

C.L. de Visser
3772047
Israëlslaan 2, Utrecht
BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University
British English
17-07-2015
5806 words

Supervisor: Dr. T.J. Idema
Second Reader: Dr. C. Aaftink

The Transitional Protagonist in the Existentialist Novel

A Literary Analysis of Richard Wright's *The Outsider* through Sartrean Existentialism

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Introduction

“Why were some people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be?” (Wright 24). This question posed by protagonist Cross Damon in Richard Wright’s novel *The Outsider* (1953) illustrates Wright’s alienated position from society and his feeling that he has no control of his life. The novel is simultaneously a representation of the segregated position of the African American.

After a successful literary life in the United States, Wright’s move to France in 1946 enabled him to obtain a distanced perspective of the African American experience and get in touch with existentialism. His move allowed him to become inspired by French philosophers such as Sartre, Camus and De Beauvoir, away from the American society that had been saturated by apartheid and slavery. As a result of this apartheid, the African American community still felt racially segregated from the rest of the United States (Kersten 13). Distanced from post-colonial America, Wright continued his literary career in France where existentialism dominated intellectuals and the public sphere (Baert 640). Under these circumstances Wright wrote *The Outsider*, which will serve as the primary source for this thesis, a novel depicting the daily struggle caused by apartheid and offering the solution provided by existentialism.

The position of Cross in *The Outsider* is the position of an outsider in an irrational universe: he is considered a stranger by the African American community as well as the American white culture. Cross represents the individual’s attempt to find meaning in an irrational world (Bailly 1). The reason for specifically selecting *The Outsider* is that through the perspective of existentialism, Wright’s view on the position of the segregated African American can be seen more clearly in this novel. The depiction of Cross as the ultimate outsider can also be regarded as a representation of Wright himself. Although Wright has never stated that *The Outsider* was intended as autobiographical, the novel shows striking

resemblances between author and protagonist: both deemed a radical move necessary in their life, were closely connected to Marxism and communism, and deemed elements of the philosophical school of existentialism a solution for the segregated African American.

Due to Wright's personal childhood experiences of segregation, existential elements can be found prior to his relationship with Sartre. While critics like Coles and Baldwin argue there has been a transition in Wright's work due to his move to France (Coles 53), others are hesitant to make this claim and argue instead that the distress of his early youth in Mississippi was the main factor that brought existential elements to his work (Introduction 1379).

Because of his personal experience in his early childhood with living under Jim Crow laws, Wright started emphasising anyone's right to have individual freedom. He quickly became the first, and one of the most prominent voices of the African American community because of the excellent way he transformed his reminiscences into words. (Moskowitz 58).

Rather than arguing that Sartre was a decisive influence on Wright, this thesis demonstrates that through the perspective of Sartrean existentialism, Wright's call for individual freedom for the African American can be understood more clearly. Existentialism is a philosophical school of thought that stemmed late in the nineteenth century and reached its pinnacle after World War II, under the influence of Sartre who stated that no individual can disclaim their responsibility towards others, which was the case during World War II (Baert 639). Existentialism opposes any situation in which people or organisations impose ethics and morality on others, restricting their individual freedom and it stresses the importance of the human being as a unique individual (Macquarrie 67). The essence of existentialism lies in an understanding of the human subject, as living in an incomprehensible world that lacks any purpose. The individual subject becomes the centre of his world, allowing him to determine his laws and, consequently, enabling him to opt for living without constraints. For Sartre,

despite the fact that the human being lacks definite knowledge of right and wrong, he is responsible and accountable for his own actions and determines his fate.

Analysing *The Outsider* from an existentialist perspective will provide the reader with Wright's solution to the segregated position of the African American community. The situation Wright opposed in his works is the imposition of constraints on the African American community by the distant, dominant white culture. The existentialist elements of dread, alienation, and freedom of choice (which will be explained and analysed in more detail below) return clearly in the character of Damon, the protagonist of Wright's novel, whose personality develops throughout the plot as a result of fundamental changes in his life that are closely related to, and can be seen more clearly through, the philosophy of existentialism. Damon's existential difficulties have become an internal conflict. He disavows his ethnic background and takes full responsibilities for his choices, such as the rejection of religion, the killing of four antagonists, and the sexual intercourse with a minor.

In *The Outsider*, Wright uses the existentialist elements of dread, alienation, and freedom of choice to disclose a dynamic change of the protagonist's character. In this thesis it will be argued that through Sartre's existentialist perspective, the character development can be seen more clearly. This is fruitful because it provides an exemplary case of how segregated minorities can change their perspective on their situation and change their perspective on themes of equality and freedom. The emphasis will be to what extent the character development shows existential elements. First, this thesis will explore the existential field and relate this to Wright and the African American experience. Subsequently, the existentialist nature of Wright's *The Outsider* will be analysed and related to the character development of the protagonist. The analysis of the novel as existentialist is not new, since scholars like Fabre and Widmer have already written on this, but this thesis will add to the current studies on

Wright and existentialism an analysis of the character development through the perspective of Sartrean existentialism, which has not been explored yet.

Chapter 1 – Wright and Sartrean Existentialism

Prior to analysing the protagonist in *The Outsider* from Sartre's existentialistic perspective, it is important to consider the African-American experience of racial segregation and how Wright relates to this experience. Furthermore, it is important to observe what Wright's move to France entailed, to what extent this move was necessary for the author and the novel, and in what way the idea of his move resonates in the novel. In Paris, he encountered French philosopher Sartre and the school of philosophy called existentialism. It was already mentioned that Wright's work can be analysed more clearly through the perspective of this Sartrean existentialism, but what is this perspective and what makes it fruitful? Exploring Wright's personal relationship with African Americans and their segregated position will also reveal the significance of the novel.

Wright and the African-American experience of racial segregation

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

desires, but with *The Outsider* he also provides the African-American community with the existentialist perspective on the human being and, consequently, a critical perspective on their position as a segregated minority.

Wright's literary success originates in his ability to personally identify with the African Americans who were segregated from the white Americans. Wright was born on a plantation near Natchez in 1908, close to the border between Mississippi and Louisiana (Moskowitz 58). According to Moskowitz, Wright's childhood and upbringing were "a bitter and fearful experience" (58). He was raised by his mother, as well as his uncle, due to the fact that his mother suffered from a stroke and the fact that his father left the family when Wright was six years old. Moreover, he started attending high school late and his employers racially abused him. He experienced the racial segregation caused by the Jim Crow laws in Mississippi personally. According to Hoelscher, despite the fact that Mississippi had the fewest number of Jim Crow laws, it was "the most racially restrictive and oppressive state during the entire segregation period" (659), which indicates to what extent racism was rooted in the customs of the white South. Wright was reluctant to describe this racial segregation as "The Negro problem", but called it "a white problem" instead, meaning that the white feeling of superiority was the problem rather than the African-American feeling of inferiority" (Wright qtd. in Hoelscher 662). Wright's literary career started after his move to Chicago in 1927, where he worked in a post office. In Chicago he met members of the Marxist writers' organisation John Reed Club and in 1933, Wright joined the Communist Party. As a result of his proactive attitude and participation in the Communist Party, he quickly developed a distinctive perspective on political and social matters (Graham 18). Wright left the Party because his ideas on individual action and self-responsibility diverged from the Communist emphasis on collectivity. As a writer, Wright was deeply convinced that all literature was protest and that all literature "should be an instrument of social progress" (Moskowitz 61).

His influence as a writer is summarized by McCall: “Wright is the father of the contemporary black writer because when we come to Wright’s best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America” (McCall qtd. in Moskowitz 61). This central question concerns what it means to be an African American in a racist and segregated society.

Wright moved to Paris in 1946 and established a friendship with French philosophers Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus, which resulted in Wright’s particular interest in their philosophies of existentialism (Graham 22). According to Graham, Wright regarded existentialism as a philosophy that could become a solution for the oppressed, in this case the segregated African American (22). Considering the fact that Wright moved to Paris at the height of the “enormous popularity of existentialist philosophy between 1944 and 1947”, this thesis will mainly focus on Sartre (Baert 23).

Sartrean Existentialism and how it relates to Wright

The core of Sartrean existentialism consists of the notion of human subjectivity and the idea that the existence precedes the essence of a man, both resulting in individual freedom. Although it is difficult to present one, widely accepted definition of existentialism, French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre defines it as a modern philosophical movement where “man is responsible for what he is. ... It puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders” (22). His ideas are explained by Macquarrie who summarizes it the following:

Existentialists emphasize the unique existence of humans as concrete individuals involved in a specific historical and social world in which they are not things in themselves or objects, which Sartre referred to as “en-soi” or being-in-itself, which lacks consciousness and self-awareness, but rather self-reflecting and outward-looking

agents of action and decision, which he referred to as “pour-soi” or being-for-itself, which has consciousness and transcendence (67)

As he explains, Sartre’s existentialism is unique in its emphasis on the “pour-soi”, which means that the conscious human being, who has no pre-ordained purpose, has the freedom to choose what it will be or become: “Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself” (Sartre 22). This is an important insight for this analysis since it will return as a central theme in *The Outsider* later on. What we have seen is that Sartrean existentialism emphasises on the individual freedom to define oneself, and we will now analyse the responsibility that follows from this freedom.

The core of Sartrean existentialism is that a man is defined by his actions. Sartre emphasises the importance of individual responsibility. According to him, the major notions of existentialism are: dread, alienation and freedom of choice (22, 25). Especially freedom of choice and alienation are important existential elements to Wright, since these elements enable his protagonist to develop in *The Outsider*, and the element of dread will frequently return in the novel as well. These three notions come together in a term called ‘subjectivism’, which is made explicit by Sartre in a lecture he delivered in Paris called “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946). Sartre defines subjectivism in two ways: on the one hand as mankind’s individual freedom, and, on the other hand, as “man’s inability to transcend human subjectivity” (Sartre 24): a human being is nothing more than the accumulation of his actions (38). When existentialism precedes man’s essence it means that the human being has no constituents that together can form a human being, but a man can only define himself by his actions. In addition, having a preordained set of characteristics would deny or at least limit the liberty to create one’s personal identity. By eliminating the idea that there are predestined elements in every human being and the idea that one’s surroundings determine someone’s identity and actions, Sartre was able to call for individual responsibility. He regarded this

responsibility as the result of making consciously decisions based on personally developed values. Wright's view runs parallel with Sartre's view, since he encourages the African American community to live according to their values and not those imposed by the dominant white culture (Bailly 20).

In this thesis, the three main Sartrean existentialist elements alienation, anguish, and the previously discussed freedom of choice will be used as perspectives to analyse *The Outsider*. Firstly, a human being is able to alienate himself from religion, society, and people, when he has individual freedom of choice. Sartre mainly focuses on alienation or abandonment in the context of the absence of a God. He accuses some unspecified French intellectuals of suppressing God and simultaneously believing that the status quo of morality, ethics, and social values would remain, which he deems naïve (Sartre 28). Morality and ethics must have existence in themselves, instead of being imposed on mankind by a God. According to Sartre, the existentialist "finds it embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven" (Sartre 28). The ramification of this insight is that the human subject is free from any restrictions posed upon mankind by God. In the absence of a God, any action and type of conduct is allowed, but, similarly, behaviour cannot be justified anymore; hence Sartre defines this situation as "man is condemned to be free" (29). Like Sartre, Wright's also acknowledged the importance of alienation since Wright regarded it as a way to cease the African Americans' inferior position, but he also recognised the possible dangers, which will return in the novel. Secondly, anguish, or despair, stems from the responsibility and the consciousness that the taken decisions influence the entirety of mankind (Sartre 25). The responsibility someone bears inflicts or influences more than only the decision-taker. This does not prevent people from acting, but presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities" (27). Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of dread as "a condition for action", rather than a state of paralysis

(27), which returns in the first part of the novel, when Cross is subjected to his fear. In addition, the absence of a transcendent God is one of the essential reasons why freedom of choice plays a role in existentialism: “You are free ... to ... invent. No rule of general ethics can show you what you ought to do” (Sartre 33). With Sartre’s view on existentialism explicated, it is now also important to bring into focus Wright’s life and persona and the context in which he wrote *The Outsider*.

Wright and the French Existentialists

Wright not only developed his perspective on existentialism through his contact with Sartre in France, but his personal experience with racial segregation in his early life played a major role as well. Due to his personal experience of racial segregation, which was legalized by Jim Crow laws, he had developed several ideas and principles that could be classified as existentialist independently from the French philosophers. This experience became his intrinsic motivation for exploring existentialism thoroughly after having encountered it personally at its pinnacle in Europe for the first time. It is true Wright had already encountered Sartre and his ideas in the United States before they met in Paris, but the French philosophers were definitely not the only ones to inspire Wright. According to Fabre, analysing existential philosophers from European countries other than France, such as Denmark, Russia and Germany, will reveal as many connections with Wright’s work as the French philosophers (49). However, considering the fact that Wright arrived in France at the height of Sartrean existentialism, this thesis will only focus on Sartre (Baert 23).

The development of existentialism was catalysed by World War II and the tensions during its aftermath. Despite the fact that existentialism has always been related to philosophers like Kierkegaard and Sartre, the existential school was not an invention of individuals, but a way of thinking developed during and after World War II up to the time of

the Cold War (Baert 620). It was a period marked by the racial segregation of Jews, Romani people, the segregation of homosexuals and people with disabilities, resulting in the desire for individual freedom irrespective of race or gender. Wright's move to France freed him from the American right-wing press, enabling him to think without restraints in a literary and philosophical sphere that was dominated by the Marxist and Communist thinkers he was interested in (Baert 635). Additionally, *The Outsider* was written at the pinnacle of McCarthyism in the United States, which marks a period of anti-communism: communists like Wright were under intense governmental scrutiny from which he was freed after moving to France.

Wright's close relationship with Sartre was based on friendship as well as their shared political ideology of the non-Communist left. Wright fostered a close relationship with several French philosophers, including Camus and De Beauvoir, but he was especially close to Sartre (Fabre 42). Beside the literary interests, what bound them most was their left-wing political preference for the communist ideals of equality and the classless and stateless society. Beside this, Sartre and Wright were also anti-American in the sense that they both demanded unlimited independence for the African American, which can be seen as the predominant extrinsic motivation for growing intellectually towards each other (Fabre 44-45).

As we have seen, Wright encountered Sartrean existentialism in France, which emphasises the individual freedom of a man to determine his being and his future by his actions. This notion returns in *The Outsider* and is important to Wright and the segregated African American. This thesis will now use the Sartrean perspective in order to see the character development of Cross more clearly in the novel.

Chapter 2 – Analysis of *The Outsider*

In the previous chapter, the Sartrean existentialism that is useful to the analysis of the novel was observed, in particular the three main elements of anguish, alienation and individual freedom. It was seen that Wright is related to the perspective of Sartrean existentialism and that this perspective provides better insights into the character development. Furthermore, relevant context of Wright's life and in which *The Outsider* was written, was provided. In this chapter, the plot of *The Outsider* will be recapitulated. Subsequently, the novel will be analysed by means of the three main Sartrean existential elements, which are explained in the previous chapter. Finally, it will be illustrated in what way Wright relates Cross's alienated position to the position of the African Americans.

The Outsider is a novel in which the protagonist develops into an amoral, lawless, individual human being as a result of a deliberate choice to distance himself from society. The protagonist in *The Outsider*, Cross Damon, becomes gradually limited in his freedom by the efforts of his blackmailing ex-wife and pregnant underage girlfriend. He decides to take advantage when he is mistakenly identified as the victim of a fatal subway accident, giving him the opportunity to take up a new identity as Lionel Lane, a name he steals from a grave, and to embark on a fruitless pursuit of truth. Since he thinks that the end - protecting his new identity - justifies the means, this leads to the killing of four people. He moves away from his miserable position in Chicago and discovers the Communist Party, where he meets Eva Blount. She is the wife of party member Gil Blount, who was forced by the party to marry her in order to profit from her intelligence. Cross eventually murders Gil in order to free Eva. Cross then meets district attorney Ely Houston who suspects him of murder. She is reluctant to judge him and believes that ignoring his actions is a harsher punishment. In the end, he is shot by Communist Party members and, while dying, admits to Houston that the alienation was no solution: "The search can't be done alone" (585). His last message is that his feeling

of innocence over his amoral actions was terrifying. Next, the thematic analysis of the character development will be divided into three parts: the elements of dread, alienation and freedom of choice.

Firstly, Sartre's theme of dread returns in Cross's character and it gives rise to a so-called double-consciousness. Dread is an important theme because it designates the existentialist character of the novel as a whole, and it is the state Cross finds himself in before the accident and the decision to create a new identity. He dreads everything in his life, which evolves catastrophically, caused by the aforementioned attempts of his underage pregnant girlfriend, blackmailing ex-wife, and mother to curtail his freedom. The first clear example of dread found in *The Outsider* occurs when Cross heads for his mother's home, contemplating the religious way in which she raised him and especially her over-protection regarding sex and living a dissolute life, cautioning him that these would lead to his eternal perdition (22). His upbringing has given rise to his double-consciousness, a concept that refers to a struggle for identity, where the character is divided between how others see him and the way they he regards himself, while struggling to merge these two perspectives (Du Bois 615). On the one hand Cross has a sensuality and hunger for sexual pleasure, but on the other hand he still feels restricted by his mother (22). Despite her religious attempts to subjugate him, he realises that his sensuality increasingly dominates him, causing his desire and fearlessness to turn into dread (23). After a heated discussion with ex-wife Gladys, Cross recapitulates his first encounter with Dot, his underage girlfriend of seventeen: he had erotic contact with her and he was able to relate to the state she found herself in: "... she was trembling slightly and he knew that she was claimed by a stated he knew well: dread" (41).

The dread found in *The Outsider* is closely related to Cross's alienated position from his routine, the world, and most of all, himself. For instance, after having decided to take

advantage of his mistaken identity Cross reveals in a monologue his conviction that dread and alienation are strongly interrelated:

The relationship of his consciousness to the world had become subtly altered in a way that nagged him uneasily because he could not define it. His break with the routine of his days had disturbed the tone and pitch of reality ... And now he was seeing an alien and unjustifiable world completely different from him. It was no longer *his* world; it was just *a* world (116).

As we can see, the disappearance of his routine causes anguish, and results in even more distance between him and the world. Even as a well-educated person, Cross is not able to account for his existential dread rationally, and the realisation that his existence is set in an irrational universe overwhelms him (Widmer 15). His state of dread seems innocent at times, but it is not. For example, after his near-death experience, Cross feels that committing suicide would have been the only solution, had he lost the massive amount of money he was carrying with him during the train accident. The dread in *The Outsider* can certainly not always be fully explained rationally. There are scenes in which the protagonist has no idea where the sudden dread originates from. For instance, when Cross suspects prostitute Jenny of spying on him, he has no idea where the sudden dread and suspicion originates from (Wright 119, 128, 130).

Cross's state of dread is not the cause for his violent behaviour. No real consensus exists between academics about Cross's motives, and Wright has never defined these either. Graham and Adell have argued that Wright fails to provide a reasonable explanation for the extreme, inexplicable violence (30; 387). Widmer explains dread as the disclosure or indication of his excruciating life: the subordination to his abusive ex-wife and the alienation that marks his life (13). Wright himself called dread "man's most dominant characteristic"

and this importance of dread is reflected in Cross's vicissitudes in *The Outsider* (qtd. in Watkins 153). The dread in Cross's life is extremely intense and it marks the existential character of the novel as a whole.

Secondly, freedom of choice is related to dread, which is illustrated in the decisions Cross takes. Initially he is reluctant to make a decision and is only to some extent afraid (62). His dread increases after he decides to alienate himself, and starts acting unscrupulously by killing four people. Widmer argues that these actions are not caused by his "racial consciousness" but stem from an all-encompassing state of dread, which reveals "the horrible truth of the uncertain and enigmatic nature of life" (13). This 'horrible truth' can only be perceived by looking from outside of the segregated minority, thereby seeing that radical changes are necessary for those inside (Widmer 21). However, Widmer is incorrect in concluding that race is unrelated to 'the horrible truth', since it plays an important role in Cross's consciousness of being an outsider (16). According to Wright, discovering this truth was something he and Sartre had in common (Fabre 42). Furthermore, Sartre even regards the ability to choose individually as an equivalent to truth (Fabre 45).

Prior to Cross's decision to alienate himself, his freedom is restricted by factors such as his habits and his family: his mother, his ex-wife Gladys and his underage girlfriend. He becomes increasingly aware of the destructive force habits can have on his life. He feels trapped in the habits of his job as a postal clerk and his excessive alcohol consumption (4). He draws the conclusion that he has to break with his habits immediately (114). The feeling that he is not in charge of his life results finally in self-hatred (71). Cross is only able to escape through radical change, and he gradually becomes aware of the responsibility he has as a human being. A passage in which Cross reacts to him and his wife Gladys attending a 'white party' together illustrates this: "It's up to us to make ourselves something", he argued. "A man creates himself." (65). Cross develops into a person who is conscious of his freedom

to choose. The realisation that becoming an outsider is the necessary solution to his problems is evident: “he could only get out of this world or stay in it and bear it” (27). After having taken up his new identity, Cross permits himself any conduct. For instance, after Cross ruthlessly kills one Communist Party member because he was fighting another member, he decides to kill the second member as well, because “his imperious feeling ... was not fulfilled” (303). This reminds us of Sartre’s existentialist idea that there is no authority to judge his actions.

The existential idea of freedom of choice can also be related to the African American experience of racial segregation with respect to the imprisoned feeling caused by the lack of hope for change in the near future. According to Coles, existentialism was in potential the school of philosophy that could become the solution to the oppressed (53). In addition, Wright regarded both existentialism and exile as means to the end of escaping the current miserable life (Coles 52-53). Webb adds that the major distinction between European existentialist philosophers and Wright is the fact that the former perceived the notion of existentialism in a hypothetical, philosophical way, whereas the latter regarded existentialism as real life: “His preoccupation with self-hate and anguish was an examination of reality, not philosophy” (280). Existentialism offered human beings the freedom to determine their own fate and create a meaningful life. Exile, or alienation, is one of the means to this end.

Thirdly, the alienation of Cross in *The Outsider* is the origin of his problems, as well as the solution to his segregated position. Although we have seen that Cross regards himself as an outsider because he is restrained by his habits and his family, one could also argue that Cross is less alienated after his decision to adopt a new identity and alienate himself from his former life. Cross, under the alias Lionel Lane, seems to move closer to people again, like Houston and Blount, than he could have done as the former Cross. However, we cannot draw the conclusion that this less alienated life is preferable, which follows from Cross’s overview

on his life: "I wanted to be free ... To feel what living meant to me ... 'And what did you find?' Nothing" (585). The irony of alienation as an element of existentialism is the fact that alienation is problematic as well as a potential solution. Despite the fact that Cross feels distanced from his environment, he finds the solution in the decision to move away from his friends and family, which is most evident in the scene where Cross isolates himself from the citizens of Chicago, afraid of being recognised after killing a former friend who debunked his alias (107 - 108). The fact that Cross does not get into a state of paralysis here, is explained by Sartre who states that dread is not paralysing, but "a condition for action" (27), in this case, the action of alienating himself.

Cross's growing alienation is highly significant to *The Outsider*, because it marks the existentialist character as a whole. Glicksberg argues that Cross's alienation is the key problem in *The Outsider*: "He is ... introspective to the point of nihilistic alienation. If he kills ... it is not out of racial rage but out of his sense of isolation, his feeling that he is beyond human law. ... That is his tragedy!" (qtd. in Adell 394). Although Cross initially appears to thrive as a result of his isolated position (99), he gradually becomes conscious of his solitude and the consequences of his immoral behaviour (148).

Alienation is part of Sartrean existentialism because it is one of the instruments of an individual to retain his freedom, and therefore also significant to segregated minorities. Wright shows the dangers of alienation and, therefore, shows the harmful position of African Americans in society in general. The reality of the African American experience of racial segregation is made explicit by Wright, for instance when Cross contemplates: "Were there not somewhere in this world rebels with whom he could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusion?" (35).

Conclusion

As demonstrated and argued in this thesis, the character development of Cross in *The Outsider* can be understood more clearly when seen through Sartrean existentialist ideas. The alienation, freedom of choice, and dread mark the existential character of the novel as a whole. The analysis of Wright's *The Outsider* by means of a Sartrean existentialist perspective undertaken here has provided new insights into the significance of Cross's character development and the relationship between Wright's literary work and the racial segregation of African Americans, namely that Wright's novel can serve as an instruction for them on how to escape from the dominant white culture. Additionally, whereas others previously felt that Cross's violent behaviour lacks motives, a new insight is that his dread is caused by his alienated position. This thesis yields an analysis of Cross's character development, which will add to the current studies on existentialism in Wright's work and *The Outsider*. Studies have already explored the existential character of *The Outsider* and Cobb also acknowledges the fact that this may be found in the character development, but until now this was never examined (371). This thesis has analysed the character development and the elements of alienation, anguish and individual freedom, but Wright's view on existentialism and the exact influence of *The Outsider* remain underexposed. The main limitation of this thesis is that it has focused on Sartre's existentialism as explained in his speech *Existentialism is a Humanism*; a more comprehensive analysis of Sartre's ideas on existentialism could be valuable, because it may provide a more detailed and nuanced perspective, and another limitation is that it lacks the novel's reception by the African American community in the 1950's. This is important since it would have revealed whether the African Americans utilized the solution provided by Wright in *The Outsider* or not, and therefore would have revealed the relevance of the novel. One unanticipated finding was that only just before his death, Cross starts viewing his 'new' life in retrospect and starts drawing

conclusions. Since *The Outsider* is sometimes described as a 'novel of ideas', it would have been more logical for Wright to illustrate his final and most important idea earlier and in a more elaborate manner (Coles 60).

Further research should be carried out to establish to what extent Sartrean elements can be found in Wright's later work, because in his later life he felt that Sartre and other existentialists disregarded new changes of the African American community and the African continent (Fabre 47). An inquiry into Wright's autobiographies and commentaries that reflect on his work are also valuable, because they may clearly illustrate his perspective on existentialism, which gives an enhanced insight in how that view relates to Sartrean existentialism.

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