

Article

Marxist Ideology, Identity Crisis and Existentialism in Richard Wright's "The Outsider"

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A B S T R A C T

The present paper deals with the American blacks' attempt to seek all the means possible to establish their own identity. During the thirties, the Marxist ideology attracted thousands of Blacks who believed to have found in it the solution of their problem. But the vast majority of them quickly realized that the communist party wanted simply to use them. Richard Wright's great disillusionment manifested itself in a novel in which he denounced an ideology thirsting after power and prepared to do anything to achieve its ends. *The Outsider* (1953) is a powerful existential novel and Cross Damon is its memorable existential hero fighting the battles of life. It is a novel that treats seriously problems of freedom, ethics and morality, the dilemma of politics and religion and the paradox of racism in a democracy. The novel is concerned with the meaning of being - the significance of life in a universe that makes no particular judgments about the value of man.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Intellectual, Freedom, Alienation, Violation, Community

Introduction

Divided into five sections: Dread, Dream, Descent, Despair and Decision, *The Outsider* is the story of Cross Damon, a twenty six year old Black intellectual in love with freedom, whereas he lives in an environment of oppression where his actions are controlled. The five sections that comprise the novel follow the evolution of a person in search of total independence. The novel is an autobiographical work since it reflects Wright's personal experiences.

At the beginning of the story, Cross Damon is in an intolerable position emotionally. His fifteen year old beloved is pregnant. She hopes to force him to marry her by threatening to charge him with statutory rape if he refuses. His wife, from whom he is separated, refuses to give him a divorce. Instead, she insists that he borrow \$ 800 so that she can complete payments for the house and car, which he must give to her. She warned if he refuses,

she will create scandal which will lost him his job at the post office. At every opportunity, his mother reminds him that he is not behaving as she taught him.

When authorities use the overcoat and identification papers he left behind after climbing from a train crash to identify another victim as him, Damon sees opportunity to began a new life. After assuming a number of aliases, he journeys to New York and becomes involved with the Communist party. He is introduced to Gil and Eva Blount, communists, who invite him to live with them while he studies communism. Shortly Damon has moved in discovers and reads Eva's diary from which he learns that Gil Blount had deceived her. He married her not out of love, but because it was the order of Communist party. Alarmed over this cynical violation of individual rights, Cross vows that the party will not destroy his freedom and humanity. Though he has violated Eva's privacy by reading her diary never enters his mind. Later,

entering a room ostensibly to stop Blount and Herndon fighting, Damon kills both men. He arranges the clues so that it appears they have killed each other. Damon rationalizes that in destroying the Communist and the fascist he is killing “gods” who would rob him of his freedom.

Cross Damon falls in love with Blount’s widow, Eva. But when she realizes that Cross has been responsible for the death of her husband, the landlord and another communist, she killed herself by jumping from a window. The District Attorney knows that Cross has murdered the three men but refuses to press charges because he has no proof.

Cross Damon, alone, enters the streets of Harlem. He hides in a theatre but communist party members track him and shoot. In the final scene reminiscent of Wright’s greatest rebel hero Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Cross explains to his lawyer Boris Max, in existential terms: “Don’t think I’m so odd and strange I am not I am legion I’ve lived alone but I’m everywhere.” Cross suffers existential alienation from beginning to the end of the novel.

The title of the novel “*Outsider*” enables us to understand cross’s essential alienation. Cross is alienated not only from the inhuman white society of America but also from his family and friends. He was an outsider all his life. As a boy growing up in Mississippi, he felt outside the pale of a loving, understanding and protecting family. He felt himself outside the accepted world of the privileged, the educated, the dominant white culture, the bourgeois class. He had lived in dire poverty among bigots, fanatics and insensitive people who believed in the primacy of skin color, in money and privilege and deprived all those who were different or who thought differently. Cross Damon failed to find tenderness, compassion and understanding even from the fellowmen of his own race. He felt himself alone against the world, living in a place and time of absurdity, feeling that even the gods, if they existed, were laughing and making fools of us all. He was not sure that there was a heaven as he lived in hell all his life.

He was an American and he was Black. He expressed the belief that he was forced to leave the United States, to live in self-exile because of white racism and the prejudices of all white Americans. Significantly, Cross is an outsider more because he is an intellectual than because he is a Black in oppressive white society. For him his own problems are more valuable than the problems of his society and community. He has his own norms of living in the meaningless society. Although free of all obstacles, Cross Damon is still forced to live on the fringes of society because of the colour of his skin. This situation enables him to observe and understand better the environment he is rejecting.

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