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RITES OF PASSAGE IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S FICTION: FROM CHAOS TO A NEW WOR(L)D

por

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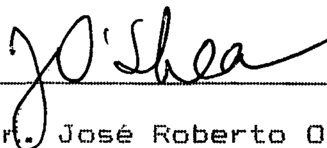

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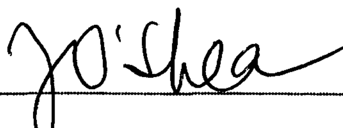

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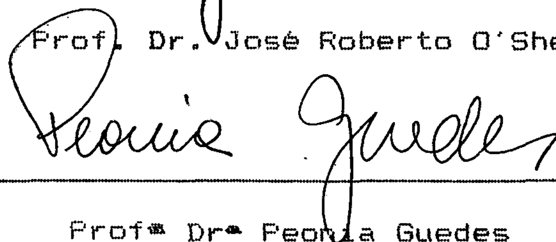

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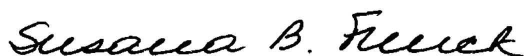

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ABSTRACT

Based on a close reading of Arnold Van Gennep's The Rites of Passage, this analysis investigates the strong relation between the tripartite pattern of the rites of passage according to Van Gennep and the lives of two of Richard Wright's protagonists: Bigger Thomas (Native Son) and Cross Damon (The Outsider). The peculiarities of both protagonists' lives were also studied according to Houston Baker, Jr.'s theory of the "rites of the black (w)hole", which emphasizes the impossibility for the conscious Negro to be reincorporated into society with a new status, or with a new awareness of his own condition in life. The three stages of the rites of passage were also comparatively studied side by side with Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero cycle.

RESUMO

Baseada numa leitura densa de The Rites of Passage, de Arnold Van Gennep, esta análise investiga a forte relação entre o padrão tripartido dos ritos de passagem de acordo com Van Gennep e as vidas de dois protagonistas de Richard Wright: Bigger Thomas (Native Son) e Cross Damon (The Outsider). As peculiaridades das vidas de ambos os protagonistas foram estudadas, também, de acordo com a teoria de Houston Baker, Jr. dos "ritos do buraco/todo negro", a qual enfatiza a impossibilidade para o negro consciente de ser reincorporado à sociedade com um novo status, ou com uma nova consciência sobre a sua própria condição na vida. Os três estágios dos ritos de passagem foram também comparativamente estudados lado a lado com a teoria do ciclo do herói de Joseph Campbell.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF RICHARD WRIGHT

In order to contextualize Richard Wright's oeuvre, allowing a better understanding of his concerns, themes, and, perhaps, the frequent use of violence in his fiction, besides a careful study of the author's own background, one has to have in mind a brief view of the history of Negro Literature in the United States up to Wright's days. A reading of The Negro Novel in America (1965), by Robert A. Bone, is very useful for that end, despite the datedness which the year of publication may suggest.[1]

Willingly or not, one has to admit that Negro fictional expression mingles itself with the social aspects that have shaped a warped sort of living for an entire race. The extent to which a writer has been able to transform these particular aspects into universal issues is one way to grant him an artistic status. Robert Bone has avoided what he calls in his introduction the "Parrington fallacy,"[2] i.e., the tendency to treat novels "primarily as social documents [forgetting] the value of a novel as a work of art" (7). In Bone's own words: "While I have my social biases and have not hesitated to express them, I have tried to avoid the

Parrington fallacy by placing strong emphasis upon form--attempting to establish the work of art in its own right before viewing it as part of the cultural process" (7). Thus, the critic distances himself from a tradition that has evaluated Negro novels mainly for their social importance.

Right on the initial pages, Bone states that the strong cultural differences of the Negro life "are the result not of innate 'racial' characteristics but of a distinctive group experience in America" (2). Historical circumstances, such as slavery and the system of castes that created segregating institutions and kept the Negroes living "within the geographical and cultural confines of a Negro community... produce[d] a distinctive minority culture which is neither obliterated by the larger culture nor completely separate from it" (2). Such a minority would have a literature of its own, dealing mostly with characters mirroring that minority, i.e., with Negro characters.

Trying to achieve the universality supposedly desired by most artists, the Negro writer in America has the ambiguous task of interpreting the two cultures that frame his intellectual life: on the one hand, Western culture in general and the particular traditions of English literature that have shaped his writing and, on the other, his own peculiar Negro heritage, with its major concerns and themes.

Since the African slave was brought from his homeland to the New World, he started to face a process of

extirpation of his native culture: he was torn away from his tribe and his family, and he could not use his language or practice his religion. As E. Franklin Frazier states in his The Negro Family in the United States (1940), in the United States, African traditions and practices could not take root and survive (7-8); in order to provide us with some reasons for the non-survival of African tradition in the U.S.A., Frazier cites Professor Robert Park, who says that the slaves who came to the New World were taken from all the peoples of Central Africa. Furthermore, those slaves were divided in small numbers, being sent to different plantations as soon as they were landed in the United States. On the plantation, the new slave had to confront "slaves who had already forgotten or only dimly remembered their life in Africa" (8); and a final reason for the loss of African identity was that "English was the only language of the plantation" (8).

Thus, in his struggle to survive, the slave had to appropriate a new set of cultural tenets, but his access to Western culture was directed by the interests of his white masters. The Negro slave was not allowed to learn how to handle the essential tools to enter and operate in that culture: reading and writing. Until this situation was gradually changed, the Negro was limited to creating upon folk forms.

As Bone puts it, "Broadly speaking... the cultural history of the American Negro falls into two periods, beginning with folk art before the Emancipation[3] and becoming literary in the full sense about 1890" (11). In fact, before 1890, only three novels written by Negroes were published, the first one being William Wells Brown's Clotel, in 1853. Responsible for the appearance of that literary art among Negroes was the rise of the Negro middle class, which slowly began to have access to higher education.

The early novels written by that rising middle class reflected the ideology involved in racial advancement or individual success; according to Bone, "Constant stress is placed on the property-acquiring virtues. Thrift and industry, initiative and perseverance, promptness and reliability are the qualities which distinguish hero or heroine from ordinary mortals" (13). Paradoxically enough, Bone moves close to Parrington when he asserts that "the early Negro novelist had the soul of a shopkeeper.... With few exceptions, his life was occupied with business affairs; literature was merely his avocation. Usually his single novel was written during an interlude from the harsh economic struggle" (15).

Side by side with the propagandistic or inspirational function implicit in the advocacy of the capitalistic system of increasing wealth, the early Negro novel was also used as an instrument of protest against the oppressing American

caste system. This system appeared as a way of guaranteeing white supremacy, mainly in the South, and was characterized by "segregation in housing and travel, discrimination in employment, and exclusion from places of public accommodation" (16). Bone proceeds to point out a racial strategy present in the early Negro novelists: "their open contempt for the Negro masses" (18). In order to emphasize their difference from the black masses, the so-called Talented Tenth (a term coined by W.E.B. DuBois and used synonymously with Negro middle class) had to distance itself from the former and "press for acceptance as a privileged minority" (19). Even the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority was accepted and used by the early novelists: "Heredity therefore plays a cardinal role in the plot and characterization of the early novels, and many of the colored protagonists proudly trace their lineage to some erring member of the white aristocracy" (19). All these attempts to secure a special treatment from whites to the Talented Tenth show us that the latter still had to find out about the obtrusive logic of the caste relations that took the place of slavery (20). After World War I, the awareness of the real situation of American Negroes in general had an appeal for a union of the Negro novelist with the Negro masses, under the influence of W.E.B. DuBois' program.

In terms of form, according to Bone, the early Negro novels were often faulty because they "foudered on the rocks

of characterization and style" (28). In his attempt to oppose the post-Reconstruction[4] repression, the early novelist had to use whatever tools available. This meant that he had to counterattack the Negro stereotypes that existed theretofore. Melodramatic in the vein of the popular fiction of the day, the early Negro novels were limited to Manichaean moral standards of good and bad, creating, thus, only new stereotypes so as to attack the previous ones. As Bone notes, the use of melodrama by the early Negro novelists expresses "social aspirations and... firm allegiance to the American success ideology" (25), because "Melodrama is essentially a romantic projection" (25) of a future in the upper class. Although as early as 1912 James Weldon Johnson wrote "the first Negro novel to contain a complex, fully motivated character" (27), The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, it was not until the advent of later literary realism that "Negro characters could be fully emancipated from the stereotype, and... the theme of racial protest could find a suitable stylistic medium" (28).

Once again, historical facts interfered in the development of Negro art. The manipulative Southern paternalism gave way to the independent struggle on the part of the Negro, due to the urban migration that took place after World War I, with a vast population moving from South to North, or from farm to city. As Bone aptly notes, this movement was not as simple as that: "In the course of this

migration, centuries of historical development were traversed in a few decades... it was the sudden transplanting of a debased feudal folk from medieval to modern America" (53). A number of circumstances drove more than 2,000,000 Negroes to leave the farm for the factory. The results of the "Great Migration" were obvious: "...the Negro's urban environment lifted him to a new plane of consciousness" (54) which, in turn, reflected in the artistic expression: "The new group experience called for a new literary movement to interpret it" (54).

One important place of confluence for a large segment of that community of migrants was Harlem. Privileged for its location in "a city which was the literary, musical and theatrical capital of America" (Bone 54), Harlem was, as Thadious M. Davis puts it in her essay "Southern Standard Bearers in the New Negro Renaissance" (in The History of Southern Literature, 1985), "'the' place to be for blacks in general and for black writers in particular" (291). The participants of the intellectual community that was attracted to Harlem started to be called New Negroes after the anthology of young writers, The New Negro, published by Alain Locke in 1925. Highly rebellious against their predecessors' way of life, the members of this intelligentsia, in the words of Robert Bone, "cut through the taboos of the Victorian Age, demolished its shallow optimism, repudiated its value system, and entered the

mainstream of contemporary intellectual life" (55). The movement that encompassed the more regional manifestation of the New Negroes was the so-called Negro Renaissance, which "reversed the assimilationist trend of the pre-war period, with its conscious imitation of white norms and deliberate suppression of 'racial' elements" (Bone 62).

The New Negro novelist used some strategies in order to create a sense of his own alienation from the dominant system. One such strategy was the use of folk culture so as to stress a distinctive racial individuality. Differently from his predecessors who had to draw on primarily oral folk forms to express themselves artistically, the New Negro could develop the main themes inherent in his own upbringing according to the parameters the dominant culture has shaped for literary expression. The intellectual could go still further and use primitivism, or the cult of African origins. From this attitude emerged a dualism, a "clash between 'native' and European values" (Bone 72). A second strategy used by the New Negro school was its use of a distinctive language, "greatly influenced by the rhythms and inflections of Negro speech, and especially by jive, the colorful argot of the urban Negro" (Bone 66). Finally, an important aspect of the New Negro novel is that being "more interested in interpreting Negro culture than in pleading the cause of racial justice [the novelists] chose to write novels of Negro life rather than novels dealing with relations between

the races" (Bone 66). They were, thus, breaking with a long tradition of protest writers.

In fact, Bone argues that the New Negro novelists developed the "sense of alienation from bourgeois society which is the mark of the modern artist" (96) by creating a sense of catastrophe towards the destructive impulses of the modern world (106). However, their way of emphasizing their alienation from the modern world was through a "carefree abandon", an exoticism, an "emphasis on 'atmosphere' rather than form", a "combination of literary realism and local color" (107). Their successors of the 1930's were to bring a "grimmer view of Negro life" (107) with the so-called "proletarian" fiction.

A number of different major themes of the New Negro Renaissance is provided by Thadious Davis in her previously cited essay:

> the search for and discovery of a black-centered identity; the unearthing of roots in the soil, the South, and Africa; the realistic conception of the North in the lives of blacks; the reassessment of religion; the exploration of class distinctions among blacks; the realization of beauty and the consciousness of pain caused by racial, social, and economic conditions; the consideration of how the past ought to be viewed...; the value of folk traditions and practices. (300)

Continuing the historical perspective, we might stress that the hardships caused by the Great Depression brought with them a new social awareness marked by public

demonstrations demanding better life conditions. Negro intellectuals of the 1930's supported the black workers in their grievances, developing a class consciousness non-existent theretofore. Most of the more respected black writers participated, together with more liberal whites, of the Federal Writers' Project. Along with the Communist Party, all the social agitation of the decade helped to overcome the Negro isolation. The rather few novels of the period accompanied the movements, displaying "a greater social realism" than "the joy-centered novels of the Harlem School" (Bone 118).

Against the socially turbulent background of the 1930's, Richard Wright started his career as a writer. Born on a cotton plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, on September 4, 1908, Richard Nathaniel Wright was the first son of an ex-schoolteacher, Ella Wilson, and a supposedly illiterate farmer, Nathan Wright, who was never able to support his family adequately. As Addison Gayle informs us in Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son (1980), Wright's grandfathers were ex-slaves, and one of them, Nathaniel Wright, "... was said to have been an extremely dark man, though with the blood of both whites and Indians flowing in his veins" (2). Wright's grandmother, Margaret Bolden Wilson, who had nine children, was "the illegitimate child of a union between a white man of Irish-Scottish ancestry and a black African woman" (Gayle 4). In fact, as Wright

himself describes her in Black Boy (1945), she was "as nearly white as a Negro can get without being white, which means that she was white" (35).

As Davis informs us in her essay on Wright in Fifty Southern Writers after 1900 (1987), after their marriage in 1907, Richard's parents tried to live on a farm, but their financial condition deteriorated and they moved with their two sons, staying for a brief period with Ella's parents and then moving again in 1912, this time to Memphis, Tennessee. There, the hard responsibility of supporting a family under very poor conditions made Nathan desert Ella and the boys, in 1913. The absence of his father and the long hours spent by his mother away from home to get sustenance imposed upon young Richard Wright the charge of taking care of his brother, Leon Allan, and also with freedom to ramble through the streets of Memphis (Davis 546).

In 1916, after having to leave her sons in an orphanage for one year due to an illness, Ella moved with them to live with her sister, Maggie, in Elaine, Arkansas. That year, Ella and her sons spent the summer in her parents' new home in Jackson, Mississippi. Wright had then the chance to live in a clean and spacious environment, something which he had not known in Memphis. The stay in Elaine was happy but ill-fated: after a brief while, the killing of Maggie's husband by a white mob drove all of them--Ella, Maggie and the two boys--to move to another town in Arkansas, West Helena. Once

again, their future was not going to be very hopeful; after some time working as cook and domestic, Ella suffered a series of paralytic strokes that forced her to return to her parents' home, taking Richard with her after a while; meanwhile, Richard's brother went to live with Maggie in Detroit (Davis 546).

It was during his comparatively long stay in Jackson, under the tutorage of his grandmother, Margaret--from 1919 to 1925--, that Richard got into regular attendance at school. At that moment, however, as Addison Gayle attests in _Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son_, Wright was already a potentially eager reader, having discovered the fascination of books on a certain occasion when one of his grandmother's boarders read to him the story of _Bluebeard and His Seven Wives_ (Gayle 15). Due to the rigorous religious education that his grandmother imposed on him and to the treatment he received from other relatives--in order not to be beaten, he confronted his aunt Addie, who was his teacher for some time, with a knife (Gayle 23), and his uncle Tom with two razor blades (Gayle 30)--, Wright's youth was far from blissful, but it was at that time that he started writing stories, having one of them ("The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre") published in 1924, in the black newspaper _The Southern Register_. The following year, selected as valedictorian of his ninth-grade class, he wrote and delivered the graduation address (Davis 547).

Afterwards, Wright saved most of the money he earned from a series of jobs, leaving his family and Mississippi for Memphis and thinking of moving north with his mother to Chicago. Simultaneously, he voraciously read books so as to help his own writing. In order to borrow books from the public library, he had to count on the help of a white coworker, since blacks were not allowed to check out books for themselves. In 1927, Wright finally went to Chicago, having to face, once again, a number of jobs so as to save some money and manage to have his mother and brother by his side within a year. His concern with a literature that would function as a denouncing element within society was complemented with his sympathy towards Communism. Eventually, Wright joined the American Communist Party in 1933. He had already started writing poetry and the engaged newspapers could use Wright's poems and essays to attack the ways of the society in which he lived, particularly the absurd way Negroes were treated (Davis 547-548).

The terrible consequences of the economic Depression reenacted the terrible situation under which Richard Wright lived in the South. Wright was then assisted by the government to support his family, and the books and short stories he wrote were not accepted by the publishers--with the exception of "Big Boy Leaves Home", published in The New Caravan anthology. In 1937, he moved to New York where, after becoming editor of the Daily Worker, a Communist

publication, he won the first prize in a contest for members of the Federal Writers' Project, sponsored by Story magazine, and managed to be contracted by Harper & Brothers for his first book, Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas (1938). Two years later, in 1940, the same company published Native Son, which was rapidly going to establish Wright as the best-known black writer of the 1940's as well as to provide him with international respect (Davis 549). That year, after spending some time in Mexico with his first wife--Dhima Rose Meadman, a dancer whom he married in 1939--Wright returned home by way of Mississippi, where he visited his father, whom he had not seen for 25 years. Divorced, Wright married again; on March 1941, he marrried Ellen Poplar, a hardworking Marxist with whom he would have two daughters, Julia (born in April 1942) and Rachel (born in January 1949). In a very productive period, he managed to have his autobiography, Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth, published in 1945. Two years later, the Wrights were to move permanently to France. There, Richard Wright made contact with African and West-Indian writers and began the French-American fellowship. In 1950, he starred a film version of Native Son. In this period, Wright officially resigned from the Communist Party, and The Outsider, his first novel since Native Son, was published in 1953. In fact, he had been estranged from the Party for a long time--

since 1944--and his new book displayed in a way a justification for that attitude (Davis 549-550).

From his travels to Africa, Asia, and Europe, Wright collected the materials to be written in his future nonfiction books. Only two more fiction books appeared before Richard Wright's death: Savage Holiday (1954) and The Long Dream (1958). His situation then, however, was strongly adverse: he was being criticized in the United States for his long exile in France and for alleged anti-American sentiments; his last books did not sell satisfactorily; his mother died in January 1959; and he was not permitted to live in London with his family--his older daughter, Julia, was going to attend Cambridge and the British officials granted visas only to his white wife and both daughters; alone in France, Wright developed an amoebic dysentery probably contracted in Africa or Asia. The only connection with writing was his prolific experiences with haiku. Unable to recover from the illness, Wright died of a heart attack on 28 November 1960. He was 52 years old. His body was cremated and his ashes were placed in Paris's Columbarium, along with those of Black Boy (Davis 550-551).

Undoubtedly, Richard Wright is one of the most vivid representatives of the Modern Negro. His always conflicting stance in life puts him in the same strenuous condition as his hapless characters, and his sharp consciousness drives him to be always concerned with the future of his own race,

of the powerless peoples in the whole world and, ultimately, of the human race as a whole. Wright's life put him in contact with situations and people that were going to help him create his fictional works. Obliged to support his brother and mother due to the facts related beforehand, Wright had lots of experiences with Negroes' reality in America. Among a series of jobs, he was a staff member at the South Side Boys' Club (Native Son xxvi-xxvii), where he heard a number of tales that enriched his repertoire. Although having traveled many places after leaving the United States, his novels always depicted the distressed conditions of blacks in America.

As a writer, Richard Wright appeared as a natural continuation to the flow of the Southern black novelists that arose with the New Negro Renaissance in the 1920's. As already said, after the affirmation of black culture and character that was emphasized in that period, novels by black writers started to be more concerned with social and racial problems in the late 1930's and in the 1940's.[5] As it will be fully discussed later on, Wright's work, along with the work of other writers, was ranked in the rather limiting scope of "protest literature", i.e., a literature concerned only with social action, engaged in an attack against injustice, despising the artistic aspect.

It is easily recognizable that Wright's fiction is intrinsically based on the author's own life and

experiences. The plights through which he had to go in life provided him with the materials to weave a fictional work that denounces the injustice committed against people with the sole excuse of their skin color. Wright's characters are always presented in oppressing environments which help to build their personalities but from which they want to escape.

Such situation comes as no surprise, for the society in which such characters are depicted is a society that denies them as human beings; they are not expected to show human responses; they cannot eat, sit, shop, have fun--in short, they cannot live--in the same places as the whites; they must be branded different from the cradle; and, in order to be maintained in that submissive condition through life, they are not given the same opportunities as whites. Even if an individual under such an oppressive environment finally achieves the goal of fleeing, he will never be able to forget what he is, he will never be able to lead a normal life because he is marked for life. Richard Wright knew all of this by his own account and possibly the best way he found to try to make amends with his life was writing.

Obviously, at a certain point in his life, Wright became aware that those oppressive, inhuman conditions under which his race lived were not the "privilege" of one race. This broader sense of human life made him create a fiction that encompassed basic and universal human yearnings: the

quest for identity within a constricting environment and the quest for an understanding of that very identity and of the nature of the quest as well. Within the range of such yearnings, it is easy to identify, just as Davis has done in her previously cited essay on Wright in Fifty Southern Writers after 1900, a number of recurrent themes in Wright's fiction: "alienation, flight, becoming, rebellion, oppression, freedom, and self-actualization, all within the emotional nexus of fear, dread, pain, anger or rage, and, in a few instances such as The Outsider, despair" (552). Thus, black life becomes a symbol of the limited human condition. We can extend Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomases in his introduction to Native Son (1940), "How 'Bigger' was Born", to most of his protagonists, who are often described "hovering unwanted between two worlds--between powerful America and his own stunted place in life" (xxiv), into a territory that is many times in Wright's fiction called "No Man's Land". Those characters, then, become the perfect symbol of the outsider, the marginal within the society, the individual who is trapped like an animal and who will "respond, often violently, to an internal need for wholeness even when [he is] unable to articulate [his] need or to translate it into a viable existence" (Davis 552).

By the time Native Son appeared in 1940, critics already knew Richard Wright from his first collection of novellas (Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas, 1938). But

what was only a promise of a new strong analyst of American society became a hard truth with the novel. According to Thadious Davis, "In fact, the reception of Native Son was phenomenal; no black writer before Wright had been the subject of as much extensive and favorable critical commentary" (556). Another example of the importance of the novel is what Lee Greene writes in his essay "Black Novelists and Novels, 1930-1950" (in The History of Southern Literature, 1985):

> Beginning with Native Son, Southern black novels become more concerned with emphasizing the psychological complexity of their protagonists than with creating protagonists who are representative victims of racism or who are intended essentially as familiar or social types. (397)

The enthusiastic response to Wright was maintained with the publication of his autobiography, Black Boy, in 1945. The prolonged exile in Paris, however, severely shook his reputation in the United States, and his books after Black Boy often received adverse criticism in his own country. This situation went unchanged till after Wright's death, with the cold reception for the two posthumous publications, Eight Men--a collection of short stories--and Lawd Today--one of the first novels he wrote. It was only with the political and cultural activism that started in the late 1960's that Afro-American writers saw their chance to be better received. According to Davis,

> [a]s blacks began to reassess their own traditions and to resurrect literary forebears, they rediscovered Wright and his importance. By the early 1970s, one aftermath of the civil rights movement and the new black renaissance was a considerable interest in Wright as a major writer, as a proponent of racial identity and opponent of racial oppression. (Davis 556)

With this renewed interest, Wright started to be the subject of many biographies and critical studies, which, in their majority, helped to reassess the author's work.

Exemplary of a more recent reassessment of Wright's fiction is Houston Baker, Jr.'s essay, "Reassessing (W)right: A Meditation on the Black (W)hole" (in Modern Critical Views - Richard Wright, 1987). In this study, Houston Baker introduces a rather complex and unusual metaphor, the black hole, in order to have a completely new point of view and to read Wright under a new light. Through the analysis of two of the writer's novels, the critic duly explains the metaphor and shows how it fits adequately Richard Wright's fiction. Baker starts by justifying his initial argumentation of the need to reassess Wright's work and brings back the question of the author's supposed lack of artistry according to traditional evaluation. As Baker appropriately asserts,

> traditional evaluative accounts of Wright and his corpus have been grounded on a theoretical model that has generated a quite limited set of explanatory terms. This well-rehearsed model is a

> discourse predicated on **lack**... a model which proceeds almost entirely in terms of a capitalistic economics' 'need' and 'lack'. (128)

According to this view, and as James Baldwin's and Ralph Ellison's essays on Wright would reiterate, Wright is characterized merely as a "protest" writer, a writer who, "according to Baldwin, is less a creator of cultural texts than a victim" (129); a writer who, deprived of the articulation of the culture in which he is inserted, can only try to imitate in an impoverished manner the texts of that culture. Morover, Wright has often been found "lacking" according to traditional evaluation because he is "an artisan of social protest... he failed to transcend the social in order to arrive at **art**" (139). In such a reductive view, "Art" is taken as an abstraction, an ideal realm separate from all the social processes. Against the traditional stance, Baker proposes the use of "a signifying device sufficiently unusual in its connotations to shatter familiar conceptual determinations" (133) so as to reassess Richard Wright and not find him "lacking". That unusual device or metaphor proposed by Baker is the trope of the black hole.

After a brief definition or description of "black hole" as a scientific term, the critic proceeds to show how Wright has achieved a point at which he, as a fundamental writer in Afro-American canon, is very similar to the black hole:

Richard Wright, in Black Boy, "is like the Red Giant burning toward fulfilled concentration" (Baker 134). Through the mediation of Black Boy, we are shown that Wright presents a search, a desire for "something terribly important" (Black Boy 218) that makes him consume matter--in this case, naturalistic and realistic fiction--in order to fulfill or substitute an absence of some indefinite element, just like the black hole consumes everything that enters its gravitational field. Baker quotes a passage in Roland Barthes's A Lover's Discourse (original French edition: 1977) to demonstrate the relationship between absence, desire, and language: in order to manipulate and endure absence, one has to

> transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language (language is born of absence: the child has made himself a doll out of a spool, throws it away and picks it up again, miming the mother's departure and return: a paradigm is created).... This staging of language postpones the other's death: a very short interval, we are told, separates the time during which the child still believes his mother to be absent and the time during which he believes her to be already dead. To manipulate absence is to extend this interval, to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death. (Barthes, quoted in Baker 136)

In Black Boy, "the mother's suffering absence... suggests the foundational image in the repertoire of human desire" (Baker 135). Wright takes his mother's absence as a symbol of all the negative elements of Negro existence in

America, of "the meaningless pain and the endless suffering" (Black Boy 87). The author's quest is "to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering" (Black Boy 88), thus relating the meaning itself to the mother's image. In this view, "[a] beautifying, `literary' language is a restrictive array of conventions preserving class division, maintaining the status quo surfaces of life, **creating desire** rather than elaborating its transcendence" (Baker 137). Therefore, another vehicle, an adequate and expressive vehicle, is demanded in order to transcend desire. In fact, just as "[t]he trope of the black hole suggests a 'squeezing' of matter to zero sum [so Wright in his autobiography] reduces literary language [and conventional discourse] to zero sum.... Inversive language is repeatedly represented as nullifying fixed discursive norms" (Baker 137). Now, through this new point of view we can finally infer, along with Baker, that "Wright incontestably drew all of **art** into his own singularity and employed it to fuel his project of articulating a black blues life's pressing desire" (140).

At this point of the essay, Baker relates the black hole to the black social underground, with its destructive but also invigorating force, a place that represents the "achieved rationality of black community" (140), a place that frees the Negro from the restraints of a white world, allowing him to produce a new expressive order. Here, Baker insightfully introduces the "set pattern of rites" (140-1)

that marks the Afro-American underground experiences and refers back to the Belgian anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, specifically to Van Gennep's book The Rites of Passage (1960), to insert the tripartite form of the rites of passage. The ceremonies that accompany such rites, Baker argues, have the purpose of enabling "the individual to pass 'safely' and profitably from one defined social position to another" (Baker 141), a movement which brings forth "critical transformation, creating cultural instability" (Baker 141) for the individual. Drawing on Van Gennep, Baker informs that the three phases of the rites of passage are: "(1) separation from a fixed social position, (2) movement through a 'timeless' and 'statusless' marginality, and (3) reincorporation into a new, fixed social state with a new status" (141).

According to Baker, "[the] life crisis of black identity in a white society is instituted by the black person's sudden awareness that he or she represents... a 'zero image' in the perceptual schemes of the white, dominant culture." For Baker, "[s]uch a realization is always followed in black narratives by passage rites--by what might be termed **rites of the black (w)hole**" (141). The rites of the black (w)hole have the same tripartite form as Van Gennep's but have some peculiarities. The first particular feature is that after the first stage--separation from the dominant white society--the timelessness and

spacelessness of the second phase are accompanied by the receipt of "ancestral" wisdom. The initiand learns internalized images of the black community which enable him to effect a negation of negation; i.e., the inversion of all the values of the dominant society allows him to negate his own negative image before that society. Eventually, where in the third phase of the rites of passage there is usually a reintegration of the initiand, with a new status, into the society he has been previously separated from, the initiand in the rites of the black (w)hole gets into the third and final stage when he becomes aware of the impossibility of his "reintegration" into a dominant white society that has never accepted him. The black initiand has no place to return because, unable to fit into the parameters that white society has defined for him, he cannot live with his peers who have accepted or acquiesced to those parameters: "The achievement of **Black (W)holeness** means that accepted and acceptable roles meted out for blacks by a dominantly white society are no longer feasible" (Baker 143). The initiand has achieved, according to Baker, the invisible center of the black (w)hole, which nullifies conventional senses of time and space. The initiand's new consciousness consists of his entry into an initiated, expressive black community which becomes "a substitute for the perceptual schemes and modes of discourse of white society in a premarginal phase of black existence" (143). This marginal expressive

community is the center of a new order of existence, with an equivalent new order of discourse.

Baker proceeds in his analysis showing how extremely well does "The Man Who Lived Underground" fit in the preceding scheme of rites of the black (w)hole. The protagonist Fred Daniels's rite of separation is complete with his escape through a manhole into the depths of a sewer system. Then, Daniels continuously and completely inverts the conventional aboveground values. He contributes to "the institution of a new 'interstitial' cultural discourse and [his actions] both substantiate and materialize a distinctively black mode of constituting 'reality'" (Baker 154). In his movement through marginality, Daniels gets in contact with elements that give him a sharp awareness of his human condition, an awareness that cannot and will not be accepted aboveground, because otherwise it would be a threat to the established order of the white world. Thus, creating a "countertext" to aboveground cultural discourse, Daniels becomes unable to share his experience and, consequently, to reintegrate in the community he used to live. His underground experience has created a new text, "a new 'Word' transforming chaos and death into a humane order of existence" (154).

Unable to integrate with equal and full rights into the white dominant culture, the Negro in America (and elsewhere) has been isolated throughout the years. As Baker says in his

essay, "[in] a conventional, white American field of cultural perception, the Afro-American falls between categories into a suppressed, 'unnameable', taboo. He is thus a **tertium quid**, a 'third thing' giving forth neither human nor animal image.... The Afro-American... is a threat to order" (153). Suddenly torn away from his native land (Africa), the Negro slave was obliged to learn to live a sub-human life. His totally marginal status was in no way changed by the liberation of the slaves. As Richard Wright himself so duly notes in the introduction to Native Son, "How 'Bigger' Was Born", "when the Negro was freed, he outnumbered the whites in many of [the] fertile areas [of the South]" (xi). The whites, thus, had to strengthen the already existent system of devaluation of the Negro, creating a strong set of taboos and isolating him more and more. The reactions of the Negroes to such a system of oppression were obviously varied, ranging from blind rebellion to utter submissiveness. And their history in America is a history of attempts to fit, as it were, into that delimited social territory left for them by the whites, learning the implicit rules of that territory and trying to incorporate a consciousness of a new meaning for their lives.

The intention of the present dissertation is to investigate two of Richard Wright's novels--Native Son and The Outsider (1953)--in the light of Houston Baker, Jr.'s

theory of the rites of the black (w)hole, i.e., to investigate whether and, if so, in what ways the process described in Baker's essay is present in the two novels by Wright. This investigation will be done by examining the way two of Wright's protagonists go through patterns of separation, then through a transitional period, and finally achieve a point at which they cannot be socially reintegrated, as is the case with "The Man Who Lived Underground".

NOTES

1. There are, obviously, more recent studies in Afro-American literature, but Bone's book appeared as appropriate because it deals with the subject in a very clear and forthright manner and because the period to be studied in the introduction is dated as well. Furthermore, one such recent study, Robert Stepto's "Afro-American Literature" (in Columbia Literary History of the United States, 1988), is but a very skilful criticism on the anthologies of American Literature, which are often constrained in generalizations of periods, geography, forms, and canons. Revising each of these points, Stepto gives a brief "outline of a newer history" (793) of Afro-American literature, but goes little further than that.

2. Vernon Louis Parrington, American scholar, professor of English at the University of Washington from 1908 to 1929, "is famous for his economic interpretation of American literature, Main Currents in American Thought (3 vol., 1927-30), which had a great influence on subsequent literary criticism" (Harris, William H. and Judith S. Levey, ed. The New Columbia Encyclopedia. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975, p. 2074).

3. During the Civil War (1861-65), the Emancipation Proclamation was the executive order abolishing slavery in the Confederate States of America: "On Jan. 1, 1863,... [t]he President [Lincoln]... declared free all those slaves residing in territory in rebellion against the Federal government 'as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion'" (Harris, William H. and Judith S. Levey, ed. The New Columbia Encyclopedia. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975, pp. 861-62).

4. Reconstruction (1865-77) was "the period of readjustment following the Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, the defeated South was a ruined land. The physical destruction wrought by the invading Union forces was enormous, and the old social and economic order founded on Negro slavery had collapsed completely, with nothing to replace it. ...The radical Republican governments in the South attempted to deal constructively with the problems left by the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. ... they began to rebuild the Southern economy and society. Agricultural production was restored, roads rebuilt, a more equitable tax system adopted, and schooling extended to Negroes and poor whites.

The freedmen's civil and political rights were guaranteed, and Negroes were able to participate in the political and economic life of the South as full citizens for the first time. [When] Reconstruction officially ended..., the Negro was once again deprived of many civil and political rights, and his economic position remained depressed" (Harris, William H. and Judith S. Levey, ed. The New Columbia Encyclopedia. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975, pp. 2286-87).

5. Concerning the importance of sociology to Wright's fiction, in the introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1945) XVIII, Richard Wright states that "it was from the scientific findings of men like the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew the meanings for my documentary book Twelve Million Black Voices and for my novel, Native Son". Park, Redford, and Wirth were University of Chicago social scientists who broke new ground in the field of urban sociology and race relations. Although Wright was not a student at the University of Chicago, he made the acquaintance of Prof. Louis Wirth through his social worker, Mrs. Mary Wirth, Prof. Wirth's wife. The theories of these social scientists influenced not only Wright's conception of Afro-American character and culture but also the thinking and research of many social scientists, including well-known black sociologists as Charles S. Johnson and Horace Cayton.

CHAPTER II

RITES OF PASSAGE AND THE HERO CYCLE

The concept of rites of passage interweaves with that of myth. Hence, in order to have a clearer idea of what rites are and what their function is, one has to attempt to understand what myth stands for. Indeed, at a first glimpse, it would appear that rites of passage are included in the world of myth. After more careful study, however, we see that things are not so simple and that myth would not exist if not for the rites. Both concepts are separate but interdependent.

Throughout history, every human society has dealt, in one way or another, with the mystery of the relations between human beings' inner worlds and the outer physical reality, as well as with the way human beings' psychic manifestations influence their lives. In John Cafferata's Introduction to his compilation in Rites (1975), we are told that

> we create forms to bring a sense of order to bridge the difficulties which coexist within our mind and the 'external' world in which we reside. To explain and give meaning to the process of existence, mythical tales are narrated to explore the conflicts between our instinctual drives and the repressed wishes, fears, and conflicts which they motivate. (xi)

We might infer, thus, that myths exist only in narration, only in the fantastic weaving of the words. Uncountable human lives, however, have been annihilated out of a strong belief in myths; it is the case of the sacrifices, where there is a victim who will be a gift to mysterious powers, so that those powers are pacified. Similarly, the so-called primitive societies hold a set of rituals and rites that affect, in many cases, the physical bodies of their members in irreversible ways, so as to stand for a signal of the important role the mythical realm plays in their actual lives. As Cafferata states, "[t]he purpose and force implicit in [the] myths become the underlying symbols of identification embodied in those rituals which function as a means to integrate the individual into a culture's explanation of the mysterious encounter with the cycle of life", i.e., "cultures establish rituals which introduce the individuals into the community and afford them an explanation of the community's concept of the world" (xi).

Joseph Campbell, in <u>The Hero With a Thousand Faces</u> (1968), says that now and again:

> dangerous messengers begin to appear in the brain. These are dangerous because they threaten the fabric of the security into which we have built ourselves and our family. But they are fiendishly fascinating too, for they carry keys that open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of the self. (8)

Campbell is thus bringing the subject of myth closer to our contemporary lives and imprinting in it an optimistic view of its illuminating possibilities. The author also introduces a third issue which is interrelated with the two already cited (myth and rites): the hero cycle.

Throughout his book, Campbell will follow innumerable instances of mythical stories which with no exception deal with demiurgic characters and fantastic elements and display their ordeals and trials as rites that they must pass in order to achieve their goal. But what is important for the present discussion is that, like Cafferata, Campbell stresses the important role that myths supposedly play in the present days: "It is only those who know neither an inner call nor an outer doctrine whose plight truly is desperate; that is to say, most of us today, in this labyrinth without and within the heart" (23). Campbell also insists that the psychoanalysts' writings are fundamental to the student of mythology, since those writings demonstrate that the logic, the heroes, and the deeds found in myths are still present in modern times (4). The latter statement is proven to be true mainly by the close relation between myth and dreams: "Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche" (19), says Campbell.

The Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung has elaborated the theory of the archetype so as to encompass the elements found in the "collective unconscious". According to him, there is a deeper layer in our unconscious which is not derived from personal experience but is inborn, universal, i.e., "it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals" (Jung The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious 4); the contents of that collective unconscious, according to Jung, are known as archetypes, which are primordial, universal images that have existed since the remotest times (Jung 5). Moreover, Jung was able to find numerous mythical elements in the dreams of his patients, thus also connecting myths to modern times.

In Cafferata's words, "[i]n other times, cultures created certain 'rites of passage' to serve as connecting links for individuals as they moved from one phase of life to another" (xi); when successful, the initiate is "allowed knowledge of tribal myths which explain and give meaning to (1) tribal customs and (2) rituals which enable members to enter a world beyond the measure of time" (xi). For Campbell, "[i]t has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in couteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (11); in other words, "the purpose and actual effect of [the rituals]

was to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life" (10), clarifies Campbell.

In the essay "Modern Man's Need to Understand the Rites of Passage", collected in Cafferata's book, Mircea Eliade confirms that every primitive society considers the world to have a "sacred history", a mythology: "The world is the work of Supernatural Beings--a divine work and hence sacred in its very structure" (28); "for the man of traditional societies everything significant--that is, everything creative and powerful--that has ever happened took place **in the beginning**, in the Time of the myths" (28). The rites of initiation are for Eliade a means that enables a novice to attain to that conception of the world as sacred, i.e., to the mythology of his society. "To know the myths... is to know a divine history--which nonetheless remains a 'history', that is, a series of events that are unforeseeable, though consistent and significant" (30). The world into which the myths lead us, "a world that cannot be described but only 'narrated'" (30), resembles the cosmogony, which deals with the creation of the Universe, in this case by the gods. In this abstract realm, we deal with the origin of all things and all beings, "the devolvement of eternity into time, the breaking of the one into two and then into the many" (Campbell 153). Campbell states that

"[t]his image stands at the beginning of the cosmogonic cycle, and with equal propriety at the conclusion of the hero-task, at the moment when the wall of Paradise is dissolved, the divine form found and recollected, and wisdom regained" (154). But it is only after a long series of ordeals and rites that the hero is able to achieve that final goal.

An important aspect of the rites which once again emphasizes the peculiarity of the position to be achieved by the initiand is his ritual death: "The majority of initiatory ordeals more or less clearly imply a ritual death followed by ressurection or a new birth" (Eliade 28); or, in Campbell's words, "the traditional rites of passage used to teach the individual to die to the present and be reborn to the future" (15). Eliade argues that when the novice returns to the fellowship of the living, he is a new man, free of his childhood, his ignorance, and his profane condition (28).

According to Cafferata, the term "rites of passage" "was originally used by Arnold Van Gennep to interpret how individuals made the transition from one stage in life to the next" (xii). Cafferata explains that the main concern of the primitive societies while enacting the ceremonies that constitute the rites is "to ease the anxiety accompanying changes as individuals move through the various stages of life" (xiii). Serving as models to be imitated, the rites

created "patterns for living which assured individuals of the continuity of life" and this "led to a belief in the individual's ability to survive in an 'external' world" (xiii).

"Each larger society contains within it several distinctly separate social groupings"--thus the Belgian anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep begins one of the first complete studies of rites of passage ever, entitled The Rites of Passage (1965, in the English version), and he continues: "As we move from higher to lower levels of civilization, the differences among these groups become accentuated and their autonomy increases" (1). Simultaneously, the intervention of the sacred into the secular world is complete in semicivilized[1] societies, in which "the holy enters nearly every phase of a man's life" (2). In such societies there are no definite bounds between the sacred and the secular; thus, the movement from one social grouping to another--professional or age groupings, for instance--is accompanied, or even accomplished, by special acts enveloped in ceremonies, since "every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions between sacred and profane" (3). Being the goal of those ceremonies the same--"to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another" (3)--, Van Gennep points out that there is "a wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage,

pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals" (3). The author is able, then, to define his primary purpose with his book, as a reaction "against the 'folkloristic' or 'anthropological' procedure, which consists of extracting various rites... from a set of ceremonies and considering them in isolation, thus removing them from a context which gives them meaning and reveals their position in a dynamic whole" (89).

Proceeding with the classification of rites, Van Gennep introduces the first possible differentiation, sympathetic and contagious rites. Sympathetic rites are those "based on belief in the reciprocal action of like on like, of opposite on opposite, of the container and the contained, of the part and the whole, of image and real object or real being, or word and deed" (4); the researchers who investigate this class of rites constitute the "animistic school". In sharp opposition to this animistic school, a later one came into being--the dynamistic school. Thus, another category of rites was stated: the "dynamistic rites (i.e., rites based on a concept of a power, such as mana, that is not personalized)", which are related to the contagious rites, "characteristically based on a belief that natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmissible (either through physical contact or over a distance)" (7). "**Dynamism** designates the impersonal theory of mana; **animism**, the personalistic theory, whether the power personified be a

single or a multiple being, animal or plant (e.g., a totem), anthropomorphic or amorphous (e.g., God)" (13). However, "[w]e should note", along with Van Gennep, "that sympathetic rites are not necessarily animistic, nor contagious rites necessarily dynamistic. The four classes are independent" (7-8).

As a second way of classification, we have a distinction between "rites which act directly and those which act indirectly. A direct rite, for example a curse or a spell, is designed to produce results immediately, without intervention by any outside agent" (8); its effect is automatic. "On the other hand, an indirect rite --be it vow, prayer, or religious service--is a kind of initial blow which sets into motion some autonomous or personified power, such as a demon, a group of jinn, or a deity, who intervenes on behalf of the performer of the rite" (8), says Van Gennep. The effect of the indirect rite, which is not necessarily animistic, comes as a repercussion.

As a final classification of the rites, "we may also draw a distinction between positive rites (or volitions translated into actions) and negative rites" (8). Positive rites correspond to positive volitions. Negative rites, also known as taboos, "are prohibitions, commands 'not to do' or 'not to act'" (8); they are the equivalents of negative volitions, i.e., "taboos also translate a kind of will and are acts rather than negations of acts" (8).

Besides the three previous ways of classifying rites, Van Gennep has identified "characteristic patterns in the order of ceremonies" (10), and because he had no knowledge of any complete study about these ceremonial patterns to his day, he thought it "legitimate to single out **rites of passage** as a special category, which under further analysis may be subdivided into... preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (10-11). The author emphasizes that "in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated" (11). Moreover, depending on the transitional period, which in certain ceremonies can be "sufficiently elaborated to constitute an independent state", the whole arrangement of the pattern may be reduplicated (11).

Van Gennep is aware that rites of birth, initiation, marriage, and the like are not only rites of passage:

> all these ceremonies have their individual purposes. Marriage ceremonies include fertility rites; birth ceremonies include protection and divination rites; funerals, defensive rites; initiations, propitiatory rites; ordinations, rites of attachment to the deity. All these rites, which have specific effective aims, occur in juxtaposition and combination with rites of passage... (11-12)

sometimes to an extent in which "it is impossible to distinguish whether a particular ritual is, for example, one of protection or of separation" (12).

A more general problem identified by Van Gennep is the variability of the presence of the sacred. "Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations" (12), so that "whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa" (13). It is the function of rites of passage to reduce the harmful effects of those changes of condition upon the individual's life as well as upon the life of the society.

In the second chapter of his book, "The Territorial Passage", Van Gennep addresses the specific elements which are found in the "territorial passage" (15)--i.e., the passage between two physically defined extremes--so as to provide a clear framework for the discussion of rites of passage. The author is eventually able to "propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, **preliminal rites**, those executed during the transitional stage **liminal (or threshold) rites**, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world **postliminal rites**" (21).

In the third chapter, "Individuals and Groups", Van Gennep explores the similarities between society and a house divided into rooms and corridors; the rooms represent the different phases and separations of social life and the corridors and doors stand for the passages between those phases. "In a semicivilized society... sections are

carefully isolated, and passage from one to another must be made through formalities and ceremonies which show extensive parallels to the rites of territorial passage" (26). The view of an internally divided social life is as dynamic as society itself, as well as rites. The latter often link themselves in a meaningful sequence and, as we have seen, link different phases of life as well.

The remainder of Van Gennep's book is an extensive list of rites with different purposes--"Pregnancy and Childbirth", "Birth and Childhood", "Initiation Rites", "Betrothal and Marriage", "Funerals", and "Other Types of Rites of Passage" are the titles of the remaining chapters, the latter encompassing the handling of the hair, veiling, special languages, the dealing with sex, flagellation, the transition of the seasons, the departure and the appropriation of the individual in relation to a religious society, all taken as signs of special moments in someone's life--but with the same fundamental tripartite scheme already discussed. A stronger emphasis is given to initiation rites (more than a quarter of the book is dedicated to their study), probably because inflicting, usually by way of mutilation, definite physical changes upon the individuals, so as to represent physically the social passage to a different stage in life, these are the most formidable of the rites. "The mutilated individual is removed from the common mass of humanity by a rite of

separation (this is the idea behind cutting, piercing, etc.) which automatically incorporates him into a defined group; since the operation leaves ineradicable traces, the incorporation is permanent" (72).

The main criticism to Van Gennep's The Rites of Passage is that, although the author states that he intends to write a book that coalesces different rites so as to show how they are not isolate entities but function as dynamic and interdependent elements, in his yearning to show the tripartite form that those rites have in common, Van Gennep ends up providing a long list of rites from different societies, studying and analyzing the rites 'per se', forgetting the relations between the rites and the needs and beliefs of those societies.

Although in the conclusion of his book Van Gennep states that "it would be possible to draw a diagram for each people in which the peaks of a zigzag line would represent recognized stages and the valleys the intervening periods" (194), he also acknowledges that "[a]mong certain peoples... however, [the pattern] is circular, so that all individuals go through the same endless series of rites of passage from life to death and from death to life" (194). It is precisely this "extreme cyclical form of the pattern" (194) that relates it to the hero cycle cited earlier. As Campbell himself has noted, "[t]he standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula

represented in the rites of passage: separation - initiation - return" (30). In the study Mythology - The Voyage of the Hero (1973), David Adams Leeming also identifies in any large mythic event constituting the life of the hero "elements of many or all of the basic rites of passage" (7).

According to Campbell, "the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit above described: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (35). Thus, virtually every phase of Van Gennep's rites of passage seems to have an equivalent in Campbell's general scheme for the hero cycle. The first step-- separation from the world-- is identical. The second and the third points are only differently defined: the source of power alluded by Campbell may very well be connected to the "magico-religious" power (in Van Gennep's terms) that the individual achieves while passing through the rite; and the return of the individual can be admitted as life-enhancing for both him and his society because it is through the fine completion of the rites that society as a whole can maintain its well-being and thus guarantee the good faring of its members.

In the following chapters, an attempt is made to apply Van Gennep's general scheme for the rites of passage to the lives of two protagonists created by Richard Wright, namely, Bigger Thomas (Native Son), and Cross Damon (The Outsider). Moreover, it will be shown, when appropriate, how some

concepts of Campbell's hero cycle fit very accordingly certain situations that occur in Wright's narratives.

NOTE

1-There is no clear definition for the term "semicivilized", but in the first pages of his essay, Van Gennep writes about higher and lower "levels of civilization", and "the scale of civilizations (taking the term 'civilization' in the broadest sense)" (Van Gennep 2); thus, we might infer that there is a ranking given to societies according to their level of civilization, and, in contrast to "modern societies", the author writes of societies that are at "the simplest level of development" (2), most of the time referred to as "semicivilized societies".

CHAPTER III

RITES OF PASSAGE IN NATIVE SON

Discussing the way literature has dealt with myths, Campbell states in The Hero with a Thousand Faces:

> Modern literature is devoted, in great measure, to a courageous, open-eyed observation of the sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us, and within. Where the natural impulse to complain against holocaust has been suppressed--to cry out blame, or to announce panaceas--the magnitude of an art of tragedy more potent (for us) than the Greek finds realization: the realistic, intimate, and variously interesting tragedy of democracy, where the god is beheld crucified in the catastrophes not of the great houses only but of every common home, every scourged and lacerated face. And there is no make-believe about heaven, future bliss, and compensation, to alleviate the bitter majesty, but only utter darkness, the void of unfulfillment, to receive and eat back the lives that have been tossed forth from the womb only to fail. (27)

Richard Wright's fiction fits every word of Campbell's definition of the modern tragedy. More than that, as Michel Fabre has aptly stated in The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (1973), Wright, with his work, "was grappling with a definition of man. Although his solitary quest ended prematurely and did not allow him to find one, his achievement as a writer and a humanist makes him, in the

Emersonian sense, a truly 'representative man' of our time" (531).

The tragic aspect in Wright's fiction has been studied in depth by Joyce Ann Joyce in Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy (1987); the critic's main concern with her extended essay is "to show how [Wright's] language merges with his subject matter to illuminate Native Son as a tragedy" (xv). Thus, Joyce discusses mainly the way the paradoxes found in Bigger's surroundings and in his own psyche are woven by Wright so as to compound a meaningful and impressive work of fiction. The critic argues and demonstrates how complete is the similarity between Bigger and the tragic hero: "The underlying consistency in the characterization of the tragic hero... is the dignity that motivates the hero and isolates him psychologically and many times physically from the rest of society" (21); the critic invokes Arthur Miller to support her emphasis on the importance of dignity:

> As a general rule... the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society. (Miller, quoted in Joyce 19-20)

From the previous discussion, and considering the close relation held between the hero cycle and the rites of passage, we are able to view Bigger Thomas' life as one

divided into, as it were, defined parts which generally have as limiting elements situations of utter desperation and subsequent violence. Those situations provide Bigger with psychological experiences and scars from which he cannot recover. As Joyce puts it, "Bigger learns intensely from his experiences"; he passes through a "spiritual growth of transcendence" (22). The pattern that controls the way those situations unravel through Bigger's life can be considered as a series of rites of passage.

The first element of similarity between rites of passage and Bigger's life is the process of isolation that Bigger suffers through the novel, separating him from his environment. The scene that opens the book, the chasing and killing of the rat, depicts Bigger as taking part in a common struggle along with his family, while also uniting him to his family in their horrible social condition. The complicity implied in that first scene, however, is soon debunked by the sharpness of Bigger's real feelings toward his family, described right away: "He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. ...So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain" (Native Son 13-14).[1] The curtain behind which Bigger's mother and sister now and again go invariably to work functions as a parallel to that imaginative curtain Bigger has created for himself. In fact, the physical

curtain of the apartment stands for a symbol of the mother's resignation, in that, while going behind it, Bigger's mother is playing the role that white society has assigned to her, the role of the good old black mother, always concerned with providing for her sons, no matter how ungrateful or perverse they are, always trying to put them on the right track, always working hard for the whites and living in sub-human conditions.

As Joyce has aptly noted, "[t]he world outside Bigger's home is as confining as that inside" (36). Being "sick of his life at home" (16), Bigger feels as if in a blind alley, always pressed by scarce options in a world ruled by strange powers: "he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve" (16). The tiny one-room apartment in which Bigger, his brother, sister, and mother live appears as a physical expression of the stunted way of life the family leads. That way of life is soon extended to the whole Negro community and its origin is made plain right in the first conversation Bigger holds outside his home. Everything Bigger and Gus talk about seems to be aimed at showing how oppressive the attitudes of the whites toward the Negroes are; Bigger states:

> I just can't get used to it.... Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time

> I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence.... (22-23)

The oppressive white world seems to determine Bigger's ambiguous and unexpected attitudes. In a world where "[n]othing ever happens" (23), Bigger looks like an overstretched spring pulled by indifference in one extreme and desire in the other:

> All that morning he had lurked behind his curtain of indifference and looked at things, snapping and glaring at whatever had tried to make him come out into the open. But now he was out... and his self-trust was gone. Confidence could only come again now through action so violent that it would make him forget. These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger... (31)

In a way, the fight with Gus because of the frustrated assault at a white man's grocery store is premeditated, and when the affair is all over and Bigger is at home waiting for his appointment with the Daltons, he feels isolated from his own gang: "He was disgusted with the gang; he knew that what had happened today put an end to his being with them in any more jobs" (43).

After that prelude of isolation, we witness Bigger entering, like a stranger, a sort of prohibited zone, a land that, although only slightly distant from his home, was completely unknown to him: "This was a cold and distant

world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded" (45); "He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him" (47). Even the language used by the Daltons is foreign to Bigger: "The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language" (48). The physical intimidation of that white world upon Bigger extends itself to the psychologically contending power of the white characters that Bigger meets in that world. Once again, Joyce has a quotation that fits very adequately, this time from Karl Jaspers:

> The tragic atmosphere arises as the strange and sinister fate to which we have been abandoned. There is something alien that threatens us, something we cannot escape. Wherever we go, whatever we see, whatever we hear, there is something in the air which will destroy us, no matter what we do or wish. (Jaspers, quoted in Joyce 40)

Thus, Bigger is already walking down the road of his fate when he first faces those strange white characters in an environment alien to him. Moreover, the strange force that acts upon Bigger is described in terms of superhuman elements: "To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark" (109).

Bigger's relationship to Mary Dalton, the symbol of white virgin beauty, is one of hate and fear; he hates her from the very first moment he sees her: "He hated the girl then. Why did she have to do this when he was trying to get a job?" (53); she is breaking the rules that were stuffed in Bigger's consciousness, she is talking openly to him: "... this rich girl walked over everything, put herself in the way and, what was strange beyond understanding, talked and acted so simply and directly that she confounded him" (56). Although Mary and her boyfriend Jan are the only individuals in Bigger's new environment conscious of and concerned with the Negro situation in their country and who try to respond to Bigger as a human being, in Bigger's eyes they are even more dangerous than the "common" whites because he does not know how to deal with them:

> He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly, with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? ...It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent.... At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate. (67-68)

That situation of "sitting between two vast white looming walls" (68) is utterly unimaginable to Bigger, who has

"[n]ever in his life... been so close to a white woman" (68). In short, Bigger "did not understand them; he distrusted them, really hated them" (71).

The first climax of the novel comes after the scene of utter discomfort for Bigger when he is obliged to eat and drink with his two white companions. Even the relaxing effect of the alcohol upon Bigger's body and mind is soon replaced by a myriad of constricting and contrasting feelings after he is left alone with Mary in the car: "He watched her with a mingled feeling of helplessness, admiration, and hate. ...in spite of his hate for her, he was excited standing here watching her like this" (81-82). The sense of Bigger's desperation at the situation of danger that he faces for carrying a white girl in his arms upstairs to her room goes in a crescendo, just like his sexual excitement:

> ...he looked at her face in the dim light, his senses drunk with the odor of her hair and skin. He stood for a moment, then whispered in excitement and fear (...) His fingers felt the soft curves of her body and he was still, looking at her, enveloped in a sense of physical elation. This little bitch! he thought. Her face was touching his. (82)
>
> His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. (83)
>
> ...her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined.(...) he leaned over her, excited... not wanting to take his hands from her breasts.... He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. (84)

Right at that climactic moment of physical excitement, a threatening "white blur" (actually Mrs. Dalton) opens the door to Mary's room and Bigger is seized by a "hysterical terror" (84). "[I]ntimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him" (85), dominated by frenzy, Bigger is now in another extreme and responds to it the only way he can think of: trying to conceal himself by pressing a pillow harder and harder onto Mary's face so as not to permit her to delate him; unfortunately, he ends up killing the white girl.

The whole scene--from the time Bigger is left with Mary in the car to the moment the "white blur" leaves Mary's room --may well be taken as a set of rituals which ultimately lead to a sacrifice. Bigger feels "strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (83). On such stage, each character has a definite role: Mary is the character/object that allures Bigger but that also threatens him with the dangerous possibilities she/it contains, being at the same time repulsive for the hate she/it inspires in him; Bigger is the intruder, the initiate who will attain to a new kind of living, a different sense of being, by facing a brutal sacrifice that he himself impinges upon someone else; and Mrs. Dalton is the cold and blind presence of white justice, unheeding of the claims of the Negroes.

After Mrs. Dalton leaves Mary's room, Bigger feels "that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free" (86), but the elements of a sacrificial rite are still present and controlling Bigger's movements. "It was unreal. Like a nightmare" (88). Terror-struck, hysterical, Bigger makes up in his mind a wild plan to try to shift off suspicion from him by burning Mary's body and even beheading her so that the body fits in the furnace.

Representing the complete rupture between Bigger and his previous life, as well as his passage or rebirth into a new and unknown life after the bloody rite, a subsequent scene describes him as dead to his past reality. Next morning, back in his family's home, after an uneasy sleep, Bigger feels "unable to rise to the land of the living" (93). And when he does, he appears as a new man, reborn, and the relations with his previous world have definitely been transformed: "Gus and G.H. and Jack seemed far away to Bigger now, in another life" (100); moreover,

> [t]he thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself.... He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them. (101)

"Like a man reborn, he wanted to test and taste each thing now to see how it went" (106); "[h]e was following a strange

path into a strange land and his nerves were hungry to see where it led" (107). As a reiteration of his new identity after the "ritual", instead of the previous all-encompassing fear, Bigger starts to show a strong confidence in himself: "Things were becoming clear; he would know how to act from now on" (101-102); "[his fingers] were not trembling from fear. It was a kind of eagerness he felt, a confidence, a fulness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act" (111).

Very accordingly, as a typical initiand, Bigger displays a new awareness, a new capacity of sight and of action that differentiates him from everybody else he knows: "...many things became plain. No, he did not have to hide behind a wall or a curtain now; he had a safer way of being safe, an easier way" (102).

> The thing to do was to act just like others acted, live like they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted. They would never know. He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded. He felt that they wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit.... All one had to do was be bold, do something nobody thought of. (...) Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind... in more ways than one.... Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind.... (102).

It is striking how aptly the above quotations fit the path of the hero as described by Campbell in The Hero With a Thousand Faces: "A blunder--apparently the merest chance--reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood.... The blunder may amount to the opening of a destiny" (51); as Campbell points out, the call to adventure:

> marks what has been termed 'the awakening of the self'.... the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration--a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand. (51)

After the call,

> what formerly was meaningful may become strangely emptied of value.... Thereafter, even though the hero returns for a while to his familiar occupations, they may be found unfruitful. A series of signs of increasing force then will become visible, until... the summons can no longer be denied. (55-56)

The call to adventure "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown" (58).

Bigger's meaningful act of killing Mary is liable to be called a terrible accident, since Bigger unintentionally

kills the white girl in an attempt to conceal his presence in her room while her mother stands there in the dark. But in stifling Mary, Bigger is only externalizing his hate and fear toward white society as a whole, and he is, in a way, stifling that which has stifled him through all his life. He is stifling the terrible element which most contributed to his choking existence, the element which would sooner or later expose Bigger as the intruder, as an uninvited presence among white people, being thus guilty of endangering the continuity of normal life. Moreover, Bigger himself does not consider his crime as an accident:

> ...in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this.... The hidden meaning of his life--a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide--had spilled out. No; it was no accident, and he would never say that it was. (101).

Seeing "Bigger's murder of Mary as the beginning of his journey into self-discovery", as Joyce suggests (22), we are able to have a better understanding of Bigger's succeeding steps as he tries to elude the whites with his cunning stratagems.

> He was not satisfied with the way things stood now; he was a man who had come in sight of a goal, then had won it, and in winning it had seen just

> within his grasp another goal, higher, greater.... he had just learned to walk and was walking but could not see the ground beneath his feet; he had long been yearning for weapons to hold in his hands and suddenly found that his hands held weapons that were invisible. (123-124)

Bigger has just learned that he could use the stereotypical preconceptions that the white people held against the Negroes as weapons in his attempts to shift any suspicion from him. In his newly found confidence and awareness, Bigger is able to start to control his feelings before the whites, to face the risk of being recognized as Mary's murderer, and even to elaborate and put in practice his plan of dropping a kidnap note at the Dalton's door in order to get ten thousand dollars from the white family. After exposing his plan to his girlfriend Bessie, Bigger feels as a different man, powerful and more conscious than ever:

> He felt that he had his destiny in his grasp. He was more alive than he could ever remember having been.... For the first time in his life he moved consciously between two sharply defined poles: he was moving away from the threatening penalty of death, from the death-like times that brought him that tightness and hotness in his chest; and he was moving toward that sense of fulness he had so often but inadequately felt in magazines and movies. (141)

Bigger's determined attitude is extended to the story he invents regarding what happened the night Mary "disappeared"; cornered by Mr. Britten, Mr. Dalton's private

investigator, Bigger finds himself in an advantageous position: "They wanted him to draw the picture and he would draw it like he wanted it... In the past had they not always drawn the picture for him? He could tell them anything he wanted and what could they do about it?" (149). Bigger believes that he has the control of the situation: "Because he could go now, run off if he wanted to and leave it all behind, he felt a certain sense of power, a power born of a latent capacity to live" (155). In contrast to his previous constricted existence, Bigger now has a number of choices for action, and "these avenues of action... made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands" (179).

After so many moments when Bigger felt that he could control his own life, the inevitable fate takes its course and betrays him. The same fire that once promised to be an allied force in destroying the evidences of Bigger's crime turns against him now. Not familiar with the working of the furnace--he had never dealt with fire before (55)--, and beside himself under growing psychological tension, Bigger is unable to control the furnace when it gets too filled up with ashes. "[T]he fire was dying" (197) and Bigger, afraid of the possibility that Mary's bones have not burned yet, instead of clearing the ashes from the bottom of the furnace, pulls the lever for more coal and chokes the furnace (202). In the confusion that is installed in the

basement, Mary's bones are finally encountered by the white reporters and, for a brief moment, Bigger feels a familiar fear: "There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong.... It was the old feeling, hard and constant again now, of wanting to grab something and clutch it in his hands and swing it into someone's face" (206).

Indeed, the second climax of the novel, the climax of the discovery, is preceded by elements that may be taken as characterizing that moment as yet another rite through which Bigger passes on his road to self-discovery. At the time when Bigger enters the Dalton's home after leaving the kidnap note, he is "deeply conscious... of violating dangerous taboo" (173); then, he is going to face a strenuous series of constricting scenes inside the white family's home, being eventually surrounded by a crowd of white reporters in the basement. Bigger "did not know how to act toward them or what to expect of them" (187). "Events were like the details of a tortured dream, happening without cause" (187); in that very unfamiliar situation, Bigger stands up against the wall "by some strength not his own" (197). As Campbell states, "[o]nce having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (97); the general atmosphere and the weird

elements in the preceding scene are very close to Campbell's definition of elements of the hero's path.

Once Mary's bones have been discovered, Bigger is obliged to flee, to find somewhere to hide. Thus, once again, he is going to be isolated from his previous environment, this time more completely than before because he is going to live with no one known to him. Bigger's resolution to escape the law makes him murder for the second time; his girlfriend, Bessie, "was in no condition to be taken along and at the same time in no condition to be left behind. ...he thought this... as a man seeing what he must do to save himself and feeling resolved to do it" (216); "Bessie did not figure in what was before him" (220). Increasing the sense of isolation, the world into which Bigger enters after fleeing from the Daltons' and after killing Bessie is a new world, a world of his own where he lives alone: "He had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself" (226).

The same sense of freedom that Bigger felt after killing Mary, he feels again, added by a new sort of completeness, when he tries to sleep after raping and killing Bessie: "In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply.... Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and

murder and flight" (225). The ritual aspects of key events in Bigger's life are seen by Bigger himself as almost unbearable trials: "During the last two days and nights he had lived so fast and hard that it was an effort to keep it all real in his mind. So close had danger and death come that he could not feel that it was he who had undergone it all" (224).

Yet another step in Bigger's road to self-discovery, i.e., his response to his capture by the police, is typically wrapped in contradiction: one moment, Bigger acts like characters in most of the short stories in <u>Uncle Tom's Children</u>, using his own death as a way of securing his pride, by not permitting any white man to take his life away: "He would shoot before he would let them take him; it meant death either way, and he would die shooting every slug he had" (208); "...he would save one bullet for himself. They would not take him alive" (250). The next moment, he is psychologically absent from the scene, "going behind his curtain, his wall" (250); "[h]e was outside of it all now ... he was outside of them, behind his curtain, his wall, looking on" (252).

Finally arrested, Bigger is ultimately in an irreversible state of physical isolation. His first response to that situation is the same indifference shown at his capture: "He was not so much in a stupor, as in the grip of a deep physiological resolution not to react to anything"

(255). But then, when he goes to the inquest, when he is "prepared to sink back into his dream of nothingness" (257), something happens that brings him back to action:

> ...he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment; that they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control. The atmosphere of the crowd told him that they were going to use his death as a bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world. And as he felt it, rebellion rose in him. He had sunk to the lowest point this side of death, but when he felt his life again threatened in a way that meant that he was to go down the dark road a helpless spectacle of sport for others, he sprang back into action, alive, contending. (257)

Thus, just as he had reacted in previous moments of utter desperation, Bigger leaps once again into action so as to feel that he is the owner, as it were, not only of his life but also of his death. If he was to die, he would die with dignity, with something to show both for the world and for himself. "He had come out into the world again.... It was to save his pride that he had come" (259). And now, more than ever, Bigger shows that he is conscious that there is no way for him to return: "Ought he to go back behind his wall? Could he go back now? He felt that he could not" (262). The experience which he is undergoing is to bring an irreversible change in him, even more than the previous ones because those were things that he could not escape; after the "accident" of killing Mary, Bigger is taken by his

inevitable fate and thrown into chaos, even though he tries to manage things his way. But now, from a totally constricting situation, he is about to fight the most meaningful fight of his life and it is he who is making the decisions.

The first round of that fight is the visit of the preacher which he receives in jail. In a way, Bigger had already fought religion inside him and had definitely and entirely rejected it from his life: "He had killed within himself the preacher's haunting picture of life even before he had killed Mary; that had been his first murder" (264). In the second round, things are more difficult, and Bigger has to face, in an improbable but significant scene, nine characters--the two lawyers, Mary's parents, Jan, the preacher, and Bigger's mother, brother, and sister--at the same time in his cell, and three more standing at the door. In fact, what is at stake here is Bigger's pride and keen awareness. He has to stand there, without showing his feelings for his family, out of defiance to the "white mountain looming behind him" (276). As well as the first, this second round is not unfamiliar to Bigger; he has fought it before, during all his life, since he has never been able to talk openly about what he thought of his own life due to the presence of an appalling "white mountain" which constricted him to a terribly limited existence. There is no winner in this part of the contest because Bigger can

neither reject nor accept the people who surround him, nor can those people get rid of Bigger.

In his apparently deplorable situation, Bigger is, however, aware that he is in a new world, and all alone; he cannot communicate with his companions in the prison because "[t]hey were not his kind" (316). In the first long talk alone with his communist lawyer, Max, Bigger is already in a process of wanting to find something in which he could have faith and which could change his attitude toward life:

> Bigger felt that he was sitting and holding his life helplessly in his hands, waiting for Max to tell him what to do with it; and it made him hate himself.... Either he was too weak, or the world was too strong; he did not know which. Over and over he had tried to create a world to live in, and over and over he had failed. (319)

Initially, Bigger rejects Max's attempts to help his case; "he doubted if Max could make him see things in a way that would enable him to go to his death" (321); Bigger is afraid of trusting Max. There is in him an automatic response: "...as always, when a white man talked to him, he was caught out in No Man's Land" (321). But after a brief prelude, "[h]is talking to Max had evoked again in him that urge to talk, to tell, to try to make his feelings known. A wave of excitement flooded him" (323). Bigger, so frantically inarticulate throughout the novel, finally finds the words for his feelings toward his situation in a white

man's world. And after exposing somehow why he had murdered--"I killed 'em 'cause I was scared and mad" (328)--and why he rejected religion--"[t]he white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us" (329) --Bigger finally discovers that "he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even to himself" (333).

Once again, like in the aftermath of previous climactic moments in his life, Bigger passes through decisive changes. First of all, he has to make a decision: "in order to walk to that [electric] chair he had to weave his feelings into a hard shield of either hope or hate. To fall between them would mean living and dying in a fog of fear" (333). The talk with Max puts him in "a thin, hard core of consciousness... he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before" (333). "For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of.... For the first time in his life he felt ground beneath his feet, and he wanted it to stay there" (334). All of this because of Max's questions, and his own answers to them.

Later, however, Bigger is thrown by his feelings in a sea of doubt:

> He looked out upon the world and the people about him with a double vision: one vision pictured death,

> an image of him, alone, sitting strapped in the electric chair and waiting for the hot current to leap through his body; and the other vision pictured life, an image of himself standing amid throngs of men, lost in the welter of their lives with the hope of emerging again, different, unafraid.... Had his will to believe in a new picture of the world made him act a fool and thoughtlessly pile horror upon horror? Was not his old hate a better defense than this agonized uncertainty? Was not an impossible hope betraying him to this end? On how many fronts could a man fight at once? Could he fight a battle within as well as without? Yet he felt that he could not fight the battle for his life without first winning the one raging within him. (337)

Thus, what is at stake in what we can call the third round of Bigger's fight is his sense of hope, threatened by the hate that has characterized all his previous life. Bigger's own previous reality provides him with a pessimistic view, and hate is the prevailing force; on the other hand, Max shows Bigger a new possibility for his inner life, a hope to feel that, if he had a chance, he could share his whole life with other people. Ultimately, hope defeats hate in Bigger's mind; he even wants to shelter his newly found anchor from outside influence, while in the trial:

> ...he felt more deeply than ever what Max had grown to mean to him.... There smoldered in him the hope that Max had made him feel in the first long talk they had had. But he did not want to risk trying to make it flare into flame now, not with this trial and the words of hate from Buckley. But neither did he snuff it out; he nursed it, kept it as his last refuge. (353)

Max's plea at the trial shows that Bigger's hope is based on the words of an extremely open-minded, conscious, and articulate man. For Max, Bigger's death will be just another link in "the unconscious ritual of death in which we, like sleep-walkers, have participated so dreamlike and thoughtlessly" (354), and Bigger stands out as a test symbol to be examined, as a germ to be studied "in relation to our whole sick social organism" (354). Max sees Mary's death as a sacrifice, speaking in Mr. Dalton's place, "'I offered my daughter as a burnt sacrifice and it was not enough to push back into its grave this thing that haunts me.'" (362). This "thing" is the new form of life represented by the presence of the Negroes within an urban environment: "This is life, new and strange; strange, because we fear it; new, because we have kept our eyes turned from it. This is life lived in cramped limits and expressing itself not in terms of our good and bad, but in terms of its own fulfillment" (359); "...injustice blots out one form of life, but another grows up in its place with its own rights, needs, and aspirations. What is happening here today is not injustice, but **oppression**, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life" (360-361), Max cries out.

Bigger's hope is threatened by the short but eloquent and venomous speech by Buckley, the State Attorney. Outside the court room after the accusation's speech, Bigger is "paralyzed with dread". Once, before talking to Max, he had

thought "[w]hat did the puny friendship of Jan and Max mean in the face of a million men like Buckley?" (271). Furthermore, Bigger once had the consciousness that hate was an irrevocable presence in the Negroes' existence: "Had not this voice of hate been sounding long before he was born; and would it not still sound long after he was dead?" (338). Now, after being dominated by a hope brought by Max's words, the inevitable outcome of the trial and the ferocious attacks from the State Attorney are powerful strokes on Bigger's troubled psyche.

Condemned to death, Bigger is once again absorbed in confusion when alone in his cell: "To accustom his mind to death as much as possible, he made all the world beyond his cell a vast gray land where neither night nor day was, peopled ty strange men and women whom he could not understand, but with those (sic) lives he longed to mingle once before he went" (381-382). The idea of merging is soon repeated--"his mind sought to fuse his feelings with the world about him" (383)--but the reality of his situation is too strong for him, and there is a sense of willing to understand some disturbing meaning:

> He wanted to be free of everything that stood between him and the full and terrible realization that life was over without meaning, without anything being settled, without conflicting impulses being resolved.... He believed that Max knew how he felt, and once more before he died he wanted to talk with him and feel with as much keeness as possible what

> his living and dying meant. That was all the hope he had now. (382)

In a stream of exasperating doubts, being about to die, Bigger is made finally to question himself, "[w]hy this black gulf between him and the world: warm red blood here and cold blue sky there, and never a wholeness, a oneness, a meeting of the two?" (383). Bigger's stutter in his final attempt to talk to Max--"'I just r-r-reckon I h-had it coming'" (385)--demonstrates his hesitancy in dying without understanding his life. And then, after failing to talk as he wishes, Bigger receives the final and definitive blow of the fight: "Max did not know, had no suspicion of what he wanted, of what he was trying to say. Max was upon another planet, far off in space. Was there any way to break down this wall of isolation?... Max had left him. Max was not a friend" (386).

Although defeated, although betrayed by futile words, Bigger must talk to Max: "He summoned his energies and lifted his head and struck out desperately, determined to rise from the grave, resolved to force upon Max the reality of his living" (386). But Max is more concerned with the reality of the communists' fight, or at least his own fight, to restore men's confidence in themselves so as to "make the world live again" (390). Max's pathetic plea to Bigger--"...y-you've got to b-believe in yourself, Bigger...." (391)--finds no echo in Bigger's mind, because he finally

believes in himself and in what he has done to his life as being good, as being meaningful, and it is Max who is unable to understand that now. "...[W]hat I killed for, I am!" (391-392), Bigger states emphatically, as though able now to comprehend the fullness of his life. Max is just another "white" man concerned with "his" world, using Bigger for the sake of that world, as a victimized subject to be studied in an attempt to heal that world. Meanwhile, Bigger's individuality is disregarded, is thrown into a vacuum. Thus, Bigger's fight is very different from Max's. And that's why, in the end, the white lawyer is unable to understand Bigger's ultimate awareness about his own life. Bigger achieves a definitely meaningful goal in his long series of rites of passage, although the sense of something being denied him problematizes the completion of those rites.

The impossibility of Bigger sharing his feelings even with one of the few people who had shown some concern for him and the utter isolation he feels in the end of the novel parallel the impossibility and isolation that we encounter in Fred Daniels, the protagonist of Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground". As we have discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, Houston Baker, Jr., in his essay "Reassessing (W)right: A Meditation on the Black (W)hole", finds a peculiarity in the third phase of what he calls the **rites of the black (w)hole.** Where, according to Van Gennep's scheme, there is a reintegration or reincorporation of the

initiate into his community with a new status, in Baker's apt adaptation the Negro initiate has no place to return to, since he has always been rejected by the whites and is, in his predicament, placed in a condition where he cannot accept the way his whole community lives. Baker has accompanied Fred Daniels' life as exemplary of that scheme, and, as we could perceive, Bigger is another exemplary of the suffocating situation suffered by the Negro in America in his way to self-discovery and self-assertion.

For many of us, removed from extreme forms of intense racism, the only way we have to know Bigger's plight is through fiction. Only in the realm of words can we at least wonder what it is to be a conscious Negro within an oppressive and constricting white world. The importance of words is highlighted at points in the novel itself: "Many times... [Bigger] wondered wistfully if there was not a set of words which he had in common with others, words which would evoke in others a sense of the same fire that smoldered in him" (337); in Max's words: "'How soon will someone speak the word that resentful millions will understand: the word to be, to act, to live?" (369). But at the end of the narrative what we feel is that Bigger has been betrayed in his faith in a white man's words. Max's words are after all similar to those of any other white; he only adapts them to different interests. Nevertheless, Bigger's feelings and his keen sense of the reality of his

community are forever imprinted in the readers' minds, waiting for responses that some day may create a new glimpse at a better reality for all men. Otherwise, Bigger's desperate cry will be lost forever like the wind that blew outside the building where he killed Bessie, the wind that "moaned and died down, like an idiot in an icy black pit" (221).

NOTE

1-The edition used in the present dissertation is the first Perennial Library edition (1966), and all subsequent references to Native Son are to this edition.

CHAPTER IV

RITES OF PASSAGE IN THE OUTSIDER

Similarly to what happens with Bigger Thomas in Native Son, the first element that approximates the life of The Outsider's protagonist, Cross Damon, to rites of passage is the sense of isolation felt by Cross, a sense that becomes more and more urgent, finally reaching an apex. The first scene of the novel depicts four friends walking down a street in a manner that suggests a good relationship: "Behind turned-up overcoat collars their gruff voices exploded in jokes, laughter, and shouts. They jostled one another with rude affection..." (1).[1] Cross is introduced as just one of the men, "tall but slightly built, with a smooth brown and yellow skin, and his body moved as though it had more nervous energy than it could contain" (3). Yet, right away, he is picked out from the group of men by his sullen manner; while all the others laugh, he just smiles: "All of them laughed except Cross, whose lips shaped themselves into an ambiguous smile whose meaning might have been a jeering at or a participation in the merriment" (3); "Cross stood aloof as the others bent double with their laughter.... The more Pink, Joe, and Booker guffawed, the longer Cross retained his nervous, ambiguous smile" (4-5). Through their

conversation at Doc's bar, we come to know that Cross used to be fond of reading and of pulling stunts on everybody he knew, "like a man standing **outside** of the world!... Like somebody outside of your window was looking into your house and poking his tongue at you" (7), according to Joe. Now, drinking heavily everyday, Cross feels that his friends are "outside of his life.... Now more than ever he knew that he was alone..." (10).

The sense of Cross's isolation is mingled with both dread and confusion. Cross's sense of dread itself provides the name of the first "book" of the novel and pervades the whole novel. His disturbed situation in life is shown bit by bit: "What a messy life he was living! It was crazy; it was killing him; it was senseless..." (14). Married to Gladys, he dropped out of the university, "and after that nothing had gone right" (15); "[h]is life was a delicate bridge spanning a gasping chasm and hostile hands were heaping heavy loads upon that bridge and it was about to crack and crash downward" (19). Lost in his numerous conflicts, Cross feels as an animal in a cage or trapped in a labyrinth, trying to find a way out. The walls in that labyrinth show him the many apparently insoluble problems of his life, caused mostly by the three more important women in the novel so far: his wife, Gladys, who only wants to take more and more money from him so as to be able to raise their three sons; his mother, who has been abandoned by his father and

has turned to religion for solace; and the under-aged Dot (Dorothy Powers), who has lied about her age to him and who is pregnant by him. Dot uses her pregnancy as an instrument to force him to marry her, and Cross's alternative is imprisonment; the fact is that Cross cannot marry anyone, even if he wants to, because the marriage is Gladys's way of having him in her hands. Complicating his situation, Cross's wife "was using Dot to drag money from him and at the same time betraying Dot" (87); "[s]eeing Gladys had compounded his problems. If he did what she wanted, he was lost; and if he didn't, he was lost" (88).

Due in part to that terribly disturbing situation, there is in Cross a necessity which he cannot satisfy and which makes him hate his life: "He yearned to talk to someone; he felt his mere telling his story would have helped. But to whom could he talk?... there was not a single man to whom he cared to confess the nightmare that was his life" (17-18); "[h]e shook his head, his body seething with hate against himself and the world" (15). Cross's brooding character is of no help at all: "his self-knowledge, born of a habit of incessant reflection, did not enable him to escape the morass in which his feelings were bogged. His insight merely augmented his emotional conflicts" (21).

Emphasizing Cross's dissatisfaction with the way his life is going, the narrator dwells sometimes on an urge to flee:

> He had a hot impulse to rise and flee the apartment and disappear forever... What had he to lose by throwing up this fool's game? His job? It wasn't worth a damn, he was so mortgaged with debt. He really had nothing to lose. What a stupid situation for an intelligent man to find himself in!... Somehow he would shake loose from this and never in all his life let himself be caught again.... (48).
>
> If ever, now was the time to act upon the impulse of flight. He had about fifty dollars in his pocket. He ought to buy a railroad ticket for as long a journey as the money would cover, and vanish. (51)

If we compare the protagonists of The Outsider and Native Son, we see that both of them are trapped in a condition where there is no way to act by their own accord: they are obliged to follow the tracks that have been previously set for them, in Bigger Thomas' case, by white society, and in Cross Damon's, by the very relations that he has naturally contracted through his acts and decisions. Differently from Bigger, Cross does not hate white people because of their color; he does not feel inferior or humble because of his color: "he was black, but he had never felt that humble in the face of life" (144); while on his way to ask for a loan in the Post Office where he works, Cross reacts to the Union secretary's attitude toward him by hating "Finch's whiteness, not racially, but just because Finch was white and safe and calm and he was not" (89). Also differently from Bigger, it is not white society that gives Cross scarce options in life; the very

people to whom he relates, as we have seen, constitute one of the greatest causes of his lack of choices.

What happens just after Cross's constricting situation in life is exposed is something that will put an end to Cross's chaos and bring him a new possibility, creating, thus, a sense of relief, mingled, however, with a sense of urgency, due to the tragic aspect of the event: a subway wreck. The scenes that precede this tragic event picture Cross living in a physically stressed condition, as if he is being prepared for a ritual: "... it had been like this now for months. Each morning he'd come from work and crawl wearily into bed and toss for hours, yearning for the mercy of a sleep that was not his and at last he realized that his search for surcease was hopeless" (15-16). Cross's own body is described as an unwanted element: "He was despairingly aware of his body as an alien and despised object over which he had no power, a burden that was always cheating him of the fruits of his thought, mocking him with its stubborn and supine solidity" (17). Indeed, Cross feels "as though he were already dead..." (88): "If those who were pressing him knew how little like a human being he felt, they would recoil in horror; he felt unreal, scarcely alive" (61).

As a physical representation of confusion and of the difficulty in understanding what is actually happening, after the providencial subway wreck, Cross lights his

lighter and sees a messed-up scene: "Lines zigzagged and solids floated in shadows, vanishing into meaninglessness; images dissolved into other images and his mind was full of a sense of shifting significances" (94). In order to be able to leave his place in the distorted coach, Cross has to shove a man's head that is blocking the way of a seat which is jamming Cross's leg to the steel wall. Unable to find any other reasonable way of freeing his leg, "[h]e panted with despair, regarding the man's head as an obstacle; it was no longer flesh and blood, but a rock, a chunk of wood to be whacked at until it was gone" (95). Cross manages to pull the man's head away beating at it with the butt of his gun; after he has done it, he looks at "the mangled face [which] was on the floor; most of the flesh had been ripped away" (96). Continuing in his horrible, bloody, and totally unfamiliar path to a still unthough-of freedom, "[Cross] crept forward over the ceiling of the overturned coach, past twisted and bloody forms, crunching shattered electric bulbs under his feet, feeling his shoes slopping through sticky liquid. He moved on tiptoe, as though afraid of waking the sleeping dead" (97). The scene of a disaster is highly representative of a stance in life completely disorienting and ripe with unfamiliar events.

Amazingly enough, only slightly bruised, Cross manages to leave unnoticed from the scene of the accident. When he was trying to free himself from the wrecked coach, he had to

take off his overcoat with all his papers in it; but the money from the loan in the Post Office--eight hundred dollars--is still with him, in his shirt. Due to the papers left in his overcoat, he is wrongly identified as the man who was sitting near him on the subway. And it is only when he hears his name being listed on the radio as one of the victims of the subway crash that he starts to think of the new possibilities the bloody event has opened to him:

> **He was dead....** All right... Okay... Why the hell **not**? Why should he refute it? Why should he deny it? He, of all people on earth, had a million reasons for being dead and staying dead! An intuitive sense of freedom flashed through his mind. Was there a slight chance here of his being able to start all over again? To live a new life? It would solve every problem he had if the world and all the people who knew him could think of him as dead.... (105)

It is as though only through the terrible coincidence of a tragic accident is Cross able to find his way out of the confining labyrinth in which his life had turned; being a wreck, Cross's life could only be saved by an actual wreck. The sense of loneliness and of detachment from the surrounding environment, however, is obviously going to be much stronger: "From this moment on he had to vanish.... Hide... Now!" (106); "[a]nxiety now drove a sharp sense of distance between him and his environment. Already the world around him seemed to be withdrawing" (109). Cross is completely alone in his plan of shaping a new life; he

cannot count on anyone to help him in so fantastic an enterprise: "He could not plot or plan this by talking it over with anybody. He would have to sit down alone and figure this thing out carefully" (107).

Thus, the first stage of a rite of passage is obviously complete for Cross; he has to leave behind all that he knew as a life, all that he has constructed as a man: "He had to break right now the chains of habit that bound him to the present.... [H]e had to break with everything he had ever known and create a new life.... It was up to him to **make** it work. He was walking fast, caught up in a sense of drama, trying to work out a new destiny" (108). Cross's attitude and response toward his surrounding reality are changed:

> The relationship of his consciousness to the world had become subtly altered in a way that nagged him uneasily because he could not define it. His break with the routine of his days disturbed the tone and pitch of reality.... and now, since last night, since he had broken all of the promises and pledges he had ever made, the water of meaning had begun to drain off the world, had begun to dry up and leave the look of things changed; and now he was seeing an alien and unjustifiable world completely different from him. It was no longer **his** world; it was just **a** world. (117)

The strong resolution to go ahead with his completely new life results from Cross's deep wish for freedom: "All of his life he had been hankering after his personal freedom, and now freedom was knocking at his door, begging him to come in" (108); "[i]t was for much more than merely criminal

reasons that he was fleeing to escape his identity, his old hateful consciousness. There was a kind of innocence that made him want to shape for himself the kind of life he felt he wanted, but he knew that that innocence was deeply forbidden" (109-110).

Starting a sort of transitional period which, according to Arnold Van Gennep, is characteristic of the second stage of the rite of passage, Cross rents a room in a hotel where probably nobody he knew would appear and gives his first false name to the landlady: Charles Webb. Incognito, he manages to watch his own funeral and when it is over, he feels not only fearful and alone, but as if he were living in a dream:

> He was empty, face to face with a sense of dread more intense than anything he had ever felt before. He was alone. He was not only without friends, their hopes, their fears, and loves to buoy him up, but he was a man tossed back upon himself when that self meant only a hope of hope.... Nothing made meaning; his life seemed to have turned into a static dream whose frozen images would remain unchanged throughout eternity. (129-130)

In fact, the transitional period, characterized by a dreamlike condition, is going to last so long that it will encompass a rite of passage which will enable Cross finally to achieve the third and final stage of the larger rite of passage that constitutes his own life.

In a trick of fortune, Joe Thomas, Cross's old friend from the Post Office, in a completely unexpected event, meets Cross in the corridor of the hotel. Confirming Cross's resolution to follow his path into a new life, during the subsequent conversation in Joe's room, Cross knocks out his old-time companion by crashing a bottle of whisky on his head and, in a swift movement, immediately throws Joe's fat body through the window (138). It is as though Cross has to throw away in a very tragic manner some disturbing element that has been part of his previous life so that the force of that attitude enables him to give that life over, dispatching it as something devoid of any significance. In a first moment, the absurdity of what he has just done makes him confuse reality and fantasy: "But he had tossed Joe out of that window; or had he? He struggled to sort reality from fantasy" (139); after some minutes, however, the narrator, inside Cross's conscience, rationalizes that "he had done that to save himself.... He had had no choice; it had been either he or Joe" (141). Cross has just stepped into a criminal life in order to guarantee his newly found avenue to freedom, however temporary.

So as to stress even more the insignificance of Cross's previous life in relation to his probable future, at this point in the narrative the author makes a comparison between Cross's previous life and a pile of refuse that a man dumped from a garbage can in an alleyway where Cross has sat for a

while; after describing the contents of the pile in detail, the narrator says that "[Cross] had to shake off this dead weight and move on" (148). Just like the contents of the refuse have been used, providing some satisfaction during some moments in somebody's life, and are useless now, Cross's life hitherto is a refuse that has no function, not being necessary anymore: "He recalled that pile of steaming garbage, the refuse the world had rejected; and he had rejected himself and was bowed, like that heap of garbage, under the weight of endurance and time" (150).

The "journey into self-discovery" (Joyce 22) discussed earlier in Bigger's case is much more clearly illustrated by Cross's situation; in the train leaving Chicago bound for New York, Cross rationalizes the recent events of his life: "As the train wheels clicked through the winter night, he knew where his sense of dread came from; it was from within himself, within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, and yet not really known to him.... And it was into this strange but familiar world that he was now plunging" (150).

Despite the sense of living in a dream--"Dream" is the title of book 2--, of being under a spell, the persons to whom Cross relates on the train to New York become fundamental to his future life. The first person he meets is Father Seldon, who sits at the same table as Cross in the dining car; this meeting with a priest is the opportunity

for the reader to know not only Cross's dislike for religious men but also what he feels towards their belief in God:

> Cross had to discover what was good or evil through his own actions, which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. For him there was no grace or mercy if he failed. (158)

Another person to whom Cross relates on the train and who comes to play a very important role in his future life is the Negro waiter, Bob Hunter. Cross helps him in an accident with a white woman and later on the waiter asks Cross to witness in his behalf, in case the woman decides to sue him.

The third person Cross meets on the train is the district attorney of New York City, Ely Houston; despite the obvious fear of being before a district attorney, Cross sees in Houston a sort of companion in his condition of outsider. Houston appears as a very shrewd and insightful white man who can talk not only about modern man's problems in a very convincing manner but also about the Negroes' situation in modern American life. In fact, as Houston says, his "personal situation in life has given [him] a vantage point from which [he has] gained some insight into the problems of other excluded people" (164). Cross is aware that "Houston,

in identifying himself with Negroes, had been referring to his deformity" (164), i.e., his hump; Houston's "deformity made [him] free; it put [him] outside and made [him] feel as an outsider" (171).

Refuting one of Houston's assertions concerning the pretense of order in our modern civilization, Cross reveals, in a long series of questions, one of his main concerns in life:

> Isn't life exactly what it ought to be, in a certain sense? Isn't it only the naive who find all of this baffling? If you've a notion of what man's heart is, wouldn't you say that maybe the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization is simply man's frantic attempt to hide himself from himself? That there is a part of man that man wants to reject? That man wants to keep from knowing what he is? That he wants to protect himself from seeing that he is something awful?... Aren't all of man's efforts at order an attempt to still man's fear of himself? (173)

Thus, in a sense, Cross is a living example of an individual who is trying to discover what man is, after all, no matter what dangers might be involved in such attempt. By rejecting a life full of people who depend on him somehow and trying to create a life in which he would feel less pressed or at least with no hard promises to keep, he is the prototype of modern man, a man lost in his responsibilities and never satisfied with his life. Cross's sense of loss is mostly due to the fact that, having rejected myths as ideal guides to his modern life, he is still attached to a mythical realm in

that his life is presided by definite rites of passage that have been the same throughout the ages.

Aware that his flight from Chicago is close to an end, Cross feels a pressing necessity to give an end to the transitional period in which he is living, i.e., he wants the second stage of his rite of passage to reach a final point:

> He had to break out of this dream, or he would surely go mad. He had to be born again, come anew into the world. To live amidst others without an identity was intolerable. In a strict sense he was not really in the world; he was haunting it, pleading for entrance into life.... (169)

Thus, before doing anything, Cross had to create a new identity for himself: "[h]e had to become human before he could mingle again with people. Yet he needed those people and could become human only with them. Dimly he realized that his dilemma, though personal, bore the mark of the general" (177). Being dead to his past life, Cross must now be reborn to a new social environment; and his rebirth will characterize his entering into the third stage of the rites of passage. According to Van Gennep, there are certain "transitional periods which sometimes acquire a certain autonomy" (The Rites of Passage 191-192), containing within themselves the pattern described in the rites of passage: there will be a separation stage, a transitional stage, and a stage of incorporation within a single transitional

period. As we will see, this is the case with Cross; although the long transitional period in Cross's case is apparently at an end, in fact it will be doubled and the different events that will happen in the immediate future can be taken as different kinds of rites in Cross's way to the last stage of the larger rite of passage of his life.

Cross's first step in an "entrance into life", indeed the first stage of the transitional period, is to find a new name, a new identity for himself, and he does so in a way that once again relates him to death: "all he had to do was to go to a cemetery and find the name of a man born on his birthday or any birthday that would make his present age and appearance seem normal! Why, if he were clever about it, he could even have a birth certificate" (186). After renting a room, the following morning he goes out to look for his new identity. Reversely to how Cross has been given as dead, now he is to gain a new name, a new life in fact, changing places with yet another dead man. Whereas after the subway crash a dead man has taken his place, now he is to take the place of another dead man. As if in a weird resurrection ritual, Cross searches for somebody who has been recently buried so as not to rise much suspicion; the scenario is very appropriate for such an enterprise, combining, as well, with the unfamiliar environment created in a ritual:

> At last the cemetery came into view, veiled by snowflakes dancing crazily in the winter wind.

> Myriads of white marble crosses and tombstones stretched away in a white shroud. The huge, iron gate was locked; no one was about. He climbed over the fence and stood in the white silence, a feeling of unreality filling him. (192)

Cross finally finds the perfect name in Lionel Lane, "buried only two days ago" (193). After a number of shrewd stratagems, he manages to have some information about the deceased and decides that he is on the right track. In order to obtain a birth certificate, he acts the role of a simple-minded Negro in front of two white clerks in the City Hall. What Cross does is to manipulate in his own behalf a basic preconception that he knew most white Americans have in relation to Negroes:

> The two clerks bent double with mirth. And as he stood there manipulating their responses, Cross knew exactly what kind of a man he would pretend to be to kill suspicion if he ever got into trouble. In his role of an ignorant, frightened Negro, each white man--except those few who were free from the race bias of their group--would leap to supply him with a background and an identity; each white man would project out on him his own conception of the Negro and he could safely hide behind it. (203)

Therefore, through the resurrection ritual constituted by the newly found identity, the first stage of the transitional period is complete, because there is a clear separation from a previous situation, namely Cross's dreamlike living.

The second step in the building of Cross's new identity, indeed Cross's entering into the second stage of the transitional period, is his search for Bob Hunter in order to redress the wrong he had done to the train waiter. When they finally meet, Bob talks to Cross of how he has lost his job in the railroad company due to the lack of a witness to save him from the charge of carelessness. Bob understands and forgives Cross, assuming that Cross is hiding himself because of some racial crime he has committed elsewhere. Cross confirms Bob's notion and realizes that "[h]is life had become a vast system of pretense; one act of bad faith necessitated another, and in order to prove the sincerity of a new lie he had to fall back upon lying still further" (208). As a matter of fact, the meeting between Cross and Bob can be taken as one of a series of small rites pertaining to a bigger transitional rite which, in its turn, is contained within that larger transitional period in Cross's life. To be able to consolidate his new identity, Cross must be somehow accepted as a member in a small community, and his relation to Party members will provide him with the social environment that he needs. Thus, through Bob, a Communist Party member, Cross finds a way of proceeding with his new life: "Maybe communism would be the best temporary camouflage behind which he could hide from the law.... To be with them was not at all a bad way of ending his isolation and loneliness" (209). To a certain

extent, Cross is right, because he would be making a new circle of friends. But, all in all, getting close to communists will turn out to be the hardest lesson of his life.

Simultaneously to the consolidation of a new horizon for his social and political life, having been invited to a dinner that night with some communists in Bob's place, Cross also tries to consolidate his new identity even more. By way of another stratagem, he manages to get a duplicate draft card and, so as not to arouse any suspicion to his missing card in the draft board, he sets the building on fire; incidentally, there is a church in the same building. It is as though he has to burn not only man's laws, but God's as well.

At Bob's flat, Cross meets some of the people who will give shape to his new life, delineating his actions and feelings from now on. First of all, Gil (Gilbert) and Eva Blount, a "stolid white man and a tall, blonde white girl" (220); Cross does not like Gil right from the first moment: "there was about the man, even before he had found more valid reasons for his aversion, a rigidity of bodily pose that irked him.... Life to Gil was a stubborn, humorless effort" (221); "[Cross] was not a little shocked at Gil's colossal self-conceit. He acts like a God who is about to create a man.... He has no conception of the privacy of other people's lives" (222).

Even before dinner is served, Cross's near future is planned: he is to study at the Workers' School and live with Gil and Eva. And as a new reality shows itself to Cross in the manner of an open invitation to learn how the communist party works, so as to be recruited, "Cross felt himself slowly coming awake, feeling the real world about him. Here was a challenge the measure of which might meet his needs" (223); "[t]o grapple with Gil would involve a total mobilization of all the resources of his personality, and the conflict would be religious in its intensity" (224); "Cross felt that he was at last awaking. The dream in which he had lived since he had fled Chicago was leaving him. The reality about him was beginning to vibrate: he was slowly becoming himself again, but it was a different self" (237-238). Thus, the book entitled "Dream" ends exactly at the same time as what has been here called Cross's smaller transitional rite contained within a larger transitional period; trying to be reincorporated into society, Cross is starting to live again, but in order finally to be a part of the surrounding environment, he still has to pass through a final and bloody rite, which can be taken as an incorporation rite.

Yet another event which leads Cross to his final rite is the game of mutual manipulation that he and the communists play. Cross's objectives in playing the communists' game are very clearly exposed:

> It was an emotional compulsion... to feel and weigh the worth of himself that was pushing him into the arms of the one thing on earth that could transform his sense of dread, shape it, objectify it, and make it real and rational for him. Logic was guiding his sense of direction, but his emotional needs were dictating the kind of directions he chose. (240)

Gil Blount, on the other hand, uses Cross, in a first moment, as a bait in a dangerous campaign:

> against realtors who discriminate against Negroes here in Greenwich Village.... There is no law against Negroes living anywhere in this city they want to, but landlords have banded together and made codes against Negroes. One of the leading supporters of this code is the man who lives downstairs; he is my landlord. (249)

The strategy they are going to use is to put the landlord, Langley Herndon, in a situation where he has no legal basis to throw Cross out, so that he is obliged to show openly his prejudice and the case can be exposed in the Daily Worker for world-wide recognition (252).

The intense empathy that Cross feels toward Eva after reading her diaries, which depicted a story of deceit and pretense, a story of a woman who has always lived a sad and lonely life and who has been trapped into a marriage ordered to Gil by the Party for prestige purposes, is a strong element which will delineate Cross's responses from now on and which will push him to his inevitable fate.

The expected meeting between Cross and the landlord happens soon enough and in the predictable manner: supposing that the man is going to take a gun from a dresser drawer, Cross shuns him away with the threat of taking his own gun from his coat pocket. After that, events disentangle very fast. A little before dinner, Bob comes to the Blounts' to ask for Gil's help in his predicament: the Party has not only expelled him but supposedly has denounced Bob's illegal situation to the Immigration authorities; Gil says that the Party is right because Bob has disobeyed it in insisting to organize against the Party's decision. Thus Bob is fated to be deported back to Trinidad, where he is sure to be arrested for Party activity; and "[t]en years in jail in the tropics is death" (281), as Bob says. Compared to what is expected to happen pretty soon, when Gil and Herndon meet, Bob's case is so unimportant that it is immediately dropped. Nevertheless, Bob's predicament is important in the present analysis because it is yet another negative element in Cross's reaction toward the Party, leading Cross to the completion of his incorporation rite.

Then we come to the second climax of the novel, which is the rite of incorporation itself, putting an end to the long transitional period. Cross and Eva stay in the apartment listening to a hot argument going on in Herndon's flat, then "shouts full of hot anger, ... a sharp snapping like wood breaking, then a dull thump" (285); Gil and

Herndon were obviously fighting and after yet another scream downstairs, Cross decides to go down and help Gil. Cross's response to the scene of the two men fighting hard is right from the first moment an ambiguous one, given that we expect him to help one of the contenders:

> Both men were oblivious of Cross, who stood in the doorway with a bitter smile on his face. Cross could barely contain himself as he watched the battle. Which man did he hate more? Many times during the past hours he had wished both of them dead and now he was watching them batter each other's brains out.... (286)

Thus, the reader is, in a way, prepared for the bloody and utterly violent climactic scene that takes place in Herndon's somber apartment. Cross brutally kills both Herndon and Gil battering both men's heads with a table leg. And right after doing that, Cross is initially possessed by a deep sense of life; it is as though only through a shock as intense as the one caused by the subway wreck is he able to come to full life again: "The universe seemed to be rushing at him with all its totality. He was anchored once again in life, in the flow of things; the world glowed with an intensity so sharp it made his body ache" (290). A bloody accident brought by fortune has taken him out of the world and into a crazy dream, and now a bloody crime deliberately committed by Cross is making him at last wake up from a nightmare of a life into a crazy criminal reality. Through

the shock of a bloody incorporation rite Cross is now able to feel alive again, able to control his own life.

Cross's cold blood enables him to plot a "fictitious" story of how Gil and Herndon have killed each other, and he even has the cool nerve to wipe out any trace of his presence in Herndon's apartment. Moments later, however, already at the Blounts', Cross is able to realize the complexity of his crime, which, in a way, explains the subtitle--"Descent"--and puts an end to the third "book" of the novel:

> I killed two little gods.... Yet he could not get it straight. Just a moment ago it had all seemed so simple. But now it was knotted and complicated. There was in him no regret for what he had done... But how **could** he have done it? He too had acted like a little god... he had assumed the role of policeman, judge, supreme court, and executioner... their disease had reached out and claimed him too. He had been subverted by the contagion of the lawless; he had been defeated by that which he had sought to destroy... he was trapped in the coils of his own actions. He had acted, had shattered the dream that surrounded him, and now the world, including himself in it, had turned mockingly into a concrete, waking nightmare from which he could see no way of escaping. (294-295)

Cross has, in other words, descended to the level of those whom he had just killed and has also definitely bogged himself in a morass of criminal deeds.

Cross soon realizes that there is a serious problem with his new life: his relation to Eva, which turns out to be an intense love affair, is based upon his worst and most

detestable lie; and he lies because he knows that "[i]f he told her that he had killed, the horror she felt for the Party would be transferred to him" (302). Thus, Cross's new life has assumed the same intricate aspect of his previous life in Chicago, and, once again, he must face all by himself the intricacy of his life of pretense and all the despair and guilty feelings accompanying it, "he had to tread this guilty treadmill alone" (304). In fact, rekindling the metaphor of the labyrinth, instead of finding a way out of his conflicting previous life, Cross gets into a new labyrinth, all the more dangerous because he does not know what awaits him in its end. This last labyrinth represents the third and last stage of the rite of passage through which Cross is passing, just as the messy aspect of the second stage could be represented by yet another labyrinth. As Van Gennep has done in <u>The Rites of Passage</u>, connecting each rite to a door in a house linking many rooms, in Cross's case, as we have seen, each rite represents a new way in the labyrinth which in the end comes to a door which opens to a new stage in the rite of passage. Thus, within a larger labyrinth which constitutes Cross's inner life--reflecting in its walls all the conflicts of Cross's outer life--we accompany the protagonist as he passes from one smaller labyrinth to another. Each one of these smaller labyrinths represents one stage of the rite of passage which constitutes Cross's life.

The bloody crime committed by Cross puts him under a strong pressure; he sees in John Hilton, "a member of the upper circles of the Party" (308) who has been called by Cross himself to take care of things concerning the recent criminal event, an adversary "who played a game whose stakes held nothing less than life and death" (313). Surprise and intranquility hit Cross when, charged with the investigation of the recent crime, the district attorney Ely Houston walks into Gil's apartment next morning. After a momentary lapse of his sense of reality, Cross is relieved by both Houston's and Dr. Stockton's decision to give the case as double murder or double manslaughter. While talking to Cross during the individual inquiry, however, Houston speculates about the possibility of a third man getting into the fight and killing both Gil and Herndon. In a very shrewd manner, getting right at the truth, Houston says that this third man

> feels toward those two men as those two men feel toward the masses of people.... He's playing the same game, but on a much smaller scale. Who knows, maybe he's been hurt by both sides? He kills 'em, and with no more compunction than if he were killing flies.... That man who kills like that is a bleak and tragic man. He is the twentieth century writ small.... (362)

Leaving that theory in the speculative realm, fortunately for Cross, Houston goes out after inviting him to dinner sometime later on.

The strong pressure of the recent events leads Cross to make an important decision in his new life: "Only the presence of Eva could make him try to forget himself. Yes, he would make of that girl his life's project, his life's aim; he would take her hand and lead her and, in leading her, he would be leading himself out of despair toward some kind of hope" (374). Cross is thus starting to depend upon his relationship with someone else as a means to survive, to go ahead with his new life. Getting into the third and last stage of his rite of passage, Cross sees in Eva his possibility of constituting a social organism, however tiny that organism might be; i.e., Cross sees the possibility of being reincorporated into society with a new status, which characterizes the third stage of the rites of passage, according to Van Gennep.

Meanwhile, Cross's criminal tendency is revived yet again, and his impulse to face Hilton and get even with him grows even more as, unnoticed, Cross gets into Hilton's apartment and finds an incriminating handkerchief that he had tried to burn the night before, after killing both Gil and Herndon. Cross understands that "Hilton was saving this handkerchief as his trump card; he was trying to own him morally" (376); "Hilton was after power and keeping his mouth shut about Cross's guilt was but one more step in getting hold of a bright young man whose life he would own

and whose talents would serve him in his struggle for power" (377).

During the discussion that precedes Cross's killing of Hilton, Cross states one of his concerns in life which also characterizes his "journey into self-discovery": he wants to understand why Hilton and men like him are not reluctant, as he is, in going on killing other people; and another important source for Cross's despair is exactly that although he is eager to get out of his criminal compulsions, he cannot stop them: "'I won't stop; I can't stop as long as men like you keep playing your dirty games', Cross said; and there was a genuine despair in his voice. 'I won't ever feel free as long as you exist...'" (381). Hilton tries to counter-argue Cross by saying that Cross is an idealist, who wants "'to redeem life on this earth with so-called meaning--But what you see before your eyes is all there is.... Living in this world, Lane, is what we make it, and we make what there is of it. Beyond that there's nothing, nothing at all....'" (382). Cross cannot accept that cold, pessimistic, rationalist way of thinking; he believes that:

> [s]omewhere there was an anchorage to be found. The logic of Hilton reduced all actions of life to a kind of trading in death. And that was not his sense of it; he had killed, but not to exalt that. He had been trying to find a way out, to test himself, to see, to know; but not killing just to live.... (383)

Unable to forgive all the "meaningless suffering" (384)

caused by men like Hilton, Cross kills him with a shot through the temple. This crime can be taken as what could be termed a rite of consolidation, i.e., Cross is, among other things, trying to consolidate his position in his new life, by way of yet another bloody rite. And the truth about this crime is that once again Cross has descended to the level of that which he has tried to defeat, being himself defeated: "again Cross was dismayed at himself for contracting the ailment he hated. To fight Hilton meant fight Hilton on Hilton's ground, just as he had to kill Gil and Herndon on their own ground, and that in itself was defeat, a travesty of the impulse that had first moved him" (313). Instead of trying to find a way out of the morass that was his life, Cross has just sunk deeper into it, multiplying his inner conflicts and compounding the last labyrinth of his life.

Right after killing Hilton, Cross assumes his characteristic cold temperament and tries to leave no possibility at all of his being connected with Hilton's death. When Cross is nearing home, however, the police are waiting for him and take him for an inquiry concerning John Hilton. When Ely Houston starts questioning him, they talk again about the theory of a third man possibly involved in the recent crimes, and Cross finds himself discussing about himself; following Houston's first few considerations about that third man, Cross gives his contribution to that theory:

> He's a man living in our modern industrial cities, but he is devoid of all the moral influences of Christianity. He has all the unique advantages of being privy to our knowledge, but he has either rejected it or has somehow escaped its influence. That he's an atheist goes without saying, but he'd be something more than an atheist. He'd be something like a pagan, but a pagan who feels no need to worship.... And, by the nature of things, such a man sooner or later is bound to appear. Modern man sleeps in the myths of the Greeks and the Jews. Those myths are now dying in his head and in his heart. They can no longer serve him. When they are really gone, those myths, **man** returns. Ancient man.... And what's there to guide him? Nothing at all but his own desires, which would be his only values. (403-404)

While Cross yearns to talk to somebody, to express his disgust with the absurdity of his life, Eva responds to him with more displays of confidence in him. Even Cross's complete and desperate confession is taken by Eva as a consequence of an "eruption of delirium" (410). Cross's despair reaches an apex at that moment, and, while moments before he wanted to talk, to confess to someone, now he wants to protect Eva by keeping her in her ignorance concerning him: "something close to a prayer rose up from his heart.... Show me a way not to hurt her... not to let her know.... And his despair seeped from his hot and tired eyes in large, salty tears" (410-411); we are told that:

> [h]e ached with anxiety as he watched the flame of love and trust glowing in her eyes, for it was he who had lit that fire with his unintentional deception, and he knew that when she finally gained a knowledge of what he was, it would be snuffed out; and his heart shuddered in fear of her going back into her feminine house and slamming the door on life forever. (411)

Thus, in a way, Cross is predicting the end of his present life: "How much time did he have before his foolish world caved in?" (416).

Cross and Eva decide to move to Sarah's apartment, and right on the first morning there, they are visited by Herbert Menti, an important Party member who is becoming more and more present in Cross's life. Through Menti's inconvenient and insistent presence, "Cross knew that the Party was adamantly on his trail" (438).

The Party, in the figure of Mr. Blimin, "an elderly, portly, white-haired, well-dressed man" (442-443), finally presses Cross more closely. After exposing the difficulty in tracing Cross's life--"[w]hen we try to check on you, we run into a maze that leads nowhere" (448)--Mr. Blimin reveals the Party's suspicion that Cross is a killer. In trying to defend himself before everyone in the room, including Mr. Blimin, Cross is in fact "trying to clarify his predicament in his own eyes" (449). At a point of the book which appears rather a historical treatise than part of a novel, Cross exposes all of his historical knowledge, also revealing a deep understanding about myths. The detailed and long exposition about modern man's predicament living in a world devoid of meaning because of the lack of some element to replace myth shows Cross's sharp awareness of his own stance in life. Modern man, according to Cross, has torn away "the

veil of myth worlds" (456), i.e., he has debunked myths as ways of hiding the real world and has put himself face to face with that real world by way of science and industry; the problem is that "[a] split took place in man's consciousness; he began living in the real world by the totems and taboos that had guided him in the world of myths.... The real world stands at last before our eyes and we... don't know how to live in it" (456). The problem is that, having rejected myths, modern man has not learned yet how to live without some fundamental elements of myths, such as the rites of passage, which somehow still dictate many aspects of modern man's life.

After that, Cross gets to the point where he discusses his antagonism to any kind of party and to the communist party in particular. He says that the "Jealous Rebels", his term for the communists, manipulate the hopes and the daydreams of the men in the street, "men who think that ideas will lead them to freedom and a fuller life" (465). Thus, Cross blames the communists for replacing ancient myths with a more realistic myth (465-466). In the last part of his "speech", Cross reveals what he thinks a man can do to "save himself": "discipline his dread, his fear, and study it coolly, observe every slither and convolution of its sensuous movements and note down with calmness the pertinent facts" (469). Cross is thus speaking as an initiand who has achieved a point at which he is capable of

identifying means to "save" his life, i.e., by way of the rites of passage through which he has passed, Cross has finally reached some new knowledge about himself and, consequently, about modern man.

Mr. Blimin's response to Cross's long explanation gives us a sort of clue to what is going to happen with the protagonist: "'it's dangerous for a man knowing and feeling what you know and feel to hang around loosely on the peripheries of our Party'" (469). And Blimin's invitation to Cross to join the Party, right after Gil's funeral, is yet another hint to what the Party feels toward Cross: the Party would forgive him of killing Gil to get Eva if he accepts to join the Party (473); according to Blimin, "'[i]t's easier and simpler when we know what a man wants.... But with you, we don't know what you want" (473-474). Thus, the Party is worried about Cross, really afraid of him, because they cannot grasp what his intentions are; they cannot understand that man.

Starting a series of three confrontations, representative of three further stages in which the incorporation period of the rite of passage is subdivided, Cross is taken up in what is depicted as the definitive confrontation with Ely Houston but which ends up not being definitive at all. Cross's reaction to that confrontation is similar to that of Bigger Thomas's when he is arrested in <u>Native Son</u>: "[Cross] knew exactly what he had to do. He

would do nothing, say nothing; there was nothing that he could really say.... He would bear it as though it was not he himself who was undergoing it... he lay back, his heart locked against the world" (476-477). At that moment, Cross is ready to put on yet another mask, that of the indifferent criminal. On his way to the district attorney's office, Cross muses about his life, and his self-analysis provides us with a sort of reason why he has been so criminally insistent on guaranteeing his freedom:

> At some point in his past life, while living the normal ritual of days allotted to us all, he had come to a consciousness of having somehow fallen into a vast web of pledges and promises which he had not intended to make and whose implied obligations had been slowly smothering his spirit; and, by a stroke of freakish good luck, he had been able to rip the viscous strands of that web and fling them behind him.... It was not because he was a Negro that he had found his obligations intolerable; it was because there resided in his heart a sharp sense of freedom that had somehow escaped being dulled by intimidating conditions. (481-482)

Through Houston's failed attempts at getting some reaction from him, Cross comes to know about his mother's death. Not even the physical presence of Cross's ex-wife, Gladys, and his three sons can move Cross from behind his mask of indifference (498-499).

Very accordingly to what the critic Houston Baker, Jr. has written about the last stage in the "rites of the black (w)hole", the last stage in Cross's rite of passage becomes

a peculiar example of the impossibility of his being reincorporated into society. The aftermath of the second confrontation of that night--between Cross and Eva--characterizes the last stage as being one of separation instead of incorporation. Taken by Menti and Blimin to some Party headquarters and bombarded with the recent pieces of information about and charges against Cross, Eva comes home in despair, backing away from Cross and finally finding out about all the crimes he has committed. While confessing his killing of Gil, Cross realizes that if he lies to Eva and says that he has killed Eva's husband to get her, she would react positively. But he discards that possibility because he wants, for the first time in his life, to talk to someone about what he has done, to communicate his horror at his own life: "Could he ever tell her? He had to try. He had to talk or he could not go on living. He had to try to get for once in his life from behind himself, to walk out of his house as she had once walked out of her house to meet him" (510). But Cross at once acknowledges that she would never understand his reasons:

> 'I feel like I'm talking to you from another world... trying to talk to you through a glass wall.... I know you can't understand.... you'll never understand this....' Despair was full in him.... All of his hope had gone. (511)

Nevertheless, Cross desperately tries to explain what he

felt the moment he killed Gil and Herndon:

> ...when I stood in that room I saw more senselessness and foolishness right before my eyes and I felt a way to stop it! I hated what I saw! And I hated myself because all my life I was unable to do anything about it.... I wanted to blot it out, wipe it from the face of the earth.... (511-512)

As expected, Eva cannot comprehend the reasons exposed by Cross and her reaction is the most tragic: she locks herself in the living room and jumps from the window. Thus, Eva has just done what Cross has always feared but, in a way, has always expected her to do: "He had lost. She had fled him forever; she had taken one swift look into the black depths of his heart, into the horror of his deeds, and had been so revolted that she had chosen this way out, had slammed her door on life" (517); "[h]e was now locked in loneliness" (518). The same thing that happens with Bigger in Native Son, when he trusts his lawyer as his last hope at life, as a very conscious man concerned with the Negro situation in America, and the latter ends up betraying Bigger by showing only self-concern, happens now in The Outsider, in that Eva denies any possibility of Cross being finally part of somebody's life, any possibility of putting an end to his utterly lonely situation, i.e., Cross is denied his final access or reincorporation into society.

After a brief inquiry due to Eva's death, Cross goes back to Sarah's apartment and, after talking to Menti and

Sarah, he is finally confronted, yet once again, by Houston. The district attorney makes a detailed and exact presentation of Cross's recent moves, of what his life since the subway crash has been, and of the right motives Cross has had for committing all his crimes; Houston has a sharp and accute view of Cross's feelings and Cross sees himself at the hands of a man of the law: "What he had feared most had come; there was nothing he could hide from Houston" (543). After a long retelling of Cross's steps in a too accute manner, Houston finally exposes his punishment to Cross:

> ...I'm going to let you go... I'm going to let you keep this in your heart until the end of your days! Sleep with it, eat with it, brood over it, make love with it.... You are going to punish yourself, see? You are your own law, so you'll be your own judge... I wouldn't **help** you by taking you to jail... you'll sweat tears of terror, night and day. That's the lot of a little god. Didn't you know that gods were lonely?... To whom could you tell your story, Damon? Who will listen?... It's between you and you, you and yourself. (549-550)

Houston could not have thought of a harder and more perfect punishment. That third and last confrontation is actually the last and definitive stage in what has become a separation period. Cross's response to the punishment is a deep realization of his utter loneliness and a strong sense of terror:

> I'm alone, he said to himself. He felt dizzy. Terror wrapped him around in a sheet of flame and his body wept tears.... The prop had gone; Houston had gone; the world against which he had pitched his rebellion had pitied him, almost forgiven him.... The thing he had been fighting had turned its face from him as though he was no longer worthy of having an opponent.... He was not to be punished! Men would not give meaning to what he had done! Society would not even look at it, recognize it! (551)

What Houston did was to cut, to extinguish any possible relation between Cross and the real world, the world inhabited by "normal" people, not by "little gods" or something like that. In other words, Cross is being definitely denied any possibility of being reincorporated into society, thus fitting Baker's last stage of the "rites of the black (w)hole". Cross is aware that his life has come to a sort of blind alley, an insoluble dilemma; he cannot go back and his condition in life makes it impossible for him to go ahead: "He was moving again among people. But how could he ever make a bridge from him to them?... He would have to start all over again. And it was impossible to do that **alone**" (556).

The only way out of this dead end is death; only death would take Cross out of his labyrinth and possibly free him of his awfully lonely situation. However, since Cross himself is still attached to life and apparently does not consider the possibility of a suicide, it is the Party that is going to do him this "favor": Menti and Hank--the latter an inexpressive, sullen Party member--follow Cross at night,

in Central Park; one of them finally shoots Cross on his back while he is trying to run to a taxi. Already in a hospital the next day, Cross knows his life is ending while talking to Houston for the last time. According to Cross, the Party has probably ordered that he be shot because "[t]hey didn't understand me.... And they shoot what they don't understand" (560). Cross's last words tell of the necessity of people to share their lives, because he has found out that "[t]he search can't be done alone.... Never alone.... Alone a man is nothing" (561); Cross is thus showing that he has learned the final and hardest lesson after a long, troubled, and painful series of rites. And through his findings, Cross relates himself to every modern man:

> I've lived alone, but I'm everywhere.... Man is returning to the earth.... For a long time he has been sleeping, wrapped in a dream.... He is awakening now, awakening from his dream and finding himself in a waking nightmare.... The myth men are going.... The real men, the last men are coming.... Somebody must prepare the way for them... Tell the world what they are like.... We are here already, if others but had the courage to see us.... (562)

Reading Cross's final words as representing the birth of a new breed of men, we can take The Outsider to end on a positive note. The men resulting from that new breed are free from any illusion, being thus innocent when seen through the light of a new code of values. While this code

of values is not generally accepted by a given community, however, any man resembling that new breed is a man fated to live a completely lonely life. In a way, Cross's fate is not different from that of Bigger's in Native Son. Both protagonists have lived a highly dissatisfying life; it is exactly this dissatisfaction with their lives that puts them on the tracks of their destinies. And, just as has happened with Bigger at the end of Native Son, Cross fulfills the third and last stage in what Houston Baker has called "rites of the black (w)hole": he is denied any possible access to a communal life, because not only does Eva abandon him, but the world around him, through the district attorney's paradoxical punishment, shows him only indifference, only "silence, the silence that roars like an indifferent cataract, the silence that reaches like a casual clap of thunder to the end of space and time" (551).

NOTE

1-The edition used in the present dissertation is the second Perennial Library edition (1989). All subsequent references to *The Outsider* are to this edition.

CONCLUSION

Through the reading of both Native Son and The Outsider we are able to observe a sort of journey through life which is characteristic of most of Richard Wright's protagonists as well as of many Negroes in America, as Wright's own autobiographical work attests. It becomes clear through the analysis developed so far that such journey is marked by a pattern which is closely related to that of the rites of passage, as Arnold Van Gennep and Houston Baker have noted, with but a few peculiarities. We have checked what Baker has termed the "rites of the black (w)hole" as these manifested themselves in the lives of Bigger Thomas (in Native Son) and Cross Damon (in The Outsider), confirming the hypothesis that such rites are present in the two novels by Wright.

Due to the close relation between Baker's scheme for rites and the more general, theoretical scheme by Van Gennep, a comprehensive study of Van Gennep's book The Rites of Passage was developed, including the strong interrelation between rites and myth, as well as the similarity between Van Gennep's general scheme for rites and the hero cycle as described by Joseph Campbell.

In the application of the theory of the rites to the novels, the bleak existence of the Negroes as depicted by Wright gained yet more power, in that not only the conscious American Negro but any conscious individual can identify himself or herself with Wright's protagonists in their desperately isolated situation and in their painful process of acquiring a sharp awareness by way of different and complex stages contained in the rites of passage.

Both protagonists' trajectories describe a complete circle, and both of them, by the end of their respective narratives, reach a point at which their constricted and isolated situations are not remarkably different from the ones they had at the beginning. The only significant difference is the awareness achieved by both Bigger and Cross concerning not only their own bleak existence but the existence of every conscious Negro, and, in the case of Cross, of every human being, since his plight is ultimately set against the plight of humankind as a whole.

In the analysis provided in the present dissertation, there is an attempt to state, as clearly as possible, the strong relation between the tripartite aspect of Van Gennep's rites of passage and the lives of the two cited protagonists in Wright's novels. Both Bigger and Cross are initially depicted as very dissatisfied with their lives, with situations that cannot offer them what they expect from

life, notwithstanding the fact that neither one knows what he really wants. Thus, they pass through a brief process of detachment from their community and eventually achieve, through the help of crimes, a point at which they feel completely free, as if reborn. This sense of rebirth after a process of detachment is what strongly relates both protagonists to the rites of passage. According to Van Gennep, what characterizes the first stage of the rites of passage is exactly a separation from a previous environment and that is what definitely happens to both Bigger and Cross. In Cross's case, the separation is even more emphatic, since he is actually given as dead by his previous community, and his crime consists exactly in not denying that fact, having to abandon, thus, his past life.

After that definite step toward freedom, both Bigger and Cross go through a sort of transitional period, which characterizes the second stage of the rites of passage. In this period, both of them try to make moves toward the consolidation of a new identity, attempting to find a new place in the world. But then the same powers that oppressed both characters in the beginning of their narratives, making them hate their existences, appear again to deny them their freedom and their possibility of a new life. In Bigger's case, it is the white society, which has always oppressed him and obliged him to live in sub-human conditions, that finds out about his crime and condemns him even before his

trial. And in Cross's case, it is the promises and pledges that he has made but has not been able to keep that condemns him to living completely alone. The impossibility of both Bigger and Cross to resume life in society with a new status is precisely one of the peculiarities discussed by Baker in the third stage of the "rites of the black (w)hole".

Interestingly enough, one can easily perceive, through the reading of the two parts of Wright's autobiography--Black Boy and American Hunger (1983)--, that Wright's own journey through life is in many ways similar to those of Bigger and Cross, as well as to those of many of his other characters. Thus, one would be able to pursue a similar pattern of the "rites of the black (w)hole" in Wright's life, too. As is known, one of the most important events in Wright's life was his relationship with the Communist Party. That relationship determined, in many ways, what his life was. By the same token, much of the lives of both Bigger and Cross, especially towards the end of their respective stories, is determined by their relationship with the Party, and both of them, just as Wright, are helped by the Party in achieving their final awareness of their own isolated situation in the world. But a positive, heroic tinge is imprinted in both novels, in that Bigger dies with a sharp comprehension of his own life, not giving up his life to be used by whites as yet another symbol of the white supremacy over Negroes' existence, and Cross dies feeling that he is

the representative of a new kind of man. Through the presentation of their plight, they have helped other men akin to them. And, to be sure, American Hunger is also concluded on a positive tinge; in the last words of Wright's autobiography one is left face to face with a man who would use words as illuminating elements in the troubled reality of our modern world:

> I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.
> I would hurl words into darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human. (135)

That is irrefutably what Richard Wright has done with his words.

As a matter of fact, words are the only way Bigger and Cross have of imprinting any meaning to their lives. As happens to "The Man Who Lived Underground" according to Baker's reading, as Fred Daniels eventually creates "a countertext to the cultural discourse of the upper world" (Baker 157) which serves "as a revised logos--a new 'Word' transforming chaos and death into a humane order of existence" (158), so happens with both Bigger and Cross. Bigger learns, by the end of his narrative, that he is completely alone with his discourse; he has created a new

'word' so as to be able to understand the chaos of his previous life, and nobody else in his environment seems to understand him; he is thus in a new and lonely world. In The Outsider's case, what Cross eventually learns is to distrust his own discourse as improper to express what he feels and thinks because, as a very understanding and eloquent man, he can manipulate words in his behalf, but when it comes to the most important talk of his life, with Eva, he fails. In fact, being a representative of a new kind of man, Cross has a kind of living which cannot be understood nor accepted by the people who surround him; he already lives in a world of his own, a world with different values and norms. Just like Bigger, Cross has created a new world in order to put an end to the chaos of his previous life.

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