel Cross finds himself in the middle of a disorganized,

pointless resistance which he considers useless:

Most of the folks on the rest of the universe is colored, and if the white folks knew that the other worlds was full of colored folks who wanted to come down here, what the hell chance would the white folks have? [...] Laughter died slowly. The men wiped their mouths with the back of their hands, gazing at one another with sly joy. (34)

White folks take advantage of colored people and relegate them to a subservient role because they would not have a chance, if the other worlds full of colored folks came down. The inconsistent line of reasoning adopted by Cross's friends and acquaintances is based on fear, the sentiment which dominates a tragic social environment; unfortunately, if *white folks* are scared, *colored folks* are even more scared. Cross sees cowardice behind *laughter* and does not share his friends' attitude, even though he experiences the same anger and anxiety toward a white world which has everything. Hakutani, in his book *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (1996), observes that: "Wright's hero is not simply an embodiment of a half-baked philosophy but also a genuine product of the African American experience" (141). Wright inserts several comments on stereotypes and prejudice throughout the book, under the form of Cross's thoughts, such as: "in the minds of whites, what's one Negro more or less?" (124).

The protagonist does not only create a new life for himself, he also discusses colored people's condition and white people's attitude toward them: "-Mr. Houston and I are very much interested in your people,- the priest said to Cross. [...] - I mean the colored people -. -Oh- Cross said, giving a play-acting laugh. -But they were born that color. Nobody *colored* them" (161). It is interesting to notice how Cross only gives a *play-acting laugh* to Houston and the priest, demonstrating his deep understanding of the issue. Laughter, or lack of laughter, differentiates the outsider from his friends and in this case also shows witty disagreement. The priest wants to know more about *colored people*, a social group forced to live in *one corner of the city*, and Cross uses irony to criticize his ignorance. The outsider argues that black people were *born that color*, implying that it was white people who *colored* them with racist stereotypes, creating a rupture between the two communities. Cross does not believe in two distinct peoples, he knows white people and colored people are exactly the same. The only reason why the priest can refer to *Cross's* people and *his* people lies in two artificial worlds built on cowardice, fear, preconceived images and pretension:

He knew that deep in their hearts those two white clerks knew that no human being on earth was as dense as he had made himself out to be, but they wanted, needed to believe such of Negroes and it helped them to feel racially superior. They were pretending, just as he had been pretending. But maybe men sometimes pretended for much bigger and graver stakes. (218)

When Cross pretends to be a black wastrel in order to obtain his birth certificate he plays a role and fakes, just as the white clerks do. White people *need* to feel racially superior, they *need* to believe in a world based upon an artificial order they can control.

Wright in *The Outsider* wants to investigate the *bigger and graver stakes*, the reason why men sometimes pretend, the reason why they need to feel superior. The author uses Cross Damon, an intellectual, to investigate the underlying causes of the racial problem. The outsider lives outside the dominant community and tries to understand why it is not possible to create a bridge between two worlds divided by artificial assumptions, pretension and fear: “the real world man did not want; he was not stouthearted enough to endure its dangers and uncertainties. His myths sought to recast that world, tame it, make it more humanly meaningful and enduring” (479). Escobar (1997) sustains that man needs an artificial culture in order not to become a mental case at the mercy of fear, Wright argues that *man was afraid* of the clamoring world and for this reason tried to tame it, projecting: “another world in *front* of the real world” (479). White people project a *color* onto black people because they are afraid and need to believe in a safe world: the *color* is made of stereotypes and racist assumptions, which hide dangers and uncertainties. The outsider criticizes colored people because they accept their color, they are *blind* to the fact that they live in a world dominated by dread and anxiety. Cross does not want to play with stereotypes, because in order to get rid of a false *color* it is necessary to stop playing with it.

The author retrieves an image used in *Native Son* to describe another aspect of the relationship between white and colored people:

The point is not so much that these capitalists despise their rats, but that they despise themselves and all mankind. To keep their rats contented, they strive to convince them that their rats' lives are more glorious, better, richer than at any time in history, and, in the end, they come to believe in their own lies. (486)

The *rat* is an important symbol in *Native Son*, even though Wright inserts this quote in a section which discusses capitalism and communism; at the very beginning of the novel

Bigger Thomas has to kill a huge black rat which penetrates into the flat where he lives with his family, the frightened animal is cornered and attempts to bite Bigger in an ultimate act of rebellion. The rat can be associated with Bigger, who is forced to live in a *corner of the city* and reacts against capitalists such as Mr. Dalton, who strive to convince colored people that they are living *glorious, better and richer* lives than any time in history. The outsider aims at creating a new existence for himself, away from all kinds of lies.

Wright purposefully chooses to depict Cross and Bigger as unlikable anti-heroes, it is problematic for the reader to feel compassion for protagonists who commit murders and behave aggressively. The author in "How Bigger Was Born" writes: "I swore to myself that if I wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (*Native Son*, 23). After the bittersweet stories of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) Wright decides to shock and provoke, he uses violence, pain and rebellion in order to avoid tears and convey a more authentic message.

3.4 - Cross Damon outside his own self

Outsiders have issues with their identity, they have to live on a separate dimension and comply with their exceptional qualities. Bigger assumes a passive role and is driven by his impulses, Richard is tragically aware of his distinct personality and Cross gradually embraces his uniqueness, trying to rationalize his double consciousness; nonetheless, all of them experience severe estrangement from their own self, and the author exploits Cross in order to explain and describe this painful process more exhaustively.

Wright chooses *dread* as a title for the first book of *The Outsider*. The quote which introduces the chapter, by Kierkegaard, reads: "dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears what one desires" (1). Dread is a negative feeling due to a restriction of human freedom or possibility, a power which *lays hold* of an individual. At the beginning of the novel Cross is overpowered by dread and anxiety, he cannot tear himself away: "what a messy life he was living! It was crazy; it was killing him; it was senseless; and he was a fool to go on living it" (14). Wright exploits free indirect speech to express Cross's turmoils: he is confused, desperate, his life

does not make sense. His condition is very similar to Bigger's, who at the beginning of *Native Son* is afraid of his own impulses and cannot follow them, ashamed of his life and ashamed of his family. Cross is controlled by an *alien power* because he has not renounced his *anonymous existence* yet: “he lay still, his bloodshot eyes staring blankly before him, and drifted into dreams of his problems, compulsively living out dialogues, summing up emotional scenes with his mother, reliving the reactions of his wife, Dot, and his friends” (15). The protagonist tortures himself and tries to interpret his life according to other people's sets of rules (Abbagnano and Fornero, 1992), he focuses on *emotional scenes* with his mother, wife and friends. Cross is afraid of his mother's judgment and haunted by his ex-wife and young mistress, life appears to him as crazy and senseless because it is shaped by other people's decisions and he does not agree with them. Heidegger (1927) suggests that man is not what he is but what he chooses to be and Cross has no possibility to choose: “his rebellious nerves twanged with a terror which his mind sought desperately to deny” (15). The outsider feels his *rebellious nerves* but is not ready to react, his mind seeks to *deny the terror* which lays hold of him and generates hate.

Adell, in her article “Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and the Kierkegaardian Concept of Dread” (1991), argues that:

Like Bigger Thomas's fear, most of the dread Cross experiences prior to the subway accident occurs, therefore, on the ontic level. But the great detriment to his being-in-the world is not the white world as Bigger Thomas experiences it, although it is a world with which he, too, must contend. His great “detriment” is his relationship with Dot Powers and his wife Gladys. (382)

It is not completely true that most of the dread Cross experiences occurs on the ontic level. The protagonist is haunted by an existential sense of dread, which is an *alien power*, and laments that: “his dilemma was the meaning of his life” (24). Solving physical and material issues would not solve Cross's dilemma: “there was no cure for his malady” (24). The ontic level is not even Bigger's main concern, the most *physical* of Wright's outsiders experiences estrangement from his family and friends because of a sense of shame and repulsion toward the *blindness* which has overpowered them, not only because he is crushed by the material pressure exercised by white supremacy. In *The Outsider* Cross uses his superior intellectual faculties to place his dilemma on an ontological and philosophical level, deepening the analysis of a process which Bigger cannot understand completely. Furthermore, even though

Cross's relationship with Dot and Gladys is an important detriment, Cross is also greatly concerned about his life in the white world. Wright often expresses Cross's concern indirectly, using other characters, but this does not mean the outsider is not affected by the problematic social environment.

The subway accident gives Cross the opportunity to abandon his *anonymous existence* and embrace an *authentic existence*, he decides to act and begins a new life, in order to prove to himself and to the world that he is free:

His repudiation of his ties was as though his feelings had been water and those watery feelings had been projected by his desires out upon the surface of the world, like water upon pavements and roofs after a spring rain; [...] now, since last night, since he had broken all of the promises and pledges he had ever made, the water of meaning had begun to drain off the world, had begun to dry up and leave the look of things changed; and now he was seeing an alien and unjustifiable world completely different from him. It was no longer *his* world; it was just *a* world... (116)

The author uses a poetic metaphor and water to describe Cross's existential baptism, the protagonist abandons the superficial world and is born again. Cross has to *repudiate his ties* in order to get rid of the stressing feelings which ruin his existence, after a life haunted by *promises* and *pledges*, obligations and judgments, the outsider is able to see the world as it is: *alien* and *unjustifiable*. Cross's feelings have dried up and everything is different. Hakutani (1996) observes that: "Wright's chief interest in *The Outsider* lies in an exposition of what freedom means to certain individuals" (137) and freedom to Cross means being able to see and understand the world, beyond blindness and fear.

The outsider has to fight in order to preserve his new existence, because blind people reject outsiders; exceptional individuals must be eliminated to maintain the precarious, artificial social order (Escobar, 1997). Cross kills his friend Joe in the attempt to protect his new identity, he has no other choice; however, murder destroys his soul and relegates him to a life made of loneliness and partial self-awareness. Pretense dominates the new life Cross has created for himself, he is forced to feign in order to preserve it and this causes estrangement from his new identity, which is supposed to be based on truth and courage: "imprisoned he was in a state of consciousness that was so infatuated by its own condition that it could not dominate itself; so swamped was he by himself with himself that he could not break forth from behind the bars of that self to claim himself" (149). Cross is *infatuated* by his newly

acquired state of consciousness because it gives him the possibility to choose and the opportunity to create a new world, and yet he cannot *dominate* it. The protagonist feels like Bigger: he has created something which is all his own, but murder and creation are two opposite concepts and generate anxiety, a sense of dread which enters the conscience of the outsider. As Kingsley (1960) observes: “Wright's quest for the authentic takes the path of demonic purgation. Existentialist enlightenment requires a full descent into the darkness of defiance, destruction, hidden desires, and nihilism” (17). Cross has to descend into darkness, where he experiences fear and terror which come from: “within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, and yet not really known to him, a world that was his own and yet unknown. And it was into this strange but familiar world that he was now plunging...” (148). The outsider knows that his new world is vast and *mysterious*, completely *unknown* and possibly dangerous; nonetheless, it is *his and his alone*, it allows him to express his individuality and for this reason he decides to *plunge* into it.

While in *Native Son* Bigger mainly follows his instincts and impulses, in *Black Boy* Richard takes more time to ponder his actions; Cross in *The Outsider* has something in common with both of them, and cannot dominate his own self because of two strong physical and philosophical impulses. The first impulse can be described as “an urge to launch again into life” (151), Cross: “had to be born again, come anew into the world. To live amidst others without an identity was intolerable. In a strict sense he was not really in the world; he was haunting it for his place, pleading for entrance into life”(167). The outsider suffers because of his loneliness, he feels the need to *be born again* and *launch again* into life, even though his exceptional qualities prevent him from gaining entrance. The second impulse is strictly connected with the first one: “he passed the train's huge, sighing, black engine and longed to become as uncaring and passively brutish as that monster that lived on coal. [...] To be a God who could master feeling! If not that, then a towering rock that could feel nothing at all!” (174). Cross understands that his attitude toward life generates anxiety, he feels like Richard who: “began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others. [...] feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a void.” (*Black Boy*, 30). The outsider feels *suspended over a void* and longs for a complete absence of feelings, he acts like a God but cannot get rid of dread and despair. Cross would like to transform into a towering rock which can *feel nothing*, in order to enjoy the *authentic existence* he has embraced.

The protagonist cannot *master feeling* like a God but he decides to act like one when he deliberately kills Gil and Herndon: “he had judged them and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and had carried out a sentence of death upon them” (308). The outsider kills in order to preserve *his sense of life*, his new perspective on a world ruined by blindness. Cross rebels against Gil and Herndon as Bigger rebels against Mary: “Hell, she made me do it! I couldn't help it! She should've known better!” (*Native Son*, 143). Bigger *cannot help it*, he kills Mary because she insults his sense of life too: “She... It was... Hell, I don't know. She asked me a lot of questions. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog” (*Native Son*, 379). The outsider kills in order to live, he rebels against people who do not see individuals, only animals whose lives do not matter. Murder becomes the ultimate act of rebellion in the name of a forgotten *sense of life*, and Cross and Bigger do not deny it: “[Cross] knew exactly what he had done; he had done it deliberately, even though he had not planned it. He had not been blank of mind when he had done it, and he was resolved that he would never claim any such thing” (304) and Bigger feels that: “it was no accident, and he would never say that it was” (*Native Son*, 136). However, ironically Bigger's and Cross's murders transform them into the monsters described by the stereotypes they fight. Bigger becomes the black murderer who rapes white women, and Cross realizes:

He was, yes, he was trapped in the coils of his own doings. He had acted, had shattered the dream that surrounded him, and now the world, including himself in it, had turned mockingly into a concrete, waking nightmare from which he could see no way of escaping. He had become what he had tried to destroy, had taken on the guise of the monster he had slain. (308)

The outsider kills and the world around him turns into a *concrete nightmare*: Cross acts like a God and eliminates two little gods, but becomes *the monster* he has slain. As Coles (1983) observes: “the greater Cross's alienation from himself and humanity, the greater his chances for his own destruction. Cross foreshadows his own annihilation by his violence, which grows increasingly intense as the novel develops” (59). Violence transforms the outsider's world, it *shatters the dream* and mocks the rebel, who plunges deeper into the strange, new world he has created. Unfortunately, alienation leads to self-destruction.

Cross's destiny is doomed, just like Bigger's. Lynch (1996) argues: “both Bigger and Cross sense on some level that their revolt will end disastrously, but their need for asserting

their dignity and expanding the possibility of their identity overrules concern for others and fear for themselves” (261). The outsider has to make a decision: he can either follow his concern for others and fear for himself, or follow the need for *asserting his dignity* and expanding the possibility of *his identity*. He decides to revolt, even though he senses that his revolt will end disastrously.

In *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1886) Raskolnikov confesses and eases his conscience, the author gives him the opportunity to redeem and establish a connection with Sonya. In *The Outsider* Cross tries to establish a connection with Eva, but she refuses and commits suicide in front of a monstrosity she could never have imagined. The outsider wants *love* and *mercy*, he knows he has killed and destroyed other people and his own self, but: “Cross is condemned to a life without hope of human connection or love” (Lynch, 1996, pg. 257). Wright creates an outsider who cannot find a place into the world he has left, because in that world his *sense of life* does not mean anything.

The greatest difference between Cross and his antecedents lies in the fact that he believes he has a mission, he follows his destiny because: “I can't stop as long as men like you keep playing your dirty, tricky games” (400). While Bigger follows his instincts and Richard tries to survive in a complex social environment, Cross rebels because according to him the outsider is: “the strong at the top, who represents modern man. Beyond themselves, their dreams, their hopes, their plans, they know that there is nothing” (485). Hopelessness is a starting point and the final destination, the ultimate truth in a world dominated by dread and anxiety. Cross embraces the contingency described by Sartre⁸, he destroys the tragic blindness which haunted his anonymous existence and transcends the meaningless lives of his friends and family, who are: “afraid of the new and the untried, who fall on their knees and break into a deep sweat when confronted with the horrible truth of the uncertain and enigmatic nature of life” (484). Wright inserts an observation which can be associated with Escobar's, and suggests that the outsider rebels in order to get rid of: “the spiderwebs of ideology, the glittering strands of which are designed to appeal to the hopes of hopeful men” (489). The structure of symbols has to be destroyed, to achieve an *authentic existence*.

As Lynch (1996) rightly points out, Cross's assertion of freedom takes place in the moral vacuum of a godless world; however, in his attempt to become a God the outsider loses sight

⁸ See introduction

of his own self, and for this reason his existence cannot be considered as completely authentic. Cross believes that his only crime is that: “he had cynically scorned, wantonly violated every commitment that civilized men owe, in terms of common honesty and sacred honor, to those with whom they live” (501). The outsider considers himself a God and acts accordingly, he *violates every commitment* and severs all the ties with the people with whom he lives. Apparently Cross wins the battle, he cannot be charged with his crimes and has abandoned any kind of hope, the feeling which belongs to people who fall on their knees when confronted with life, but Houston explains to him that:

Damon, you made one fatal mistake. You saw through all the ideologies, pretenses, frauds, but you did not see through *yourself*. How magnificently you tossed away this God who plagues and helps man so much! But you did not and could not toss out of your heart that part of you from which the God notion had come. And what part is that? It is desire... (565)

Cross does not see through *his own self* and forgets he is a man who desires, not a towering rock which can feel nothing at all. The outsider longs for a connection, even though his existence is all about destroying any kind of connection. Cross: “wanted to be free... to feel what I was worth... what living meant to me... I loved life too much...” (585), he desires the same thing Bigger and Richard desires: freedom, the opportunity to *feel* life because it is something too precious to be obscured by blind hope. It is only at the end of the quest that the outsider understands that the search can't be done alone, Cross's ultimate desire is to: “give the meaning of his life to others... to make a bridge from man to man” (585); as a consequence, when Houston asks him how his life was he can only answer: “It... it was... horrible... [...] because in my heart... I'm... I felt... I'm *innocent*... That's what made the horror” (586). The outsider's life ends tragically, because chasing innocence with a god-like inclination does not take into account the need and desire for a connection with other people. The outsider embraces an *authentic existence* which is not complete, because it lacks a connection with a world which cannot be completely ignored or forgotten.

CHAPTER 4 - The Outsider Underground: Surrealism and Invisibility

In 1942 was published “The Man Who Lived Underground”, a novella originally written as a novel, which the author had to shorten in order to find a publisher. It is the story of a fugitive: Fred Daniels, a black man falsely accused of murder, who hides in the sewers of an unidentified city to avoid capture. The *underground*, a secluded environment separated from the upper world, while challenging the protagonist's spirit allows him to observe the world from a different perspective, changing his consciousness. Wright inserts powerful symbols in a surreal setting, providing essential information about the figure of the outsider. An important source of inspiration for Wright was the novella “Notes from Underground” (1864), written by Dostoevsky, a text which discloses the deep and confused thoughts of an unnamed narrator, who lives underground and discusses his alienation: “a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man” (1). The underground man suffers because of the social and cultural transformations which affect the modern man's conscience (Kenneth, 2004). Dostoevsky's novella is considered the first existentialist novel and presents a protagonist who shares inclinations and impulses with Wright's outsiders: alienation, intelligence, self-loathing and an attitude which betrays emotional distress. Fred Daniels experiences dread, anxiety and estrangement like Bigger, Richard and Cross, and is therefore another character who demonstrates the early connection between existentialism and racial conflict in Wright's works.

The underground, symbolism and surrealism play an important role in another novel which can be useful to study the figure of the outsider: *Invisible Man* (1953), by Ralph Ellison. After he moved to New York, Ellison came in contact with Wright and the two had a long and complicated relationship. The narrator and protagonist of *Invisible Man* has no name, as the protagonist of “Notes from Underground”, and at the end of the story finds himself underground, lost and confused. Invisibility, the dramatic outcome of blindness and stereotypes, is a fundamental trigger in the life of Wright's outsiders. It is useful to consider the invisible man's reaction to invisibility, in order to gain a better understanding of its ramifications.

4.1 - "The Man Who Lived Underground"

Wright's novella focuses on a fundamental phase of the outsider's existence: his descent into the underground. The underground is a special place, a unique dimension in the outsider's consciousness where he can hide and feel the despair which haunts his existence. In the upper world colored people are invisible, they accept a life made of blind hope and tragic stereotypes; the outsider cannot stand it and descends into the underground to feel hopelessness, dread, despair and ultimately try to rebel against them. It is important to analyze Fred Daniels' descent to understand how the outsider's conscience evolves and reacts. As Cappetti, in her article "Black Orpheus: Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" (2001), observes: "The discoveries that Fred Daniels makes in the course of his underground journey are significant and multiple. They concern the racist society aboveground, his own status as an exile and an invisible man, and the language" (41). Life underground is a journey, a peculiar process which changes the consciousness of exceptional individuals.

The underground is a precious refuge, but does not correspond to a fairy-tale world: "the cover clanged into place, muffling the sights and sounds of the upper world. Knee-deep in the pulsing current, he breathed with aching chest, filling his lungs with the hot stench of yeasty rot" (29). The upper world cannot intrude but Fred's chest aches, he has to fight against the pulsing current in a filthy, unwelcoming environment. The underground changes the protagonist's perspective completely: "he had never thought that cars could sound like that" (29) and allows him to explore his consciousness: "everything seemed strange and unreal under here. He stood in darkness for a long time, knee-deep in rustling water, musing" (29). Wright creates a surreal world and provides effective symbols: the outsider ponders existential darkness, while seeking refuge in his exceptional consciousness. Bigger, Richard and Cross, like Fred, experience moments of darkness at the beginning of their journeys: Bigger is *afraid and angry*, Richard feels *suspended over a void* (*Black Boy*, 30) and Cross's nerves *twang with terror* (*The Outsider*, 15).

Fred's descent coincides with relief, confusion and wonder: "it seemed that he had traveled a million miles away from the world" (31). The protagonist of Wright's novella understands he has plunged into a separate world, he explores the underground and gradually

becomes aware of his new perspective:

The singing was on the other side of a brick wall. Excited, he wanted to watch the service without being seen. [...] He edged to the crevice and saw a segment of black men and women, dressed in white robes, singing, holding tattered songbooks in their black palms. His first impulse was to laugh, but he checked himself. [...] Pain throbbed in his legs and a deeper pain, induced by the sight of those black people groveling and begging for something they could never get, churned in him. (33)

Fred Daniels lives outside his community like Bigger, Richard and Cross. He is on the other side and watches without being seen, the *brick wall* allows him to feel and study his pain. Black men and women are symbolically dressed in *white robes*, they grovel and beg for something unattainable, which belongs to the white, stereotyped world. Fred cannot laugh, he stays aloof and refuses to take part in a shameful ritual, based on fear and senseless hope. The protagonist explores the underground and obtains more proof of blindness and unjustified hope when he accidentally enters a movie theater: “he stood in a box of the reserved section of a movie house and the impulse he had had to tell the people in the church to stop their singing seized him. These people were laughing at their lives, he thought with amazement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves” (38). Wright uses the movie as a symbol and creates a parallel between the motion picture, a projection of shadows, and the spectators, people who *act like shadows* and accept an *anonymous existence* based on unfair, preconceived images. The spectators *act* like Bigger's relatives, who: “wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above the others; and they were blind to what did not fit” (*Native Son*, 136). Laughter disturbs Fred, who realizes that: “these people were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying” (38). The protagonist feels like Cross, who cannot smile while Negroes roll in laughter (*The Outsider*, 35).

Fred Daniels discovers a cave in his underground world, which becomes the starting point of his existential quest. Young, in “Phenomenology and Textual Power in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground” (2001), argues that: “the cave provides Daniels an uncontaminated realm of understanding in which he can examine whether the world of his daily life, the aboveground, is real or merely an illusion. In this new realm, Daniels becomes a cultural and ideological explorer, an archaeologist of ideational freedom” (73). Fred

exploits his privileged position and examines both his worlds, debating which one is real and which one is not. However, the cave and the underground are not an *uncontaminated realm* of understanding: they also generate fear and terror, altering Fred's consciousness. Wright inserts existentialist elements throughout the story, showing that the underground does not mean only enlightenment, but also sufferance: "the images of terror that thronged his brain would not let him sleep. [...] Then dread paralyzed him. How long had he slept? Was it day or night now?" (43). *Terror* and *dread* are always present during a quest which causes estrangement and detachment. The protagonist knows the underground cannot be a permanent solution, otherwise he would become: "like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch" (40). Fred knows he has to leave the cave, but leaving would mean facing the policemen who have wrongly accused him.

Wright exploits dreams to show the protagonist's distress, describing unconscious images:

His dreaming made him feel that he was standing in a room watching over his own nude body lying stiff and cold upon a white table. At the far end of the room he saw a crowd of people huddled in a corner, afraid of his body. Though lying upon dead upon the table, he was standing in some mysterious way at his side, warding off the people, guarding his body and laughing to himself as he observed the situation. (66)

Fred is concerned about his condition, he watches his own body upon a *white table* and notices that it is stiff and cold, there is no life in it; however, he is alive and stands at his side, *warding off* the people. Fred laughs because he grasps the absurdity inherent in his existence: a part of him is dead, but he is aware of it and guards his body. The underground shapes the outsider's consciousness, he has to figure out how to deal with the aboveground in order to protect and resuscitate his dead body.

The white world causes blindness, it is: "the dead world of sunshine and rain he had left, the world that had condemned him, branded him guilty" (55). Fred examines the *illusions* of the aboveground and realizes the upper world is based on a senseless order, it is a *dead world* which condemns innocent people. The protagonist of Wright's novella steals and questions the basic assumptions of the white world, such as money, time and justice: "he stood in the dark, wet with sweat, brooding about the diamonds, the rings, the watches, the money; [...] he stared with vacant eyes, convinced that all of these images, with their tongueless reality, were

striving to tell him something..." (59). Fred has an intuition, symbolically represented by the *slight shocks* he receives and the sudden illumination which *blinds him*: wealth and time do not mean anything underground, they finally reveal themselves as *magical objects* which white people use to assert their power. The outsider plasters the cave walls with green bills, watches, and scatters diamonds over the floor: "he had triumphed over the world aboveground! He was free!" (62). However, Fred's intuition has significant consequences, which cause estrangement. Time loses its meaning: "he did not attempt to set them at any given hour, for there was no time for him now" (62), money and the other basic assumptions of the white world, the *spiderweb of ideology*, burst and dissolve. Fred has triumphed, but: "what was his name? He stared, trying to remember. He stood and glared about the dirty cave, his name on the tip of his lips. But it would not come to him. Why was he here? Yes, he had been running away from the police. But why? His mind was blank" (61). Fred's anonymous existence has been destroyed and he does not remember his name: his previous identity, which only made sense aboveground, suddenly disappears. As Cappetti (2001) points out: "this moment of intense alienation from the world aboveground and from its absurd values is one among several of increasing intensity that signal the transformation of Fred Daniels" (49). The outsider forgets his name and *feels* his existence, he loses faith in magical and material values and discovers a new world made of glittering darkness, diametrically opposite to the *dark sunshine* aboveground.

Nonetheless, Fred cannot stay underground, because: "emotionally he hovered between the world aboveground and the world underground" (48), his exceptional consciousness does not allow him to live like a *sightless worm*, his intuition causes *pain in his eyeballs* and forces him to act. Fred is restless, like Bigger, Richard and Cross: "he would think of going up again in the streets, but fear would hold him still. He stood in the middle of the cave, surrounded by green walls and a laughing floor, trembling. He was going to do something, but what? Yes, he was afraid of himself, afraid of doing some nameless thing" (64). Fear and pain are always present and prove that the outsider's life is made of dramatic choices, which endanger his consciousness. Fred knows he has to *do something*, but is afraid of himself; he is trapped in the coils of his own doings (*The Outsider*, 308), and as Cross is afraid of becoming a *monster*: "maybe *anything's* right, he mumbled. Yes, if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture" (64). It

is a crucial moment for the outsider, who has to decide how to react against the tragic truth he has learned: Fred considers *any* act, for a brief moment, but ultimately makes a decision which differentiates him from the other outsider figures created by Wright. While Bigger and Cross kill and create a new world for themselves, Fred attempts to establish a connection: “he wanted to run from this cave and yell his discovery to the world” (62). The protagonist of Wright's novella maintains hope in hopelessness and resolves to yell his *discovery*, choosing a selfless form of rebellion. Cappetti (2001) argues that: “the only possible explanation for his return is that Fred Daniels reaches a new level of consciousness and clarity with regard to the aboveground, and with regard to race and class oppression in the aboveground, that preclude his remaining underground” (53). Fred Daniels exhibits a new level of consciousness, he is aware of the difficulty inherent in his choice: “[he was seized by] a cold dread at the thought of the actions he knew he would perform if he went out into that cruel sunshine” (73) and decides to share his view on *race and class oppression*; nonetheless, he does not realize it is not possible to *tell* the underground to other people, it needs to be experienced.

Fred tries to establish a communication with *his* people in the church, but they do not listen to him: “-Say!- he shouted. - Many turned to look at him, but the song rolled on. His arm was jerked violently. -I'm sorry, Brother, but you can't do that in here” (75). The outsider shouts, but *the song rolls on*. Failure does not stop Fred, who decides to share his discovery with the white world:

Yes, the police... That was it! [...] they had beaten him, accused him, and had made him sign a confession of his guilt. He would go there and clear up everything, make a statement. What statement? He did not know. He was the statement, and since it was all so clear to him, surely he would be able to make it clear to others (76).

The outsider proves his boldness and audacity: he attempts to clear up everything with the people who *made him sign* a confession, the same who are responsible for the cruel sunshine and the state of *eternal anxiety* which haunts colored people. Young (2001) observes that: “[Fred] liberates his subjectivity from aboveground control and heroically decides that he must generate a text about his underground discoveries so that those discoveries will be accessible to the aboveground” (72). The outsider chooses heroism over selfishness, but unfortunately does not know *what statement* he should generate in order to make his discoveries accessible. He thinks *he is the statement*, but it is not enough: “-what's your

name?- He opened his lips to answer and no words came. He had forgotten. But what did it matter if he had? It was not important” (78). Wright uses a restricted point of view to highlight Fred's mistake, he cannot be understood because the name and identity he has *shaken off* underground are still fundamental in the upper world, they are indispensable tools without which it is impossible to establish a communication: “panic filled him. Yes, they were indifferent to what he would say! They were waiting for him to speak and they would laugh at him” (82). The policemen cannot hear or see Fred, they only see a *black wastrel* who cannot speak their language, and expect him to act like a clown; they behave as the clerks Cross has to deal with: “they wanted, needed to believe such of Negroes and it helped them to feel racially superior” (*The Outsider*, 218).

Fred tastes again invisibility, the surreal state of non-existence: “he stared, thunderstruck; the sun of the underground was fleeing and the terrible darkness of the day stood before him” (83); however, he does not give up: “they did not believe him, but he *had* to make them believe him!” (83). The outsider *must* react against invisibility, he cannot go back to his cave alone because his unique consciousness condemns him to action. His last resort is to show the policemen the underground and make them see what he saw: “-let me show you the cave- he said. - Come one, and you'll see” (87). Unfortunately, Fred does not understand that white people *do not want* to see, they need to feel racially superior in order to win their fear and *tame the world* (*The Outsider*, 479). The policemen joke: “-say, boy,- Lawson said soothingly, -will you show us the underground” (87) and ultimately kill the outsider, to reassert their dominance and get rid of a potentially harmful individual:

He looked in amazement at the blurred white faces looming above him. They shot me, he said to himself. [...] His jaw sagged and his mouth gaped soundless. A vast pain gripped his head and gradually squeezed out consciousness. As from a great distance he heard hollow voices. -What did you shoot him for, Lawson?- -I had to.- -Why?- -You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things.- (92)

Fred Daniels reaches a *new level of consciousness*, after his descent into the underground, but has too much faith in other people's consciousness. While Bigger, Richard and Cross create a new world only for themselves, Fred actually sacrifices his life in the attempt to make a bridge from man to man. His mouth *gapes soundless* after he is shot, in an absence of sound made of incredulity before a tragic, definitive awareness which *squeezes out* consciousness.

White people have to shoot *his kind*, because they are dangerous: outsiders threaten to *wreck things* and tamper with white supremacy.

4.2 - Invisibility and its ramifications: *Invisible Man*

The outsider rebels against blind hope in a world dominated by stereotypes, preconceived images which generate invisibility. Invisibility means an anonymous existence based on unfair assumptions, which erase colored people's consciousness. The dominant community is responsible for a social environment which feeds on stereotypes and enslaves the outsider's community, physically and mentally. Bigger, Richard, Cross and Fred react against invisibility and reassert their status as human beings, demonstrating their ability to choose and feel life. Bigger and Cross kill and try to create a new world for themselves, Richard cultivates his unique consciousness with literacy and Fred attempts to create a connection with the white world; however, invisibility can have other ramifications. For instance, the nameless narrator and protagonist of *Invisible Man* (who symbolically hides underground like Fred Daniels) chooses to write about his experience to pass on the things he has learned. It is useful to analyze the prologue, the epilogue and one episode from the second chapter of Ellison's novel, in order to appreciate the protagonist's reaction and to study invisibility.

The nameless narrator provides a clear definition of invisibility:

I am an invisible man. [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me. [...] That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. (3)

Invisibility is the outcome of a *peculiar disposition* of the eyes of those people who *refuse* to see certain men. Larkin, in his essay "Postwar Liberalism, Close Reading and You: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (2008), observes that: "black Americans were invisible as human beings because white people refused to see them, preferring instead to engage in cultural and historical fantasies about them" (275). Cultural and historical fantasies are *figments of their imagination*, false and unfair stereotypes.

In the second chapter of *Invisible Man* the nameless protagonist has to show around the

campus Mr. Norton, one of the rich white men who fund the university he attends. It is interesting to notice how his name and figure is similar to Mr. Dalton in *Native Son*: they are powerful white men who strive to convince colored people that their lives are more *glorious, better and richer* than at any time in history (*The Outsider*, 486); however, they ultimately need to feel superior. Such an attitude feeds stereotypes and forces colored people to adapt and play with them, in order to survive in a hostile social context. Ellison inserts a dramatic and shocking episode, to explain how invisibility works and the deleterious consequences it has: Jim Trueblood's story concerns incest, racial bestiality and preconceived images which have to be preserved in order to maintain white supremacy, a social structure which the nameless narrator, as Wright's outsiders, cannot accept. Mr. Norton and Trueblood plunge into a different dimension when they meet, they fall into a familiar pattern. Mr Norton says: "I must talk to you" (51), and the verb "must" expresses the almost inexplicable urge which compels the rich white man to listen to the black farmer's story. Trueblood is perfectly at ease, he answers "without surprise" (51) and is ready to *act*. The nameless narrator is excluded, he sees Mr. Norton "staring into Trueblood's face as though reading a message which I could not perceive" (51), the farmer places his hand on the narrator's shoulder but he shakes it off and refuses to be a part of the shameful exchange. The protagonist is excluded because the conversation takes place on a different dimension, ruled by stereotypes which the narrator has not been trained to recognize yet. The situation is absurd: Trueblood has committed a crime, he has impregnated both his daughter and his wife, and yet Mr. Norton is fascinated. *White folks* are not disturbed by abnormality, they are disturbed by normality and want proof that black people are not their equals. A conclusion has already been drawn: colored people are beasts incapable of controlling their instincts, Trueblood has accepted the inevitability of this supposition and gives *white folks* what they want: "he talked willingly, with a kind of satisfaction, no trace of hesitancy or shame" (53). Nonetheless, the black farmer is not completely passive and exploits his speech to demonstrate that there is something more behind the stereotypes: he tells his story in a "deep, incantatory" (54) way and drops hints which tell another truth, elements which cannot be picked up by Mr. Norton. Trueblood uses poetic expressions, similes, metaphors such as: "all of a sudden a flock of little white geese flies out of the bed" (58) and a style which clashes with the stereotype of the black beast. The farmer tells Mr. Norton the story of a black man who cannot dominate his animal instinct, a

beast who rapes his own daughter while dreaming about having sex with a white woman; he does it because he knows that Mr. Norton wants to hear such a story, the tale becomes a metaphor for the pressure exercised by white supremacy on colored people. Trueblood had no choice before he committed the crime and has no choice afterward, he decides to exploit the absurdity, obtain money and deny his consciousness. The nameless narrator is taken aback, he does not believe in what he sees and is profoundly shocked, a reaction which proves he has a subtler consciousness and wants to react against invisibility and what it causes.

The invisible man ponders his condition and debates whether invisibility can be a favorable or an unfavorable condition: “It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves” (3). When the stereotypes which generate it are exploited, invisibility can be mistaken for an advantage. For instance, as Trueblood, Shorty in *Black Boy* obtains money. Jarensky, in her essay “Invisibility Embraced: The Object as a site of Agency in Ellison's *Invisible Man*” (2010), argues that invisibility can be considered as a site of power and a viable, even desirable choice (85); however, the nameless narrator clarifies his position and laments that, when invisible: “you ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you do strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognizes you” (4). Invisibility causes pain and existential estrangement, damaging self and identity. The protagonist insists on *the need to convince yourself*, because to be unseen heightens the risk of losing *sight* of real life. As a consequence, invisibility is *not* a viable or desirable choice but a *nightmare* which makes you *doubt if you really exist*.

The invisible man shares basic impulses with Wright's outsiders. He feels shame: “I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs” (5) and almost resorts to violence: “in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat” (4); however, he chooses a different course of action: “most of the time [...] I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones” (5). The protagonist of Ellison's novel, even though ashamed, does not slit throats or attempt to establish dangerous connections: he *walks softly* and takes time to examine his invisibility underground, entering a *state of hibernation* (6). The nameless narrator goes through a process of intellectual enlightenment, the underground means to him a *new level of consciousness*, as it does to Fred Daniels. Allegorically, the invisible man has

light in the hole where he lives: “there are exactly 1369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it” (7), a detail which establishes a parallel with Fred's cave. The protagonist also provides a specific definition of hibernation: “a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13), foreshadowing the decision he makes in the epilogue.

At the end of the story the invisible man analyzes his existence and becomes fully aware of the fact that invisibility: “placed me in a hole - or showed me the hole I was in - [...] So I took the cellar; I hibernated. I got away from it all. But that wasn't enough. I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the mind, the *mind*. It wouldn't let me rest” (573). The underground and hibernation are not a solution because there is the *mind*, something unstoppable and uncontrollable. The exceptional faculties of the invisible man do not allow him to rest or be still, it is impossible for him to accept invisibility and live among stereotypes and blindness, not even hidden in his enlightened hole: “deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. *That* is real soul-sickness” (575). The nameless narrator cannot stand naked and shivering, he cannot allow millions of eyes to *look through him*, and decides to react.

Rebellion, to the invisible man, means that: “the hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath” (580). He comes up and writes, because he has learned *some things* and: “so I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love” (580). The nameless narrator chooses interaction and involvement in the sick world of *dark sunshine*:

I must come out, I must emerge. [...] I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play. (581)

Ellison repeats the key factors which lead to the invisible man's choice: hibernation is over, he has to come out. He does not: “wantonly violate every commitment that civilized men owe to those with whom they live” (*The Outsider*, 501), the nameless narrator wants to play a *socially responsible* role and goes back into society, shaking off the old skin. However, the invisible man does not underestimate invisibility, he knows he is *no less invisible* without the old skin and does not attempt to make a fragile bridge from man to man, like Fred Daniels.

To love and hate means denouncing the *things* learned underground, during the exceptional life of a human being who does not surrender to violence and despair in the attempt to overcome invisibility.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates a connection between the protagonists of Wright's major works: the outsider evolves and develops, as an individual who has to live outside multiple social groups and fight for freedom.

Bigger Thomas cannot stand to live with his family and to share their attitude toward life, he is ashamed of his mother, brother and sister. The same thing happens to Richard, who has to leave home in order to escape close-mindedness in a world dominated by blind hope. In particular, Richard refuses to accept religion as a solution to all problems, he rebels against his grandmother and ultimately goes away. Cross repudiates his wife and children, he is an intellectual who chooses another identity over his previous existence, characterized by a dramatic lack of freedom. Bigger, Richard and Cross are colored men who live outside their community, a group haunted by poverty, ignorance and helplessness. Racial identity plays an essential role, it is the main cause of the *anonymous existence* which the outsider cannot tolerate. Bigger is afraid of the white world, he murders to feel alive and to get rid of the pain. Richard refuses to play with stereotypes, he does not accept a subservient role and does not want to renounce his identity in order to survive. Cross uses his superior intellect to go beyond fear and stereotypes, creating a new identity which suits his needs. The white status quo is the outer world, the ultimate taboo which prevents the outsider from obtaining freedom and an *authentic existence*. Bigger cannot speak when he is in the presence of white people, he acts and kills to destroy fear and uncertainty, incapable of understanding his condition. Richard reads and writes, he observes how colored people react to white people's presence and understands the profound injustice which governs his world. Cross refuses to be afraid, studies the dominant community's reign of terror and murders in the attempt to crush and expose the fear which generates stereotypes, denouncing the absurd and biased need for a secured world based on preconceived images. *Angst* and *despair* persecute the outsider: restriction of human freedom and loss of hope are fundamental triggers to Bigger, Richard and Cross, who rebel and react in order to obtain an *authentic existence* based on a true understanding of the world. In *The Outsider* Wright defines and investigates existentialist feelings in a more complete and detailed fashion, but the same principles are present in

Native Son and *Black Boy*. The outsider lives outside his own self: while his rebellion allows him to embrace a more authentic existence, he has to sever all the ties with the world, ultimately experiencing both loneliness and tragic awareness. At the end of his quest Cross understands that it is not possible to establish a connection, it is not possible to “make a bridge from man to man” if the search is done alone, because “alone a man is nothing” (*The Outsider*, 585). Fred Daniels in *The Man Who Lives Underground* provides essential information on the figure of the outsider, in a surreal environment which highlights the existential dilemma which causes rebellion and violence. Invisibility, blindness and stereotypes generate *anonymous existence* and the outsider cannot accept it, he rebels and kills in a tragic quest for freedom and *authentic existence*. Ellison provides an alternative with *Invisible Man*.

In conclusion, it is important to consider Bigger, Richard and Fred together with Cross Damon in order to gain a better understanding of the figure of the outsider and its existential implications. Further studies to identify other significant characters in Wright's work should result in a more comprehensive picture of this fundamental figure. Also, a more detailed comparison with Ellison's *Invisible Man* should provide satisfactory outcomes.

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