

To Make a Self: Existentialist Themes in Richard Wright's Black Boy

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Richard Wright's autobiographical account of his first eighteen years, Black Boy, is his attempt to describe a "universal black childhood." His desire in this work is to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves and, primarily, "to render a judgment on [his] environment" (Fabre 251-2). That Wright succeeded in his goal is testified to by the fact that Black Boy has long been recognized as a scathing and compelling indictment of the American South. Donald B. Gibson finds that Wright's aim in his autobiography is also to show how his early life experiences were "preparing him to be the person he found himself to be after he had been in Chicago and New York for some years" (492). These aspects of Black Boy are certainly true, but there is more happening in the book than this. Underlying Wright's story of his life is a subtext of Existentialist themes which this paper will demonstrate.

In his introduction to Lloyd Alexander's translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea, Hayden Carruth comments that Existentialism is a philosophy that "has been independently invented by millions of people simply responding to the emergency of life in a modern world" (v-vi). Wright is probably one of these "millions." There is no evidence that he had formulated a personal Existential philosophy by the time Black Boy was written. Carruth, in his analysis of the roots of Existentialism, points out that three divergent personalities, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky, all "shared the same experience of loneliness, anguish, and doubt, and the same profound concern for the fate of the individual person" (vi-vii). These same experiences are all central to Black Boy. Also, Carruth asserts that "William Barret . . . has shown that what we now call the Existentialist impulse is coeval with the myths of Abraham and Job . . ." (vi), and it is interesting to note that Wright's epigraph to Black Boy is taken from the Book of Job. No one should be surprised to find Existentialist themes in Black Boy, which was written during 1943, because by this time Wright had written Native Son and "The Man Who Lived Underground," both of which have been frequently analyzed as Existentialist texts. In fact, Edward Margolies claims that dread, terror, guilt, and nausea have "always been basic thematic elements in Wright's fiction" (143).

The beginning is a good place to start, and Wright's dread and sense of alienation is the substance of his earliest memory recorded in Black Boy. The four-year-old Richard has been chastised by his mother, and we find him "dreading" her return and "resentful of being neglected" (10). Out of this initial dread and loneliness will grow Wright's state of mind for years to come, for he proceeds to set the house on fire and then runs in fear to hide under the house in the darkness at the base of the chimney. This descent under the

house can be paralleled to the descent of Fred Daniels in “The Man Who Lived Underground” in that one of the realizations Daniels comes to is descriptive of the effect on Wright’s own life of this earliest memory.

He [Daniels] was now in possession of the feeling that had gripped him when he had first come into the underground. It came to him in a series of questions: Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was retracing in one’s feelings a faint pattern designed long before; it seemed that one was always trying to remember a gigantic shock that had left a haunting impression upon one’s body which one could not forget or shake off, but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one’s life a state of eternal anxiety. (554-55)

In Wright’s own case, it was the shock and the guilt of the fire and the subsequent beating that left him conscious of being in an underworld of dread and anxiety which permeated his life until a pivotal event, which I will discuss later.

Within three years of the fire, Wright found himself in an orphanage, and the adult Wright remembers that “Dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being . . .” (38). A few years later, in West Helena, Arkansas, Wright experiences the anxiety of being in a white neighborhood as he tries to sell his dog (79). He remembers that a “dread of white people now came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination” (83). Wright certainly had reason to fear whites, but that he calls it a “dread” and that he has particularized it, connecting it to whites, is interesting. Furthermore, Wright recalls that soon his feeling of dread became universalized through his reflections on his mother’s stroke.

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. (111)

What Wright describes here is certainly an Existential consciousness. He later proclaims a release from “cosmic” dread at about the age of thirteen (135), but the more particular anxieties and tensions of living in the South will remain until he departs for Chicago.

Next I want to tackle the difficult concept of facticity. Facticity is the state of being a fact, an existent. It is concerned with a particular existing being and that being’s connection with the world. Wright presents two lengthy catalogues in Black Boy which seem to illustrate the facticity of the child, Richard. Introducing the first one, he writes, “Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living

slowly revealed their coded meaning” (14). The second begins with, “The days and hours began to speak now with a clearer tongue. Each experience had a sharp meaning of its own” (53). What follows each of these statements is a list of Wright’s experiences of the world—of nature and of people. Each experience evokes a particular feeling in the boy. The impression is that he is wholly connected with his surroundings; he feels existence; he is aware. These catalogues are remembrances from early youth, but a little later when his family is trying to get him to join their church, he draws on this facticity as his reason for rejecting their pleas.

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. (127)

Wright here attaches priority to existence, to what is, and this is in line with the Existentialist belief that existence precedes essence.

Another important Existential concept is that of the absurd. The Existentialist definition of the absurd is “that which is meaningless” (Sartre 799). By the time Wright was twelve he had arrived at a conception of the universe that he says “no education could ever alter.” This is a “conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering” (112). Nonetheless, seeing that suffering is meaningless does not prove that Wright saw the universe as meaningless, but I think there is evidence that he did. Esther Merle Jackson provides the clue to this when she writes, “The modern perspective begins, writes Camus, at the moment when Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov declares that ‘everything is possible.’ It is this universe of infinite human possibility that Camus and others have named ‘the absurd’” (129-30). Everything is possible because all is meaningless. When Wright was around the age of ten, he felt that “Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible, because I wanted everything to be possible . . .” (82). This is not quite the same thing as believing that all is possible, though, but later, he dreamed of going to the North because it seemed to him “a place where everything was possible” (186). He has moved closer to belief, but he is unable to locate possibility where he is. Wright draws even nearer when he decides to steal because he “no longer felt the inner restraint that would have made stealing impossible.” He identifies this state as one of “freedom” and says that it made him feel “lonely and afraid”—these feelings are consonant with an Existential state of consciousness (220). Finally, as he is headed north, he acknowledges that he has become “conscious of possibilities” (282). We see only the embryonic development of the concept of the absurd in Black Boy, but it is clear that Wright

eventually accepted this view of the world if one simply considers Bigger Thomas, Fred Daniels, and Damon Cross and their stories.

The final theme I want to address is that of freedom and the making of one's self. According to Carruth:

Later in his philosophical development the idea of freedom became Sartre's main theme. Man, beginning in the loathsome emptiness of his existence, creates his essence—his self, his being—through the choices that he freely makes. Hence his being is never fixed. He is always becoming. . . . (xiii)

First, it should be pointed out that the emptiness of Wright's existence is well represented by the trope of hunger which pervades Black Boy. But what of Wright and his "self"? It is known that autobiographers are in the business of creating a self, the self that they want their readers to see. Gibson tells us that Black Boy contains several inconsistencies which call into question the picture Wright paints of himself as isolated from family and community (492). Isolation, alienation, and the perception of one's self as an outsider are consistent with an Existential world view, and I would suggest that although Wright may not have been literally isolated, he was indeed mentally and psychically an outsider. Now, let's look closer at what he says about "self" in Black Boy.

In the midst of Wright's first catalogue, he writes, "There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey" (14). This is, of course, the adult reflecting on the small boy's experience. But the word choice is revealing. A "yearning" is a type of hunger, and "identification" suggests identity, a self. And what sparks this feeling? An ant, who is "solitary," "burden[ed]," and on a "journey." One could make the case that this one sentence is Black Boy in microcosm. Not much later in the text, we find young Richard in an orphanage where, in the thrall of dread and distrust, he says, "I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others" (38). Here the discovery of self is a dawning awareness, but already it is a creation; it is self as something, in this case, one who strives against others.

As I mentioned above, Wright did experience a moment of release from the dread that had been his lifelong companion up to that point. Wright was about thirteen at the time of this experience, and of it he writes:

No longer set apart for being sinful, I felt that I could breathe again, live again, that I had been released from a prison. The cosmic images of dread were now gone and the external world became a reality, quivering daily before me. Instead of brooding and trying foolishly to pray, I could run and roam, mingle with boys and girls, feel at home with people, share a

little life in common with others, satisfy my hunger to be and live. (135)

What brings about this release, this freedom? It is the result of a choice he makes. Rather than spending time in his room praying as he has promised Granny, Wright decides to spend the time writing. After writing his first story, he comes to a realization: “I had never in my life done anything like it; I had made something, no matter how bad it was; and it was mine” (133). Thus, Wright’s newfound freedom is a consequence of a choice he makes which results in creation—the creation of a story, but also of a self, a new identity. Richard can now identify himself as a writer, whether anyone else understands what he is doing or not. And they do not understand. The young woman to whom he reads his first effort is flabbergasted. His first employer can not believe that a black boy can even conceive of being a writer, and when he publishes “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre” in the local Negro newspaper, he receives only negative feedback. Yet, Wright’s newly-created self enables him to dream, and, by the time he is fifteen, he feels that in him is “shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about [him] had said could not be” (187). He is in the state of becoming.

At the end of chapter thirteen, Wright is in Memphis, and he says, “I could calculate my chances for life in the South as a Negro fairly clearly now” (276). He knows that he cannot live the life the South will impose upon him, and like the solitary ant, he carries a burden on his journey through life—continuous “terror, tension, and anxiety” (277). The final chapter, then, is Wright’s record of another choice which makes his “self.” He chooses to leave this South which is so oppressive, and though he does not know where “he caught a sense of freedom” (282), he has the authenticity to freely choose to make his own life. Wright says that the South never allowed him “to be natural, to be real, to be myself.” According to Carruth, “Sartre has said that genius is what a man invents when he is looking for a way out” (xiv). Wright is looking for a way out of the South so that he might find the freedom to make the choices that will make him what he knows he can be. And clearly, Wright’s free choices lead to the genius of his created self—a self that can in turn create works of art that communicate the truth of human experience, human existence. In his art, Wright truly achieves the “redeeming meaning” (285) which he has sought in our absurd, alienated, anxiety-ridden, guilty, nauseated world. And that meaning is himself, the man Richard Wright made, a writer.

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