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Richard Wright’s The Outsider and Albert Camus’s The Stranger

Although the likeness in theme, character, and event between The Outsider and The Stranger has been pointed out, it has not been studied in any detail. In general, critics have regarded Wright’s philosophy in The Outsider as nihilistic. Charles I. Glicksberg, in “Existentialism in The Outsider” and “The God of Fiction,” saw parallels between Wright and Camus in the treatment of the metaphysical rebel, calling Cross Damon’s philosophy most consistently nihilistic.¹ More recently, critics have demonstrated Camus’s influences on Wright in his conception of Cross Damon.² Edward Mar-golies in his comparison of Damon and Meursault pointed out that “both men kill without passion, both men appear unmoved by the death of their mothers; both men apparently are intended to rep-resent the moral and emotional failure of the age.”³

It would be quite tempting to compare the two works if they were the products of the same age and the particular philosophy they dealt with was in vogue. It is a well-established fact that Wright lived and wrote The Outsider in France, where he maintained a close contact with such influential writers as Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir. Moreover, Camus’s indifferent philosopher can conveniently be placed side by side with Wright’s protagonist, who contemplates human existence through his exhaustive reading of Nietzsche, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevski. One suspects, however, that the com-

²Michel Fabre specifically indicates that Wright’s composition of The Outsider “was influenced in subtle ways by his reading of The Stranger in August 1947. He read the book in the American edition at a very slow pace, ‘weighing each sentence,’ admiring ‘its damn good narrative prose,’ ” and commented:

It is a neat job but devoid of passion. He makes his point with dispatch and his prose is solid and good. In America a book like this would not attract much attention for it would be said that he lacks feeling. He does however draw his character very well. What is of course really interesting in this book is the use of fiction to express a philosophical point of view. That he does with ease. I now want to read his other stuff.


parison of the two novels would never have been made unless the two novelists were both caught up in the philosophical context of existentialism. This meant that the literary likeness was taken for granted. Meursault kills a man; he is charged with a murder, tried, and convicted in a world of court, jury, and judge. Damon, on the other hand, kills more than one man, not only an enemy but a friend, a mentor, and an ally, and is responsible for the suicide of a woman he loves. But he is never charged with a crime, brought to a trial, or convicted. Unlike Meursault, who encounters his death in the world of daylight in Algiers, Damon is himself murdered by two men, the agents of the Communist Party, on a dimly lit street in New York. The Outsider, therefore, is fiction of a different order, brought together with The Stranger in an assumed definition of human existence in the modern world. Although the two novels are regarded largely as existentialist, giving attention to the crucial details that differentiate the narratives makes Meursault and Damon radically different in their ideology and action.

It is time to reexamine The Outsider and the black tradition and experience that underlies it. Comparing this novel with an avowedly existentialist novel like Camus's The Stranger will reveal that Wright's novel is not what critics have characterized. Contrary to disclaimers, Cross Damon is not a black man in name only. Not only is his plight real, but all the incidents and characters he is involved with, which at times appear to be clumsily constructed symbols, nonetheless convey well-digested ideas. He is not "pathetically insane" as a reviewer described him.4 The book bewildered black reviewers as well, not because of Wright's novel philosophy, but because Wright seemed to have lost contact with his native soil.5 But a detailed comparison of this novel with The Stranger, a novel of another culture and another tradition, will show not only that Wright's hero is not simply an embodiment of a half-baked philosophy, but that he is a genuine product of the African-American experience. Such a reevaluation of the book will also clarify misconceptions about Wright's other books as well.

The disparity between the two books becomes even more apparent if it is seen in the light of the less fashionable literary philosophy, naturalism. To some American writers, such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, naturalism is a doctrine that asserts

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the indifference of the universe to the will of man. Camus, though his naturalistic vision is not conveyed with Dreiser's massive detail or analyzed by Zola's experimental method, nevertheless constructs his novel to dramatize a climactic assertion of universal indifference. Wright's novel, on the other hand, is filled with the events and actions that exhibit the world's concerns with the affairs of man. The outside world is indeed hostile to Damon, a man of great will and passion. Refusing to be dominated by it, he challenges its forces. But Meursault, remaining much of a pawn, is not willing to exert himself against the forces which to him have no relation to existence.

Heredity and environment, the twin elements in naturalistic fiction, are more influential on human action in The Stranger than they are in The Outsider. Though heredity has little effect on Meursault's behavior, environment does play a crucial role. Meursault is consistently shown as indifferent to any of society's interests and desires: love of God, marriage, friendship, social status. He is averse to financial success or political power; he receives only what is given or acts when acted upon. He is, like Dreiser's Sister Carrie, "a wisp in the wind"; he is more drawn than he draws. This explains his passivity. Camus painstakingly accounts for human action just as Zola or Dreiser demonstrates the circumstances under which it occurs.

Camus shows that Meursault, who had no desire to kill the Arab, merely responded to pressures applied by natural forces. The blinding sun and the glittering knife held by the Arab caused Meursault to fear and forced him to pull the trigger. If the man

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6 The indifference of the universe is most poignantly described by Stephen Crane in "The Open Boat":

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.


Dreiser describes the forces of nature in Sister Carrie:

Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilisation is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct: scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason . . . As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learned to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers—neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free-will.


7 Cf. Sister Carrie, pp. 83-84.
with the knife had been a Frenchman, Meursault would not have acted with such rashness. Given the history of Arab-French colonial relations, Meursault's antagonism toward the Arabs might have subconsciously triggered his action. Camus's emphasis in this narrative, however, is placed on the elements of chance, that is, the blinding sun and the glittering knife, rather than on the social elements such as the disharmony between the French and the Arabs.

This idea of chance and determinism is absent in Wright's concept of human action exhibited in *The Outsider*. Each of the four murders committed by Damon is premeditated, the suicide of a woman is directly related to his actions, and his own murder is a reprisal for the actions he could have avoided. In each case it is made clear that Damon had control over his action; in each murder he was capable of exerting his will or satisfying his desire. In marked contrast to Meursault, Damon exerts himself to attain the essences of his own existence. They are the very embodiments of the abstract words of society—friendship, love, marriage, success, equality, and freedom—to which he cannot remain indifferent. Wright takes pains to show that they are not empty dreams. The fact that Damon has been deprived of them at one time or another proves that they constitute his existence.

*The Outsider* represents a version of existentialism in which human action is viewed as the result of an individual's choice and will. To Wright, the individual's action must be assertive and, if need be, aggressive. This is perhaps why he was more attracted to Sartre and de Beauvoir than to Camus. In an unpublished journal Wright wrote:

Sartre is quite of my opinion regarding the possibility of human action today, that it is up to the individual to do what he can to uphold the concept of what it means to be human. The great danger, I told him, in the world today is the very feeling and conception of what is a human might well be lost. He agreed. I feel very close to Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.8

If Wright's protagonist is considered an existentialist actively in search of an essence in the meaningless existence, Meursault seems a passive existentialist compelled to do nothing in the face of the void and meaningless universe. Focused on the definition of existence, their views are alike: Damon at one time says, perhaps uncharacteristically, "Maybe man is nothing in particular."9 The point of disparity in their world view, however, is the philosophy

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8See Fabre, p. 186.
of the absurd. While Meursault is convinced of the essential absurdity of existence, Damon is not. If one judges life inherently meaningful as does Damon, then it follows that his action to seek love, power, and freedom on earth is also meaningful. Conversely, however, if one judges life absurd as does Meursault, then it follows that his action is also absurd.

What is absurd is this dilemma of Meursault between his recognition of chaos and his search for order. It is the conflict between his awareness of death and his dream of eternity. It is the disparity between the essential mystery of all existence and one's demand for explanation. The fundamental difference in attitude between Meursault and Damon is that Meursault seeks neither order, nor a dream of eternity, nor explanation, while Damon is passionately in search of such an essence. Meursault's passivity, moreover, stems from Camus's attitude toward his art. Camus tries to solve the existentialist dilemma by arguing that an artist is not concerned to find order, to have a dream of eternity, or to demand explanation, but to experience all things given. The artist describes; he does not solve the mystery of the universe that is both infinite and inexplicable.

Whereas Camus's hero resists action, Wright's is compelled to act. Wright endows his hero with the freedom to create an essence. Damon's revolt is not so much against the nothingness and meaninglessness of existence as it is against the futility of man's attempt to make illogical phenomena logical. In the eyes of the public, Damon is as guilty of his murder of the fascist as Raskolnikov is guilty of his murder of the pawnbroker in Crime and Punishment. Both crimes result from premeditated actions; Meursault's killing of the Arab is accidental.

Some critics find a contradiction in Damon's view of the world. Earlier in the story, Damon considers man "nothing in particular" (p. 135), but at the end of his life he asserts, "We must find some way of being good to ourselves. . . . Man is all we've got. . . . I wish I could ask men to meet themselves" (p. 439). Likewise his inaction initially makes him see nothingness and meaninglessness in human existence but in the end his action results in his realization of loneliness and "horror" on earth (p. 440). In short, what appears to be a contradiction in Damon's view of existence is rather a reflection of activeness and aggressiveness in his character.

10As Damon's murder of the fascist Herndon is analogous to Raskolnikov's murder of the pawnbroker, Damon's killing of his friend Joe is similar to Raskolnikov's killing of the pawnbroker's sister, Lizaveta. In the case of Joe or Lizaveta, the murderer has no malice toward the victim but intentionally kills the victim to protect himself from prosecution.
The chief difference in philosophy between the two books derives from the differing philosophies of the two novelists, Wright and Camus. Though both men are regarded as rebels against society, their motives for rebellion differ. Damon rebels against society because it oppresses him by depriving him of the values he and society share, such as freedom in association and opportunity for success. Meursault is aloof from society because he does not believe in such values. Moreover, he does not believe in marriage or family loyalty. His obdurate attitude toward society is clearly stated in Camus’s preface to the American edition of *The Stranger*:

I summarized *The Stranger*—a long time ago, with a remark that I admit was highly paradoxical: “In our society any man who does not weep at his mother’s funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.” I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game. In this respect, he is foreign to the society in which he lives; he wanders, on the fringe, in the suburbs of private, solitary, sensual life. And this is why some readers have been tempted to look upon him as a piece of social wreckage. A much more accurate idea of the character, at least one much closer to the author’s intentions, will emerge if one asks just how Meursault doesn’t play the game. The reply is a simple one: he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels. This is what we all do, every day, to simplify life. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened.11

If Meursault is characterized by his refusal to play society’s game, Damon is a type of person who cannot resist playing such a game. If society is threatened by Meursault’s indifference to it, it is Damon rather than society that feels threatened.

This estranged personality of Meursault is reflected in his relationship with his mother. Some critics have used his calm acceptance of the bereavement as evidence for his callousness.12 But the fact that he does not cry at his mother’s funeral would not necessarily suggest that he is devoid of emotions. Had Meursault thought her death would have spared her the misery of her life or that death would be a happier state for man, he should not have been aggrieved by the passing away of his mother. What makes him a peculiar character, however, is the fact that an experience which would be a traumatic one for others is for him devoid of any meaning. *The Stranger* thus opens with the protagonist’s unconcerned reaction to his mother’s death: “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I
can't be sure." But as the story progresses he becomes a more sensitive individual. He is indeed disturbed during the vigil by the weeping of his mother's friend. And every detail, whether it is the driving home of the screws in the coffin lid or the starting of the prayers by the priest, is minutely described. Throughout the story there is no mention of Meursault's disliking his mother. He fondly reflects on her habits and personality; he affectionately calls her Maman.

By contrast Damon's relationship with his mother betrays not only the estrangement between them but also his hostility to the racist society that had reared her. His mother, the product of the traditional Christianity in the South that taught black children subservient ethics, tries to mold her son's character accordingly. It is only natural that Damon should rebel against such a mother, who moans, "To think I named you Cross after the Cross of Jesus" (p. 23). He rejects his mother not only because she reminds him of Southern Negro piety but because she is an epitome of racial and sexual repression:

He was conscious of himself as a frail object which had to protect itself against a pending threat of annihilation. This frigid world was suggestively like the one which his mother, without knowing it, had created for him to live in when he had been a child. . . . This God's NO-face had evoked in his pliable boy's body an aching sense of pleasure by admonishing him to shun pleasure as the tempting doorway opening blackly onto hell; had too early awakened in him a sharp sense of sex by thunderingly denouncing sex as the sin leading to eternal damnation. . . . Mother love had cleaved him: a wayward sensibility that distrusted itself, a consciousness that was conscious of itself. Despite this, his sensibilities had not been repressed by God's fearful negations as represented by his mother; indeed, his sense of life had been so heightened that desire boiled in him to a degree that made him afraid. (pp. 17-18)

The young Damon's desire to free himself from such a bondage is closely related to his inability to love any black woman, as shown by his relationship with Gladys, his estranged wife, or Dot, his pregnant mistress. The only woman he loves is the white woman Eva, the wife of his Communist friend Gil Blount. Damon falls in love with Eva despite, and partly because of, the fact that a black man's desire for a white woman is taboo. He feels an affinity to her, for he discovers that she, too, is a fearful individual and that she had been deceived into marrying her husband because of a political intrigue. Damon is tormented by the envenomed abstraction of racial and political myths. Unlike the white phonograph salesman, who seduces the wife of a black man in "Long Black Song," he is

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permanently frustrated. Since *The Outsider* portrays a rich variety of racial and political animosities, his love life is defined in terms of the forces beyond his control. To him the consummation of his love for Eva means the ultimate purpose of his new existence. It is understandable that when that goal appears within reach and yet is taken away from him, he finds only "the horror" that he has dreaded all his life (p. 440).

Meursault’s relationship with women, on the contrary, is totally uninhibited socially and psychologically. His relationship with Marie is free from the kinds of racial and political entanglements which smother Damon’s relationship with Eva. Meursault, the perfectly adjusted man, does not suffer from any kind of repression. His action for love is motivated from within according to logic rather than convention or sentiment. In his life, love of woman is as natural an instinct as is eating or resting; love is more akin to friendship than marriage. He helps Raymond, for he says, “I wanted to satisfy Raymond, as I’d no reasons not to satisfy him” (p. 41). Meursault is kind and benevolent as Damon is not; he is relaxed and content as Damon is tense and frustrated.

Meursault’s indifference to existence is epitomized by his love life. His attitude toward Marie bears a sort of impersonal, superhuman mode of thought. To the public such an attitude is inhuman, unconventional, and unethical. His view of love is no different from that of death; interestingly enough, his sexual relations with Marie begin immediately after his mother’s death. If death occurs beyond man’s control, so does love. His meeting with her takes place by mere coincidence and the relationship that develops is casual and appears quite innocent:

> When I was helping her to climb on a raft, I let my hand stray over her breasts. Then she lay flat on the raft, while I trod water. After a moment she turned and looked at me. Her hair was over her eyes and she was laughing. I clambered up on to the raft, beside her. The air was pleasantly warm, and, half jokingly, I let my head sink back upon her lap. She didn’t seem to mind, so I let it stay there. I had the sky full in my eyes, all blue and gold, and I could feel Marie’s stomach rising and falling gently under my head. We must have stayed a good half-hour on the raft, both of us half asleep. When the sun got too hot she dived off and I followed. I caught up with her, put my arm round her waist, and we swam side by side. She was still laughing. (pp. 23-24)

Even when a marriage proposal is made by Marie, his indifference remains intact: “Marie came that evening and asked me if I’d marry her. I said I didn’t mind; if she was keen on it, we’d get married” (p. 52).

Meursault’s indifference is also reflected in his reaction to the crime of which he is accused. Partly as a corollary to the nature of
the crime, he is passive rather than active. Unlike Damon, he commits a crime without malice or intention. He kills the Arab not because he hates the victim but partly because he sympathizes with his friend Raymond, whose life has been threatened. Given this situation, it would be more natural for him to defend his friend than the hostile stranger. Meursault's crime is a crime of logic; it is not a murder. Camus's purpose for using crime in *The Stranger* is to prove that society, rather than the criminal, is in the wrong. Camus's intention is to prove that his hero is innocent, as well as to show that Meursault's logic is far superior to society's. When crime appears innocent, it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself. In *The Stranger*, then, it is society, not the criminal, that is on trial.

Because Meursault is convinced of his innocence, he attains at the end of his life his peace of mind, a kind of nirvana:

> With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.
> (p. 154)

Damon is also convinced of his innocence at the end of his life. What the two novels share is not only that the hero is prosecuted by society, but that society—the prosecutor, jurors, and judge—seems to him to be always in the wrong. Camus's hero refuses to play society's game; as a result he is sentenced to death by society. Society expects him to grieve over his mother's death and refrain from having a casual affair with a woman during the mourning. But Wright's hero, induced to play society's game, loses in the end. He is tempted to participate in the normal activities of society such as a love affair and a political association. Tasting his agonizing defeat and dying, he utters:

> I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others. . . . To make a bridge from man to man . . . Starting from scratch every time is . . . is no good. Tell them not to come down this road . . . We must find some way of being good to ourselves . . . We're different from what we seem . . . . . Maybe worse, maybe better . . . But certainly different . . . We're strangers to ourselves.
> (p. 459)

The confession at the end of his life suggests that he, unlike Meursault, has always felt obliged to justify his actions. He has finally realized that they always collided with society's interests and values. As an outsider, he trusted no one, not even himself, nor did society trust him. While maintaining in his last breath that "in my heart . . . I'm . . . innocent" (p. 440), he is judging society guilty.
While Meursault is a victim of his own crime, Damon is a victim not only of his own crime but of society's. Meursault, who refuses to justify his actions, always feels innocent: "I wasn't conscious of any 'sin'; all I knew was that I'd been guilty of a criminal offense" (p. 148).

Although both novels employ crime as a thematic device, the focus of the author's idea differs. Camus's center of interest is not crime but its consequences—its psychological effect on his hero. Before committing his crime Meursault is presented as a stranger who finds no meaning in life. After he is sentenced to death he realizes for the first time that his life has been enveloped in the elusive beauty of the world. "To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly," he says, "made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still" (p. 154). In The Outsider crime is used, like accidental death or suicide, to create a new life for the hero. He murders the fascist Herndon as a reprisal; he intentionally kills the Communist Blount out of his desire for a white woman. In stark contrast to Camus's hero, to whom death has brought life and happiness, Wright's hero in the end is once more reminded of his own estrangement and horror.  

The two novelists' divergent attitudes toward the problems of crime and guilt are also reflected in the style and structure of their works. The Stranger is swift in pace and dramatic in tone, and displays considerable subjectivity, involving the reader in the consciousness of the hero. The reader's involvement in the hero's dialectics is intensified because the book consists of two parts dealing with the same issue. The first part involves the reader in a few days of Meursault's life, ending with his crime; the second re-involves the reader in the same experiences through the trial in court. Since the hero's experiences are viewed from different angles, they never strike one as monotonous or repetitious. The chief reason for the juxtaposition is for the hero, and for Camus, to convince the reader that what appears to society to be a crime is not at all a crime in the eyes of an existentialist.

This juxtaposition also elucidates the discontinuity and unreliability of Meursault's experiences in the first half of the story

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14The kind of fear Damon suffers at the end of his struggle is clearly absent in Meursault's life. A critic, in comparing Meursault to Clyde Griffiths, the hero of Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy, comments: "Passivity in L'Etranger is strength, and only the strong can be indifferent. When Meursault receives this almost Buddhist illumination, he loses the two great distractions from life: hope and fear. He becomes happy, rather than terrified, in the face of his expected execution; he no longer hopes for some wild chance to deliver him from it. This prisoner is alone and freed, from within." See Stropher B. Purdy, "An American Tragedy and L'Etranger," Comparative Literature, 19 (Summer 1967), 261.
despite the reordering and construing of those experiences in the second half. As the incidents and actions in the first half are discontinuous, so is time. No days are referred to in Meursault's life except for Saturday and Sunday, his days off. Of the months only August is mentioned since Meursault, Mason, and Raymond plan to have their vacation together; of the seasons only summer. By the same token, there is no mention of the day of the month. And Meursault's age is unknown; he is merely "young." As there is nothing unique about his concept of time, there is nothing unique about his experience. As points in time are discontinuous, so are the experiences. At his trial the prosecutor accuses him of moral turpitude, for Meursault shed no tears at his mother's funeral and casually started an affair with Marie immediately after. To Meursault, his mother's death, his behavior at the funeral, and his love affair are not only devoid of meaning in themselves, but discontinuous, unrelated incidents.

Similarly, the threatening gesture of the Arab, the sweating in Meursault's eyebrows, the flashing of the sun against his eyes, and the firing of his revolver occur independently of one another. If his eyes were blinded by the sun and the sweating of his eyebrows, his pulling the trigger on the revolver would not have been a logical reaction. When he is later asked by the prosecutor why he took a revolver with him and went back to the place where the Arab reappeared, he replies that "it was a matter of pure chance" (p. 110). If he does not believe that he is "morally guilty of his mother's death" (p. 128), as charged by the prosecutor, it would be impossible for him to admit that he is morally guilty of the Arab's death. This is precisely the reason why he tells the priest, "I wasn't conscious of any 'sin'; all I knew was that I'd been guilty of a criminal offense" (p. 148).

Swift and intensive though Camus's probing of Meursault's character is, the reader is deliberately kept from coming to an easy conclusion about Meursault's guilt. By contrast, the reader is instantly made aware of Damon's guilt in unambiguous terms. In The Outsider truly heinous crimes are constructed in advance with all the plausible justifications. Before the reader is made aware of Damon's guilt, the author has defined in unequivocal terms the particular traits in Damon's character and the particular forces in society that had led to his crimes. In so doing Wright creates a clear pattern by which Damon's motives for crime are shown. Whereas there is no such

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15The most precise analysis of Camus's concept of time is presented in Ignace Feurlicht, "Camus's L'Etranger Reconsidered," PMLA, 78 (December 1963), 606-621.
relatedness in Meursault's motives for action, there emerges in *The Outsider* a chain of events that can scarcely be misinterpreted. The murder of the fascist is committed side by side with that of the Communist. Damon kills both men with malice: he murders Herndon because of his hatred for the racist as he does Blount because of his passion for the white woman. Unlike Meursault, Damon is conscious of his guilt in the instant of committing crime.

Since Damon's actions are predetermined and interrelated, Damon is constantly made conscious of the passage of time. The problems in his manhood and marriage, for example, are related to those of his childhood. His desertion of his wife is analogous to his rejection of his mother just as the Communists' rule over workers in modern times is akin to slavery in the past. *The Outsider* opens with a scene at dawn in which Damon and his friends "moved slowly forward shoulder to shoulder and the sound of their feet tramping and sloshing in the melting snow echoed loudly" (p. 1). Like Jake Jackson in *Lawd Today*, Damon, bored with his routine work, finds the passage of time unendurable. In *The Stranger*, Meursault is least concerned with time; he never complains about the monotony of his work. In fact, he dislikes Sundays because he is not doing his routine job. Damon, on the contrary, wishes every day were Sunday, or reminisces about Christmastime in a certain year. More importantly, Meursault says whether he dies at thirty or at seventy it doesn't matter. For him life has no more significance than death.

For Damon life is all that matters. If his earlier life is not worth living, a new one must be created. Therefore, a freak subway accident, in which he is assumed dead, offers him another life and another identity. All his life he plans his action with hope for the future and with denial of the past. Such attitude is emblematic of the African-American tradition, the deep-seated black experience, as expressed in the spirituals. While Edgar Allan Poe's writings...
sometimes smack of morbid romanticism, that erotic longing for death, the spirituals reverberate with energy and vitality and convey the sense of rejuvenation. However violent and destructive Damon may appear, he inherently emerges from this tradition. Meursault, on the other hand, is the very product of the nihilistic spirit that hovered over Europe, particularly France, after World War II.

Despite Wright's effort to relate Damon's actions to his social and psychological backgrounds, *The Outsider* remains an imperfect work. Some of its faults are structural rather than philosophical. Given the kind of life Damon has lived, it is not difficult to understand his nihilistic view of the world stated earlier in the book that "man is nothing in particular" (p. 135), or his conciliatory vision that man "is all we've got... I wish I could ask men to meet themselves" (p. 439). But, as some critics have pointed out, it is difficult to believe that a young man with such mundane problems, renewing his life through a subway accident, suddenly emerges as a philosopher discussing Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard. While in *The Stranger* the two parts of the story are so structured that each enlightens the other, those in *The Outsider*, the hero's life before and after the accident, are constructed as though they were two tales.

This weakness notwithstanding, *The Outsider* is unquestionably a powerful statement made by an outsider who refuses to surrender his will to live. One can scarcely find among black heroes in American fiction such a courageous and tenacious, albeit violent, man. As compared to Bigger Thomas, Wright's celebrated hero, Damon stands taller and poles apart simply because Damon is endowed with an intellectual capacity seldom seen in Afro-American fiction. Small wonder that when the novel came out, critics in general, both white and black, who were unfamiliar with such a character, failed to appreciate Wright's intention and execution in the book.20


19Orville Prescott's *New York Times* review was a typical white critic's reaction to *The Outsider*. With due respect for Wright's previous successes, Prescott politely insisted that Wright must have deplored Damon's moral weakness and irrational behavior at the end of the book, and further remarked, "That men as brilliant as Richard Wright feel this way is one of the symptoms of the intellectual and moral crises of our times" (*New York Times*, March 10, 1953). Saunders Redding, quoted earlier, noted that Wright's brand of existentialism, instead of being a device for the representation of truth, "leads away from rather than toward reality" (*Baltimore Afro-American*, May 19, 1953). Arna Bontemps was even sarcastic: "The black boy from Mississippi is still exploring. He has had a roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre, and apparently he liked it" (*Saturday Review*, 36 [March 28, 1953], 15-16).
The strengths of The Outsider become even clearer as this novel is compared with The Stranger. Although Damon professes to be a nihilist, as does Meursault, he is never indifferent to human existence as is Meursault. Camus's hero is called a stranger to society as well as to himself; he is indifferent to friendship, marriage, love, success, freedom. Ironically, Damon, who seeks them in life, fails to obtain them. It is ironic, too, that Meursault, to whom they are at his disposal, is indifferent to them. Wright's hero, an outsider racially as well as intellectually, struggles to get inside. Damon wants to be treated as an individual, not as a second-class citizen or a person whose intellectual ability is not recognized. On the other hand, Camus's hero, an insider but a stranger, strives to get outside.

It is hardly coincidental, then, that both novels are eloquent social criticisms in our times. The Outsider is an indictment against American society, for not only does Wright maintain Damon's innocence but he shows most convincingly that men in America "hate themselves and it makes them hate others" (p. 439). The Stranger, on the other hand, is an indictment against French society, for Camus proves that while the criminal is innocent, his judges are guilty. More significantly, however, comparison of the two novels of differing characters and traditions reveals that both Wright and Camus are writing ultimately about a universal human condition.