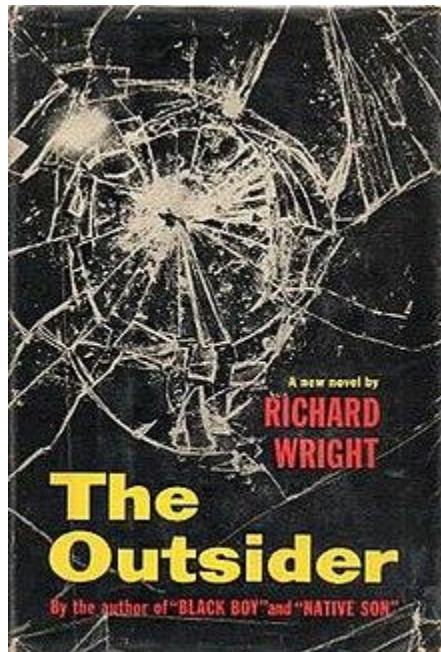


A Search for Complete Freedom in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*

G. Elakkiam, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar and
Dr. S. S. Nirmala



Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The Outsider \(Wright novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Outsider_(Wright_novel))

Abstract

The Problems concerning the Afro-American's identity crisis and repressed manhood are dealt with by many prominent Black intellectuals and authors but Richard Wright wrote extensively about the racial problems of the Blacks, and was much concerned with the problems of all the suppressed people. The main theme in all Richard Wright's fiction expresses the search for self-identity and freedom. Richard Wright's first major work in the second period of his fiction writing is *The Outsider*. It is a hybrid work whose protagonist, Cross Damon, can trace ancestors from two centuries and several cultures. The complexity of the novel derives from Cross Damon's alienation from himself and society. The alienation is deeper than that of his American forbears, on one hand, yet; on the other hand, he seems to be more influenced by environmental factors.

Keywords: juxtaposition, freedom, fear, racial environment, identity.

Cross Damon - Bound To Live in a World That Demands an Identity

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.

Through the contrived literary device of a subway accident, Cross is assumed dead and seizes the opportunity to escape from his problems. The idea of letting the public believe he is dead appeals to him and he experiences an intuitive sense of freedom. Believing that the chance to start afresh 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” (OS 84). 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” (OS 86).

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. He starts his new life by assuming the identity, Charles Webb, a Black from the Deep South, who had worked as a porter in a drugstore.

The Name Charles Webb -

Living under the name Charles Webb does not transform Cross. Practical joker that he is, his amusement and curiosity about the reports of his death imply much more than a concern for legally establishing himself dead. It is a manifestation of his interest in society. His desire for alcohol and sexual gratification remains unabated, indicating that his personality has not changed. Although he would like to break all ties with his past, he experiences a morbid curiosity about the reactions of his wife, Gladys, and his mistress, Dot. On the other hand, he is saddened by the thought of not seeing his sons again. As he looks at his mourning mother, he feels to confess and beg for forgiveness, but is afraid she might die of shock.

Cross, alias John Clark

As Cross, alias John Clark, student from Chicago, witnesses “his funeral” from a rented room overlooking the church’s entrance, he is bothered by a very human concern. He would not be able to discuss this with any one because he has alienated himself from society. This incident dramatizes his predicament, because of his non-identity he is robbed of the freedom to communicate with other people.

Shortly after “his funeral” he feels compelled to reveal himself to the prostitute, Jenny. Luckily, she does not believe him, for a few minutes later, he murders his friend; Joe, who has recognized him. Cross ambivalence is evident, he murders Joe because he fears that his dream of being free would be destroyed, on the other hand, he expresses a desire to leave his dream-world by confessing to Jenny.

Juxtaposition of A Dream-World with the World of Reality

One of the techniques used in *The Outsider*, is the juxtaposition of a dream-world with the world of reality. Nevertheless, to maintain his non-identity he has to pay attention to reality which requires discipline and negates his absolute freedom. 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.

During the journey to New York, Cross, alias Addison Jordon, graduate of Fisk University is still defined by his Blackness; He discusses the problems of his race with Father Seldom, and district attorney Ely Houston. The Black Waiter, Bob Hunter, identifies with Cross, and he in turn attempts to help the waiter during an accident involving a white woman. However, he soon realizes that he will be unable to testify on behalf of Bob Hunter, because of his false identity, and his non- identity. As he assesses his problems he concludes. “To live amidst others without an identity was intolerable. In the strict sense he was not really, in the world, he was haunting it, pleading for entrance into life”. (OS 132).

Interior Monologue of Anxieties

Cross’ anxieties, expressed in this interior monologue conflict sharply with his dictum, “man is nothing in particular” (OS 135). He realizes that in order to belong to the world, he has to be something in particular, or, in other words, have an identity. His problem is that he cannot define what he wants to be.

When he decides to take on the identity of a dead man, 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’s lack of freedom. Later, he plays the part of an illiterate, ignorant Black, 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.

Combination of Symbol and Event

Throughout the novel, Wright uses a combination of symbol and event to dramatize Cross quest for freedom. The hero’s involvement with members of the communist party, Fascist Langley Herndon, and impressionist painter Eva Blount, illustrates this.

Having arrived in New York and painstakingly created the alias Lionel Lane, Cross Ventures into the world of modern political realities and becomes intrigued by the power of the communist party. One of its Organizers, Gilbert Blount, defines the stance of the party as follows “The Party wants you to obey! The party hopes you can understand why you must obey, but even if you don’t understand, you must obey” (OS 183) Cross joins the party hoping it would “transform his sense of dread, shape it, objectify it, and make it real and rational for him”. (OS 188).

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. Besides identifying with the communists, he also experiences an affinity with the impressionist artist, Eva Blunt, who has been trapped by the communists and prevented from displaying her work. He himself is an artist who creates new identities.

A Symbolic Death and Rebirth Cycle

In dramatizing the story of Cross Damon’s life, Wright employs a symbolic death and rebirth cycle that is frequently used in Afro-American literature. Towards the end of the novel, Cross Damon Black, neurotic, philosophy student and existential man, is reborn to the world of reality. He longs for human companionship and confesses his crimes to Eva Blount, hoping she will give him the moral

support needed to return to society. However, she is so shocked that she commits suicide, and he is once more an isolate.

It is not surprising that the protagonist of *The Outsider* wishes to take his place in society after a bizarre life of deception and crime. Characterized by his scholarly disposition, he carries the experiment of living with false identities and striving for absolute freedom to a point which proves its futility. Early in the novel he is questioned about the books he reads and replies, “I was looking for something “(OS 7). At the end of the novel he confides. “The search can’t be done alone.... Alone a man is nothing”. (OS 439)

Although the novel is dominated by ideas, and philosophy takes over to the detriment of art, it has its own uniqueness. In order to portray the complexity of the experience it presents, it blends racism, the naturalistic literary tradition, psychology, and existential philosophy into a memorable novel. Its structure derives from its depiction of man’s pursuit for an understanding of his identity and sense of freedom. Ihab Hassan’s description applies to *The Outsider*.

As the fictional Hero attempts to mediate the contradictions of culture and even create a new consciousness, so does the form of the novel itself attempt the task on a deeper level. Realism and surrealism...event and symbol tend to fuse in evasive forms, equal to the perplexities of the day. (Hassan 25)

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 behaviour seems to be a response to his racial and social environment, 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 only relinquishes on his death-bed.

Works Cited

Wright, Richard. *The Outsider*. New York: Harper & Row, 1953.
---. *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Fishburn Katherine, *Richard Wright’s Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim*, Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977.

Hassan Ihab. *Contemporary American Literature*, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.,1974.

Reilly, John M, editor. *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception*. New York: Burt Franklin & Co., Inc., 1978.



Miss. G. Elakkiam
Part-time Ph.D. Research Scholar
P.G. & Research Department of English
K.N. Govt. Arts College for Women (Autonomous)
Thanjavur
Tamilnadu, India
ilakkiyam.g@gmail.com



Dr. S. S. Nirmala
Research Advisor
Assistant Professor of English
K.N. Govt. Arts College for Women (Autonomous)
Thanjavur, Tamilnadu, India
drssnirmala@gmail.com