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Freedom: A Critical Study in *The Outsider* by Richard Wright

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Abstract

This study falls into the rubric of struggle for freedom in *The Outsider* by Richard Wright, an Afro-American novelist. Each person in this earth has all rights to live his life as he wills. Freedom is a right that the people are looking for. All of us want to live our lives as we will without intervention of others. In the oppressed societies freedom is not giving, is taking, sometimes by peaceful struggle, and sometimes by force. The dictatorial regimes don't respect human rights and don't give people their freedom. According to Thucydides, "The secret to happiness is freedom... And the secret to freedom is courage". Moreover, Herbert Hoover stresses that "Freedom is the open window through which pours the sunlight of the human spirit and human dignity." This study attempts to show how the people are looking for freedom. They struggle for this human value. Richard Wright assures in one of his works, *The Outsider* on the value of freedom. This research paper will present how the main character of the novel was trying to get his right and freedom through his struggle and suffering. This character embodies the value of human dignity.

Keywords- Culture, Racism, Idealism, Subjugation, Empowerment

Introduction

Freedom is one of the main themes which had got a great attention in Wright's novels. He confronted racism and injustice which is imposed restriction on his social and personal freedom. Wright was a towering figure of American literature. His novels highlight the dilemmas of African Americans and its effects due to the contradictions of a quickly developing society. He unveiled the gaping contrast

between the ideal of progress in the American society and after the Great Depression. His works portray the fragmented society, both American and black. Richard Wright and other black writers broke the walls of silence that kept them apart from the rest of the world. His novels show and express his nihilistic attitude as an individual of black, and his literary works focused on identity and freedom during his life. His early fictional works represent the same theme as his later works. For instance, *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *The Outsider* represent his deep eager and desire for freedom. Wright's novel, *The Outsider* deals with Cross Damon's desire for freedom and release himself from the enslavement. It is a hybrid work whose protagonist, "Cross" can trace ancestors from two centuries and several cultures, "The American Adams of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain James and Fitzgerald" and also the dispossessed characters of Dostoyevsky.

To Richard Wright, the definition of freedom never alters. It is an achievement of self-identity and self-mastery. In the process of a quest for one's identity, God cannot be overlooked. If there is no god available one has to be invented. Freedom means to express your religious, political views and etc. "Freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth." ... "Like Mill, Holmes and Brandeis talk glowingly about the discovery of truth and the "power of reason as applied through public discussion" (Baker 8).

The Outsider

It is one of the late works of Richard Wright which influenced by Kierkegaard's concept of Dread. In this novel, he intended to reflect his reaction of looking for a new life and achievement of self-identity. *The Outsider* is divided into sections. The titles of the sections Dread, Dream, Descent, Despair, and Decision use alliteration as well as implication to trace the protagonist's identity-crisis and his quest for freedom. Throughout Wright's life one question followed him, which is , no matter where he lives , but how can he lives freely ? . After moving to Paris in 1946, Wright continued his philosophical exploration of freedom and individuality, publishing "The Outsider," significant for its departure from social realism seen in the hugely popular "Black Boy." The novel remains a significant testament to Wright's impact on American letters and his courage to examine social injustice. Wright depicted his deep desire for freedom through his hero Cross Damon.

Cross Damon

He was a fictional character from Richard Wright's 1953 novel, *The Outsider*. Cross Damon was viewed as an "outsider" who did not attempt to become a product of the established culture of American society. Cross was considered a complete opposite to Bigger Thomas, another character created by Richard Wright in his novel "*Native Son*". He also ridicules Communist techniques and lives according to the principles of free choice. Cross Damon committed murder in a completely different spirit than Bigger Thomas. He acts as an individual who is free to do whatever his habits and

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desires lead him to do. His is not a victim of social and environmental pressures outside his control. In many ways, Cross Damon resembles Meursault, the hero of Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*. Both men lived outside of any involvement with common humanity and paid no attention to social mores.

Cross Damon represents the 20th century man in frenzied pursuit of freedom. Cross is an intellectual Negro, the product of a culture which rejects him. He is further alienated by his "habit of incessant reflection", his feeling that the experiences and actions of his life have so far taken place without his free assent, and a profound conviction that there must be more to life, some meanings and justifications which have hitherto eluded him.

The name suggests his confusion for his identity, since Cross represents Christ and by extension God. He feels that he has the omniscient and power, so that he started to kill the others. Another instance, Cross automatically springs to the defense of Negro Waiter during his train Journey to New York. Early in the novel, Cross Damon begins preparation for escape from his environment. He feigns a dementia, slaps his wife, and is consequently asked to leave the family home. When questioned about his books, he replies: "I've put away childish things". This implies readiness for action.

Through the contrived literary device of a subway accident, Cross is assumed dead and seized the opportunity to escape from his problems. The idea of letting the public believe his is dead appeals to him and he experiences an intuitive sense of freedom. Believing that the chance to start a fresh would solve all his problems, he realizes that *all his life* "he had been hankering after his personal freedom and now freedom was knocking at his door". This quest for freedom seems to be influenced by his desire to "escape his identity, his old hateful consciousness and shape.... the kind of life he felt he wanted"

Nevertheless, this decision does not bring the long sought happiness, because he soon realizes that he is bound to live in a world that demands an identity, which implies limitation. Under these circumstances, he is filled with anxiety, which is existential in orientation: For Heidegger as for Tillich and (sick) Kierkegaard, "fear has a definite object, angst, whether translated as "dread" or "anxiety" has no object, being instead the reaction of a man becoming himself. In retrospect, Cross is not sure whether he is justified in murdering Joe, but he realistically plans to escape to New York, and thus divert suspicion from himself. As he journeys to New York, he realizes: "He was free from everything but himself ... he knew where his sense of dread came from, it was from within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, yet not really known to him".

Cross seems to be experiencing the kierkegaardian dread connected with man's ability to determine himself. Kierkegaardian describes dread as: the dizziness of freedom which occurs when the spirit would posit the synthesis (of soul and body), and freedom then gazes into its own

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possibility .When he decides to take on the identity of a dead man (manifesting his affinity with death, as implied in his name) he goes about it methodically, looking for the name of someone with his own racial background, and around his own age. By doing this, Wright depicts his protagonist lack of freedom. Later, he plays the part of an illiterate, ignorant Negro, and deceives the Bureau of Vital Statistics into giving him the birth certificate of Lionel Lane. Ironically, while he is striving to achieve absolute freedom, he is obliged to live in a world, which thrives on stereotypes and demands conformity. Cross regards himself as God, and his mirage of absolute freedom, are indicative of Cross neurosis. Reinforcing this neurosis that in his desire to protect his dream-like world he murders his friend, Joe. Again playing God, he brings about his justice by killing the Fascist, Langely Herndon, communists Gill Blount and Jack Hilton.

Throughout the novel, Wright uses a combination of symbol and event to dramatize Cross quest for freedom. He identifies with the communists will to power because they like himself had “reached far back into history and had dredged up from its black waters the most ancient realities: man’s desire to be a God” (p 198). In keeping with his ambivalent nature, he loathes this will to power, while he himself aspires to absolute freedom. As cross observes Gilbert Blount wielding power over his wife, Eva and Bob Hunter, he recognizes that the communist party operates on a system of master and slave.

Wright identifies the oppressor and the oppressed in America in the twentieth century. With identifying with the oppressor symbolized by the Communists, as well as the oppressed symbolized by the impressionist painter, Eva Blou nt, Cross again portrays his predicament. Cross murders both of them. He kills them because he is impelled by an imperious feeling, but he had no plan when he dealt those blows by death.

Cross' interior monologue is one of the literary devices used to portray his mental state of embarrassment, grasp, illogic and logic. After the murder he carefully destroys evidence, and creates a plea. Later, Cross commits another logical murder. He kills Communist Jack Hilton who has discovered his crime and is planning to enslave him. During the murder, he feels he possessed the rest of his devilish nature, and also makes careful plans to turn suspicion from himself by leaving a note for the dead man at his hotel’s desk. On his death-bed, the protagonist of this novel "Cross" makes a plea for human understanding. Cross Damon critically portrays the predicament of living without an identity, or with false identities. He also illustrates that the desire for absolute freedom is an illusion. His behavior seems to be a response to his racial and social environment, in which, by denying him the recognition he sought, drove him to extreme measures in pursuit of an identity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to sympathize with the logical criminality, that emerges out of his confused sense of identity, and his illusion of complete freedom, which he only gives up on his death-bed.

Finally, I believe there is no such thing as absolute freedom, so that people can do whatever they want to. As we know, in any society there are rules, laws and regulations that people have to follow. It does not allow people to act for themselves as they like to, because they are being bound by these laws and regulations, especially, within large political jurisdictions such as cities and countries. Moreover, the value of freedom can only be understood and appreciated by those who have a sense of the past and a highly developed understanding of human nature, not who have not been raised within a long-standing tradition of freedom. So, they have trouble in understanding and implementing it in their society.

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